

Between Excess and Neglect

Al-Musawwar, 18 October 1946.

1 Which of the two is better: excess in freedom, or neglect of it?! That is the question I would like readers to think about.

2 Today I wish to invite readers to think about a grave subject: the subject of literary freedom. This subject is connected to politics, if you like, and separate from politics, if you like; for its scope is wider than politics and its effect reaches further ... It is connected to politics in that it is the state that legislates the laws regulating people's rights to think and to express themselves. The state can legislate laws that are generous, easy, and flexible, allowing people to think as they please and to express their opinions as they wish; or it can legislate these laws harsh, forbidding, and narrow, burdening people with hardship whenever they think and whenever they express themselves!

3 Philosophers have said — and will always say — that freedom of thought is absolute for all people, that no one can limit it or control it, and that it cannot be subjected to law; for the authority of the state, however strong and far-reaching it may grow, can never reach the depths of conscience and the innermost recesses of the soul.

4 But while this may depict the truth from a purely theoretical standpoint, it does not depict it at all from a practical standpoint; for thought that never goes beyond the depths of conscience and the innermost recesses of the soul may have its own individual value, but it is nullified when measured against social usefulness. The individual can think as he pleases, and build castles in Spain in the depth of his conscience and the recess of his soul, but this thinking of his will have no significance at all unless it is able to emerge from the depth of that conscience and that soul to reach the depths of other consciences and the recesses of other souls!

5 Yet the matter does not stop there, but goes further still, to something of even greater consequence and still wider effect; for when the individual becomes certain that his thought will never go beyond his own conscience, and will never become a social thing that people meet with rejection or acceptance and make a subject of debate and disagreement, he grows indifferent to this thinking that profits no one and harms no one, and turns away from it to other things that his fellows

may concern themselves with. And this is true to such a degree that the individual may grow accustomed to the narrow life in which freedom of expression is restricted; he no longer feels any need to think about this subject or that, and sometimes does not even feel that this subject or that exists at all, except when he reads a book published in a foreign language, in which its author has treated this subject or that — and only then does he learn that this subject exists, that thinkers can think about it, that those who express themselves can give voice to it, and that readers can find in it pleasure and delight, or find in it discomfort and disgust.

6 It is most likely that a great deal of the admiration Eastern readers feel for certain foreign books comes simply from their finding in these books varieties of thought they are unaccustomed to, and have not felt within themselves either the need for or the capacity to engage with. But they stop at this point and do not ask themselves what causes prevent them from thinking about these subjects and expressing themselves about them. Had they asked themselves this question and probed deeply into its answer, they would have learned that the most important of these causes is their diminished share of the freedom that would allow them to think, because they do not possess the freedom that would allow them to express themselves. And had Easterners been granted as much freedom of expression as Westerners have been granted, it would have been very possible — indeed, certain — that they would take up subjects that, until now, only the men of letters and thinkers of the West have taken up.

7 It may be worthwhile to give examples of this phenomenon. The educated Egyptian, for instance, looks upon our social life and its shortcomings, and thinks about them in a limited way, and expresses this thinking of his in a limited way ... he calls for combating poverty, ignorance, and disease, and may propose simple means for eliminating poverty, ignorance, and disease. But he stops his thinking and his expression at that point! Then he reads what Westerners write in critiquing social life, and he admires what he reads, and may even be utterly captivated by it, and a certain sadness may come over him because these books were not composed in Arabic, or were not translated into Arabic — yet he knows full well that composing them in Arabic is forbidden by law, and that translating them into Arabic is forbidden by law as well; so he spares himself the trouble of thinking deeply about our social life, its scourges, and the means of ridding ourselves of these scourges, and contents himself with reading what the Westerners write,

if he is one of those possessed of resolve ... but if he is one of the ordinary run of people, he occupies himself with what occupies ordinary people themselves — eating a great deal, drinking a great deal, drowning himself in sleep, and amusing himself with every variety of joke and idle talk!

8 The same holds for subjects that touch upon higher philosophy and touch upon religion, whether nearly or remotely ... the Eastern reader finds among Westerners marvels that may delight him, may alarm him, and may captivate him, but he knows that he is utterly barred from them; for there are subjects he might be able to think about, but is forbidden by law from declaring his reading of them to others. He is therefore forbidden by law from thinking, and the law has imposed upon his mind, by sheer force, stagnation, torpor, and indolence.

9 You can see, then, the degree of connection between literary freedom and the politics that legislates laws, broadening freedom for people or narrowing it. Yet politics is not alone in limiting the freedom of the educated person and the writer; indeed, politics may often be driven to this restriction by a necessity imposed upon it by custom, and by the discomfort that fills people's breasts whenever they are injured by unfamiliar forms of thought and modes of speech!

10 Love, for example, is one of those literary subjects to which poets and writers have devoted their lives and efforts in study and inquiry, without ever reaching the final goal of this study or this inquiry. The Arab reader can find marvels among the results of this study and inquiry in the books of Westerners: in their poetry, when they compose verse; in their fiction, when they write stories; in their drama, when they attempt theater; and in their philosophy, when they take up philosophical questions ... but he is forbidden from attempting to compose on love in his own Arabic language as the Westerners compose. What prevents him from this is the familiar custom that imposes upon writers and the educated certain limits of gravity — sincere in small part, false in large part — that they ought never to exceed. If they do, they are transgressors against custom, assailants upon morals, corrupters of the young. And here politics is driven to intervene to protect custom, morals, and the young! What need, then, has the writer to study, what need has he to inquire, what need has he to think or to speak, so long as all of this may end for him in the public's wrath and the ruler's violence?!

11 All of this depicts for you the connection and the separation that exist between the writer's freedom and politics ... Freedom, then, has two

adversaries: one comes from the state when it legislates narrow, forbidding laws, and the other comes from custom when it is excessively strict in its strictness, and excessively dour in its dourness. And all of this ends with the writer and the educated person turning away from thought altogether, so long as he is incapable of publishing what he has thought; and this is neglect.

12 But freedom does not suffer from neglect alone; it suffers from excess too. For custom may free itself from a great many restraints, and become generous, accepting everything, profiting from whatever is useful in it, and disregarding whatever it finds of no use. And there, politics frees itself just as custom frees itself, legislating laws that are generous and easy, or neglecting the enforcement of laws if they contain any hardship or narrowness.

13 Human reason is always unruly, and freedom of thought knows no limit of its own, unless this limit is imposed upon it from outside. And for this reason, this unruly freedom, restrained only slightly by custom and only slightly by politics, ends in varieties of harmful excess; it stops at nothing, holds nothing in reverence, but rather scorns all values, mocks all truths, and brings man in the end to a kind of ruinous despair. It is enough for a person to look at some of the books the Americans and the French have been composing in these days — and before these days — to know what freedom comes to when it is let loose upon its own nature.

14 The question now is this: which of the two is better — excess in freedom, or neglect of it?

15 This is the question I would like readers to think about! And it is most likely that they will see, as every moderate thinker sees, that moderation is better than both excess and neglect, for the best of things are their middle ways ... but if there is no path to moderation, then which of the two is better: excess or neglect? This is the problem.