And Philosophy …

Al-Jumhuriya, 14 May 1955.

Yes, and philosophy too — shall I translate it into Arabic as the ancient Arabs translated it, who by translating it transformed the nature of Arab life, and raised up through it this magnificent Islamic civilization which had so grave an effect in reviving Europe in the Middle Ages … before Europe gained direct access to the philosophy, letters, and arts of the ancients in all their variety?

This is a question that our contemporaries do not pose as it ought to be posed, nor do they think it through as it ought to be thought through; rather, they settle it with firm, decisive opinion, then charge forward with that opinion, unreserved, unverified, unconsidered, in order to demolish the opinions of others utterly and raze them to the ground.

For the contemporaries among our writers are warriors, masters of the arts of attack, skilled at charging and skirmishing and prolonging the fray even when no one charges or skirmishes or contends with them at all; and perhaps they attack where there is no occasion for attack, and charge and skirmish where there is no occasion for charging or skirmishing. It might be better for them to take what comes their way gently and easily, with something of breadth of temperament, generosity of spirit, gentleness of nature, and soundness of forbearance. That would be more apt to guide them, and others, to the truth, and more likely to direct them, and others, to what is right. But they have taken to violence where there is no occasion for violence, and to argument where there is no need for argument.

The whole matter, as is said, breaks down into three elements, which work together at times and separately at others. One of these elements is infatuation with words and being deceived by appearances: people who see the modern inventions, and what the West in general and America in particular have achieved in the way of superiority in renewing the material life people live and devising wonderful and terrifying instruments, and are dazzled and bewitched by them; and it has been impressed upon their minds that these inventions, which fill life with ease and abundance, and which also expose life to death and annihilation, are owed entirely to the advancement and progress of science — so they rush headlong to call for the translation of science, without reservation, without verification, without asking themselves how the translation of

science is to be done, for whom it is to be done, why it is to be done, and who stands to benefit from this translation? … and what effect this translation might be expected to have in enabling the Arabs in particular, and the people of the East in general, to take part in invention, innovation, and the renewal of life — and in exposing it to horror and annihilation?

And the second of these elements is what people in this country have grown accustomed to: every man's partisanship for what he is good at, and for what he imagines himself to be good at. The historian ranks no branch of knowledge above history; the philosopher ranks nothing above philosophy; the mathematician sees mathematics as the first and last of the sciences; and the man of letters sees literature as the very foundation of life!

We have tested this ourselves when we saw the men of education trying to lay down the curricula and programs for primary and secondary schools: every group grew partisan for the particular branch of knowledge it practiced, each faction wishing to build education, its curricula and its programs, upon the branch to which it devotes itself and in which it specializes — all of them forgetting that culture is a temperament that must be composed of different elements, and that these elements must be held in balance within it, so that none of them overwhelms the others.

As for the third element, it is very simple indeed: the eagerness to take part in every manifestation of activity, so as to win some share, great or small, of the fruits of that activity, whether material or moral.

It has been said to people that the head of government has set aside fifty thousand pounds for translation, and that everyone capable of translating ought to have a share, great or small, of these fifty thousand — for something is better than nothing, and the people's money must be returned to as many of the people as possible. I would like to set at ease these claimants and aspirants, whether their claim is just or unjust, by assuring them that the Prime Minister has not placed at my disposal a single thousand, nor a few thousand, nor many thousands, nor has he given me free rein over any sum of money to spend as I please and as I fancy; he has merely shown his readiness to attend to the affairs of literature, art, and cultural production as a whole, and has entrusted his colleague the Minister of Education with laying down whatever system this undertaking requires.

And the Minister of Education is earnest in what the Prime Minister has asked of him; so let the claimants and aspirants wait, then, for each of them may yet be granted his share of these thousands, which may reach fifty thousand, or may well exceed it by a great deal.

Let us return, then, to those who argue and struggle and skirmish and charge, deceived by words and appearances, or partisan for what they are good at, or what they imagine themselves good at, among the branches of knowledge — and let us call them to a common word that will set them at ease, and set us at ease, and set everyone at ease, from this barren argument that avails no one anything.

As for those who are fond of translating the sciences, it is their right to put this demand to the scientists and to the government. A Council for Scientific Research was established in Egypt some time ago, so let them put to it whatever they wish of the translation of science, and let them ask the state to facilitate this for it, by reconsidering its system and granting it whatever funds would enable it to carry out research and support researchers, and to carry out translation and support translators, to the furthest extent possible. There is no harm or blame in their demanding all this of the Council and the government; for they live in a rising nation, aspiring to glory, eager to take part in the advancement of human civilization, and it is their right to demand that this ambition be directed to wherever they see the good.

As for those who demand the translation of philosophy, it is their right to put this demand to the new council which the government intends to establish to oversee letters, the arts, and culture; and I do not think they would mind waiting for this council to come into being, so that once it has come into being and taken up its work, they may put to it whatever they wish.

And I believe, most firmly and most strongly, that translating the foundations of human philosophy is one of the necessities of advanced life in every nation that aspires to advancement and strives toward it; and I believe, too, that a living nation that wishes to advance, and wishes its life to have some share of fruitfulness, has no hope of attaining what it wants unless it comes to know the foundations of human philosophy, in all the variety of its schools and homelands.

But I should like these gentlemen not to indulge themselves and others with such talk, flung out without reservation, without verification, without caution; for the ancient Arabs did not prefer philosophy over

literature when they translated what they translated of the works of the ancients — they translated only what they knew and what it was given to them to translate. Had they known Greek and Latin letters as they ought to have been known, they would not have fallen short in translating them.

How much nonsense is said without research or verification! The Arabs did not translate the poetry of Homer or the poetry of Pindar, and the Arabs did not translate the plays of the dramatic poets, out of some deliberate turning away from these forms of literature, because they were — so the claimants claim — pagan, unsuited to Islam. As though everything they translated of philosophy was suited to Islam, and agreed with it, and did not contradict it in the slightest or the greatest degree!

I know of no claim more steeped in folly and nonsense than this one; for the Arabs translated, from the philosophy of the philosophers, things that contradicted Islam in the sharpest contradiction, and this did not stop them from translating it and responding to it. And there were among them, in the earliest ages, those whose minds were captivated by certain philosophical opinions at odds with religion, who wrote books on the subject, composed essays on it, and made verse of it — proclaiming it openly when the opportunity for open proclamation was available to them, and concealing it when there was no choice but concealment. The Arabs abandoned the translation of ancient literature only because they did not know it as it truly ought to have been known, and they did not know it because Christianity was the one that had first turned away from it, and had forced it into concealment and hiding, until it was rediscovered in modern times.

And the Christians, like the Muslims, knew of the epic, lyric, and dramatic poets, because the names of these poets had come down to them; but neither the one nor the other read the works of these poets, because they were neither current nor familiar among the Greek-speakers of the East, nor among those who spoke Latin in the West.

And I am confident that had the Arabs known Greek dramatic poetry, its serious and its comic alike, they would have translated it, and would have tried to produce the like of it, and would likewise have tried to establish drama and to make it a genuine Arab art, just as they translated philosophy and then made it a genuine Arab philosophy.

The Arabs, then, did not deliberately turn away from translating ancient literature; they were simply forced into this turning-away by

necessity. And even granting that they did turn away deliberately, who can oblige us to err as they erred and fall short as they fell short — if indeed they were caught up in any error or shortcoming at all?

Let those who wish for philosophy to be translated set their minds at ease, for philosophy will indeed be translated into the Arabic language, no doubt about it, and both its ancient and its modern forms will be translated, however various their schools and their homelands may be; for the very nature of modern Egyptian life demands this translation and imposes it as a necessity. And to what end, then, is all this quarreling, or all this idle talk which profits nothing and avails nothing?!

I have said, in a past discussion, that people as a whole cannot read science, nor can they become scientists by virtue of such reading, and that scientists are skilled in foreign languages and read their science in them, and are not in need of having it translated for them. I say the like of this with respect to philosophy: not everyone can digest the philosophy of Descartes, Kant, Auguste Comte, and their like among the luminaries of philosophy, ancient and modern; rather, it is digested and benefited from only by those who read it among professors, students, and people of higher culture.

And all of these are skilled in one foreign language or another, so the translation of science and philosophy can afford to wait a little, until the material and technical means for it are prepared, and there is no harm, great or small, in waiting for it. I know of no one who can dispute that the readers of literature, those who benefit from it and are devoted to it, are far more numerous than the readers of science and philosophy. And when I think of these matters, I do not think of Egypt alone, but of the whole of the Arab lands, and of all those who take the Arabic language as a means to culture, and to higher culture in particular. I am not attempting to translate Shakespeare and the other luminaries of literature and culture in the name of the Egyptian government, but am attempting this in the name of the Arab League, which works for the whole Arab world.

There is no harm, then, in our beginning with what benefits the greatest possible number of Arabs, and waiting a little with what benefits the few, until such means become available to us as would enable us to translate for the few and the many together; and this wait will not be long, for the government is concerned with this matter and earnest about it as no government before it has been concerned or earnest about it.

Those who are devoted to science and philosophy can wait in peace of mind; those who are eager to have some share of the activity of translating science and philosophy can likewise wait in peace of mind; and those who hope to seize their fortune from the fifty or sixty thousand, or from the hundreds of thousands, can likewise wait in peace of mind. And if they do not care to wait, and want nothing but haste, then let them direct their insistence and their impatience to the Prime Minister and the Minister of Education, not to me; for I possess none of these thousands, many or few. Had I possessed any part of them, I would have filled the earth for them with science, philosophy, literature, and art, nor would I have obliged them to demand of me some measure of patience and forbearance, given how much earnestness, effort, and activity I impose upon them.

Now then: the ancient poet did not err when he said:

Judge well your foot's place ere you take the step, for he
who climbs a slippery slope unwary, slips and falls.

And what reckoning of risk could be more necessary than reckoning the material and technical means that would allow us to carry out translation without exposing ourselves to slipping, or failure, or a halt midway along the road?!