

Superiority...

Mosamarat al-Gaib, 23 November 1947.

As for our being superior to all the peoples of the earth — that is a thing beyond doubt, one that none can dispute except those who delight in stubborn contention and are addicted to argument for its own sake. Our superiority over the peoples of the earth takes many shapes and colors: some of it ancient, appearing at the dawn of civilization; some of it modern, appearing only in these very days; and some of it abiding, accompanying us throughout the whole of our life, across its length and across the differing ages and eras. For we were superior in ancient times, since we preceded the whole of humanity in founding civilization, building the pyramids that defy time, raising the Sphinx as a witness to events, defiant before calamities, and exploring the sciences and the arts while humanity was still drowning in seas of ignorance with no bottom to them.

Egypt is, beyond doubt, the mother of civilization, and for that very reason the mother of all humanity — civilized humanity, of course. As for barbarous humanity, it is not of Egypt, nor is Egypt of it, and it must seek itself a mother wherever it pleases. As for the modern superiority that has arisen in these most recent days, we have earned it, as the doctors say, in the fight against the epidemic; for Egypt is the only country whose people were all inoculated — if the reports of the Ministry of Health are to be believed — against the cholera epidemic, and thereby she has outdone East and West, North and South alike, outdoing even the countries that cholera has chosen as its own homeland, such as India and China, whose peoples are too numerous for their health ministries ever to inoculate them all, and outdoing too the countries that cholera does not care for, and has no wish to settle in, because their climate does not suit it or agree with it.

As for the people of Europe, they were not inoculated, because they had no need to be; and this guarantees us superiority over them forever, for every Egyptian is superior to every European, because the Egyptian has been inoculated, and the European has not, nor is he expected to be inoculated unless the earth is exchanged for another earth, and the sky for another sky. And so we have been granted an ancient superiority whose beginning is unknown even though its end is known, and a modern superiority whose end is unknown even though its beginning is known.

Nor is this the whole of the superiority written for us, for we are superior in other things that may be of still greater consequence and still graver import than the founding of civilization, or the inoculation against the epidemic.

We are superior in having befriended the three enemies who have become our three friends, whom we once wished to make war upon and have now become eager to make peace with, and of whom I speak as people speak of the wise, though they have nothing at all of wisdom in them; they are: ignorance, poverty, and disease. These gentlemen have become our friends, through long familiarity on their part and ours, and long companionship on their part and ours, and have become wise and mature counselors, guiding us in the management of our affairs and the conduct of our business with truly splendid and masterful guidance. For we are the most ignorant of the civilized nations — none doubts this but the corrupt — and you may consult the books and journals of statistics; you will find no civilized, advanced country that shares with us the distinction we hold in ignorance, or that comes near us in the distinction we hold in the sheer abundance of our ignorant.

And we are likewise the poorest of nations, and the most diseased of them, the most exposed to disease, and the most given to harboring disease once it visits us or settles among us. All of these are qualities by which we distinguish ourselves from the nations, and by which we outdo the peoples; and people seek out the means of superiority and distinction wherever they can find them, and however they are able to find them. If some nation manages to distinguish itself by knowledge, that is its own affair, and whatever it wishes to make of it. As for us, we have wished, and circumstance has wished for us, that we distinguish ourselves by ignorance; and say the same in regard to poverty, and say the same in regard to disease, and in regard to many other distinctive qualities that we alone possess, shared by no other people on earth.

And it does not matter whether what distinguishes us is good or evil, beneficial or harmful; what matters is only that we distinguish ourselves by something that no one else shares with us — otherwise, what pride is there for us in being the one people on earth whose members were all inoculated against the cholera epidemic? For my own part, I would rather we were among the modest peoples who are not inoculated, neither all of them nor any part of them, because they have no need of inoculation at all.

Yet we do not distinguish ourselves by these qualities alone; we distinguish ourselves also by other qualities no less significant, among them forgetfulness — a swift forgetfulness, excessive in its very swiftness. For had we not forgotten the cholera epidemic that struck us at the beginning of this century, we should never have been exposed to the cholera epidemic that has returned to us before this century has even reached its midpoint. The Ministry of Health is cautious, in what it says, that the epidemic not return with spring or with summer, but I would wager with anyone who cares to take the bet that Egypt will have forgotten this epidemic even before a year or two have passed. Indeed, we are superior in something graver still than forgetfulness: boredom. For we were told, when the evil of the epidemic grew great, that its victims were in need of assistance, and that it would be a good thing for the well-off to contribute to the relief of the hard-pressed, since the state might not find in its treasury what would enable it to fight the epidemic and aid its victims.

And the well-off came forward to contribute, sluggishly and reluctantly, but then the Ministry of Health began publishing its official communiqués, and these communiqués began indicating that the epidemic was beginning to ease; and at once the well-off forgot the need of the hard-pressed for assistance, and at once most of them grew bored with spending before they had spent anything at all, and at once we forgot the cholera, or very nearly forgot it, with nothing left to remind us of it except what the Ministry of Health continues to publish in its communiqués.

And the one thing you can assert with full confidence that you are right and not mistaken is that educated Egyptians have, this past week, concerned themselves with the story of the cabinet reshuffle far more than they concerned themselves with the story of the epidemic. And do not say that the cabinet reshuffle will change nothing one way or the other, will neither benefit Egypt nor harm her, while the epidemic strikes people in their persons, their wealth, and their facilities; this may well be true, but the truth is not what matters here. What matters is that we are superior in our swiftness to forget, in our swiftness to grow bored, in our attentiveness to the trivial, and in our neglect of the grave. Just as we are superior in founding civilization, and in catching cholera twice in less than half a century, and in inoculating the entire population against cholera, and in ignorance, poverty, and disease, and in our love of empty talk that profits nothing, and our aversion to productive work that

benefits people.

And the strangest thing in which we surpass all other nations is our love of contradictions, for we are not content with our superiority and our distinction, but at the same time wish to resemble the civilized, advanced nations over whom we claim this distinction and this superiority; and to that end, we adopt the ways of modern civilization in politics and administration, in economics and education, and in everything else — so that we are superior and distinguished on the one hand, while on the other we rush headlong into imitation and copying, carrying this rushing and this imitation to such excess that I recently read, in some newspaper, a proposal that we should have an Unknown Soldier of our own, just as the European and American nations have their Unknown Soldiers. And I have no doubt at all that we could furnish ourselves with unknown soldiers in the plural, not merely one; we could furnish ourselves with an Unknown Ignorant Man, an Unknown Poor Man, an Unknown Sick Man, and whatever else you please of these symbols that depict these splendid qualities by which we surpass all other people, or in which we share with all other people.

*The intelligent man suffers, even amid bliss, from his own intellect,
while the brother of ignorance, in wretchedness, lives at ease.
(al-Mutanabbi)*