

The Sorceress Has Died

Al-Jumhuriya, 16 August 1954.

I do not know whether many Egyptians know her, or whether only a particular circle among them knows her — those who take a sincere interest in elevated literature, and follow French literary production with something of that passion granted only to those enchanted by the beauty of art in itself, not for the sake of this or that benefit it achieves, or this or that purpose it serves, but for its own sake, as the pure beauty in which the soul finds contentment and delight, even if it chafes at some of its details.

I do not know whether many Egyptians know her, but I know that all the French hold her in high esteem and value her influence on their literary life, and regard her as among the most accomplished of their writers in this modern age, and go further still, further even than that, in holding that she refined French prose and raised it to a rank attained by only a few of their most brilliant writers.

I also know that her literary voice crossed the borders of her homeland a very long time ago, so that she became one of the landmarks of world literature in this century, and I believe that many of her works have been rendered into the great living languages, though I do not recall having seen a translation of any of her works into our own Arabic.

This is Colette, whose obituary the Italian papers conveyed to us two days ago, and today the French papers have reached us, telling us a great deal about her rich, turbulent, marvelous, and startling life.

This writer set out upon her literary path to glory in the closing years of the last century, before she had reached twenty-five, and went on producing, dazzling and enchanting with her output, until death overtook her after she had passed eighty; she had thus spent more than half a century producing elevated literature, waging strange forms of struggle in a turbulent life laden with great events, filled with what pleases and what angers, with what brings joy and what brings grief.

And what do you make of a girl who grows up in a village of Burgundy, and almost before she can reason grows familiar with nature, becomes infatuated with it, and all but sings within it? She is enamored of the forests, enraptured by the gardens, enthralled by all that is striking

and wondrous in nature's scenes, and she does not cling to nature as other girls her age cling to it, taking it as a plaything and a diversion, but clings to it with a peculiar passion: she wants to test it, to reach its depths and its truths, to blend with it, to become part of it; and beyond that she loves solitude with this nature, speaking in the depths of her soul to its trees, its flowers, its fruit, its grass, and its creatures both wild and tame.

She lives among all of this as a child lives among its family and its playthings, lending to all of it the best that is in her of life, sensation, and feeling, and drawing from all of it onto herself the best that is in it of beauty, wonder, and that free, unbridled, untrammelled life that loves neither order nor restraint.

And when she was sent to school, her studies did not turn her from her beloved nature; rather the school itself became part of that nature, for she observed her classmates and her teachers just as she observed the trees, the fruit, and the flowers; and she had barely passed twenty when a reckless young writer from Paris came to visit her family and won her heart with passion. And it seems most likely that she loved him in that same manner she had grown accustomed to in loving the trees, the flowers, and the fruit.

And the important thing is that she became enamored of him and became his wife, and moved with him to Paris; and it was as though she had captivated him with the tales she used to tell him of her budding life at school, so he asked her to write down these accounts of hers for him to look over afterward, and she did; and the husband looked over what she had set down in her notebook of her own accounts, and paid them no heed at first, then returned to them after a year and part of another year, and was pleased with them, and revised them, and sent them on to the publisher; and so appeared the first book in which this young woman had a part, and no sooner had it appeared than Paris was enchanted by it, then France was enchanted by it, and it became the first installment of a series that appeared in its entirety depicting Colette's life at school, within her family, and in married life, and this series became among the most widely read books of the early years of this century.

The distinguished man of letters reads it and sees in it the first signs of excellence and renewal; the ordinary Frenchman — and the ordinary Frenchwoman especially — reads it and sees in it a mirror of himself, of his inclinations and passions, and of the hidden recesses of his

conscience which he can scarcely reveal or even murmur aloud, and sees in it too a mirror of his homeland and its enchanting nature that captures hearts and loved ones.

The century had scarcely reached its sixth year when the writer grew impatient with her husband, and divorce came between them, opening to her doors onto a strange life and onto adventures without end; for this woman, who had barely passed thirty, was wild of temper, giving herself free rein in her own nature, proud of her strength and her capacity for struggle, unconcerned with people's opinion of her or their talk about her, able to heed nothing but her own opinion and her own judgment of people and things. And at the same time she gave herself free rein in her own nature, leaving her instincts free to range over life, taking from it what she loved and leaving aside what she disliked, with no measure for this but her own taste, her own judgment, and whatever pleasure or pain, satisfaction or displeasure, attraction or aversion she found.

And she needed to live, so why should she not earn her living in the manner she loved to earn it? And so she became a dancer in the dance halls of Paris, and her devotion to dancing allowed her to be inventive in it, and she kept renewing and innovating, not content with mere dancing, but inventing in it new arts and new forms; and when she grew tired of dancing, or had taken from it what sufficed her, she turned to acting, and performed in others' plays, and this allowed her to master the fine points of acting, until one day she became a writer of dramatic fiction, acting out the characters she herself invented.

And when she had taken her share of this turbulent life, she became a journalist, attending the sessions of parliament and depicting them most vividly, and oversaw the fiction section of one of the great Parisian newspapers; then she inclined toward family life and took for herself a husband from among the prominent figures of French life, then went on with this turbulent, headlong life of hers — ordered nonetheless, because it suited the writer's own nature, temperament, and taste. And throughout all of this her output never ceased; scarcely a year or two would pass before a book of hers appeared that filled souls with admiration for her, love for her, and delight in her art, until one day she became a member of the Belgian literary academy, filling the seat of the great French poetess Anna de Noailles.

And not many years passed after this success before she became a member of the Académie Goncourt in Paris, then its president, while her literary output continued unabated, touched by no weakness, no frailty, no flagging; and she became an inspiration to music, for Maurice Ravel composed the score for one of her stories performed at the Opéra-Comique; she inspired pure drama, and her stories were performed in the various theaters of Paris; she inspired cinema, and some of her stories were made into films that met with the fullest success. And after all of this she remained settled upon the throne of fiction, having attained in it the utmost mastery a writer can attain, settled upon the throne of French prose, which she had refined and in which she had distinguished herself until she became the fourth of four whom the French regard as the masters of modern French prose: André Gide, Paul Valéry, Claudel, and Colette.

And she was perhaps closest in her art to André Gide; for like him she gave herself free rein in her own nature, first in life, and then in expressing that life, and paid no heed to people's displeasure or approval of her conduct, just as André Gide paid no heed to any of that, whereas Claudel was restrained by virtue of his Christianity, and Valéry was restrained by virtue of his rigorous philosophy.

What is strange about the matter of Colette and André Gide is that neither of them paid any heed whatsoever to social conventions, inherited traditions, or customary norms, and neither submitted to any authority but one, which neither ever tried to disobey or transgress its laws: the authority of art. Each of them was an authority in language like their two companions, and each was most scrupulously careful of the purity, solidity, precision, and refinement of diction, and of the rules laid down by classical French literature, like their two companions in that as well; and each of them, beyond this, was free to the farthest reaches of freedom in expression: describing truths and minute particulars of life that classical literature disdained to describe, and depicting matters of instinct, passion, and inclination that classical French literature shrank from depicting.

What is strange, nonetheless, is that this freedom, wide to the farthest limits of breadth, deep to the farthest limits of depth, never lowered either of them beneath the foundations of elevated literature, but rather opened to both of them horizons and fields that elevated literature had not reached, for each of them extended the dominion of literature over kinds of feeling, inclination, passion, and sensation that literature

had been loath to approach, and each of them, for that very reason, imposed himself upon people by sheer necessity, so that people took to reading the works of Gide and the works of Colette despite their strong distaste for the lives of Gide and Colette. Say what you will of this distaste: say that it was sincere among men of gravity and social rectitude, and among men of faith and religious rectitude; and say that it was false and hypocritical among those who merely affect gravity and religion.

But the certain thing is that these two writers wrested the admiration of friend and foe alike, and won that admiration by sheer force, imposing it upon people's souls by virtue of the purity of their art, the beauty of their style, the sincerity of their voice, and their preference for artistic freedom above all else. It is thus no wonder that the French people grieved at André Gide's death, even though this same French people had often grown impatient with André Gide and his freedom both in speech and in conduct, nor is it a wonder that the French people should mourn Colette's death, even though this same French people had often grown impatient with that turbulent life which produced Colette's literature.

The French papers tell us that various groups of the French, of every class and standing, have taken to gathering around the house where Colette's body came to rest after death overtook her. Gide had been raised a Protestant, and he never cared in the least whether churchmen approved or disapproved of him; Colette had been raised a Catholic, and she too never cared in the least whether churchmen approved or disapproved of her; but her family, it appears, is anxious to observe Catholic rites in her burial. And the French papers tell us that negotiations are under way and efforts are being made for the family to obtain the Church's permission to bury Colette according to Catholic Christian rites.

Two things stand out especially when we read Colette's obituary. The first: that this writer was perhaps the greatest French woman writer, for all the many women and distinguished women writers in French literature since the seventeenth century, and that she owed her glory to art alone; she was not of noble family, and had no part in politics as was the case with many brilliant women before the French Revolution and during the last century, but rather it was her rich, free, exceptional nature, her sincerity in depicting herself and in depicting the people and things around her, and her adherence to the traditional foundations of

French literature — all these qualities together are what granted Colette this literary glory granted to no other Frenchwoman. And this very year people had been celebrating the brilliant French woman writer of the last century, George Sand, on the century and a half since her birth, and now they mark the setting of this radiant French star that filled French literary life with beauty and light in this century.

The second thing is that of these four I mentioned just now, whom the French regard as the masters of their modern literature, three have now died: the first of them was Paul Valéry, the third was Colette, and none remains but the poet and genius writer Paul Claudel. And it is strange that each one of these four influenced French life most greatly and most deeply, yet not one of them left behind a disciple who carries on his path, preserves his way, and guards his artistic method from being lost. André Gide was perhaps the most fortunate of them, for among the French who have approached old age there are some who write in his manner and hold fast to his artistic method; but there is no doubt whatsoever that the death of these three masters is a grave impoverishment for contemporary French literature.

And how often now does the Frenchman who seeks nourishment for his mind and delight for his taste turn to other nations: to American writers, or to the English and the Italians, or to the writers of northern Europe, or to German writers — because they find, or scarcely find, nothing to read in purely French literary production; yet the French have an advantage that allows them to seek artistic delight in foreign literatures when they do not find it in their own national literature, namely their care for translation, and their eagerness to produce as much of it as the means of publication allow them. And who knows — perhaps the undeniable crisis that French literature has been suffering in these recent years is but one chapter among the chapters of the comprehensive crisis that France has been suffering throughout its whole life since the disasters of the last World War befell it; and perhaps this comprehensive crisis is but one long, heavy night among those long, heavy nights that from time to time overshadow the life of nations, nights whose darkness the dawn is never slow to dispel. And who knows whether the second half of this century will find among French women a writer who influences French literature, indeed world literature, as this enchanting writer influenced it — she who, from today, lies hidden within her grave?