The Modern Age's Offense Against the Writer

Al-Hilal, January 1953.

The life of the writer in the modern age is difficult and arduous, and speaking of it will be neither easy nor simple. We used to read — and still read — accounts of the clubs and salons in which writers would speak of their craft, and we would find in them delight of every kind, and pleasure of every kind.

Now, however, I fear greatly that speaking of the writer's life has become difficult and arduous, not free of a certain darkness, nor free of stirring something of pessimism and constriction of spirit; for the circumstances of life have changed drastically, and literature has come to be closer to stern seriousness than to anything else, and the writer's life has grown complicated in a way we never knew before. This complication arises from the circumstances in which we live, for there was the First World War, and life grew complicated in the extreme.

Mankind had scarcely recovered from the first war when the second war followed it, more dangerous and more dreadful still, and from these two wars, which erupted within less than half a century, arose a disruption of people's economic affairs, a disruption of political affairs, and the emergence of grave social tendencies that had occurred only to thinkers and philosophers who love to philosophize about the life of the soul; and we look, and find the world has split into two camps:

One camp believes in freedom, and tries to reconcile it with social justice, but will under no circumstances sacrifice freedom for the sake of justice; and another camp demands justice and sacrifices everything for it, even freedom, even individual and social personality; and thus the world has split into these two camps, which are now in turmoil in peacetime, and it is feared that this peace may give way to war.

And thus people's views on all of life have grown disturbed: anxiety from fear of war, anxiety from social disturbance, anxiety from economic disturbance and the rest, in this complicated life in which we do not know how we shall find ourselves in the morning, nor, come evening, what tomorrow's dawn will bring. In this disturbed life, literature stands in a position of bewilderment, and perhaps its position is more bewildered

still than that of ordinary people, because the writer's first duty is to be a guide and a leader. He does not know toward which face of life he is being swept, nor how to confront the problems that have straitened humanity, which philosophical thought has failed to solve, and before which people stand bewildered and at a loss on every side.

I do not think the writer has needed to pose the question the philosophers posed — whence do we come? whither do we wish to go? what do we want? — I do not think the writer has needed to examine himself and his conscience, and to think and sustain his thinking, to the degree he needs to now. Everything around him is confused and disturbed, living in an obscure darkness in which he does not know which way to turn.

For this reason, speaking of the writer's life has become difficult, just as his life itself is difficult and arduous. And were some of our ancient writers to live again, or to be raised from the dead, and hear the conversations of contemporaries when they meet one another, they would understand nothing, and would turn away from them in denial; for our ancient poets and writers, when they met one another, spoke of their craft — criticizing and praising, pleased with one poet and displeased with another, setting forth the grounds of their pleasure and their displeasure, and so on.

Now, however, writers have gathered in Venice, and scarcely speak of literature, poetry, criticism, or taste at all, but rather of something lesser in standing, yet graver in danger at the same time: they speak of life — how the writer lives it, bears its burdens, and discharges his task in the modern world.

The Writer Under the Shadow of Kings and Princes. The problems of material life, as they bore upon writers in ancient times, were simple, nearly solving themselves of their own accord, so that the writer stood between two courses: either he held a trade or occupation by which he earned his bread, and indulged his literary art as a form of luxury, a species of intellectual pleasure; or else he had no trade at all, but attached himself to some king or sultan, living from his largesse, spending his life in his shadow, or moving between kings and princes, selling them his art and taking their money. Now, however, literature has grown complicated, and it has become difficult to add to one's art a trade by which to earn one's bread; for literature in the modern age demands a great deal of learning, a great deal of reading, research, and

investigation, and then a great deal of reflection and thought in order to produce, and if one attempts to produce, one needs a great deal of effort to correct and refine one's meanings, and then to select the words that render them faithfully on the one hand, while securing some measure of artistic beauty that captivates the ear, pleases the heart, and nourishes the mind. And all these labors are apt to consume his time entirely, and all these labors are apt to leave his time too narrow for anything else, so that if he must also work at some trade besides literature, this takes from him something of his time first, something of his effort second, and something of his capacity to work and produce third; and so he cannot devote himself wholly to his literature, nor set his effort entirely upon it — and indeed: "Gone are they in whose shelter one once lived, and I remain among a remnant like the mangy camel's hide." There are no kings or princes now to patronize writers, and had they existed, writers would have turned away from them, recoiling from them with the utmost aversion, for a simple reason: that literature has become free and independent, and holds itself too proud to be made free to the great, or purchased with money; so the writer has had no choice but to rely upon himself to earn his bread, and in many cases the writer does not live for himself alone, for he is a man with others depending on him, so that he must earn his own bread and theirs, while still finding time free for his literary production — and I do not mean mere versifying, but rather elevated production that is never debased, but rather lifts its readers above the troubled world in which they live.

Your Activity, and the Leisure of Your Mind. How, then, can the writer reconcile these two contradictory demands: leisure for literature, and earning for his bread? Al-Jahiz could once tell those devoted to literature, "Take from your time your hour of leisure." But now he could not say what he said in his epistle, in which he asked that the writer not think of his literature while his mind is preoccupied — for the writer today is preoccupied throughout this life. How, then, can he reconcile these contradictions? That is one aspect; the other may be still more difficult — namely, holding fast to freedom as the writer ought to hold fast to it. For freedom means that when the writer makes time free for his literature, and some form of thought is inspired in him or revealed to him, and he renders this form in some mode of expression, he must keep his freedom whole and unmarred by any taint, whatever the circumstances. And we all know how difficult this has become in the modern age! It has become difficult because the writer is exposed to various forms of censorship — the government's censorship is not the most difficult of

these, but rather the easiest to bear! There is the censorship of public opinion, or of the audience, and there is the government's censorship in peace and in war. And the essence of this censorship is to constrain the writer's freedom; for public opinion wants writers to write what it loves to read, and I think readers will agree with me that writing what the masses love to read is not something the writer relishes, if he is a writer in the true sense of the word; for there is a difference between ancient and modern ages — in ancient times, reading was confined to aristocratic minorities, but in the modern age education has become compulsory, and the state has become charged with teaching people to read, cultivating them, and preparing them for literature and for what they read. So if the writer composes a book, that book will not be read by some small faction of the cultured alone; and even if this faction alone read it, the writer could not live from it, so the book must be able to extend beyond the class of the cultured to other classes among more modest circles, who can scarcely appreciate elevated literature in the true sense of the term — they find irksome whatever costs them effort and toil, they wish to read for benefit, they toil through the day at their occupations, and when rest and the chance to look into a book come to them, they will not add weariness to weariness. And so the writer is left to choose between writing for the narrow, limited faction that cannot keep him from hunger, or for the broad class which, if it is to read him, he must descend toward it, since he cannot raise it up to himself. How can the writer make himself free for his literature on the one hand, and free himself from the burdens of earning his material living on the other? And if some measure of freedom is granted him, how is he to free himself from the constraints that social life imposes when it is pleased with literature, and when it is displeased with it? And how is he to reconcile his freedom with the laws enacted in some countries that constrain writers' freedom unbearably? And then how is he to escape governmental censorship? And after all this, how is he to preserve his elevated literature and raise up his readers, without descending at the expense of art and beauty?

Toil by Day and Hardship by Night. These are some of the problems literature suffers from in the modern age, problems from which it was relatively free in ages past; for in past ages the writer did not need to waste time earning his bread, and if he did need to earn it, the nature of life excused him whatever time he lost to it, for there was then no complication from the distance of travel and communications and the like, especially if he held a government post. An exceptional writer might be required, in earning his bread, to work under some foolish superior

and heed his orders; but from all this, the writer was exempt, or exempt from most of it. Now, however, his life is troubled from the beginning of the day to its end, and when the day ends with its toil and night falls, he is left exhausted; and hardship was not content merely to heap all these problems upon the writer, but the rise of man and the progress of civilization insisted on adding further forms of hardship to hardship, so that grave competitors to literature have arisen — competitors that I fear, as many writers in Europe and America have feared, expose literature to one of two evils: either it is brought down until it becomes facile, or a ban is imposed upon it! And these competitors come to it from the press, the radio, and the cinema — the three trials by which the writer's production has been tested in the modern age.