Commitment as Traveling Theory:

Politics in Modern Arabic Literature

By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER ONE: Beirut, the Cradle of Commitment 10
Appendix: Translation of Key Documents 68

CHAPTER TWO: Commitment Debate in Egypt 120
Appendix: Translation of Key Documents 159

CHAPTER THREE: Commitment in Iraq 189
Appendix: Translation of Key Documents 215

CONCLUSION 270

WORKS CITED 273

INTRODUCTION

Historians of modern Arabic literature agree that the notion of "commitment" (*al-iltizām*) dominated the debates about aesthetics and politics in Arabic literature during the second half of the twentieth century and that, from the early 1950s to the early 1970s, it was one of the chief concepts in the Arabic critical lexicon.[1] These historians tell us that not only did commitment become a key criterion for assessing literary works, it also played a vital role in determining the writer's place within modern Arabic letters. M.M. Badawi, the eminent historian and late editor of the *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, stressed that, by the end of the 1960s, commitment had already become "an essential part of the vocabulary of any Arabic literary critic for many years," and that the relevance of Arab writers to the canon at the time was gauged by both the type and the degree of commitment they exhibited in their writings (207). Given the centrality of the concept, then, the absence of a comprehensive study in English of commitment in modern Arabic literature is both surprising and disappointing. Beyond the few (and, frankly, unexceptional) journal articles on the topic, the scholarship on Arabic literature needs a sustained investigation of the role of commitment in shaping the Arabic critical discourse about aesthetics and politics during the second half of the twentieth century.

My dissertation explores the journey of commitment in three Arab countries: Lebanon, Egypt, and Iraq. The exploration draws on Edward Said's conclusion, in an essay entitled "Traveling Theory," that theories travel both geographically and temporally. During their voyage, Said explains, these theories continually shape and are

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[1] See, for example, Starkey 2006; al-Musawi 2006; Allen 2000, 1998; Badawi 1993, 1975; Brugman 1984; Jayyusi 1977; and Moreh 1976.

reshaped by the local conditions of production, reception, and—not least—resistance. This process entails that theories lose, gain, and modify their constitutive elements during their journeys. Said advises scholars to inquire "whether a theory in one historical period and national culture becomes altogether different for another period or situation" (1983: 226). My dissertation attempts to carry out this inquiry as regards the traveling of commitment in the Arab world during the second half of the twentieth century. My ambition, however, extends beyond the confines of Arabic literature. Although (or, maybe, because) my study focuses intensively on a single literary tradition, it makes an important contribution to the general discussion about aesthetics and politics. After all, the most heated debates on commitment in the Arab world followed the end of World War II and coincided with the peak years of the Cold War, when the extreme political unrest in Europe and elsewhere re-triggered debates on the political function of literature. The Arab debates on commitment, my study shows, further complicated the already intricate involvement of Arabic literature in the Cold War affairs—for instance, *Ḥiwār*, the journal that propagated art-for-art's-sake ideas and fiercely attacked any calls for commitment, was funded by the Congress for Cultural Freedom, a front organization that the CIA created in 1950 to combat the spread of Communism.[2]

Arguably, Sartre was the most important Western figure in the Arab circles in the mid-century. Ironically, it was Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī* which first introduced Sartre to the Arab reader and translated into Arabic some of his early works. For instance, in 1945, *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī* published Tawfīq Shiḥata's translation of Sartre's

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[2] For an account of the CIA's undercover program of cultural interventions in the USA and Western Europe, see Saudners's *Cultural Cold War*. See also Holt's "Bread or Freedom" for more on the inception and subsequent scandalous collapse of *Ḥiwār*.

"Nationalization of Literature," and it also published Ilyās Nuʿmān Ḥakīm's translation of his "The Search for the Absolute" in 1948. Between these translations, *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī* also published three pieces dedicated to Sartre: "Al-adab bayna al-itiṣāl wa-l-infiṣāl" (Literature between Attachment and Detachment) in August 1946; Mulāḥaẓāt (Notes) in July 1947; and "Fī al-adab al-faransī" (On French Literature: Jean-Paul Sartre and Cinema) in November 1947. *Al-Kātib al-Miṣrī*'s positive reviews of Sartre's works, however, were no match to the enthusiastic veneration of Sartre initiated by Suhayl Idrīs's *al-Ādāb*, which was fashioned after Sartre's *Les temps modernes*. It was on *al-Ādāb*'s pages that Sartre's views were propagated and debated. No idea proved more polarizing than Sartre's call upon writers to engage in committed writing.

Sartre introduced the notion of *litterature engagée* (committed literature) for the first time in his essay "Nouvelle écriture en France" in the July 1945 issue of *Vogue*, and he developed it further in the "Pre`sentation" of the first issue of *Les Temps modernes* of October 1945. But it was in *Qu'est-ce que la Litterature?* that he fully explored this theme and developed the boldest and most controversial expression of his proposal for engaged writing. The book came out in 1948 as *Situations II*, and it was, in fact, a compilation of articles which had appeared earlier in *Les Temps modernes*. The book was hastily translated into Arabic and published in 1950—it was translated by an amateur translator who was only a second-year university student.

Sartre's book is organized around three simple questions, which are intimately related to each other: what is writing, why write, and for whom does one write? There is also a long fourth essay about the role of the writer in 1947. In spite of the neat structure, each essay inevitably deals with all four issues, and the fact that each chapter was initially

published separately might explain the repetition that recurs throughout the book. Also, for those who were at the time familiar with Sartre's position on the committed intellectual, *Qu'est-ce que la Litterature?* did not bring anything substantially different from what they already knew. Rather, it further developed the ideas and located them within a broader historical context stretching back to the seventeenth century. However, there is one aspect of the argument in the book version that was new. In answer to the first question (what is writing?), Sartre launches into the most contentious aspect of his argument, when he makes the case that prose was unique among artistic activities. Although the introductory pages of the text dwell on the difference between writing and artistic activities like painting and music, it is the distinction between prose and poetry that forms the centerpiece of this essay. Sartre's argument is straightforward to the point of simplicity: whereas poets are preoccupied with the inner dynamics of language and see language as an end in itself, those involved with prose conceive of language as a tool to bring about change. Sartre thinks that

> Poetry is a case of the loser winning. And the genuine poet chooses to lose, even if he has to go so far as to die, in order to win. I repeat that I am talking of contemporary poetry. History presents other forms of poetry. It is not my concern to show their connection with ours. Thus, if one absolutely wishes to speak of the engagement of the poet, let us say that he is the man who engages himself to lose. This is the deeper meaning of that tough-luck, of that malediction with which he always claims kinship and which he always attributes to an intervention from without; whereas it is his deepest choice, the source, and not the consequence of his poetry. He is certain of the total defeat of the human enterprise and arranges to fail in his own life in order to bear witness, by his individual defeat, to human defeat in general (Sartre 37).

Prose, then, ties in with Sartre's notion of the committed author whose mission it is to "reveal" the world so that people can no longer claim to be ignorant or innocent. Controversially, Sartre used this argument to attack those preoccupied with form:

concerns of style should never take precedence over the revelatory task of prose-writing. Sartre's belittling of poetry was possibly even more contentious at the time given the prominent role that communists had played in the Resistance (something Sartre briefly mentioned, yet failed to elaborate on properly). Because of time constraints I will not be able to elaborate on Sartre's notion of *engagement* at greater length here, but suffice it to say that Sartre's main impact on the Arab world was not in terms of his philosophy, novels or dramatic fiction. Rather it was his writing on *engagement* that represented Sartre in the Arab world. By contrast, his major philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), which was not translated into Arabic until 1966, and then only because of the fame Sartre had achieved through his writing on commitment.

Arguably, it was Sartre's moral arguments—namely that writers ought to engage with daily social problems, and their duty to effect tangible political change—that caught the attention of Arab writers. In addition, I think that there were three reasons that contributed to the special status of Sartre in the Arab world. First, there was the fact that Sartre had denounced the French occupation of Algeria. Second, there was the aura that the writer's name commanded at the time, which only grew as he was awarded and rejected the Nobel Prize for literature in 1964. Finally, there was the fact that Sartre's call for committed writing coincided with the moment of national liberation struggles across the colonized world. *Al-iltizām* entered the Arab discourse at a critical juncture. The 1950s were favorable years for the introduction of concepts and slogans for addressing the national struggle for independence and dealing with post-colonial mess. Lebanon, Egypt, and Iraq were in particularly prime position to receive with such concepts. To be sure, *al-iltizām* joined a number of other keywords of the period, such as *qawmiyya* (Arab

nationalism), *ʿurūba* (Arabism) *al-tawjīh* (didacticism), *al-tathqīf* (culturing), *al-ṭalīʿa* (vanguardism). These keywords fulfilled an essential function: they provided the Arab intellectuals with the vocabulary to talk about post-independence needs (and aspirations). However, as to be expected this vocabulary was appropriated a repurposed by various political parties to align with and achieve their agendas. *Al-iltizām* was no different. As a concept, it was appropriated by Pan-Arabism (for example, the Baʿth Party as well as *al-Ādāb* journal), Marxism (ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm Anīs and Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim in Egypt and the Iraqi Communist Party), as well as independent thinkers (such as Ṭāhā Ḥusayn).

Chapter one begins my investigation of the traveling of commitment into the Arab world. The chapter historicizes the development of Sartre's commitment, now *al-iltizām*, in Lebanon as a distinct critical concept within the Arabic literary discourse in the 1950s and the 1960s. I start my account with the launch of *al-Ādāb*, the pan-Arab monthly journal founded by Suhayl Idrīs in 1953. Idrīs, who aimed to fashion *al-Ādāb* on Sartre's call for *littérature engagée*, tried to incorporate this call into Arabic culture and, I argue, he used his journal to propagate commitment as the effective literary arm for Arab Nationalism. *Al-Ādāb* editors were rightly concerned that, while the Arab masses that sympathized with pan-Arabism were becoming politically active, Arabic literature, in the words of one editor, "lagged behind" and was failing to deliver its "nationalist message" (*al-risāla al-qawmiyya*) because it had hitherto failed to formulate a systematic understanding of its pan-Arab "duties." In addition, *al-Ādāb* editors tried to appropriate commitment in order to counter the otherwise enticing Communist call for Social Realism. However, it was not Communism that proved to be *al-Ādāb*'s most serious detractor; *Shiʿr*, the modernist Lebanese quarterly established in 1957 by Yūsuf al-Khāl

and Adonis, fiercely challenged *al-Ādāb*'s promulgation of commitment. The Syrian Social Nationalist Party's (SSNP) failed coup against the government of Fuʾād Shihāb (Fuad Chihab) in 1961 further stoked up the debates on the political function of literature, and *al-Ādāb* charged at *Shiʿr* again because of its suspected ties to the SSNP as well as its aggressive advocacy for poetic autonomy. The chapter explores these charges and concludes that, although *al-Ādāb* ultimately won the debate over the issue of commitment with *Shiʿr*, its editors failed to agree on what exactly commitment was and, most importantly, how it achieved its promised efficacy. Such failure, I explain, developed commitment into a generative concept, and it left the door wide open for multiple (and sometimes conflicting) interpretations of *al-iltizām*.

Chapter two, which investigates the journey of commitment in Egypt, highlights some of these conflicting interpretations. I explore the writings of the celebrated writer and critic Ṭāhā Ḥusayn in order to account for his change of heart about the issue of commitment from enthusiastic endorsement in 1947 to resolute rejection in 1955. I situate this shift within the changing ideological setting that followed the 1952 Free Officers coup. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1889-1973) was the first Arab critic to discuss Sartre's notion of commitment. In fact, it was he who coined the Arabic term we still use today as the standard translation for the French *engagement* and the English commitment: *al-iltizām*. In addition, Ḥusayn's views on commitment shaped the debate on the relationship between literature and politics in Egypt throughout the 1950s. However, there is not a single scholarly study of Ḥusayn's treatment of commitment in either Arabic or English. More frustrating is the confusion about Ḥusayn's position on commitment in the scholarship. For example, while Klemm says that Ḥusayn introduced

Sartre's *engagement* to the Arab readers "in a neutral way" (53), and Di-Capua insists that Ḥusayn presented the debate unfavorably and that he was aggressively opposed to it (1070-1071), a closer reading of Ḥusayn's first piece on commitment reveals that he, in fact, endorsed the notion enthusiastically, as we will see shortly. Admittedly, Ḥusayn himself contributes to the confusion, because if we follow his writings from 1946 to 1955 closely, we soon find out that Ḥusayn adopted *multiple positions* as regards the question of commitment. In the following pages, I will follow Ḥusayn's writings on commitment, first to map out his views on the issue and, secondly, to account for the shift in his position on commitment from enthusiastic endorsement in 1946 to complete rejection in 1955. In addition, the chapter will study the debate between Ḥusayn and, on the other hand, two Marxist writers, ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm Anīs and Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim, on the concept of commitment and the social function of literature.

Finally, the closing chapter of my dissertation studies the journey of commitment in Iraq. In this chapter I investigate the journey of Sartre's *engagement* in Iraq from the 1950s through the 1970s. During those formative decades, I argue, there were two working interpretations of Sartre's engagement in the Iraqi literary scene: one which adhered to a Pan-Arab Nationalist framework, and another communist interpretation which presented the concept as being synonymous with social realism and, hence, establishing strong affinity with the Iraqi Communist Party. I show that those two representations of the concept correlated closely with the unfolding events of modern Iraqi history. In other words, when the communist party was operating (either as a tolerated opposition party during the monarchy, 1921-1958, or as an active participant in the affairs of the state during General Qāsim's rule, 1958-1963), it popularized Sartre's

engagement as a communist one, so to speak, often exaggerating Sartre's affiliation with communism. On the other hand, when the Arab Nationalists took over ruling Iraq and brutally suppressed the Iraqi Communist Party, they propagated a pan-Arabist version of commitment. Such propagation involved, on the one hand, discrediting the communist version of commitment as a foreign concept that was incompatible with Arab culture and, on the other, celebrating the Baʿthist adaptation of *iltizām* as intrinsic and emanating from the Arab *turāth* (tradition). In the chapter, I show how Nāzik al-Malāʾika's "*al-adab wa-l-ghazū al-thaqāfī*" (Literature and Cultural Invasion) fulfilled the former task, whereas Mukhallad al-Mukhtār's "*Ḥadīth fi-l-fann wa-l-iltizām al-thawrī*" (On Art and Revolutionary Commitment) carried out the latter. The chapter also studies ʿAlī al-Wardī's *Usṭūrat al-adab al-rafīʿ* (The Myth of Refined Literature) and al-Sayyāb's "*Al-iltizām wa-al-laʾiltizām fi-l-adab al-ʿarabī al-ḥadīth*" (Commitment and Non-Commitment in Modern Arabic Literature) in order to trace the mutation in the meaning of Sartre's *engagement* in Iraq from a communist concept to a Pan-Arab one.

Each of the three chapters includes an appendix containing English translation of selected articles on the question of *al-iltizām*, which trailblazed (e.g. Suhayl Idrīs's editorial in chapter one), supported (e.g. Raʾīf Khūrī's article in chapter one), and protested (e.g. Badr al-Sayyāb's lecture in chapter three) *al-iltizām*. Although some of the pieces address one another (for example, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's and Raʾīf Khūrī's), I have divided them geographically-- Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's in the Egypt chapter; Raʾīf Khūrī's in the Lebanon Chapter--for easier reference and also for maintaining the consistency of the dissertation chapter plan.

CHAPTER ONE:

Beirut, the Cradle of Commitment

In this chapter I intend to historicize the development of *al-iltizām* (commitment) in Lebanon as a distinct critical concept within the Arabic literary discourse in the 1950s and the 1960s. I begin my account with the launch of *al-Ādāb* (Belles-Lettres), the pan-Arab monthly journal established by Suhayl Idrīs in January 1953. Idrīs, who aimed to establish *al-Ādāb* as an Arabic cultural journal fashioned on Jean-Paul Sartre's call for *littérature engagée* (committed literature), tried to incorporate this call into Arabic culture, I argue, and he used his journal to propagate commitment as the effective literary arm for Arab Nationalism. *Al-Ādāb* editors were concerned that, while the Arab masses that sympathized with pan-Arabism were becoming politically active, Arabic literature "lagged behind" and was failing to deliver its 'nationalist message' (*al-risāla al-qawmiyya*) ("Risālat *al-Ādāb*" 2). In addition, the editors of *al-Ādāb* tried to map out a new direction for Arabic literature that would steer it away from both the disconnected dormancy of academic critics and the rigid militancy of writers associated with the Communist Party. Indeed, those editors felt that Arab nationalism needed to adopt a form of literature that could defeat the claims of social realism, then propagated by writers within or associated with the Communist Party. Thus, I argue, the position staked out by the editors of the journal needs to be understood within its proper Cold War context and the particular situation of those Arab intellectuals who were carving out positions against, on the one hand, the very real and violent legacies of European settler colonialism, and on the other, the clumsy and sometimes brutal maneuverings of the various communist

parties of the Arab world, which took their directions (and, in some cases, orders) from Moscow.

For the editors of *al-Ādāb*, commitment was different from the ready-made concepts of the Communist social realism because, while the concept itself was borrowed from contemporary French philosophy, its application within the Arabic literary discourse was to adhere to indigenous Arab concepts, namely *al-ʿurūbah* (Arabism) and *al-turāth* (heritage/tradition). In addition, the editors reckoned, commitment would appeal to the Arab masses because it promised an emancipatory golden mean between the isolationist art-for-art's-sake call and the programmatic social realism proposed by communists. In other words, the editors of *al-Ādāb* were attempting to carve out a nationalist, anti-imperialist intellectual position that was, on the one hand, neither Communist nor closed to a dynamic and conversation with the "West." However, Communism turned out to be *al-Ādāb*'s less serious detractor. *Shiʿr*, the modernist Lebanese journal established in 1957 by Yūsuf al-Khāl and Adonis (Adūnīs), became *al-Ādāb*'s fiercest enemy because of *Shiʿr*'s advocacy for poetic autonomy, which entailed, among other things, an absolute divorce between literature and politics. Although *al-Ādāb* succeeded in popularizing commitment, its editors failed to agree on *what exactly commitment was* and, most importantly, *how it was to achieve its promised efficacy*. Far from being a weakness, the indeterminacy of the concept (or slogan) of commitment was immensely generative, because in addition to encouraging the publication of socially-engaged literature, *al-Ādāb*'s dissemination of commitment led to important debates about literature, politics, and the role of the writer in society. By the end of the 1950s, not only had *al-Ādāb* become "the mouthpiece of a whole generation of committed writers

and poets" (Klemm 54), it managed to establish commitment as a primary concept in the idiom of modern Arab letters.

I. *AL-ĀDĀB*, THE BIRTHPLACE OF *AL-ILTIZĀM*

Upon his return to Beirut after receiving his Ph.D. from the Sorbonne,[3] Suhayl Idrīs, in partnership with Munīr al-Baʿalbakī and Bahīj ʿUthmān,[4] established *al-Ādāb*, a monthly journal "dedicated to issues of culture," as the cover of the first issue of January 1953 read. The journal became an immediate success. In fact, it became so successful that, in 1956, Idrīs decided to establish his own publishing company, Dār al-Ādāb, to publish and distribute the journal.[5] Salma Khadra Jayyusi (Salmā al-Khaḍrāʾ al-Jayyūsī) says that *al-Ādāb* soon became "the voice of the period," and explains that, at the present time,

> No scholar can study the literary, aesthetic, spiritual, psychological, and intellectual trends of the [mid-century] period in the Arab world without taking into account the role of this important magazine, not only in reflecting the various manifestations of the Arab mind, but also in shaping its concepts of art and life (601).

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[3] He received his Ph.D. in Arabic literature in May 1952. The title of Idrīs's dissertation was, tellingly, "al-Qiṣṣah al-ʿArabiyya al-Ḥadīthah: al-Taʾthīrāt al-Ajnabiyya fī-hā min ʿĀm 1900 ilā ʿĀm 1950" (*Foreign Influences on the Modern Arabic Narrative, 1900-1950*). See Idrīs's *Dhikrayāt*, p. 52.

[4] Idrīs was the editor-in-chief; Bahīj ʿUthmān, the general manager; and Munīr al-Baʿalbakī, member of the editorial board. In 1956, Idrīs broke off the partnership and became the sole owner of *al-Ādāb*. See Idrīs's memoires, especially pp. 55-56, for more on Idrīs's relationship with ʿUthmān and al-Baʿalbakī.

[5] It was initially published by Dār al-ʿIlm li-l-Malāyīn, the well-known publishing company, then owned by Munīr al-Baʿalbakī and Bahīj ʿUthmān. In an interview with al-Jazeera TV in 2008, Idrīs heartily commended his former partners, al-Baʿalbakī and ʿUthmān, for taking "the wild risk" with him to issue *al-Ādāb*. See Kawthar al-Bishrāwī, Majallat *al-Ādāb* (http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/ishrakat/2005/1/10/مجلة-الآداب). (Accessed July 9, 2014).

One of the most critical of the concepts that *al-Ādāb* shaped was commitment. Speaking in 2008, Idrīs said that he wanted to fashion the journal after Sartre's *Les temps modernes*. He had read that journal avidly when he was studying in Paris, he said, because it was "committed … to the call (*al-daʿwah*) to the freedom of people and to the glorification of their struggle."[6] For Idrīs, *Les temps modernes* was particularly admirable because it adopted a commendable political position by standing by the Algerian people in their resistance against the French colonial state without sacrificing its high literary qualities. This position, Idrīs declared, "was, in fact, what attracted me first and foremost to Sartre," adding that

> During the three years I spent in Paris, I gorged myself on the idea [of commitment]. … I became interested in committed literature in general—the literature that makes its fundamental concern the expression of the popular struggle (*al-niḍāl al-shaʿbī*) by means of literature.[7]

He explained that he had tried to incorporate this call into Arabic literature, emphasizing that, with hindsight, *al-Adāb*'s success was attributable to the sincerity of the call. In addition, he believed that two more factors contributed to the instant success and the warm reception of *al-Ādāb*'s launch. First, there was a growing need for a quality cultural journal, he said, "especially after *al-Risālah* and *al-Thaqāfah* ceased publication."[8] The need was particularly acute in Lebanon. Indeed, *al-Adāb* had to compete with only already-dwindling journals, like Albīr Adīb's *Adīb* which, according to Idrīs, "suffered

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[6] Kawthar al-Bishrāwī, Majallat *al-Ādāb* (http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/ishrakat/2005/1/10/مجلة-الآداب). (Accessed July 9, 2014).

[7] All translations from Arabic are mine, unless otherwise noted.

[8] *Al-Risālah*, which was edited by Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Zayyāt, and *al-Thaqāfah*, edited by Aḥmad Amīn, ceased publication in 1953. However, both resumed publication in 1963, before folding publication indefinitely in 1965. See Elisabeth Kendall 245.

from … the tendency to disregard the Arab nationalist concerns (*al-hamm al-qawmī*)—the concerns that *al-Ādāb* upheld strongly."[9] *Adīb* and other similar journals espoused a detached "art-for-art's-sake or literature-for-literature's-sake" editorial policy, Idrīs complained, and they seemed to have lost touch with the needs of their society and fell out of favor with the younger generation of readers. That was the reason behind Idrīs's determination to "outdo" (*atajāwaz*) these journals with the launch of *al-Ādāb*. In addition, Idrīs said that when he was thinking of establishing a literary journal,

> The Egyptian Revolution happened in 1952—the Revolution of Jamāl ʿAbd al-Nāṣir (Gamal Abdel Nasser)—which … maybe surreptitiously … coincided with the inception of *al-Ādāb*. We adopted the pan-Arab kind of thinking that stemmed from the Nasserist revolution (*al-fikr al-qawmī al-munṭaliq minn al-thawrah al-nāṣiriyya*). Although this thinking developed afterwards, it kept the Arab nationalist bearing (*al-tawwajjuh al-qawmī*).

In addition, Arab nationalism became prominent as well because of the rise of another pan-Arab political party, the Arab Baʿth Socialist Party. In fact, Idrīs admitted that "many of *al-Ādāb* contributors were Baʿthists," and that they backed *al-Ādāb* enthusiastically, especially during the journal's early years.[10]

That said, Idrīs's infatuation with the idea of commitment and his dedication to the cause of pan-Arabism featured prominently in the editorial, "Risālat *al-Ādāb*" (*al-Ādāb*'s Message), that he penned for the journal's first issue. Idrīs opened that editorial by lamenting the absence of a worthy Arab literary journal that could respond to the "growing demand among the educated Arab youth" for such a journal and could present them with "dynamic literature" that was capable of delivering a "genuinely aware

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[9] Before his work at *al-Ādāb*, Idrīs published a number of articles in *Adīb*, including a review of Sartre's *Les chemins de la liberté* (*The Roads to Freedom*).

[10] Idrīs hailed the Baʿth ascension to power in Iraq and Syria in 1963 in a celebratory editorial. See, Idrīs 64-66.

message" (Idrīs, "Risālat *al-Ādāb*," 1). Such effort was important as well because of the kind of literature such journal should present--a literature which was "an intellectual activity that [aimed] for a great end" (1). Idrīs did not explain what this great end of literature was, but he said that the effective literature for which he advocated was "the literature of 'commitment' (*adab al-iltizām*)," that advanced the "pan-Arab message (*risālah qawmiyya*)," whose delivery was part of the Arab writer's "grand duty" in order to contribute to the collective and "great pan-Arab project" (1). Again, Idrīs did not spell out the content of the pan-Arab message he wanted Arab writers to deliver. Instead, he merely said that "the concept of such pan-Arab literature," would be so accommodating and wide-ranging in scope that it would be "comprehensive enough to communicate directly with the great human literature" (1-2). In addition to coming short on laying out the terms of the "great end" that the literature his journal aimed to propagate, Idrīs, more importantly, failed to clarify the means he had chosen to arrive at such end, i.e. the "literature of commitment." He mentioned the term twice in the editorial without defining it and without acknowledging its origin in Sartrean philosophy.

Certainly, Idrīs was aware of the association of the term with Sartre's Existentialist philosophy. But at the time of the editorial, Idrīs employed the term "commitment" as a mode of declaring allegiance to a pan-Arab nationalist ideology. Of course, Sartre himself had never advocated commitment in relation to nationalist ideology; it was Idrīs, not Sartre, who labored to connect commitment to an already existing nationalist program. And here, Idrīs was compelled to perform an additional feat, namely to decouple the concept of commitment in its Arab guise from its foreign father, while simultaneously using the French philosopher's name to lend gravity and stature to

his journal's enterprise. Thus Idrīs did not mention Sartre by name, perhaps for fear that his journal would be dismissed as mimicking French Existentialism. At the same time, there is no doubt that the journal built part of its prestige on Sartre's name. After all, the call for resistance literature (*adab al-muqāwamah*) and, more broadly, combative (or "struggle") literature (*al-adab al-munāḍil*) was prevalent and, indeed, powerful at the time, especially given the ongoing (or just concluded) armed conflicts in the Arab world at the time, such as the Algerian war of independence (1954-1962), the 1952 Egyptian coup, , and, of course, the armed Palestinian resistance to the Israeli occupation. In addition, the Arab communists fervently called for politically- and socially-engaged literature through the framework of social realism. Salāma Mūsā's advocacy for the literature of the masses (*adab al-shaʿb*) was fervently debated in Egypt.[11] In essence, then, Idrīs's call for committed literature resembled the type of literature for which those other voices were calling. However, Idrīs wanted to give an aura of prestige to his journal by incorporating a "Western" concept that, he claimed, had advanced French literature towards serving the French "man."[12] He wanted to do for Arabic literature what Sartre had done for French culture.

Furthermore, Idrīs seemed to be mostly concerned with the *intellectual* aspects of the literature of commitment. In fact, this concern sets Idrīs apart from many of his pan-Arab contemporaries who contributed to *al-Ādāb*'s early issues. Indeed, Idrīs's emphasis on the intellectual aspects of literature places him between the camp of the art-for-art's-

[11] Salāma Mūsā (1887-1958), a journalist, writer, advocate of secularism, and pioneer of Arab socialism.

[12] His multiple references to "world literature" (*al-adab al-ʿālamī),* which he mentioned three times in the editorial, were meant to achieve the same air of prestige, it seems.

sake advocates on the one hand, and the proponents for combative (or "struggle") (*al-munāḍilūn*) writers. Reading Idrīs's critical output, it seems that he did not equate (in fact, he did not want to equate) the duty of the resistance writers with that of the resistance fighters. For example, in "Adabunā al-thawrī" (Our Revolutionary Literature), he admitted that the Arabs were experiencing a "'revolutionary state' (*ḥālah thawriyya*)," but emphasized that the ultimate role a writer could assume during such "a fiery stage" was to help direct this revolutionary state by "creating concepts that would help us revolt against ourselves before we attempt to change anything else." (Idrīs, "Adabunā al-thawrī" 1). Idrīs lamented that Arabic literature had remained generally absent from any meaningful engagement with the masses, and that even the progressive output of some Arab writers failed to interact with the "revolutionary state" the Arabs were undergoing. For instance, Idrīs disapprovingly pointed out, literature was noticeably absent from the Egyptian revolution of 1952.[13] It neither incited the masses to take part in it, nor did it take any significant part in the unfolding of the events of the revolution. This situation had to change, he stressed: Literature must precede worldly events, because, otherwise, its role would remain "restricted to that of a reflecting mirror," that had not shaped or taken part in shaping the people's lives (1). Unlike the proponents of "combative" literature, however, Idrīs thought that writers did not carry weapons and fight in battles; they had to deliver powerfully the "message of influence" of their committed literature so that they could "provide the Arab nation with a new drive in order to enable it to ascend

[13] The Egyptian revolution of 1952 was a coup carried out by the Free Officers Movement. The coup abolished the constitutional monarchy and established a republic in Egypt, ended the British occupation of the country, and secured the independence of Sudan. The military dictatorship established by the coup eventually succeeded in making massive reforms for workers' and peasants' rights, and helped bring about genuine social and political revolutions in the country.

to its real position among nations" (2). The committed writer had to lift the masses up intellectually. This was his faithful (and effective) contribution to the revolutionary state. Nonetheless, Idrīs was aware that, for writers to fulfill their role during such a revolutionary state, they needed to be guaranteed "a sufficient amount of intellectual freedom," which, he regretted, was "not available in most Arab countries" (2). Idrīs was quick to point out that it was the duty of the state as well as the masses to make sure that neither the government nor the people sanctioned free speech and, even more, that both should protect the public intellectuals from mob violence.

This emphasis on freedom remained a recurring theme in Idrīs' writings. For example, in a 1964 essay he wrote to rejoice Sartre's rejection of the Nobel Prize for Literature, "Naḥnu wa-Sārtar" (Sartre and Us), he declared that commitment, like any Existentialist concept, required both responsibility and freedom, which Idrīs described as "the two poles of Sartrean philosophy" (Idrīs, "Naḥnu wa-Sārtar" 1). In fact, the emphasis on both responsibility and freedom seems to have refined his understanding of commitment. With this essay in particular, Idrīs's understanding of committed literature began to change. Literature, Idrīs argues, had failed to influence society, citing as an example the 1952 Egyptian Revolution in which literature, he claimed, neither participated nor took part "in raising awareness for it." He thought that, despite the revolutionary state which dominated the Arab countries, literature continued to fail to shoulder its social responsibilities. Idrīs urged the Arab writers to augment their efforts in order to bring about a "literary revolution" through commitment (1). Such commitment, however, was beyond the grasp of individual writers. It required the participation of both writers, on the one hand, and the government and the masses, on the other. The

commitment that would lead to a literary revolution and would “enable the Arab nation to ascend to its real position among nations,” required responsibility and freedom. The former was the choice of the writer; the latter the imposition of society. It was the duty of the writer to exhibit responsibility by writing committed literature in order to take part in “overturning obsolete concepts and substituting them with revolutionary ones.” Idrīs reiterated that such duty, however, would remain impossible to carry out effectively without freedom, out of which “the meaning of life [was] born.” Securing the proper conditions for freedom, Idrīs stressed, was the responsibility of the state—which must show “both deep faith in the value of thought and willingness to defending and safeguarding it from saboteurs”—and the masses, who should stand up to defend the writers “who exercised such freedom if they were attacked because of voicing their views.” Idrīs said that if freedom, the first component of commitment, became available, the committed writers would produce literature that could “cope with all the revolutionary stages of the development of the Arab society.” If committed literature carried out this task, it would then fulfill “the best message any literature could aspire to carry out,” because it would be able to read the signs of its time and steer the upcoming events towards a correct path (2-3).

However, Idrīs still had not clarified what he meant by commitment. Rather, he described it in general terms as the “dynamic literature” that carried a nationalist message. And because he, as editor-in-chief of the journal, left the term unexplained, it remained prone to ambiguity. Indeed, in the issues that followed, numerous and often conflicting explanations of the term were presented by Idrīs and other contributors. In its

first year of publication, in fact, more than twenty articles discussed the term.[14] All of them addressed the relationship between literature and society according to a different understanding of what commitment meant. While the authors agreed that literature should prove its relevance to society, they did not agree on how it was to do so.

After a few issues, *al-Ādāb* editors seemed to have realized that there was confusion about the term and that such confusion did, in fact, weaken the claims of the case they were presenting. So, they published more articles about the topic. The subsequent articles took a more assertive tone in their attempts to present a more systematic definition of commitment. Thus, in July 1953, an article by Dāwūd Jirjīs Darwīsh appeared in the journal, with the title, "Nizūʿ al-adab: bayna al-inḍiwāʾ wa-l-iltizām" ("The Tendency of Literature: Between Participation and Commitment"). The author argued that political involvement (*al-inḍiwāʾiyya*) had played an essential role in "saving" Arabic literature at the beginning of the twentieth century by emphasizing its relevance to the lives of people because it prompted literature to "descend from its ivory tower and walk in the street, before paying a visit to the factory" (Darwīsh, "Nizūʿ al-adab" 42). The reasons behind this descent, however, were political, and not literary ones, because of the "domination of politics … over thought, philosophy, and sciences—therefore, its domination, of course, over art and literature" (42). Nonetheless, Darwīsh explained, the forms and expressions literature adopted due to this involvement stemmed from its interaction with and understanding of "persistent needs at the base of society to which no vibrant literature should turn a blind eye." *Al-inḍiwāʾiyya*, in other words, served Arabic literature well, but now that it had accomplished its mission, it should

[14] For complete list of articles, see Dību 33.

relieve literature of its unnecessary obligations. It served a "temporary task that was necessitated by exceptional circumstances." However, the proponents of involvement did not seem to understand that those exceptional circumstances were over, and that literature was "more sublime … than politics and economics … and any sociological or philosophical creed." At the present time, he argued, literature and involvement were incompatible because involvement, by its very nature, sought to limit concepts and visions in order to channel them into particular directions, whereas literature strived to widen the horizons of any topic it dealt with. On the other hand, Darwīsh complained, every political ideology claimed that it presented a "final" version for human conflict—a claim that was incommensurate with literature's status as "the living picture of the totality of life." Admittedly, Darwīsh emphasized, involvement "had resuscitated … our old literature," but we should accept it only as a "middle ring connecting past literature with the literature of the future" (43).

So, what form would literature take in the future? Darwīsh asked. His response was that it should follow the lead of commitment. When he first read Suhayl Idrīs's call for committed literature in *al-Ādāb*'s first issue, Darwīsh said, he was suspicious of the call and worried that commitment would be "merely a new version of involvement" (43). However, he admitted that his view changed because commitment offered a much-needed message (*risālah*) that would assuredly guide Arabic literature towards a brighter future. The comprehensive vision of *al-Ādāb*'s call and "the picture of the commitment principle portrayed by *al-Ādāb* … left us with a magnificent hope," Darwish argued, adding that committed literature was "a highly developed form of literature," which would "incite our society to terminate the persistent economic, political, and social problems … so that

we ccould overcome the ‘dark status quo’ and step into bright horizons.” Commitment for Darwīsh was a laudable developmental step beyond the *fin-de-siècle* concept of involvement, and it was surely to lead to a better future for *both* literature and politics (44).

However, Darwīsh’s optimism failed to address one of the main objections critics and commentators at the time had about commitment, namely the concern that the concept seemed to imply that championing nationalist causes might succeed at the expense of creativity and artistic talent. Commitment, in other words, seemed like another form of propaganda literature devoid of any aesthetic appeal, which would cleave to a particular ideology. The critics feared that such adherence would, of course, necessarily limit the freedom of the writer.[15] In response, again, *al-Ādāb* published a number of articles attempting to answer these questions. The articles published in 1953 seemed to agree that commitment to society did not mean the production of literature that was devoid of creativity and aesthetic craft. However, as to the question of the writer’s freedom, they seemed to be divided over the issue. Some, especially the Marxist critics, thought that writers should be willing to sacrifice a certain amount of their freedom in order to produce a more fruitful literature. On the other hand, there were contributors who maintained that the call for commitment, in fact, would certainly augment the writer’s freedom. They argued that, since such experience would bring the writer closer to the people, his writings would be a true representation of reality, which by itself was a meaningful exercise of freedom. So, for instance, in “al-Ibdāʿ alladhī naḥtāj ilayhi” (The

[15] See, for example, Shākir Muṣṭafā, “Minn Fawst ilā Hāmlit, maʾsāt al-insān fi-l-haḍārah al-hadīthah,” *al-Ādāb* 2.7; ʿAlī Bidūr, “al-ʿUrūbah wa-l-madhāhib al-muʿāṣirah,” *al-Ādāb* 4.6; and ʿAbdallāh ʿAbd al-Dāyim, “al-Qawmiyya al-ʿarabiyya wa-l-insāniyya,” *al-Ādāb* 4.7.

Creativity We Need), ʿAbdallāh al-Dāyim writes that the first step the Arab culture should take towards its promised renaissance was assimilating the "creativity of the Western thought."[16] For al-Dāyim, not only were Arab writers required to acquaint themselves with the major works of Western philosophy and literature, it was incumbent upon them to transmit the merits of these works into Arabic culture. Such transfer of ideas was the responsibility of the educated class (*al-muthaqqaffūn*) who should inject these valuable traditions into their culture. Assimilation (*al-istīʿāb*), however, did not mean mere copying, he warned. The Arab writers and intellectuals should digest those Western traditions with the goal of surpassing them by producing literature that stemmed out of the everyday life of the Arab peoples. True, writers had the responsibility of producing literature that made use of these intellectual traditions, but they had to base their works on issues that concerned their society. Creativity, al-Dāyim emphasized, stemmed from the tendency to represent the everyday life of society and the desire to overcome any egoistic urges. These two processes, which should necessitate each other, would guarantee the flourish of both commitment and creativity, he assured the readers.[17]

On the other hand, Muṭāʿ Ṣafadī, in his "Iltizām al-adab al-hadsī" ("The Commitment of Intuitive Literature"), agreed with al-Dāyim's call for assimilating the

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[16] ʿAbdallāh al-Dāyim, "al-Ibdāʿ alladhī naḥtāj ilayhi," *al-Ādāb* 2.2: 1-6.

[17] Al-Dāyim's call for translations of the main works of Western philosophy and literature was well received by *al-Ādāb*'s contributors. A number of translations and review essays were published that year. For examples of translations, see Albīr Kāmū, "al-ʿĀdilūn," *al-Ādāb* 2.1; Hinrī Lūfāfr, "Kārl Markis," *al-Ādāb* 2.3; Hārūld Lāskī, "al-Ḥurriyya fi-l-mujtamaʿ al-ishtirākī," *al-Ādāb* 2.3; Jān Būl Sārtar, "al-Baghī al-fāḍilah," *al-Ādāb* 2.5; Niqūlā Bardyayīf, "al-Rūḥ wa-l-qūwwah," *al-Ādāb* 2.6. For instances of studies of Western philosophy and literature, refer to ʿAbd al-Laṭīf Sharārah, "Bawl Falīrī: al-Mufakkir al-siyāsī," *al-Ādāb* 1.1; Shākir Muṣṭafā, "Minn Fawst ilā Hāmlit, maʾsāt al-insān fi-l-haḍārah al-hadīthah," *al-Ādāb* 2.7; and Yūsuf al-Shārūʾī, "Naẓariyyat al-fann ʿinda Tūlistūy," *al-Ādāb* 2.11.

Western intellectual traditions in order to produce "responsible" literature (53). He thoughts that, when the writer had lived in a culture which had assimilated various intellectual trends while maintaining its own character, writing committed literature for such a writer would have become an "intuitive act," that was both creative and socially engaged (53). Living in such a culture would provide the chance to "live life fully," giving the writer the opportunity to "face the contemporary problems, laid out in an aesthetically appealing form, without any need for fabricating [topics]" (54). Intuitive literature, therefore, guaranteed two important things, Ṣafadī claimed: the production of genuinely committed literature, as well as the protection of the writer's freedom since topics would come to the writer "automatically," and she or he would respond to them intuitively without any undue duress (55).

This emphasis on the writer's freedom proved to be crucial for *al*-Ādāb's call for committed literature. In fact, no article on commitment in the first two years of *al-Ādāb*'s life missed the opportunity to touch upon the question of the freedom of the writer. Certainly, the journal managed to proliferate the obsession with the issue of the writer's freedom beyond the confines of its pages. For example, one cannot but notice the influence of *al-Ādāb*'s call for commitment and freedom on the proceedings of the foundational conference of the Union of Arab Writers.[18] That conference concluded with the recommendation that the writer should exhibit commitment to the "greatest pan-Arab cause," while defending the freedom of his fellow citizens because "the freedom of thought and thinkers remains mythical unless the writer raises his fellow citizens to the level of experiencing and appreciating freedom. The writer has to seek his freedom in the

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[18] A summary of the proceedings was published in *al-Ādāb 2.10*, 78-9.

awareness, consciousness, and freedom of his people… Therefore, the conference calls upon all writers to use all means at their disposal in order to struggle to fulfill this cause, which is indeed the greatest cause of Arab Nationalism" (79). These lines look as though they had been copied from *al-Ādāb* editorials--an observation which shows the extent of the journal's influence in the broader literary field.

However, the call for commitment at the time resonated in many ways with the communist call for social realism, and *al-Ādāb* editors seemed to have realized this unwelcome similarity between the two calls. So, Anwar al-Maʿaddāwī, one of the editors of *al-Ādāb* at the time and one of Idrīs's closest friends,[19] took up the task of attempting to distance *al-Ādāb*'s commitment from social realism. In "al-Adab al-multazim" (Committed Literature), al-Maʿaddāwī stresses that, despite the apparent similarity between Sartre's call for commitment and the communist call for "socialist literature," there was a "fundamental difference" between the two calls (12). Commitment sought a form of "idealism for literature" (*mithāliyya li-l-adab*) which emphasized freedom—the writer's as well as the reader's (12). The writer's freedom involved freedom from "subjugation to certain political currents that forced on the writer what agreed with their ideas and views." Indeed, al-Maʿaddāwī said that, according to Sartre, in order to become committed, writers had to break away affiliation with any political party. On the other hand, al-Maʿaddāwī continued, Sartre had also realized that "free and committed literature could not address slaves," and, therefore, readers had to be free as well. Readers should not be "forced to accept only a specific line of literary production that [had] a

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[19] In his memoir, Idrīs calls al-Maʿaddāwī *ṣadīq al-rūḥ* (my soul friend), see Idrīs 117.

designated goal and a planned purpose" (13).[20] Literature had to secure those two freedoms—the writer's and the reader's—in order to "deliver its committed message." Al-Maʿaddāwī said that Sartre put particular emphasis on these two forms of freedom in order to differentiate his calls for commitment from the communist calls for political poetry, because communism "obliterates the freedom of the individual" (14).

Furthermore, al-Maʿaddāwī claimed that Sartre's introduction of commitment had split the literary community into five groups. One group "fanatically" advocated "social literature" and wanted all writers to always write politically engaged literature; another group wanted literature to not merely "portray a truthful image of the problems of society," but rather deliver "the effective cure" to these problems; there was yet another group which agreed in principle with the first group, but disagreed with the first group's insistence that writers should *always* produce politically engaged literature; another group agreed with the third group, but it disagreed with the second group's burdening the writer with "always finding solutions" to social problems (because, otherwise, this group explained, literature might be "asked to deal with things that fell outside its specialty," and, in fact, it might therefore not give the best solutions it could otherwise be capable of providing); and the final group recognized the social function of literature but it imposed nothing on it save the "aesthetic roles (*al-adwār al-fanniyya*) to which every writer must commit (*yaltazimuhā*)." Literature should be content with "expressing truthfully the reactions of the self … in a true life scenario." However, the most satisfying form of

[20] This is another example of the confusion among *al-Ādāb*'s editors about the meaning of commitment. In "ʿAwdah ilā masʾalat al-tawjīh fī al-adab" (Revisiting the Question of Didacticism in Literature), Raʾīf Khūrī said that "literature contains ideas, emotions, and images that guide the reader through *a known route and direct him towards a designated goal*. It is beside the point whether the route as well as the goal are political, social, or ethical. But they have to comprise *a known route and a designated goal*" [my emphasis].

committed literature was the one for which *al-Ādāb* called (14-15). The principles of committed literature, as laid out by Idrīs in the journal's inaugural editorial, represented " a sincere call … which [aimed] to achieve ideal goals," and they convinced the Arab litterateurs, after "weeding out all doubts," that committed literature was "both a liability (*tabiʿah*) and a responsibility (*masʾūliyya*):" it was a liability because it represented "a message of didacticism, reform, and leadership"; and it was a responsibility because "it [was] the duty of the guide, reformer, and leader to exercise freedom in forming his ideas and relay his opinions faithfully." The writer of "dynamic literature," which sought to fulfill the "message of commitment" would perform his task "perfectly" if he could "live the experience of his age," and then manage to relay this experience "as faithfully as he felt it," before "exciting his readers psychologically and intellectually." If the committed writer managed to do this well and pushed the readers to "mimic the experience, think about the problem, and revolt against the status quo," he would have delivered the message of commitment "in the most perfect way possible," al-Maʿaddāwī believed. Such delivery would result in the production of "dynamic literature," which would open up the people's eyes to numerous facts, most importantly "the fact of their existence," and would "push them forcefully" to ponder their fate and their role in this world. In *al-Ādāb*, al-Maʿaddāwī emphasized, he saw hope that such literature would prevail because of its commitment, which represented "the social message of literature," that would provide "social justice for man and liberate him from all intellectual and material yokes" (14-15).

Moreover, al-Maʿāddāwī agreed with Sartre that self-centered arts which "could not express what lies beyond them of ideas, facts, and meanings" should be excluded

from the scope of commitment. However, he disagreed with how Sartre painted the exclusion of arts with a broad brush. Although arts like poetry, painting, and music might seem unconducive to commitment because their basic elements—words and figures, lines and colors, tempos and pitches—might seem self-centered, masterful artists had already shown us that their work could indeed refer beyond the confinement of their tools. Despite the fact that the limitations of these arts forced them to do "lesser perfect role than [other forms of] literature," al-Maʿaddāwī stressed, nobody, not even Sartre, could deny the commitment of Aleksandr Pushkin's poetry, Eugène Delacroix's paintings, or Frédéric Chopin's music. Nonetheless, Sartre's exclusion of these arts was unfortunate because no one could afford to "relief poets and artists from the principle of commitment" al-Maʿaddāwī said. Understandably, however, there were instances of poetry, painting, and music whose quality was beneath the level required by commitment, he admitted. To balance out the situation, therefore, al-Maʿaddāwī suggested that Sartre's rule should be modified to stipulate that, in the case of poetry for instance, those poets who had "neither feelings nor ideas" and resorted to riddling their poems with empty "ornamentation" should be exempt from taking part in the collective effort of commitment (15).

In fine, al-Maʿaddāwī's essay did not resolve the ambiguities in the discourse around commitment that was emerging in the pages of *al-Ādāb*. Rather it complicated and expanded these ambiguities even further. Part of the reason for this confusion was that the editors focused their attention on the *efficacy* of *al-iltizām* rather than its *ontology*. In fact, after the end of *al-Ādāb*'s first year, one can hardly find articles in the journal that dealt with the question of what commitment was. However, there was a

plethora of articles discussing the *ends* of commitment, even as the question of *literary means* remained mute and underdeveloped. Many of these articles viewed the goal of committed literature as solidifying Arab nationalism, because the latter would guarantee the "liberation" of Arab countries, restore the "humanness" to the Arab individual, and cement the notion of "Arabism" (*al-ʿurūbah*).[21] Let us, for instance, consider Raʾīf Khūrī's important article, "Al-Adab wa-l-risālah al-qawmiyya" (Literature and the Nationalist Message).[22] The "Nationalist message" is one of those terms whose meanings change vis-à-vis the speaker's and the listener's preconceptions, says Khūrī. The ambiguity of the term is the result of its ubiquitous use. The ambiguity has to do with the abstractness of the term as well, which makes it very hard to pinpoint its meaning or map out its signification. For Khūrī, however, the term could be summed up in one word: Reality (*al-wāqiʿ*) (13). Not only do the circumstances of reality encode the nationalist message, understanding these circumstances decodes its content sufficiently. The message takes shape and acquires significance because of its concordance with the "core" of the society it stems from—in this case the Arab society. However, the subject of a unified pan-Arab message, Khūrī says, often conflates many branch nationalisms and, in some ways, distorts the content of the nationalist message (13-14).

This is particularly where Khūrī's call for nationalist commitment differed from, say, that of his close colleague Suhayl Idrīs. The latter had a more Nasserite

[21] See, for example, the essays by Raʾīf Khūrī, "al-Adab wa-l-risālah al-qawmiyya," *al-Ādāb* 4.5; Khalīl Hindāwī, "Azmat al-adab al-insānī fi-l-ʿālam," *al-Ādāb* 4.6; ʿAlī Bidūr, "al-ʿUrūbah wa-l-madhāhib al-muʿāṣirah," *al-Ādāb* 4.6; ʿAbd Allāh ʿAbd al-Dāyim, "al-Qawmiyya al-ʿarabiyya wa-l-insāniyya," *al-Ādāb* 4.7; Muṭāʿ Ṣafadī, "Naḥwa tajribah qawmiyya," *al-Ādāb* 4.11; Nājī ʿAllūsh, "Maʿnā al-taḥarrur al-ʿarabī," *al-Ādāb* 4.11.

[22] Raʾīf Khūrī, "al-Adab wa-l-Risālah al-Qawmiyya," *al-Ādāb* 4.5:13-18.

understanding of Arab Nationalism which emphasized “unity”—politically, economically, and socially—between the Arab nations. The so-called “regional” needs of the individual Arab countries were of lesser importance compared to the pan-Arab obligations.[23] On the other hand, Khūrī believed that the emphasis should be laid on the national needs—what the Nasserites would label as narrow “regional” needs—in order to maintain a meaningful pan-Arab ideology. Of course, those national needs would feed into and cement pan-Arabism, but they should not be treated as subordinate to it. However, such emphasis on individual countries did not, in any way, diminish their claim to the pan-Arabist cause, Khūrī emphasized. Take Lebanon, for example. Lebanese nationalism (*al-qawmiyya al-Lubnāniyya*) was, Khūrī opined, “indeed an Arab one because their [the Lebanese’] language is Arabic, their land is contiguous with the Arab land, and their history interacts … with the history of the Arab peoples” (16). However, the Arabness of the Lebanese nationalism did not conflict with its aspiration, indeed “its right,” to attain national independence. But, because Lebanese nationalism was part of a broader pan-Arabism, Lebanese independence became “incomplete and, in many ways, meaningless” without the independence of all the other Arab states which should ensure the liberation from all forms of “colonialism and occupation.” Linking Lebanese nationalism (and its hopes of building an independent and thriving state) to the independence of other Arab countries was not a mere issue of courtesy or convenience. On the contrary, Khūrī, stressed that “the ability of the Lebanese people to establish such [an independent] state was closely related to pan-Arabism and depended on its [pan-

[23] See Idrīs (1984: 63-74; 82-84; 94-95; and 146-153) for an elaboration on his pan-Arab propositions.

Arabism's] victory over colonialism in order to establish for the Arab peoples surely independent states" (16).

The nationalist message, then, is a "liberating Arab message," stressed Khūrī, and it was built on seven inseparable and interrelated "pillars":

1. Toppling all current forms of colonial rule in the Arab countries;
2. Resistance against any form of colonialism that seeks to infiltrate any Arab country;
3. Combating conspiracies, disunity, and sectarianism;
4. Attaining independence and achieving complete sovereignty;
5. Establishing the correct political and social system, which is, in my opinion, the system that manages to comprise freedom, democracy, and social justice;
6. Establishing brotherhood and complete cooperation between the Arab countries; and
7. Combating aggression no matter where it happens or what form it takes (16-17).

Committed literature has the unique capacity to absorb these seven pillars and give expression to them, Khūrī boasted. Such literature was in a unique place to embody these principles because it had the "spirit" (*al-rūḥiyya*) that was necessary to digest and express the nationalist message. It was the responsibility of the Arab writers, then, to "commit to these values, which stemmed from the liberating Arab national message," he stressed. Such commitment was necessary for both political and literary reasons. Khūrī claimed that it served a political goal by securing "freedom, democracy, and social justice" (17). In addition, it served a literary end as well. The life of any literature was concomitant to its relevance to the issues of the society in which it lived. This had been true throughout all ages, Khūrī said, adding that during the ninth century, for instance, when Arabic literature maintained its relevance to Arab society through its aestheticism, literature had the responsibility of attaining "aesthetic excellence in rhetoric and imagery." He explained that well-wrought poem boasting the effective use of multiple figures of speech

was the proof that "the litterateur had fulfilled his grand responsibility: aesthetic creativity." The modern age, however, had presented writers with different conditions and, accordingly, the assessment of the relevance of literature became different. At the present time, Khūrī believed, the writer had both "the responsibility that [was] mandated by his profession" and, more importantly, "the grand responsibility of faithfulness (*al-wafāʾ*) to the values he should believe in," which were, in the case of the committed Arab writer, the values of the message of Arab nationalism. This faithfulness guaranteed the relevance of Arabic literature to Arab life. Khūrī claimed that the existence of Arabic literature as he knew it depended on how sincerely those writers committed to the nationalist message. Any writer who chose "to become irresponsible" by turning his back to this message "would not only hurt the values [of the message, but also] … he would hurt his own writings" and, in effect, would degrade Arabic literature (18).

Khūrī linked the delivery of this nationalist message to what he termed *al-tawjīh* (didacticism), which he first formulated during his 1955 debate with Ṭāhā Ḥusayn. That debate was arranged by none other than Suhayl Idrīs. In 1954, Idrīs, who became the Director of Public Lectures at al-Maqāṣid Islamic College, arranged with the UNESCO bureau in Lebanon to host a debate on the question, "for whom we write?"[24] On October 18, 1954, Idrīs sent an official invitation to Ṭāhā Ḥusayn inviting him to take part in the debate to present the case for "writing for the elite" because, Idrīs said, "if I am not mistaken, Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn believes that the writer must write for the elite." (255). Ḥusayn accepted the invitation, and Idrīs sent to him a follow-up letter on December 9,

[24] The title of the debate was, not accidentally of course, a literal translation of the title of chapter three of Sartre's manifesto on commitment, *What Is Literature?* Accidentally, however, this chapter was the only *What Is Literature?* chapter Ḥusayn did not manage to read before the debate (see chapter two below for more details).

1954 thanking him for accepting the invitation and informing him that "the great Lebanese writer, Mr. Raʾīf Khūrī, will defend the other side of the debate, i.e. 'we write for the masses'" (266).[25] The debate was widely publicized and attracted a large attendance. It was, in the words of Jayyusi, probably "the most important literary debate" in the mid-twentieth century, because it "acquired considerable dimensions and produced much intellectual activity" (576). *Al-Ādāb* reproduced the complete texts of the debate and published them in its May 1955 special issue, appropriately titled "Literature and Life."[26]

Khūrī opened his talk, entitled "The Man of Letters Writes for the Masses" (*al-Adīb yaktub li-l-ʿammah*), by saying that it was unclear what Husayn meant by "the elite." He thought that the term remained unspecific because it was "an utterance that [had] no clear referent."[27] However, for the sake of argument, Khūrī suggested that the elite might denote those who possessed capital, financial or cultural, and he distinguished between two possible groups: the rich and the educated. He was disgusted with the first group. They devalued the poet and looked down at him as no more than "a boon companion, a clown, and a mouthpiece for them." To them, the writer was either an entertainer or a proponent of propaganda whom they easily bought since they assumed that he lived off "the crumbs that fell off their tables." This group hurt literature and culture because they often enjoyed weak and sensual writings that "entertained the animalistic appetite," because they needed literature for lustful enjoyment and for merely

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[25] For further correspondence between Idrīs and Ḥusayn, see Ḥusayn 280 and 308.

[26] I discuss Ḥusayn's contribution to the debate, "The Man of Letters Writes for the Elite" (*al-Adīb yaktub li-l-khāṣṣah*), in the next chapter.

[27] Khūrī, Raʾīf. "Al-adīb yaktub li-l-kāffah." *Al-Ādāb* 3.5 (1955): 2-8.

"passing time with it," Khūrī believed. This was one type of the elite. However, Khūrī said that he regarded Husayn "too highly to suggest that this was the elite [he] exclusively care[d] about and for whom [he wrote]." The other type of the elite, which Khūrī believed was emerging in modern society, materialized in the people who possessed cultural capital: the educated or the cultured (*al-muthaqqafūn*). Khūrī did not object to writing to this type of elite. Alternatively, he tried to problematize the category itself. The educated did not represent a clear-cut type of the elite because "[a] person might become part of the elite in one instance, and that same person would become part of the masses in another instance," he said. The educated themselves were part of the masses: for example the factory technician or the specialized physician were educated people, but they remained part of the masses, he stressed (3-4). In hindsight, Khūrī's argument appears disingenuous, since Ḥusayn's references to the elite clearly meant to denote the educated and lettered classes.

Khūrī continued his argument by saying that, on the other hand, the masses represented a very distinct category: "the masses who work and toll in the different walks of life. The worker in the factory, the farmer in the land, the student at school, the small merchant in the shop, and the junior employee in the office" (5). Khūrī said that he addressed them for pragmatic as well as ideological reasons. The masses were greater in number than the elite, and since any writer was as successful as the number of readers he mustered, Khūrī believed that he, as a successful writer, would address the masses because "in these people I find the largest number of readers." In addition, because the creation of a work of art "requires selection," Khūrī addressed the masses because he had found "in the lives of these people the richest material I could choose for the purpose of

writing." The relationship between Khūrī and the masses was mutually beneficial, he claimed: They provided him with "the richest material," for his writings, and he, in return, wrote for them so that "they would smile and the colors in their life would not faint" (5).

In addition, Khūrī said that there were two ideological reasons behind the call for writing for the masses. First, the call conformed to his philosophy of literature. He believed that literature must be open to the "dynamic, ever-changing life … [where] what becomes old withers and then dies, opening up space for what has born and is becoming youthful and powerful." In a clear jab at the *Nahḍah* generation, of whom Ḥusayn was arguably the twentieth century's most exemplary heir, Khūrī said that the *Nahḍah* had not withstood the test of time. It was time for the newer generation to forego the *Nahḍah*'s preference of aesthetics over substance, said Khūrī, because the duty of the modern writer was to "guide the masses to change life in a way that life itself can accommodate—a kind of change that [was] … beautiful and good" (6). Khūrī believed that literature should pay greater attention to its content, without ignoring form. All literature, Khūrī stressed, influenced society, which in turn influenced it back. Cultural critics needed to be aware of this mutual relationship of interdependence when discussing the role of literature to society. In addition, and more importantly, writers had to be aware of this relationship. Khūrī wanted writers to know that their writings were guided by society and that anything they wrote guided the masses. Khūrī explained that "every literature is, by its nature, both guided and guiding whether the writer is conscious of this act of didacticism or not. Let it, then, be guided by the writer consciously!" This didacticism, however, should not be of the same kind that communists advocated for and it should not be forced

on the writer. According to Khūrī, “the act of didacticism is carried out consciously by the writer who has internalized conviction for the truth” (6-7).

After laying out his case for didacticism as well as the reasons for committing to it, Khūrī moved to talk about the efficacy of didacticism. He believed that literature was performative. It did not only describe the world, it created through language non-existent states of affairs. “Powerful and deep literature, Khūrī affirmed, “went beyond interacting with … issues and problems to bringing them to life” (7). The Arab writer, who himself was part of the masses he addressed, grappled with the issues and problems of his time with the aim of alerting the masses to the severity of these issues and problems. This warning would spur the masses to action, and Khūrī believed this excitement might bring change and improve the lives of the masses. However, because the “writer is the product of his age … [and] he interacts with the masses,” his writings might achieve an even more prominent role. Through the machine of literature, the writer could produce new realities into this world, Khūrī claimed, stopping short of describing how this performative function was supposed to work (8). Nor did he give examples of how it had worked previously. He merely said that the performative aspect of literature that would create a new state of affairs and, consequently, spur people to action in a dialectical fashion would be a kind of the literature of commitment. Committed literature needed the masses as inescapably as the masses needed it. What good was the literature of didacticism if it did not interact with the masses? Surely, Khūrī wrote, “it would remain dead letters” on a piece of paper unless the masses transformed it into “belief, conviction, … determination, movement, and labor.” It was for this reason, Khūrī lamented, that Thomas Mann believed that literature had failed to change the follies and injustices that

plagued the world, leading him to believe that literature was "mere consolation." Khūrī said that literature would continue to be as such unless it changed to "become a force capable of moving the masses," in order to realize its impact and create a better and more engaged world (8).

After the debate, Khūrī realized that he needed to revisit these stipulations in order to explain how "didacticism" worked. So, in a subsequent article, "ʿAwdah ilā masʾalat al-tawjīh fī al-adab" (Revisiting the Question of Didacticism in Literature), he dismissed the classical notion that the poet received inspiration to write poetry which would overflow spontaneously out of his inner self. He also derided the idea that, as far as politically-engaged writing was concerned, the themes (or even specific passages) needed to be dictated by "a political party, a king, or a government" (7). Both of these understandings of didacticism were false, Khūrī affirmed. The writer "derived inspiration for his literature from his inner self … only in a metaphorical sense," because the writer's inner self was "nothing more than a force or an energy" that the writer would use to add sensibility and imagination to the material of his work, which he would have already received "from outside—from nature and society." They provided the raw material for the writer so that he could mold it "in the crucible of his inner self." As an example, Khūrī used an extract from the political poetry of ʿUbayd Allāh ibn Qays al-Ruqayyāt to prove his point. He explained that Qays al-Ruqayyāt's enthusiasm for Quraysh and his disgust with the Umayyads and the Khawārij were equally dictated by Qays al-Ruqayyāt's environment. He merely gave expression to them in an aesthetically pleasing form. They were already there. The poet "was directed/compelled (*muwwajjah*) by his personal circumstances, the environment around him, and the politics of his age," Khūrī

stressed. And the poet gave them his sincerest expression because he was not forced to write the poem. The poet's sincere expressions came truly out of him and they represented didacticism most fittingly because the "act of literary creation is most fitting and most correct when it happens in accordance with the writer's choice and conviction," Khūrī emphasized. (7-8).

But there is an inherent contradiction in Khūrī's argument. If the writer is "guided (*mūwwajjah*)" by "the politics of his age," how can he, then, write the best examples of such "act of literary creation," which "happens in accordance with the writer's choice and conviction" (8)? As though Khūrī is speaking from both sides of his mouth. He wants to prove that all literature is guided by its age and, simultaneously, wishes to convince us that the best representative of such literature is free from any obligation. How can the writer have the absolute freedom to write, when his writings are guided by "environment personality politics of his age"? Khūrī probably realized the contradiction, and that is why he dodged the question of the writer's independence under such circumstances. He did, towards the end of his essay, simply say "this is a question that has come late in this discussion and I will have to postpone answering it in another article" (36). But he never did. However, he did reintroduce the question of performance. Khūrī said that committed literature did not only offer a truthful description of the status quo, it also carried out a performative role and *created* a "better reality for this world" (9). But again, he did not explain how this process would take place. Nonetheless, if we accept his premise for the sake of argument, he could not have chosen poorer examples than al-Mutanabbī and Qays al-Ruqayyat! The latter led an impoverished and distressful life, especially after being sacked from the Medina by ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Marwān. And al-Mutanabbī, who lived in

a time of disturbance when the Islamic empire fragmented, had a tumultuous life seeking patrons in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Iran. He lived in abject poverty towards the end of his life and was eventually killed because of one of his poems. By using these two poets as examples of didacticism, Khūrī was shooting himself in the foot and providing the instant rebuttal to his case. If these poets created their world, who would want to live in such a world?

Nonetheless, Khūrī realized that selling the notion of committed literature to the Lebanese audience in 1950s was a tough business because of the "echoes of bad precedence" (9). The echoes were, of course, from the real associations of Sartre (and many of his ideas) with the Communist Party. These links with communism were, for Khūrī, the "elephant in the room," and the biggest source of frustration to those who sincerely sought to popularize writing politically-engaged literature outside the confines of party restrictions. Khūrī said that the problem was twofold; one was with the "form of Marxism officially executed in the Soviet Union" at large which restricted severely the writer's freedom; and, second, there was the practice of the disillusioned Arab communists who idolized the Soviet experiment and falsely claimed that the USSR was the bastion of intellectual freedom (10). Khūrī said that the "official Soviet Marxists" were keen on advocating engaged literature that served the people in light of Stalin's saying that "the writer is the engineer of the human soul." However, all this proved to be mere talk since the call for writing engaged literature had, in fact, led to "codifying" the rules of writing. Writers in the USSR were instructed—and they were watched very closely—to write only on specific, state-sanctioned topics in light of a defined point of view, Khūrī said. Writers could no longer be the engineers of the soul, because

"everything had … already been engineered for them," complained Khūrī. How could the Arab communists, then, claim that the Soviet Union was the bastion of literary freedom? Khūrī mocked those communists by saying that, because the Arab communists lacked such freedom at home, their illusions deceived them to "imagine" its existence in that "distant promised land." He recalled the Soviet writers' severe condemnation of Beira[28] after he was declared a traitor by the state. "Find me a single literary work," Khūrī challenged the Arab communists, "criticizing Beira before the state and the party announced him as an undercover traitor?" Khūrī assured his readers that the Arab communists would not be able to refer to a single example of criticism even though, according to Beira's indictment, he had been "betraying the country for years and years." The least the so-called "free writers" of the Soviet Union should have done was to "hint at Beira's misbehavior" and betrayal. Instead, however, those writers engaged in writing glorifying "psalms of praise" until the state "signaled to them to change tone." This was the literature of servility, Khūrī emphasized, not of engagement. Furthermore, just because Alexander Yashin was allowed to write self-criticism, or Simonov and Ehrenburg were permitted to engage in a literary debate, that did not mean the Soviet writers had "true freedom," because, Khūrī explained,

> Freedom involves the state guaranteeing an effective legal immunity for these writers to pose to Melnikov, Khrushchev, and other officials questions like these: why did you remain silent for years while, according to your own statements, you knew that Beria was betraying us? Who is responsible for all the unjust deaths and the squandering of national interests as a result of Beria's betrayal?

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[28] Lavrentiy Pavlovich Beria (1899-1953), was chief of the Soviet security under Joseph Stalin. After Stalin's death in March 1953, Beria was promoted to First Deputy Premier. During the coup d'état led by Nikita Khrushchev and Marshal Georgy Zhukov, Beria was arrested and executed on charges of treason.

According to Khuri, Soviet writers could not have touched upon, let alone, posed these questions. This was a form of false freedom which propagated poetry that served the state and the ruling party at the expense of the people. Such practice, Khūrī added, was the "bane of codification" that threatened any call for committed literature. The major difference between *al-Ādāb*'s call for commitment and the communist recruitment of writers for producing literature that adhered to the rules of social realism was that the former was truly free whereas the latter merely programmatic (10).

Putting all these essays into perspective, we can see that, despite the differences between *al-Ādāb* contributors about the exact definition of commitment, they all seemed to agree on a unifying proposition: literature had a message (*risālah*), and the message of modern Arabic literature should be commitment.[29] *Al-Ādāb*'s deployment of the word "*risālah*" was very significant and, especially given its use in mid-twentieth century, it was laden with powerful political and cultural connotations. Most of the pan-Arab political parties shared with the communist parties in the Arab world, to varying degrees, the slogans of social justice, worker rights, and "democracy." However, those pan-Arab parties distinguished themselves from the "blasphemous" communist parties by emphasizing their glorification of the Arab heritage (*al-turāth*) and, most importantly, their deep indebtedness to Islam. For example, the Arab Baʿth Socialist Party, one of the most powerful pan-Arab parties stressed the role of Islam in the formation of the Arab

[29] See the preponderance use of this word, for instance, in Idrīs, Suhayl. "Risālat Al-Ādāb." *Al-Ādāb 1.1* (1953): 1-2.; Al-Maʿaddāwī, Anwar. "Al-adab al-multazim." *Al-Ādāb 1.2* (1953): 12-15; Idrīs, Suhayl. "Al-naqd alladhī nurīd." Al-Ādāb 1.8 (1953): 1-2; Wahbī, Muḥammad. "Adabunā al-multazim." *Al-Ādāb 1.8* (1953): 24-25; Zakī, Aḥmad Kamāl. "Al-masʾūliyya fī al-adab." *Al-Ādāb 2.9* (1954): 17-19; Khūrī, Raʾīf. "Ayyūhā al-adīb, man anta?" *Al-Ādāb 2.11* (1954): 1-3; Khūrī, Raʾīf. "Nurīd naqdan ʿaqāʾidiyyan." *Al-Ādāb 3.7* (1955): 2-3; 74; and Khūrī, Raʾīf. "ʿAwdah ilā masʾalat al-tawjīh fi-l-adab." *Al-Ādāb 3.8* (1955): 7-10.

societies—even though it presented itself as a "secular" party—and, indeed, that it would play a vital role in facilitating the desired unity among those nations. The party adopted the slogan "Ummah ʿarabiyya wāḥidah dhāt risālah khālidah" (United Arab Nation with an Eternal Message). This *risālah*, as the party founder Mīshayl ʿAflaq explains in his book *Fī Sabīl al-Baʿth*, is the eternal message of Islam (ʿAflaq 240-253). *Al-Ādāb* editors were aware that Sartre's *engagement* was part of a more comprehensive philosophy of life. It seems that the editors thought that presenting *al-iltizām* with pan-Arab locution would make up for severing commitment from Sartre's philosophical system and attempting to infuse it into modern Arabic literature. Whereas the French had Existentialism to make *engagement* work, the Arabs possessed Arab nationalism to put *al-iltizām* to full use. However, both Idrīs and Khūrī, the most fervent proponents of commitment, lacked a comprehensive outlook or philosophy within which they might have deployed such concept. So, their presentation of commitment seemed, unfortunately, like an orphan concept, and it remained so despite their efforts to blend it with the ideology of Arab nationalism, because they, more or less, had a simple and populist understanding of *al-qawmiyya* (unlike Adonis, for example, who formulated a more sophisticated understanding of life and art). *Al-Ādāb's* obsession with distinguishing commitment from social realism, it seems, distracted it from explaining how the concept exactly would fit within the framework of Arab nationalism. They might have succeeded in promoting the concept, but their success came at the success of presenting a comprehensive (or, at least, a composed) understanding of commitment. The rivalry they perceived from social realism seemed to have hindered them from actually explaining their own concept.

Indeed, in almost all the pieces on commitment, *al-Ādāb* editors made sure to distance their call for commitment from the communist call for political literature. For Khūrī, himself a former Communist, the communist aesthetic of social realism debased literature because it turned literature into an act of "crowing from a narrow window of the political party," and repeating mindlessly "like a parrot" what the party dictated (Khūrī 1962: 34). In addition, the communist advocacy of social realism had led to the production of aesthetically inferior literature and politically futile stances. Not only did it result in the production of mediocre "propaganda" literature devoid of any aesthetic appeal, it also highlighted the failure of the communists to implement any of the social justice goals they so loudly advocated. On the other hand, however, Khūrī boasted that the Arab nationalists had overcome the political failure of the communist party ("because of the Soviet position on the question of Palestine, which distanced it from the Arab peoples"), and they managed to respond to the aspirations of the Arab masses (35-38). In contrast to the downturn of communism in the Arab world, Khūrī gleefully claimed, pan-Arabism was making tangible gains, pointing out to the fact that, just a few months before *al-Ādāb* launched, the Egyptian revolution successfully deposed the monarchy, and that in the following years Nationalist parties managed to seize power in a number of Arab countries, most significantly in Iraq and Syria. Not only was the commitment *al-Ādāb* proposed superior politically, it was also loftier aesthetically, Khūrī stressed, because it represented the golden mean between the isolationist art-for-art's-sake school and the repressive social realism the communists advanced (42).

Nonetheless, despite *al-Ādāb*'s vehement efforts to distance commitment from social realism, the difference between the established communist literary discourse on

social realism and the emergent Arab nationalist discourse on literary commitment remained vague. After all both advocated for the employment of literature to serve political ends; both claimed that literature should serve society; both championed the idea of humans breaking the intellectual and material shackles of the modern age; and both of them enshrined the freedom of the writer, even if one spoke of the writer as the "engineer" of the human soul, and the other glorified the writer as, in the words of Khūrī, the "hope of the masses" (*amal al-jamāhīr*) (Khūrī 1973: 176). One may speculate that Idrīs and his colleagues had high and sincere hopes for pan-Arabism in the early 1950s, because they saw it as a nationalist *cause* that transcended the authority of the individual Arab states as they actually existed, and thus its clout was pure in the sense it was not associated with an actual ruling faction. It was only later that the Arab states which espoused pan-Arabism—Syria and Iraq, in particular—became such bastions of repression. It was much later that writers were stripped of their relative freedoms and forced to become "committed" because, according to the Arab Baʿth Socialist Party, "no voice is louder than that of the battle."

That said, if there was confusion about the meaning of commitment, there was also significant disagreement among *al-Ādāb* editors on what *exactly* they meant by *al-qawmiyya* (nationalism/pan-Arabism). Let us, for instance, take the two most prolific contributors to *al-Adāb* in this regard, Suhayl Idrīs and his life-long friend Raʾīf Khūrī. For Idrīs, the call for commitment in Arabic literature entailed the implementation of unity between all Arab states. He called for unity in the sense of establishing one Arab political entity—Idrīs called it the Greater Arab State (*al-dawlah al-ʿarabiyya al-kubrā*), which would abolish all the borders drawn up by the imperial powers and restore to the

Arabs their state of unity (Idrīs 1974: 61-64). In fact, in an editorial he wrote in April 1963, Idrīs called on the leaders of Egypt, Syria, and Iraq to declare immediate unification between the three countries, warning them that failing to respond to the just demands of the masses that demanded unification would constitute treason and dereliction of duty (65). On the other hand, however, Raʾīf Khūrī thought that Arab nationalism would reach its goals not by unifying the Arabs under one nation, but by helping them establish their own sovereign states. Those states rooted in a territorial notion of the nation (*al-waṭaniyya*) should support pan-Arabism (*al-qawmiyya*), in return, but every effort should be made to respect the sovereignty of the individual Arab states. In this sense, Khūrī propagated a quasi-Nasserite version of Arab nationalism, with its uncertain stance toward immediate Arab unity. These differences are not insignificant. And, since the realization of national liberation was the goal of committed literature, they certainly complicate the literary idea itself. In addition, there was another level of ambiguity which made the journal's promotion of commitment all the more odd, namely their failure to unpack the concept as a term of literary criticism, that is, as having any bearing on the literary craft (or form) of their profession. Many political poems were published in the pages of *al-Ādāb*, and many of them were called examples of committed literature. And yet, there was not a single discussion where a proponent of commitment explained, in literary critical terms, how such a work represented the tenets of committed literature.

Nonetheless, despite all the ambiguity surrounding the term and its putative ends, and despite the fact that the term provided no didacticism for readers or critics who wanted to read literature according to the terms of the proposed concept, the discourse of

commitment soon came to rule the literary field in Beirut, itself arguably the capital of Arab literary modernity. “The idea of committed literature dominates the Arab world now” (34), a critic happily declared on the pages of *al-Ādāb* in August 1954, and he was not wrong. But the discussion of commitment further intensified, and became even more politicized, when another Lebanese journal, *Shiʿr*, challenged *al-Ādāb*’s call for commitment.

II. *SHIʿR*’S INTERVENTION

After spending seven years in New York as a translator in the UN (and later a freelance translator and editor), Yūsuf al-Khāl returned to Beirut in 1955. Two years later, he and Adonis launched *Shiʿr*, a curious poetry journal. From the beginning, *Shiʿr* wanted to be different. In fact, the journal’s inaugural issue offered no mission statement from the editor, which was unconventional. Instead, there were three short pieces of text in the first number. A one-page poem by the modernist Iraqi poet Saʿdī Yūsuf, followed by a short regulatory note which provided information on the journal, subscription prices, and correspondence address, as well as a few words in the middle of all this on the “poem selection” standards. The selection of the poems for publication, the note stipulated, “does not follow any artistic school the journal editors belong to; the only criterion is the literary work’s ascension to an appropriate aesthetic level (*mustawā fannī lāʾiq*)” (ii). Opposite to this note was a brief untitled piece attributed to Archibald MacLeish.[30]

[30] I say “attributed” to MacLeish because the whole text is presented as a long quotation occupying two pages of the inaugural issue, immediately before the table of contents. Robyn Creswell says that “MacLeish’s published correspondence makes no mention of *Shiʿr*” and that no scholar has managed to trace the text to MacLeish’s writings or letters. Creswell 107

MacLeish's text briefly discussed the state of poetry in the twentieth century, before ending with the following paragraph,

> It is not necessary for those who practice the art of poetry in a time such as ours to write "political" poetry, or try to solve the problems of the age with their poems; they must rather use the requirements of their art for the sake of its own ends, knowing that by way of their art, life has already touched on the life of some here, in the past, and may do so again in the future (4).

Robyn Creswell has argued that the inclusion of MacLeish's text instead of an editorial is meant to highlight *Shiʿr*'s glorification of *naql*—transmission, which emphasized the international character of the journal's content. Expanding on Creswell, we might also note that to place a translated quote instead of the usual editorial serves two additional purposes. First, it provides an air of prestige—all the newly-found Lebanese journals seemed to seek such prestige—by citing the authority of a "Western" writer. Secondly, and most importantly, the absence of an editorial or a mission statement signals *Shiʿr*'s rejection of such manifestoes. Instead, the journal chose to highlight its three major concerns without an inaugural statement: Poetry is a self-contained entity that speaks for itself, thus the inclusion of Yūsuf's poem; translation is at the core of *Shiʿr*'s mission, attested by MacLeish's piece; and the implication that *Shiʿr* adheres to the Lebanese regulations, spelled out in the short regulatory note—we will see the importance of this note shortly.

The same issue of *Shiʿr*, however, contained a short piece by Rīnayh Ḥabashī, entitled "al-Shiʿr fī maʿrakat al-wujūd" (Poetry in the Battle of Existence), which begins by asserting that poetry is superior to philosophy because it can see and understand phenomena that philosophy has scarcely identified and comprehended. Plato, Habashī says, realized the perceptive power of literature and he employed it, through his use of

mythology, in his dialogues. Plato did not use myths to deny reason; on the contrary, he used the imagery in these myths to allegorically explain things "that cannot be understood directly" (88). The Platonic myth, therefore, fulfilled two purposes: one poetic, and another philosophical. Such should the "greatness of original poetry" be, and such was the poetry for which *Shiʿr* advocated, Habashi stressed (89).

Talking about knowledge leads Habashī to discuss the role of poetry, because "knowledge is the world reflected on the mirror of consciousness, [in this case] the poet's consciousness" (89). This statement, Ḥabashī acknowledges, implies that "all poetry is committed poetry. It is committed in the poet's consciousness." Such commitment is not the result of any "political or philosophical decisions" the poet makes. It is merely the result of the poet putting into expression his experience with the world. That is why this commitment is necessarily uneven. "If the poet is superficial," Habashī says, "the world will remain outside his poetry like a view outside a closed window." But, on the other hand, the consciousness of a genuine poet would "humanize the universe," because

> If the poet is truly subjective, and if he brings into the focal point of his existence the manifestations of his sensibility and vision, the wealth of his memories, and his experience with love, death, and freedom, the whole universe will penetrate his soul becoming, through him, a human portrait that is laden with human significations (90).

However, the poet's superior perceptive power comes with a cost, Ḥabashī admits, explaining that, because "we do not realize what we cannot unify," the poet's consciousness has a strong tendency to "unify the world." Whereas science understands the world through the apparent relationships of its phenomena, and philosophy understands the world through discovering metaphysical relationships; poetry wants to realize *both* the physical and the metaphysical, Ḥabashī claims. That is why poetry "can

never reach a level of enlightened comprehension that can be proven" (91). It leads to ambiguous, albeit rich, comprehension. However, Habashī warns against the fallacy which suggests that the more ambiguous poetry is, the more "valuable" it becomes. Those who espouse such a view, Habashī stresses, "do not know the difference between ambiguity and depth." He says that ambiguity is often necessary because it plays a role in representing the poet's experience in and with the world. However, after several attempts at unifying the world, the poet would discover that "the things that make up the world begin to twin," showing unity at the core of their differences. The poet would then realize that, intriguingly, "unity is disparity," because there is a strong affinity between the different things whose disparity "crystalize upon a basis of unity," Habashī claims. He thinks that there seems to be a "contract of peace" between the different components of this world which shows the different things like multiple lines in a single poem. It is the role of the genuine poet, as a "discoverer of unity," he says, to "read this contract and bring it to full realization through his words" (91).

That said, Ḥabashī regrets that only a handful of poets are capable of doing this. And "when poetry fails," he says, "politics is born." If all of us were genuine poets," Habashī imagines, "there would be no reason for politics to exist, except, perhaps, "to regulate the poet's vision in a more practical manner." There would have been no need, therefore, to discuss commitment if that was the situation. Unfortunately, Habashī regrets, not only are we not all poets, but only a few among those who call themselves poets are, in fact, genuine poets. Because genuine poets are scarce—and because the poetry those poets write is itself not always genuine—"politics becomes necessary," he complains. The existence (and precariousness) of politics in today's world "drags the

poet into engaging with it," Ḥabashī complains, because when humanity is fighting for a certain cause, there is no course for the poet to take except participating in the affairs of the world by using "his special voice." However, he adds that the poet's contribution to the cause is different from that of, say, the news reporter in the field, on the one hand, and the soldier in the battlefield, on the other, because although the poet has to "humanize the universe … [through] his calls for justice and love," he, concurrently, has to "uncover for us the miseries of the world," after it has ceased to be the peaceful, humane world we anticipate. Poetry represents meaning in a world that is otherwise filled with lost meanings, Habashī claims (93-94).

Furthermore, there is one more way the poet can call out attention to the dysfunctionality of this world, according to Ḥabashī. The poet may adopt the "poetry of absence" (*Shiʿr al-ghiyāb*), which is a condition that takes place when poets refrain from producing any "valuable poetry." He insists that this form of "negative knowledge" is, in fact, a "positive call to action," because when we realize the horror of existing in a world devoid of genuine poetry, such horror will surely "drive us vigorously to a world full of poetry." In fact, sometimes the poet is forced to abandon poetry because when the world becomes too discordant and fragmented "to the extent that poetry alienates itself from it, the poet is forced to alienate himself from poetry" (94). The poetry of absence offers the opportunity "for the poet," Ḥabashī insists "*as a poet*, … [to engage in] the political struggle." In other words, he elaborates, the poet can indeed be labelled as a "committed poet" only if his commitment is conveyed through the means of poetic expression, because poetry is the committed poet's means and, concurrently, his ultimate end. He may choose to show commitment by other means, which are "non-poetic," but the poet

who engages in such forms of commitment will be doing so not as a poet, but as, say, a politician or a political party activist. However, Ḥabashī emphasized, such commitment, good or bad, falls outside the sphere of poetry and, more importantly, outside the scope of literary criticism and commentary (95). This is why, he forcefully says, literary journals should not be discussing it or, to that effect, any political topic.

Such advocacy for non-political literature in the pages of *Shiʿr* was garnering hostile responses from a number of publications, not only from *al-Ādāb*. For example, in its 1960 summer issue, *Shiʿr* published an uneasy conversation between Yūsuf al-Khāl and the Palestinian writer Salma Khadra Jayyusi (Salmā al-Khaḍrāʾ al-Jayyūsī). The latter had written an editorial in the Lebanese newspaper, *al-Anwār*, entitled "Kuttābunā wa-l-baḥth ʿann al-ḥaqīqah" (Our Writer and the Search for Truth). Al-Khāl was in Paris at the time and, after reading the article, he sent Jayyusi a "personal letter," which she "chose to publish selections from it," along with "a detailed reply addressing what the letter contained, in addition to what she thought the letter contained," the *Shiʿr* editors noted, adding that, in his letter, al-Khāl objected to Jayyusi's call upon poets to "seek the truth," explaining that "there was no truth in our [Arab] life," that poets had to seek (128). If Jayyusi really thought that there was such truth out there, why she was not seeking it herself, al-Khāl wondered. "Instead of writing about the thing, write *the* thing!" he told her [emphasis added]. He lamented what the Arabs were going through, elaborating that

> The real revolution in the Arab world has not been declared yet. The real revolution does not target only colonialism, oppression, terrorism, and the ongoing corrupt social and economic circumstances; the real revolution should target the root causes of these corrupt circumstances. It should launch against the outworn beliefs and anything that confines the mind,

> such as our deplorable understanding of God and our view of man and existence.

Because of such a miserable situation, in fact, the Arabs would not possess “any valuable poetry,” al-Khāl warns Jayyusi (128).

Jayyusi responded to al-Khāl’s objections by saying that “Truth is a grand word that cannot be divided to pieces,” something that al-Khāl had mistakenly attempted to do, because he assumed that he had access to the “absolute truth,” which prompted him to reject Jayyusi’s “truths” in favor of what he thought was “his truth.” Jayyusi told al-Khāl that seeking truth was a hard and arduous mission because it had to begin from a “comprehensive vision,” which many people lacked. If truth was as clear as al-Khāl seemed to say it was, why then, Jayyusi, asked, should poets be asked to laboriously seek to uncover it? As to the Arab’s inability to engage in a real and meaningful revolution, Jayyusi retorted that when al-Khāl talked about Arabs, he overlooked two things. First, he ignored the fact that he was an Arab and spoke as if he was not one. He *was* an Arab, Jayyusi said, and that it was his duty, if he really wanted to seek such a revolution, to take an active part in preparing the right conditions for it. If the Arabs lacked “valuable poetry,” then he was one of the reasons why this was the case, especially since he was the editor of a major *poetry* journal. Second, Jayyusi complained that al-Khāl seemed to forget “the hell” from which the Arabs had just released themselves. That was why he seemed oblivious to the “plethora of reasons” that necessitated the outbreak of a revolution at the hands of those “who [were] not afraid to tell the truth,” but certainly would never happen at the hands of “someone who separated himself from the moving dynamic mass of our revolution and criticized it from outside as if he were a stranger to it,” Jayyusi charged (192).

When al-Khāl read Jayyusi's reply, *Shiʿr* editors claimed, he wrote to her a response letter for publication in the same newspaper, *al-Anwār*, but "the letter has not been published" (129). Al-Khāl said that he took offence that Jayyusi was using "Idrīs and *al-Ādāb* to back up her argument." In addition, he protested Jayyusi's insinuation that there was a "political dispute" between him and her. He claimed that he did not "have any politics" with which Jayyusi might have disagreed. Instead, he held "a personal, non-collective position vis-à-vis history and existence—or man and civilization—which [was] above any 'politics' and, if you would, above any nationalism (*qawmiyya*)." As a poet, he explained, he had dedicated himself to poetry. This dedication entailed devoting his life "to the content of this type of poetry, i.e. man and freedom" (129). During al-Khāl's time, he stressed, there was no form of politics or nationalism that served the content of the poetry in which he believed. Therefore, he dismissed both. However, he considered himself "a soldier aiding not any politics or nationalism, but serving the Arab man," whom he wanted to give "freedom over his life and choices today—not tomorrow, not the day after." True, he confessed, he had been a member of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, from which he "resigned and was sacked in 1947 because of a dispute with its leader about man and freedom and their priority over any political party, nationalism, or creed" (130).[31]

As for Jayyusi's criticism that he talked "from outside" (*minn al-khārij*) and "outside the flock" (*khārij al-qaṭīʿ*), al-Khāl responded that it might have sounded as such because he did not want to be part of the so-called "rising Arab caravan" (*al-rakb al-*

[31] Founded in Beirut in 1932 as an anticolonial and national liberation organization hostile to French colonialism, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party played a significant role in Lebanese politics and was involved in attempted coups d'etat in 1949 and 1961 following which it infamy in Lebanon.

ʿArabī al-ṣāʿid) from whom he had heard only slogans but seen no action. He regretted that his generation had "allowed the fanatic political doctrines to blind it from the truth, which is man with ultimate freedom and dignity." Nonetheless, he was now one of the "true revolutionaries; the true witnesses—not the lying ones—to the current Arab generation." Those true revolutionaries realized that "the gods of the Arab world had died … and they have buried them so that new gods would arise to embody the dreams and hopes, as well as the reality and fate, of the [new] generation," al-Khāl boasted (131). Until this new embodiment took place, he emphasized, any call for an Arab revolution was a premature "claim," which would be mere "talk about the thing, not the thing itself." Interestingly, al-Khāl here is not saying that poetry is a mere expression of the poet's experiences detached from given notions of politics, as he would claim later. He is, in fact, emphatically saying that poetry is capable of carrying out political ends, if it does them *under the right conditions*. These conditions, he lamented, were absent in the contemporary Arab cultural scene because of the "fanatic political doctrines," which, he stressed, diverted poetry from serving the ultimate "truth" which poetry should seek to serve: man (132).

Despite all these "convictions," however, al-Khāl decided to dedicate the Winter 1961 issue of *Shiʿr* to the Algerian war of independence. The move was certainly out of place with *Shiʿr*'s editorial policy, but it was seen as an attempt to garner support and fend off the accusations of being out of touch with the causes of the Arab society. The issue contained a critical article, "Shiʿr al-niḍāl al-Jazāʾirī ʿalā ḍawʾ al-tajribah al-thawriyya" (The Poetry of the Algerian Struggle in Light of the Revolutionary Experience), by Nadhīr al-ʿAẓmah, one of editors of *Shiʿr*. Al-ʿAẓmah agrees with

Idrīs—without naming him—that there was a “revolutionary spirit” (*rūḥ thawriyya*) in the Arab world in the 1950s. However, he says that the Arab poets should not be pressed to produce revolutionary poetry because, whereas the revolution is often urgent, “genuine poetry” always requires “fermentation” (151). Al-ʿAẓmah adds that “it is natural for a revolution to not create its poet at its fiery stage,” because the revolutionary poet should have “a revolutionary mind and spirit,” in order to “live all the burning aspects of the revolutionary experience,” which will enrich his poetry, since

> The process of artistic creation is nothing but an expression of the revolutionary experience itself—a process of the birth of the form out of content. The deeper and more powerful and real the energy stored in the poet’s inner self is, the more powerful, truthful, and sincere the explosion of this energy would be (152).

Not every revolutionary state, however, leads to the birth of a revolutionary poet, al-ʿAẓmah elaborated. The poet might not have the time (or, in fact, the intent) to absorb the revolution; or, alternatively, the revolution itself might not have been laden with rich meanings, he says. In addition, the revolution might just not have a revolutionary poet, for no reason: “it is not dictated that the revolutionary gush be accompanied by a poetic surge,” al-ʿAẓmah says, explaining that neither the French Revolution nor the American Revolution created a revolutionary poet. “Why do we,” he protests, “demand from the Arab poets above and beyond what other poets in the West could not do?” (153).

Al-ʿAẓmah elaborates that, after World War II, the Arabs had to endure two calamities: the “Palestinian tragedy” and the “Algerian revolution.” However, neither of these two events led to the creation of a revolutionary poet. There was, indeed, a plethora of poems which claimed to be revolutionary, but the majority of them were not revolutionary at all (with the possible exception of Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb’s revolutionary poetry, he says, that certainly “stemmed from a genuine revolutionary experience”) (154).

All the other poets, however, wrote poetry that was "revolutionary by contagion," he mocks, because it expressed their feelings about "moments in their lives, not about an existential revolutionary experience that filled their entire lives." This was not necessarily the fault of the poets, al-ʿAẓmah emphasizes. The Arab poets had not been given sufficient time to absorb those events; they were being relentlessly pushed to declare their "commitment." Thanks to "the articles that *al-Ādāb* has been publishing in this regard … the calls for commitment are echoing (*tarunn*) everywhere," al-ʿAẓmah complains, adding that there were four reasons for the prominence of the idea of commitment in the Arab world in the 1950s,

> 1. Our [the Arabs'] social and psychological problems and crises that nag us to take a position;
> 2. The translation of Existentialist literature from French, especially the writings of Sartre and Camus;
> 3. The translation of Marxist and Communist views on literature and thought; and
> 4. The stances of the dogmatic (*ʿaqāʾidiyya*) pan-Arab parties on the general Arab issues (156).

Despite these reasons, however, there was a major difference between the French and the Arab approaches to commitment, al-ʿAẓmah stresses. Whereas "the roots of the Sartrean commitment pertain to a clear vision of life, the universe, and art, our commitment is a forced pan-Arab thing and a borrowed intellectual position." Commitment was not initially part of Sartre's philosophy, he elaborates; however, the post-World-War-II "historical circumstances pushed Sartre to the position of commitment, … [which] stemmed from the essence [of these historical circumstances]. … Commitment was a response to an intellectual, psychological, and nationalist need" in the French case (157). But the Arabs, who suffered from "the split between the soul and form in their contemporary intellectual life," al-ʿAẓmah says, rushed to "borrow" this

"foreign/strange" (*gharīb*) idea in order to address their issues. There would have been no problem, he redresses, if such borrowing was in line with "the Arab psychological and intellectual needs." It should, in fact, have added richness to the Arab experience because it would have shown "openness" to the experiences of others and keenness to "absorb human experiences." But the Arab commitment had proven to be a mere formality; it had no intellectual substance. It was a "formality, an outside" commitment, unlike the "existential, internal" Sartrean commitment (158).

Not only was it a borrowed concept that was not fit to address the "intellectual and psychological" needs of the Arabs, al-ʿAẓmah complains, commitment in the Arab world led to "aesthetically inferior products" because "the artistic character as well as the education of the majority of those [committed] poets had not matured yet" (195). Committed poetry might have been useful "from the nationalist point of view" and served an "instantaneous and contingent local need," but aesthetically it remained unworthy, because "unless the poet is united with the revolution and is availed with revolutionary thought and creation, he cannot become a truly revolutionary poet" (160). That said, there was rich material for poetry in the post-World-War-II Arab world, al-ʿAẓmah promises, because the "poetic geniuses are available," but the creation of revolutionary poetry was hindered by a number of factors, chief among which was the futile call for the "commitment" of the type *al-Ādāb* propagated (160-161).

III. *AL-ĀDĀB-SHIʿR* "POLEMICS"[32]

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[32] In *al-Ādāb*'s inaugural editorial, Idrīs said that he aimed to incite "*maʿārik qalamiyya*" (literally, pen battles) in the Arab world. In the appendix containing the English translation of major documents on commitment, I've chosen to translate the phrase into

When Suhayl Idrīs wrote in 1953 that one of *al-Ādāb*'s goals was to "kindle intellectual issues that would enliven the dormant Arab literary scene and clear the way for discussions, debates, and treatises" (2), he probably was not envisioning the debate that took place between his journal and *Shiʿr* in the winter of 1961. However, this, in fact, turned out to be the first meaningful and widely-read debate *al-Ādāb* engaged in. The two journals had already established themselves as the two premiere literary journals in Lebanon, if not in the entire Arab world. After the occasional skirmishes between the two journals we have seen in the previous pages, *al-Ādāb* launched a strong attack on *Shiʿr* in the form of a collectively-signed editorial in February 1961, under the title "al-Shiʿr, wa-l-haḍārah al-ʿarabiyya!" (Poetry, and Arab Civilization!). Although the editorial did not mention *Shiʿr* by name as the target of the attack, it was widely understood that *Shiʿr* was the target, especially if we understand the title as a double entendre. The editorial emphasized the need for modern Arabic literature to fetch the "living elements" of the Arabic literary history if it aspired to achieve originality and recognition. Such need should have been clear to any "sincere" Arab writer. However, it complained, there was "another group" of poets who attempted to confuse writers and critics alike with a different and unacceptable approach to the Arab past in general, and the literary history of Arabs in particular. This attempt had a notorious precedent, *al-Ādāb* claimed--

> This position goes back to a wretched claim which emerged briefly during the Mandate era and was then quickly extinguished. Its underlying idea was that Lebanon was a Mediterranean country whose civilization was a part of that civilization. As for Arab civilization, it went unmentioned. The partisans of this program might not even have recognized the existence of

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"written polemics," because the etymology of "polemic" traces it back to the Greek *polemos*, meaning "war." I am using "polemic" in the section title to refer to Idrīs's phrase in the editorial.

> Arab civilization, considering Arabism to be a synonym for ignorance, the desert, and the life of Bedouins (65).

Because those partisans, i.e. the *Shiʿr* group, were not sincere, they ignored the fact that it was the Arabs who had sustained the Mediterranean "civilizational roots" for many centuries, the editorialists said, adding that if those partisans were true to their Arab heritage as they claimed, they should have realized that it was the intellectual past that was sustaining any claims they made to "original creativity" (66). The editorial concluded with an interview with Khalīl Ḥāwī[33] who expressed dissatisfaction with the claims of the "new poetry" in Lebanon which seemed to have a disappointingly shallow understanding of the Arabic literary heritage and a superficial understanding of Western modernism. The proponents of this type of poetry would surely fail because, as the editorial concluded, "they do not realize that renewal without originality is mere blind mimicry" (66).

Al-Ādāb, however, was not done. The following month it opened with yet another collectively-signed editorial, entitled "Ulāʾikah al-muzayyafūn" (Those Phones). This time the editorialists wanted to make their target explicit: They mentioned *Shiʿr* openly. Criticizing Unsī al-Ḥāj's prose poem collection, *Lan* (Will Not), which was published by *Shiʿr*'s publishing arm, Dār Majallat Shiʿr, *al-Ādāb* said that al-Ḥāj, just like the rest of the *Shiʿr* poets, used ambiguous language in writings that copied Western literary forms indecorously, not because of any claims to creativity, but because of the ignorance of these poets of Arabic poetry and the rich Arabic literary heritage. This ignorance was clear, the editorialists stressed, in the latest issue which *Shiʿr* devoted to the Algerian war

[33] Khalīl Ḥāwī had been a member of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and published a few poems in the early issues of *Shiʿr*. He later left the party and *Shiʿr* to espouse Arab nationalism.

of independence. They pointed to two particular issues they had with that number, apart from the "bad poetry" it contained. First, the *Shiʿr* poets were not sincere about the Algerian revolution, *al-Ādāb* claimed: "They write on a subject that has been forced on them to write about. The subject is foreign to them. They do not feel the pain of its tragedy in the way that every sincere Arab does" (67). Secondly, *al-Ādāb* wondered why Adonis had not contributed to the issue. They speculated that, maybe, he did not want to displease the French government which had provided him with funds to spend a year in Paris. He should feel ashamed, *al-Ādāb* stressed, because he had remained silent about a central Arab cause, whereas the most prominent *French* writer, Jean-Paul Sartre, spoke on behalf of the Algerian people and denounced French colonialism (68).

On his part, Adonis sent a letter to al-Khāl in which he claimed that he had not read *al-Ādāb*'s editorial, but that he was told about it by fellow poet Jūrj Ṣaydaḥ.[34] After congratulating al-Khāl on the publication of *Qaṣāʾid fī al-arbaʿīn* (Poems at Forty), Adonis took jab at "some people in our [Arab] countries who find their utmost Existential pleasure by living in an environment of unreason and untruth—in an unhuman environment" (177). Those people charged at him, Adonis said, because of his theorization of the Arab heritage. For those people, "the Arab heritage [was] a mummified estate guarded by ghosts;" they did not understand that the Arab past was both "rich and complex," and, therefore, it was necessarily open to different interpretations, and it accommodated conflicting views. Otherwise, Adonis elaborated, if we were to agree with *al-Ādāb* editors that their interpretation of the Arab past was the

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[34] *Shiʿr*, 5:18 (Spring 1961), 175-181. Adonis's claim that he did not read the editorial was meant as an insult; from the response it is obvious he did, in fact, read the editorial quite carefully.

only valid one, we would have been effectively condemning the Arab heritage as "simple" and "superficial" (178). In addition, Adonis elaborated, the Arabs themselves were different and, accordingly, viewed and assessed things and phenomena differently. "We are Arabs," Adonis said emphatically, "we are thinking humans who ponder their existence and think about everything: life, God, man, and civilization. We are not a herd or similar copies" (179). However, the people at *al-Ādāb* would not accept such logic, Adonis complained, because they were engaged in "politics, religion, racism, stupidity of the soul, and prostitution of thought and existence" (180). He explained that when he said that "*Shiʿr* represented an Arab movement," which included "genuine Arab poets," he did not mean to use the word Arab "politically, religiously, or demagogically," in stark contrast to the way the pan-Arabists at *al-Ādāb* used it. They wanted to drag Arabs into "their spiritual barrenness and limited horizon," because they were fabricators, Adonis charged, who would "direct (*yuwajjihūn*), forge, and usurp," arguments. "You are wrong," Adonis addressed *al-Ādāb*, "and history is [the judge] between us!" (81).

Al-Ādāb responded to Adonis' letter to al-Khāl with "al-Wujūh al-mustaʿārah" (The Borrowed Faces), an editorial that criticized both Adonis and al-Khāl. The editorialists flat out said that Adonis was not an Arab anymore. *Al-Ādāb* accused the *Shiʿr* poets of reviving the anti-Arab *Shuʿūbiyya* of the Abbasid age with their views on poetry and culture which intended to harm Arabic literature. "When have Adonis and his friends ever called themselves Arabs?" *al-Ādāb* asked, and "when have they called their magazine and its movement an Arab movement? And when has the party they belong to ever stopped proclaiming the bankruptcy of Arabism?" (1).[35] Al-Khāl's poem "*al-Duʿāʾ*"

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[35] The party is the Syrian Social Nationalist Party.

(The Prayer), for example, was “a yearning for paganism” and an attack on the values of the Arab society, the editorialists claimed, adding that al-Khāl used Tammūz as a figure of resurrection and glorified the Phoenicians at the expense of any figure from the rich Arab heritage. Nonetheless, and despite the all the damages *Shiʿr* was doing to Arabic literature, the editorial concluded with the promise to the readers that *al-Ādāb* would completely ignore *Shiʿr* and that it would not bother them by any more mentioning of or response to the rival journal’s disruptive contributors (2).

However, *al-Ādāb* spoke too soon. On December 31, 1961, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) attempted a coup against the government of Fuʾād Shihāb (Fuad Chihab). A group of about forty soldiers along with hundreds of SSNP members, many of whom with paramilitary training took part in the failed coup. The attempt was put down by the Lebanese military and state security forces. Indeed, the coup was doomed from the outset because it was unpopular and it happened at a time “when the situation in Lebanon seemed hardly favorable … [especially because] Lebanon was experiencing a period of relative stability and economic growth” (Beshara 2). In addition, many people saw in the failed coup an assault on the Lebanese legitimacy. The participation of the SSNP made matters worse.[36] *Al-Ādāb* used the failed coup as a pretext to attack *Shiʿr*. Its February 1962 issue opened with the expression of utmost relief that Lebanon “was saved from the terrifying disaster that a group of Western imperialism agents had plotted for it” (1). The failed coup should give the Lebanese and the Arabs a pause to ponder the role of fifth columnists, the editorial suggested. Such agents were not only active in politics, *al-Ādāb*

[36] The 1961 failed coup was not SSNP’s first attempt to seize power in Lebanon. The party had carried out an unsuccessful revolt against the government of Bishārah al-Khūrī in July 1949. For more details, see Adel Beshara, *Lebanon: The Politics of Frustration—the Failed Coup of 1961* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005).

stressed, because "this conspiracy was operative in a number of fields," including poetry. The editorialists added that, at *al-Ādāb*, they

> Tried more than once to expose it [the conspiracy] in the field of culture, where the conspiracy was nourished at the hands of a group whose chief aim was the destruction of the Arabic heritage, the propagation of anarchy, and the spread of "rejectionism." It made extremism and madness its law while claiming to represent the new tendencies in Arabic literature. In that sense, it effectively participated in facilitating the criminal conspiracy that nearly overwhelmed the country and tore down its pillars (1).

Al-Ādāb saw *Shiʿr* as the SSNP's medium for continuing its policies by other means. In other words, *Shiʿr*'s claim to neutrality and non-partisanship was devious, according to *al-Ādāb*, because the journal had found a way to conceal its real political objectives under the guise of dubious art-for-art's-sake claims. The unsuccessful coup highlighted the fact that the apparent absence of ideology in *Shiʿr* was, in fact, fully ideological.

This editorial seemed to have touched a volatile nerve at *Shiʿr*. In an unusual move, the journal devoted the first ten pages of its Spring issue of 1962 to publish a collective editorial, aptly entitled "Ilā al-qāriʾ" (To the Reader). The editorial explained that *al-Ādāb* had repeatedly used politics to attack *Shiʿr*, because it was incapable of using poetry (or literature) to critique the journal. It added that *Shiʿr* was "proud of the reactions to its inception," because such reactions, positive and negative alike, were "an indication of the vitality of the [Arab] world" (6). In the same spirit, it would have welcomed any debate with *al-Ādāb*, had it not been for "the infiltration of the spurious, the profiteers, and those who want to serve personal or political ends, even though they are ignorant of the ABCs of poetry (*abjadiyyat al-shiʿr*)." Those infiltrators on culture and literature "misrepresented" what should have otherwise been a literary debate, and they constantly "direct it (*yūwajjihūnahu*) towards other directions that have nothing to

do with poetry" (7). The banality of *al-Ādāb*'s commitment showed itself clearly in its "unpoetic accusations" against *Shiʿr*. *Al-Ādāb* had no "real intention to serve Arabic poetry," and it merely used literature to propagate its editors' version of a pan-Arab ideology, the editorial claimed, complaining that such practice had been going on for some time, but that it became very clear in *al-Ādāb*'s latest issue. The editorial quoted the passage I have cited above from the February 1962 issue to showcase how *al-Ādāb* was, in fact, using the rhetoric of literature to "agitate the [Lebanese] authorities against *Shiʿr* journal" (8). The editorialists said that they, in fact, did not mind discussing "the political accusations against some of *Shiʿr*'s poets," even though the accusations were unfounded, but they asserted that such discussion should have happened "on a different platform, and at a different level, i.e. apart from modern poetry and poetic modernization because the political and the poetic should not be conflated, and neither should be judged on characteristics of the other" (9). Nonetheless, the editorialists decided to answer those "unpoetic accusations." They begin by saying that no person "should be indicted because of his past." That said, the main leaders of *Shiʿr*, Yūsuf al-Khāl and Adonis, were once members of the SSNP, but they both had left the party, the editorial explained: al-Khāl "withdrew from the pan-Arab party and was sacked in 1947." As for Adonis, he had "outgrown organizational restrictions," and abandoned all party activities in 1958 (10). However, neither al-Khāl nor Adonis would "profiteer from their past party affiliations," the editorial stressed, because this past was "part of their individual and existential experiences, including its mistakes and immaturities." Their past was not for sale, and they pondered its good and bad "in a silent internal monologue before themselves and before the ultimate truth," the editorialists stressed (11).

Al-Ādāb's propagation of pan-Arab commitment proved both its limitation and delusion, *Shiʿr* said, because such call presumed that Arab culture was homogenous, which was far from truth. Moreover, such call conflated Arabism and poetry, which *al-Ādāb* thought were quintessentially related to each other. This was not true, the editorial declared: "Arabic poetry is something, and Arabism is something else—there is no relationship between them at either the poetic or the aesthetic levels" (12). Although Arabism was a historical condition that united the Arabs, *Shiʿr* said, the task of the poet was not to engage in "political and demagogous practices," which sought to "measure the Arabism of a person." Instead, his role should have been "creating the environment for freedom," which would encourage honest debates and sincere intellectual grapplings with the problems of society. Such freedom would surely have promoted thought to "become the master of itself," which, in turn, would enable the Arab man to "say 'no!' with the same confidence … that [nowadays] pushes him to say 'yes!' to … [the authority of] God and the ruler," *Shiʿr* said (13).

Like many other Arab journals, *al-Ādāb* pushes forth "a certain ideology … [and] it commits to … strict rules about what it publishes," *Shiʿr* claimed (14). This commitment to publish likeminded opinions not only blinded *al-Ādāb* (as well as its readers) from reading alternative views, but it deprived them from the possibility of listening to such views. On the other hand, *Shiʿr* claimed to be "concerned neither with the poet's political views nor with his nationalist, social, or metaphysical ideas, nor even with the content of his poem … [*Shiʿr*] is concerned with the [poem's] aesthetic level, i.e. with the level of the experience." It was the sincere expression of this experience that would have led to freeing the Arab mind, *Shiʿr* stressed, adding that freedom was of

utmost importance for the Arab individual in order to be able to "experience his being." Man, *Shiʿr* emphasized, was "more important for us than any political party; he is more important than any ideology" (15). This essential emphasis on discarding ideology, the journal maintained, was at the core of *Shiʿr*'s belief in "non-sectarianism (*al-lamadhhabiyya*)…[and] non-partisanship (*al-lataḥazzubiyya*)." Indeed, *Shiʿr* claimed it was "leading a poetic movement … but it is a movement whose core is research, curiosity, and discovery, unyoked by any [political] involvement (*inḍiwāʾ*) and outside Ideology." If *al-Ādāb* had any objections to this movement, *Shiʿr* remained all ears, its editors claimed, as long as the objections were about poetry and aesthetics. *Al-Ādāb* should refrain from resorting to *ad hominem* tactics when discussing literature, the editorial stressed repeatedly (15).

But it was impossible not to resort to *ad hominem* tactics. *Shiʿr* editors wanted to ignore the fact that, in their debacle with *al-Ādāb*, what they were debating was not literature, but politics. I am not making this claim in order to discuss how their debate about literature happened within political parameters that neither *Shiʿr* nor *al-Ādāb* could escape—although such a discussion is worthwhile indeed. I am saying that *al-Ādāb*'s largely *ad hominem* editorials were carefully written to expose al-Khāl's and Adonis's relationship with Anṭūn Saʿādah's SSNP. Although *al-Ādāb* accused al-Khāl and Adonis of continued affiliation with the SSNP, both had indeed left the party before the launch of *Shiʿr*. However, *al-Ādāb* continued to attack their legacy and implied that al-Khāl, Adonis, and others were simply hiding their allegiance to the SSNP and that *Shiʿr* was the Party's cultural arm. With each of these attacks, *Shiʿr* responded by trying to steer the discussion back into the realm of literature and poetics. While there is truism in *al-Ādāb*'s

charge that *Shiʿr* advocacy for non-political poetry is itself a political statement, I disagree with their insinuation that this political statement was intended to serve the SSNP. With the heat of the moment, *al-Ādāb* failed to understand—or, indeed, maybe ignored to understand—that the *Shiʿr* editors started the journal in order to disavow their SSNP legacy. Al-Khāl and Adonis, I think, were not reflecting on their past "in a silent internal monologue," as they claimed; they were actively detracting attention away from this past by advancing the modernist idea of aesthetic autonomy. European modernism surely provided them with the viable tools to carry out such diversion. In other words, I believe that al-Khāl and Adonis did not espouse aesthetic autonomy merely because of their belief in modernism; it is the other way around: they propagated modernism because of its calls for aesthetic autonomy. They found in modernism the right ideology to deny ideology: they were more interested in starting afresh than they were in "mak[ing] it new."

So, with hindsight, one may understand the appeal of pan-Arabism and aesthetic autonomy for *al-Ādāb* and *Shiʿr*, respectively. Arab nationalism was on the rise and, in fact, lived its heyday in the 1950s through the 1970s. *Al-Ādāb*'s adoption of pan-Arabism proved to be very popular then. On the other hand, *Shiʿr*'s call for non-politics at a time of, in Suhayl Idrīs's words, "heightened revolutionary state" seemed out of place, but it was a necessary measure for al-Khāl and Adonis to divert attention away from their past SSNP affiliation. In the end, *al-Ādāb* succeeded in propagating commitment as a way to address the political function of literature, and by the 1960s, *al-iltizām* was in full sway.

APPENDIX I: TRANSLATION OF KEY DOCUMENTS

1. Idrīs, Suhayl. "Risālat *al-Ādāb*." *Al-Ādāb* 1.1 (1953): 1-2. This is *al-Ādāb*'s inaugural editorial by Suhayl Idrīs, al-Ādāb's editor-in-chief.

The Message of *al-Ādāb*

Suhayl Idrīs

During such a dangerous turning point in the modern Arab history, there is a growing demand among the educated Arab youth for a literary journal that carries a genuinely conscious message (*risālah wāʿiyah*).[37] The inception of *al-Ādāb* (Belles-Lettres) stems from appreciating this critical need. The message which the journal is putting forth builds on a number of larger fundamentals.

Primarily, the journal believes that literature is an intellectual activity that aims for a great end—that end is the goal of dynamic literature which, through intimate interactions with society, both influences and is influenced by that society. The present situation of the Arab countries requires every Arab patriot (*waṭanī*)[38] to exert immense

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[37] Translating the phrase to, say, "message of awareness" would have made it more readable in English. However, I have decided to translate *wāʿiyah* more accurately, though a bit awkwardly, as "conscious." *Waʿī* is the acceptable translation of "consciousness" in Arabic philosophical writings. I have opted for a more philosophical translation of the term because of its importance in Sartrean Existentialism.

[38] The difference between *waṭanī* and *qawmī,* as referring to distinct political leanings, was just beginning to formulate in the 1950s. In fact, Idrīs used the two terms interchangeably throughout that period. However, in his writings after the Iraqi and the Syrian coups d'état in March and February 1963 respectively, we can notice him using the two terms distinctly: *qawmī* referred to the enthusiastic member of the Pan-Arab homeland, whereas the provincial *waṭanī* now denoted a person concerned with narrow, country-specific concerns. See Idrīs (1976: 55-57; 74-79; 105-106). For a discussion of the use of the two terms in a different context, see Amatzia Baram, "Qawmiyya and Wataniyya in Baʿthi Iraq: The Search for a New Balance." *Middle Eastern Studies* 19.2 (1983): 188–200; and Jerry M. Long, *Saddam's War of Words Politics, Religion, and the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004, 49-53. See also Charles D. Smith's review of *Imagined Identities, Imagined Nationalisms* for a

efforts, in his particular field, to liberate the Arab countries and raise their political, social, and intellectual levels. After all, in order for literature to be true, it must not be isolated from the society in which it lives.

Al-Ādāb's major goal is to become an arena for conscious writers[39] who live the experience of their age and bear witness to it. By reflecting the needs of the Arab society and expressing its concerns, these writers pave the way for the reformists to use all viable means to remedy the situation. Therefore, the literature that *al-Ādāb* embraces and calls for is the literature of "commitment" (*adab "al-iltizām"*) which springs from the Arab society and flows back into it.

In calling for such effective literature, the journal carries an idealist Pan-Arab message (*risālah qawmiyya*). For the conscious group of writers who derive their literature from their society are capable, with time, to create a conscious generation of readers who would feel their role in society and form the core of admirable patriotic citizens. Thus, the journal contributes, through its writers and readers, to the great Pan-Arab work, which is the grand duty of every patriot.

That said, the concept of such pan-Arab literature will be wide and comprehensive enough to communicate directly with the general human literature, as long as it works to bring back human respect to every citizen, advocates social justice for him, and liberates him from any material and intellectual yokes. These objectives, of course, represent the ultimate goal of humanity. Therefore, the journal shall take part in creating human literature that encompasses and deals with the whole civilizational

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discussion of *qawmiyya*'s and *waṭaniyya*'s incompatibility with Benedict Anderson's understanding of nationalism.

[39] Idrīs calls writers here *fiʾat ahl al-qalam* (literally, class of those belonging to the pen).

question. Such human literature represents the final stage that the different world literatures aim to reach.

In addition, part of the general approach of *al-Ādāb* is to present the works of a number of creative writers who prefer seclusion and silence to having their work appear in weak publications that do not give a good idea of modern Arabic literature. By bringing them out of their seclusion, the journal offers the opportunity for those writers to regain self-confidence in order to do more creative work and to enrich Arabic literature with new output. In this regard as well, *al-Ādāb* will try to highlight the vigor, maturity, and richness of modern Arabic literature. It will celebrate the local flavors of each literature and encourage the exhibition of its unique aspects. Its pages will also host writings by authors who believe that they faithfully express the characteristics of their local literatures.

Moreover, *al-Ādāb* will attempt to kindle intellectual issues that would enliven the dormant Arab literary scene and clear the way for discussions, debates, and polemics.[40] Such an initiative will surely have a vital role in encouraging both writing and reading activities. And those robust activities will give foreigners the correct idea about modern Arabic literature and its role in the world literature.[41] Indeed, the contemporary Arab output is almost unknown among non-Arab circles, and the main reason behind this

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[40] Idrīs uses the phrase *al-maʿārik al-qalamiyya*, lit. pen battles. Earlier he calls writers "people of the pen" (*ahl al-qalam*)—see note 3 above. Instead of translating the phrase literally as, say, "battles of the pen," I've chosen to render it as "polemics," since the word "polemic" comes to us from the Greek *polemos*, meaning "warlike" or "battle."

[41] *Al-ḥarakah al-adabiyya al-ʿālamiyya* (literally, "global literary movement"). I think Idrīs here meant the production of literature around the world, rather than any particular "movement," hence my rendering the phrase simply as "world literature."

absence is the lack of an esteemed literary journal that presents the writings of respected writers and showcases the contemporary Arab intellectual activity.

While *al-Ādāb* will try to present the non-Arab literary circles with a faithful picture of the Arab intellectual activity, it will pay considerable attention to foreign literatures as well in an attempt to give Arab readers a clear picture of the most recent Western output by reviewing, studying, and evaluating it. As a result, the journal will offer its readers a general, wide-ranging culture. Moreover, *al-Ādāb* will allow the work of Arab writers and intellectuals to interact with the cultural writings of the West, giving it strength and depth, while at the same time maintaining its essential characteristics and traits.

Furthermore, the journal will pay special attention to literary criticism and fiction. For the former, *al-Ādāb* will attempt to objectively evaluate classical as well as the modern works of literature, putting each work in its right place without consideration to any previous judgments that were pronounced solely for either laudation or vilification. We will, in addition, welcome all types of self-criticism in this regard. As for fiction, the journal will dedicate a generous space for the new generation of writers who represent their age in the best way possible by deriving inspiration from their society.

With all this in mind, *al-Ādāb* will, ultimately, become an important reference in the library of modern Arabic literature, readily available for those who want to acquaint themselves with the Arab intellectual activity. Specifically, I have in mind the Orientalists who complain constantly about the lack of the references that would enable them to study contemporary Arabic literature. In each issue, the journal will publish

exhaustive studies by specialists from various Arab countries about the different trends of modern Arabic literature.

With such message and method, *al-Ādāb* presents itself to its readers, hopeful of receiving their encouragement which would enable it to continue carrying its message and striving to achieve its method.

2. Khūrī, Raʾīf. "Al-adīb yaktub li-l-kāffah." *Al-Ādāb* 3.5 (1955): 2-8. This is a transcript of Khūrī's response to Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's "The Man of Letters Writes for the Elite," during the UNESCO-sponsored debate, For Whom the Man of Letters Writes?, held in Beirut in April 1955. *Al-Ādāb* reproduced the complete texts of the debate and published them in its May 1955 special issue, appropriately titled "Literature and Life."

The Man of Letters Writes for the Masses

Raʾīf Khūrī

Respected audience, dear Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, if there is a writer or lover of literature in the Arab east who is so ungrateful and conceited as to attempt to underestimate your generosity towards him and towards Arab culture, thought, and enlightenment, that person is not me! And, if I am allowed a place among the Arab littérateurs and may talk as one of the diligent writers in this patch of Arab land on the Earth, please allow me to salute the pioneer in you who has carried us to mounts and pinnacles from atop of which we managed to overlook luminous and wide horizons of ancient Arab heritage, inveterate Greek heritage, and modern world literatures. There is not one among us today who has not received generous education and enlightenment from you. Indeed, you have honored and elevated me today by standing next to me as a debater, occupied by nothing other than the truth—whether the truth stands by you or not—to address a vital question that concerns every writer and citizen inasmuch as the writer is a human being who cares about the food of the soul as much as he does the food of the body. My utmost hope, after all you have taught me, is that I do not become like the ungrateful person rebuked in these lines

I taught him archery every day,

But, after mastering it, he shot me![42]

أعلمه الرماية كل

فلما اشتد ساعده رماني

يوم

I say this because, in this matter where our opinions diverge, you have chosen the more difficult of the two opinions. Undoubtedly, you have taken this position out of gentlemanly chivalry in order to give me, your opponent, the surest and easiest position for defense and offense. For this, I thank you!

My dear sir, for whom do you write? For the masses or for the elite? The position you have taken compels you to say that you write for the elite. But who are those elite people? I am asking for clarification, because the general public I write to is well known: the masses who work and toil in the different walks of life. The worker in the factory, the farmer in the land, the student at school, the small merchant in the shop, and the junior employee in the office. These people represent my public because, for one thing, the logic of my work as a practitioner in the art of writing pushes me to address the largest number of readers and, in these people, I find the largest number of readers. In addition, I write for these people for a graver reason. When I began writing I had to choose a subject matter for carrying out the task of writing, and I have found in the lives of these people the richest material I could choose from for the purpose of writing. I have to choose because every artistic creation requires selection. I choose from their mirth and sadness, pains and dreams, and what they aspire to and strive for in their everyday life. Thus, I take from them, and give back to them. They give to me so that I do not bankrupt; and I

[42] The line is attributed to Maʿan bin Aws al-Muzanī.

give to them so that their existence does not become dull and the colors in their life do not fade.

Moreover, there is a more serious reason behind writing to the masses. As a writer, I ensure that what I write produces a fruitfully didactic (*tawjīhī*) impact on my reading public. And this public is the majority. They represent the backbone without which there can be no people, nation, or country. The didactic impact I seek to impart on the masses may take several forms: refining their aesthetic taste; sharpening their perceptive faculty which aspires to comprehend and control the world; boosting their to seek their country's freedom and independence; establishing social justice for them; crushing any form of colonialism under which they live; resisting the wars of enslavement and pillage that beset them; or seeking peace, education, and welfare for them (and, by extension, for the whole humanity). But whatever didactic impact I want my writing to have, it will remain a dead letter unless it interacts with this majority, transforming itself into belief, conviction, and light in their minds; anger, challenge, love, and sacrifice in their chests; determination, movement, and labor at their hands.

In a chapter on artists and society, the German writer Thomas Mann writes that,[43]

> Art is the last thing [remaining] that weaves illusions about how it influences people's fates. Although art has made ugly everything that is repulsive and abhorrent, it has never been able to stop evil. Art has ensured to bestow reason and dignity upon life, but it has always been incapable of putting an end to the most trivial of follies. Art is neither will nor power. It is mere consolation.

This is what Mann think and, despite his esteem and erudition, I find him wrong. In fact, the human experiences that we call history prove him wrong as well. Or else, what of the

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[43] Khūrī is referring to Mann's talk "The Artist and society" (1952), which Mann later reprinted as a chapter in the volume *Altes und Neues*.

holy books like the Bible and the Qurʾān—I mention them as literary immortalities—and the works of John Locke, Denis Diderot, Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Payne, Maxim Gorky, etc.? Have they all been mere "consolation" as Thomas Mann says? Have they not taken part in conditioning people's fates? Were they not crucial forces during spiritual and material events like the Christian and Muslim renaissances; the English, American, French, and Russian revolutions? As for the issue of the failure of art to stop evil and end follies, let me respond in a way that might lead us to deal with philosophical questions: what good is Good if Evil ceases to exist? What are reason and wisdom if folly disappears?

That said, however, Thomas Mann is not entirely on the wrong, because art is often incapable indeed. But when? And how? Art is, to devise a definition that serves the purpose of the current discussion, ultimately images and ideas expressed in an aesthetically appealing form. Certainly, these images and ideas do not have an impact by themselves. The ones who carry the impact are the humans whom the images and the ideas inspire. The English thinker John Locke said that the authority of the king is not a divine right, but it is a contract between the king and the people. Rousseau later advocated for such a contract as well in his *Social Contract*. Had this idea not been instilled in people, under the right conditions, and become a form of didacticism (*tawjīh*) in the people's consciousness, it would have remained a dead letter on paper and would not have had the impact it did during the English and the French revolutions.

And why need I go so far afield? My debater, Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, himself put forth an opinion one day about pre-Islamic poetry, which in itself might not have been extremely serious, but in fact was exceedingly momentous because it constituted a robust

offense on a frozen mentality that was passively complacent with what it had inherited from its forefathers. Dr. Ḥusayn delivered a severe criticism of the traditional way of looking at things, and, therefore, his opinion represented a daring call for liberation and renewal in one specific field, but it went beyond that to demand liberation and renewal in other, more precarious fields. Dr. Ḥusayn's opinion exasperated a group of powerful and influential people who beleaguered him and burned his books. Those people managed to do this because Dr. Ḥusayn's opinion was limited to himself as well as a few western orientalists and a handful of Arab researchers. In other words, Dr. Ḥusayn's statement did not resonate with the masses. In addition, the aspiration to liberation and renewal was not an issue that had developed in the people's consciousness at the time. Neither were burning books and persecuting researchers a cause that concerned the masses or caused a wild wave of condemnation. Unless art becomes a force that moves the masses, it will indeed remain incapable of inspiring and exciting human beings, just like Thomas Mann said, and it will remain sheer aesthetic flamboyance and mere ideas and images.

If Dr. Ḥusayn is still unconvinced by my argument, I ask him to allow me to refer him to a field of which he is the unrivaled master. I want to remind him of the introduction he wrote to the *Epistles of Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ* (*Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*), the renowned philosophical society in the history of Arab thought. When Dr. Ḥusayn wanted to depict the milieu of the society during the fourth century AH (the tenth century CE), he said of the Abbasid age: "… there was incessant oppression. Sanctities were violated. People who had committed no crime were sought out and arrested. Assets were confiscated and seized without right."

This explains the political dimensions of the thinking of Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ, despite their attempts to disguise these dimensions. The group realized that they lived in a land they called "the state of the people of evil," and argued that all states "must arise at a specific moment and fall at another." Then they affirmed [according to Ḥusayn] that "this state of the people of evil had reached its end, and it was time for its destruction and demise so that the state of the people of good would be established. They concluded that the state of the people of good would arise when meritorious groups gathered in one place and agree on adopting one opinion, one religion, and one sect. Afterwards, they would sign an agreement stipulating that they would support one another and act like one person in dealing with all their affairs."

Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ took the discretion of drafting an ideological basis for the "one opinion, one religion, and one sect," which led them to a form of syncretic philosophy into which details I will not plunge. (However, I should remark the enlightened position the group adopted regarding their respect for the multiplicity of religions and the diversity of sects within a single religion.) They concluded that every religion had a claim to right and that all religions aimed for the same goal, and that their multiplicity went back to their respective historical circumstances from which they had emerged, and that the diversity of sects within one religion was to be attributed not to questions of right or truth, but to clashing interests and conflicting schemes. The least we can say about these statements is that they are worthy of considerable attention because they point us to the fact that there was ecumenical understanding and coexistence among religions (and among different sects of the same religion) in a land that has been hurt by the exploitation

of the multiplicity of religions and sects at the hands of both insiders and outsiders who spread mistrust and plant the seeds of turmoil and blow venom into the air.

However, the experiment Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ carried out did not lead to its intended results despite the fact that the weakness which plagued the Abbasid state since the time of al-Mūtawakkil desperately needed such an experiment. Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ were not able to destroy the state of the people of evil, nor did they manage to establish the state of the people of the good. In addition, they failed at achieving their enlightened position concerning the multiplicity of sects and religions. But why? Specialists enumerate many reasons for this failure. However, I suspect that one of the most serious reasons was that, when organizing their society, Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ had put their hopes on a small group of selected people whom they called "the righteous well-doers" and they became kept to themselves within the very limited circle of this minority or elite (*al-khāṣṣah*), as I think Dr. Ḥusayn would call them. Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ failed to open channels between themselves and the masses—a step that would have helped their ideas transform epistles written in ink to a force rising up amongst the people.

Nonetheless, it seems that Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ, when compared to our other medival thinkers, were better in this regard. For the majority of our bygone thinkers had reckoned that they had exclusive ownership of thought, and they remained suspicious of the masses and viewed them as foolish and stupid. The most famous of classical Arab philosophical stories, *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*, instructs us that there was one religion for the masses and another one for the elite. The elite were in charge of reason and invention; the masses had to be content with copying and imitation. Philosophy existed exclusively for the elite. The masses should be content with faith and submission. Keeping this in mind, we cannot

ignore the severe consequences this mentality inflicted on the masses, the formation of society, thinkers, and on thought itself. Such way of thinking made light of oppressing people, allowing countries to fall into ruin, corrupting society, and punishing intellectual activity and thinkers by pushing them towards seclusion, schizophrenia, and sometimes hypocrisy.

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My dear sir, I asked you in the beginning of this debate about the elite for whom you say you write. And now I re-pose the question to you. Even more, I see in the word “elite,” sir, an utterance that has no clear referent. If we make the issue about money and influence, the “elite” becomes a euphemism for a group of powerful and rich people who grossly squander money on food, drinks, and clothes, and who, with their gross wealth, adopt rich, purified habits, and exercise etiquette. I regard you too highly to suggest that this is the elite you exclusively care about and for whom you write. Those people, save a few, seldom see in literature anything but a commodity such as a frivolous ornament or some shiny makeup that they buy in order to break their routine and fill the emptiness that suffuses their lives and distresses them from time to time. Those people rarely put up with the idea that the littérateur is anything but a boon companion, a clown, or a mouthpiece for them. Someone who lives off the crumbs that falls off their tables in a form of disdainful business, which is doing business with literature!

On the other hand, if we make the issue about science, precision, taste, and competence, the “elite” becomes a metonym for what we call the cultured (*al-*

muthaqqafūn). Particularly in our age—an age, filled with daring experiments, that has seen the widespread of knowledge and education to the extent that, in order to master all or some aspects of them, one needs to specialize in only one of the fields of knowledge—the educated began chasing the elite, and vice versa, to the extent that the lines have blurred. A person becomes part of the elite in one instance, and that same person becomes part of the masses in another instance. What do you, sir, think of the worker in a textile factory or a farmer in a modern farm—are they educated or not? Of course both of them are educated in a certain aspect because the nature of the work in a textile factory or a modern farm, including operating machines and experience with fabric or land farming, suggests a form of education. So, are the worker and the farmer part of the masses or the elite? And, to cite another example, what do you consider a skillful physician who is unique in diagnosing diseases but is the silliest person on earth when it comes to talking about sociology, philosophy, history, poetry or even land farming—is he educated or not? And is he part of the masses or the elite? Or the case of the gifted painter and sculptor who is totally ignorant of dancing, music, and poetry—is he educated or not? Is he one of the masses of part or the elite? And this astronomer who would not understand a word from *al-Muʿadhabbūn fī al-Arḍ* (*The Sufferers*), because it is not a paper on the atom, gravity, the solar system, or Copernican—is this astronomer educated or not? And is he part of the masses or the elite? Or, lastly, how about the case of the *Ṣaʿīdī* farmer from Upper Egypt who liked your book after reading (or hearing about) it, and found in it aspects of his life and depictions of his concerns—do you consider him uneducated and part of the masses for whom you do not care to write?

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My dear Dr. Ḥusayn and esteemed audience! There are numerous theories about literature and the role of the writer. One theory sees in literature an abduction to an enchanted world: marvelous events, wondrous imagination, musical language, well-woven narration, and creative figures of speech like metaphor, metonymy, and symbolism. This theory sees nothing in literature beyond pleasure, entertainment, and consolation that the writer, dwelling in an ivory tower, creates for his readers and listeners out of his ingenuity or the unseen from which he derives inspiration. On the other hand, there is a theory that sees in literature a complete dedication to lived reality and a depiction of what this reality entails in terms of the world's beauty and ugliness with no regard to taste or morals. Literature is no more than art for art's sake. If we follow this theory more closely, we might find that the meaning of art has degenerated to mere form with no consideration to content. According to this theory, the writer is no more than an artist who is a master of describing or depicting what makes life in these forms, or, in other words, he knows no more than weaving expressions.

Furthermore, there is yet another theory that sees in literature an openness to dynamic, ever-changing life—ever-changing because what becomes old withers and then dies, opening up space for what has born and is becoming youthful and powerful. The writer, then, does not convey a copy of the real world, and he is not mere describer of the forms that reality shows him or mere weaver of words. No, the writer is the one who points out in his depictions and descriptions certain life phenomena that grow out of the aspects of life that wither and die, not with the intention of resulting in pleasure,

entertainment, consolation, or verbal ornamentation. The writer highlights these aspects for the purpose of inserting into the consciousness of the masses which of these phenomena around them are on their way to die and which ones are growing to live. The writer aims to guide the masses to change life in a way that life itself can accommodate—a kind of change that is also beautiful and good, because the well-composed artistic creation is, ultimately, an accord between the possible and the imaginable, between the artistically beautiful and the morally good.

Surely, I am one of those who believe in the latter theory of literature. For me, literature is an individual act of creation, but with a social, *not* metaphysical, subject matter, which springs out of the dynamic, ever-changing life of the people and pours back into this dynamic, ever-changing popular life, making it more conscious of its dynamism and change. In addition, the subject matter flows through the artist's soul after he retires to himself in order to tackle the task of selection. The writer selects from the minutest details in the literary creation, i.e. vocabulary, style, and imagery, to the most general foundation of literature, i.e. the subject matter. By subject matter I mean that content which, in order to become subject matter, necessarily relates to the new and growing life phenomena, and which addresses the masses, not the chosen elite. At the same time, the subject matter combines artistic and ethical acts, contrary to what some philosophers think, like the Italian thinker Benedetto Croce[44] who prefer to befog the nature of art and artistic creation with the ambiguity that he calls intuition.

What I have just said about the writer's openness to the life of his people in order to distinguish which phenomena are dying (in order to resist them) and which ones are

[44] Benedetto Croce (1866–1952) was an Italian idealist philosopher. He was President of PEN International from 1949 until 1952.

coming to life (in order to support them) entails that the writer becomes some sort of philosopher. Every art, whether the artist agrees or not, leads to a certain way of looking at the world and, subsequently, prompts a specific way of knowing and thinking. In other words, it leads to philosophy. Unequivocally, our age necessitates that the writer willingly becomes a philosopher, especially a social philosopher, who spells out the kind of philosophy which aids him to realize that life is not stagnant and is ever changing. In addition, the artist has to be mindful of the direction life is taking, given its constant change and renewal. And, lastly, the writer has to realize the source of force behind this process of change and renewal, i.e. the masses—and it is to these masses that he should address his writings!

Certainly, you, sir, know better than I do that each age has its own issues and problems which intensify and persist to become the issues and problems of the masses of that age. And, again, you know better than I do that any literature worthy of its name cannot but interact with the issues and problems of its time and stamp it with its own distinct characteristics. Indeed, if it is powerful and deep literature, it goes beyond merely interacting with these issues and problems to bringing them to life. I say this because human beings, including writers and artists, are not mere spectators in the drama of this existence—the universe, nature, or call it what you will—but they are the heroes of this drama and, throughout its performance, they give it purpose and meaning. Therefore it has become imperative for the literature of any age to deal with themes that are derived from the issues and problems of that age which represent the anxiety of the masses of that age. The writer cannot overlook these topics because he is the product of his age. Also,

because the masses are the motif for writing, he interacts with the masses and both influences and is influenced by these matters.

Furthermore, our age, as you know sir, has confronted the people with specific issues and problems which have intensified and persisted to become the issues and problems of the masses. These issues, I think, revolve around four topic: national independence, freedom and democracy, social justice, and peace among peoples (or, to be more specific, among states, especially the powerful states). The reason for the emergence of these four topics is human beings' increased realization of our humanity and our enablement to pass from the current state of our humanity to a higher form, with all the implications this involves: rejecting colonialism, ugliness, and maladies; establishing brotherhood, security, freedom, mercy among humans; creating a soul that is higher, purer, and closer to God; and giving the human hand and mind the upper hand over nature in order to dedicate all its resources to spread happiness and beauty in people's lives. The littérateur of an age is held responsible for ensuring that his literature connect intimately with these topics, deriving both content and spirit from them. Once he has done this, he may experiment as much as his talent allows with titles, arts, styles, and forms as long as his literature is directed towards the masses.

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Dear Dr. Ḥusayn and esteemed audience! Now is the time, I think, when I need to state clearly what I mean by writing for the masses. By writing for the masses I mean exactly what I have just said: the writer has to derive spirit and content of his literature from the

main issues and problems of the age, which are, I assure you, the anxieties of the masses of that age. It is irrelevant in this regard whether some people (among the masses for whom the man of letters writes) have reached the level of consciousness about these issues or not, because they will undoubtedly reach it soon. In other words, my understanding of writing for the masses does not condone the banal idea that says that the question of writing to the general public revolves around weak expressions, superficial meanings, and cheap topics which entertain the animalistic appetite of humans or their later instinctive tendencies. To me, this is not a form of writing for the masses. On the contrary, it is a type of writing that is encouraged either by certain grossly rich people who want to pass time with it, or by people who want to keep the masses occupied with such nonsense in order to drive them away from serious and well-wrought artistic literature.

Undoubtedly, someone might object to my statement by saying that the masses do not understand or have a taste for such serious and well-wrought artistic literature. In response, I have to quickly rectify my statement: we should not confuse between the literature that is artistic and well-wrought and the literature that is plagued by difficult vocabulary and weighed down by overdoing, complication, and ambiguity. Once we keep this in mind, we will realize that simplicity, readability, and clarity are not incommensurate with high composition and sublime art. One the contrary, they go hand in hand, just like they do in the finest of literary masterpieces. With this clarification collapses one of the supposed reasons for discouraging writing to the masses, namely that the general public do not understand serious artistic literature or that they do not fully appreciate it. And I cannot find closer evidence than the works of Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

himself, especially his *al-Ayyām* (The *Days*), to showcase how clarity, readability, and simplicity do not hinder high composition and sublime art. Indeed, in the case of *al-Ayyām*, they did not only not hinder such high composition and sublime art, but they were the reason behind this sublimity and the reason why the masses have kept reading Dr. Ḥusayn's work. In addition, such is the case with the proverbial lines from the poetry of al-Mutanabbī which are elevated sublimity the artistry of which no one can deny. These proverbs have lived in the people's language and become part of their everyday expressions. We should keep in mind that every language is originally the language of the people, invented by the masses, and that it becomes mummified in books if it does not toil to acquire life from what the people derive and coin every day. To put it differently, even in artistic expression, the people take far less from the writer than what they give him.

There are indeed a number of literary masterpieces that do not yield to understanding easily, and their meanings and beauty might not be readily revealed. Truly, some works take years to become comprehensible, and other works might change meanings with the advent of years. However, this statement does not hold true only in regard to the masses; it applies to the elite as well. Else, show me where this elite is that understands and appreciates Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Where are the elite who understand this masterpiece and appreciate its beauty without perusing it dozens of times and reading dozens of books explaining and commenting on it, on its poet, and on analyzing his genius and his age? Therefore, in this regard, there is no difference between the masses and the elite. They are all masses. All there is to this issue is that, by their very nature, understanding literary masterpieces requires repetition, detailed study, and accessibility

of several references to aid us in our study of them. In fact, Dr. Ḥusayn is the most qualified person to *not* defend this position. Otherwise, I will have to ask him why he has not left the elite alone to gain by themselves what he did about al-Maʿarrī, Ibn Khaldūn, and other leaders of thought whom he studied in a famous book.

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Dear audience, I am certain that much of what I have said and set out to defend tonight in the position to which I have committed (*mawqif iltazamtuhu*) on this issue is filled with echoes of bad precedents that you and Dr. Ḥusayn have recognized. The elephant in the room here is the form of Marxism that is officially executed in the Soviet Union. This is not the venue to deal with all aspects of Marxism or the Soviet experiment, but for the sake of truth and justice for you, me, and the cause, I say: I strongly believe in literature that is both guided and guiding (*al-adab al-mūwajjah wa-l-muwajjih*). Even more, I think that every literature is, by its nature, both guided and guiding whether the writer is conscious of this act of didacticism or not. Let it, then, be guided by the writer consciously! If the freedom of literature and its autonomy are thought to mean freedom from didacticism, both the freedom and the independence, along with the literature they seek to characterize, are empty and false claims. Freedom is not the absence of responsibility, neither is exploitation the lack of care and concern. But I want to insist vehemently that the act of didacticism is carried out consciously by the writer who has internalized a conviction for the truth after he has come to recognize it under the circumstances that allow recognizing such truth. This is the concept of freedom of the

writer in my opinion. Consequently, I strongly denounce any attempt to impose didacticism on the writer, by force or by incentives from the state or the ruling party. I insistently deplore any meaning of didacticism that justifies the intervention of the state or the ruling party in the affairs of literature.

Furthermore, I think that literature is not merely form, but it is a consortium of form and content. I also think that literature must interact with the issues and problems of its age, and it should single out which phenomena are growing and which ones are withering and dying, dealing with the topics that strengthen and persist. But I do not accept that these statements lead to codification, by the state or the ruling party, of either form or content. It is imperative for literature to have an element of dissonance with its surrounding. Literature has to criticize the things around it, along with what comes with these things, including the state and its leaders. Indeed, literature would lose all purpose if the state and its rulers see it as a mirror for Narcissus which they commend if it shows beauty, but readily condemn if it shows Narcissus his wrinkles and the ugliness of his face.

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Official Soviet Marxists are infatuated with repeating this statement: “The writer is the engineer of the human soul.” True! But writers become the engineers of the human soul only if everything else has not been already engineered for them. Thus says the free socialism I believe in.

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Moreover, there is the role the masses play in the reception of literature. While I think that literature is an artistic creation that the writer brings about by means of a psychological response (i.e. the writer affects reality as it affects him) and that the writer should direct this creation to the masses, I strongly denounce any attempt to evaluate writers by verdicts that the masses improvise. Fermentation is necessary for literary works, certainly, and it should be equally important when it comes to verdicts about literary works. Plato in his dialogues ridiculed the foolish practice that was prevalent in Athens, Sicily, and Italy whereby the audience instantaneously determined the quality of the play they had just seen by show of hands. The play that received the most hand counts was deemed the best. What can I say? This method did not succeed even in sending honorable men to the parliament. How can it succeed in choosing the best of literary works?

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I also need to point out that writers are not businessmen and literature is not an economic good, like capitalism wants to make them. This system that alienates the humans from their own selves and from the people around him, and which translates human values, even happiness and artistic success, into financial numbers.

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In conclusion, I say that, since writers are the engineers of the human soul—under the condition I emphasized—literature, then, has a magnificent value and a sublime message. However, such value diminishes and the message loses its force if literature does not connect with the masses, touching their consciousness, enlightening their acumen, and moving them to more of beauty and good in their existence.

3. Khūrī, Raʾīf. "ʿAwdah ilā Masʾalat al-Tawjīh fī al-Adab." *Al-Ādāb* 3.8 (1955): 7-10. In this article, Khūrī responds to some of the criticisms against his contribution to the UNESCO-sponsored debate with Ṭāhā Ḥusayn. This piece serves in many ways as an appendix to the article above.

Revisiting the Question of Didacticism (*al-tawjīh*) in Literature

Raʾīf Khūrī

Wide-ranging and multifarious was the response to the UNESCO debate about the question, "For Whom Writers Write, the Elite or the Masses?" The response was both anticipated and understandable. It is enough that Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn took part in the debate and the topic around which the debate was organized might very well be the most important issue in our age insofar as the role of literature and the task of the writer are concerned. There is not enough space here (and, quite honestly, I do not think it is useful) to discuss all the responses and commentaries on the debate. However, I feel compelled to thank all the people who have followed the debate, whether they support my position or Dr. Ḥusayn's, or have a different opinion on the question of the debate. I shall continue to benefit from everyone's comments whenever possible.

That said, I desire to revisit one of the main issues in that debate which garnered much discussion, namely, the question of didacticism in literature. What do I mean by "didacticism" in literature? I mean that literature contains ideas, emotions, and images that guide the reader through a known route and direct him towards a designated goal. It is beside the point whether the route as well as the goal are political, social, or ethical. But they have to comprise a known route and a designated goal. Literature should not be

content with having readers who merely find in it pleasure, gratification, and delight; it has to compel the readers to take a certain position and to exemplify this position in their everyday life. It is not enough for readers to show admiration for an embellished phrase or a felicitous expression, nor is it sufficient for them to merely venerate ideas, emotions, or images in the literature they read. However, this invites a number of questions. Where has the writer derived these ideas, emotions, and images for his writings? Has he derived them from within himself as some people claim? Or, have these ideas, emotions, and images been dictated by a political party, a king, or a government? Certainly, we may look at the sources from which literature comes in this way, and say this: either the inner self of the writer serves as the source for his literature—he listens only to it, and he cares only for its inspiration—or a government, a king, or a political party "guide" the writer and impose on him what he should write.

But this understanding of didacticism is false and misleading. In the first place, it is only in a metaphorical sense that the writer derives inspiration for his literature from his inner self. For the writer's self is nothing more than a force or energy which is thinking, sensitive, and imaginative. This energy receives from the outside—from nature and society, both of which influence and are influenced by the writer's self—the materials from which it fashions literature. Let me cite as an example an extract from ʿUbayd God ibn Qays al-Ruqayyāt—I am choosing him because Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, expressing a polite and gentle sarcasm, wondered who was guiding Qays al- Ruqayyāt. The latter said in a famous poem,

> I long for the time when my tribe was one,
> Undivided by whims and quirks,
> Before other tribes dared fancying
> Quraysh's rule, and enemies rejoiced.

O you who desire Quraysh’s demise,
Know that in God’s hand are its life and downfall.
Muṣʿab is a light from God
Dissipating darkness before his face.
Powerful is his rule,
Untarnished by conceit or oppression.
O my eyes, weep over Quraysh. But
Can sobbing restore what is lost?
Fearing the loss of the banner,
Quraysh caused its demise!
How can I sleep
When the turbulence storming Syria
Distracts the father from his sons,
And prostitutes the chaste virgin?
I am disgusted by you, sons of Umayyah,
For you are my enemy!
The deaths at al-Ṭaff opened wounds in me,
Which heal only with your deaths!

حبذا العيش حين قومي جميعٌ   لم تفرق أمورَها الأهواء

قبل أن تطمع القبائل في ملك   قريش وتشمت الأعداءُ

أيها المشتهي فناء قريشٍ   بيد الله عمرها والفناءُ

انما مصعب شهاب من الله   تجلت عن وجهه الظلماء

ملكه ملك قوة ليس فيه   جبروت ولا به كبرياء

عين فابكي على قريش وهل   يرجع ما فات ان بكيت البكاء؟

معشر حتفهم سيوف بني العلات   يخشون ان يضيع اللواء

كيف نومي على الفراش ولما   تشمل الشام غارة شعواء؟

تذهل الشيخ عن بنيه وتبدي   عن براها العقيلة العذراء؟

انا عنكم بني امية مزور   وانتم في نفسي الاعداء

ان قتلى بالطف قد اوجعتني   كان منكم لئن قتلتم شفاء!

Did Qays al- Ruqayyāt devise the subject matter of this poetry from within himself? We hear him talk about the fragmentation of Quraysh[45] during his age into different factions: Zubayriyyūn, Hāshimiyyūn, and Umayyads. He is discussing the desire of some tribes to take over Quraysh's leadership—he may be referring to the view of the Khawārij[46] that the caliphate is a right for any Muslim who fulfills its requirements and secures the pledge of allegiance (*bayʿah*) for assuming it. In addition, Qays al- Ruqayyāt talks about a group of people who desire the obliteration of Quraysh—he may be referring to the Khawārij as well or to the Mawālī, and especially to the Persians who remained disgusted and disgruntled by the fact that the Arabs, the boorish barefooted people from the desert, had conquered their kingdom and subjected them to their rule. We hear Qays al-Ruqayyāt talk about intra-Quraysh tensions, with each group within the tribe fearing that it might lose might, which led to civil wars in which many people from Quraysh perished. Then we hear him talk about other things: Muṣʿab ibn al-Zubayr's rule,[47] and the slaughter of al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī and his followers, and the persecution of the Hāshimiyyūn at the hands of the Umayyads. Are these materials not from the core of the Arab Muslim society? Unequivocally, they came to Qays al-Ruqayyāt from outside himself, i.e. from his own age and immediate environment. What his inner self added to these materials,

[45] A powerful merchant tribe that controlled Mecca in Pre-Islamic times. Prophet Muhammad was born into the Banū Hashim clan of the Quraysh tribe.

[46] A group that appeared in the first century of Islam during the crisis of leadership after the death of Muhammad. It broke into revolt against the authority of the Caliph ʿAlī after he agreed to arbitration with his rival, Muʿāwiya I, to decide the succession to the Caliphate following the Battle of Ṣiffin (657).

[47] Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr is son of al-Zubayr ibn al-ʿAwwām and Asmāʾ bint Abī Bakr, daughter of the first Caliph Abū Bakr. He led a rebellion against the Umayyad Caliphate but was defeated and killed in Mecca in 692 AD.

however, was the emotions he experienced about these materials. His inner self added the sadness over Quraysh's defeat and worry over its destiny, admiration for Muṣʿab ibn al-Zubayr, abhorrence for the Umayyads, disavowal of al-Khawārij, and suspicion of the Hāshimiyyūn because they depended on the Mawālī. Furthermore, even Qays al-Ruqayyāt's emotions were conditioned by his own circumstances. He was born as a Qurashī in al-Ḥijāz, and witnessed the Umayyads transferring the seat of the state to Damascus. He saw the Khawārij aspiring to form an Islamic republic without a Qurashī caliphate, he witnessed the Hāshimiyyūn relying on the *shuʿūbī* Mawalī, and he also was on the receiving end of Muṣʿab ibn al-Zubayr's generosity and compassion. In addition, Qays al-Ruqayyāt's's emotions remained *Zubayrī* until the collapse of the Zubayriyyūn. In sum, he was guided (*muwwajjah*) by his personal circumstances, the environment around him, and the politics of his age.

That said, it baffles me that after he has taught us all these things about the poet, Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn would adopt the view that Qays al-Ruqayyāt was not guided. I suspect that Dr. Ḥusayn's understanding of didacticism in literature is confined solely to the idea that someone dictates to the poet or the writer what they should compose, as though, for example, Muṣʿab ibn al-Zubayr would invite Qays al-Ruqayyāt to his camp and mandates the meanings of the "Ḥabba-dhā al-ʿAysh" poem above, and as if he might even impose on him some of its lines. Do I even need to explain why this literal understanding of the question of didacticism in literature is not correct? It is, in fact, a simplification of an issue that is too deep to allow such simplification. First, the writer derives inspiration from his inner self only in a metaphorical sense; the materials for his work arrive at him from outside of himself, i.e. from society and nature. If this is the case, the didacticism,

then, does not at all mean dictation by a king, a government, or a political party. Secondly, as I insisted in the debate with Dr. Ḥusayn, literature's materials are not metaphysical; they spring from the society in which the writer lives. Consequently, literature is a personal act of creation, in addition to being an individual act of creation, in the sense that the writer molds his literature in the crucible of his inner self. Such act of literary creation is most fitting and most correct when it happens in accordance with the writer's choice and conviction. Only then can didacticism rid itself of the bane which threatens and corrupts it, the bane of codification and copying of topics, tropes, or even expressions.

People who have a superficial understanding of the Marxist position on literature understand didacticism in this way. They also defend the claim that Soviet literature enjoys absolute freedom. With all my respect to these people—even though they might ridicule my offered respect, which is dictated by my character, the etiquette of the debate, and the desire to seek truth—I cannot agree with their stance. The happiness of those people with the Soviet Union resembles the jubilation of someone who, deprived from a precious value in his own land, imagines its existence in a distant promised land.

However, I have to declare that although I am a Lebanese pan-Arab socialist, my opinion of the Soviet experience has not been—and it will never be!—the same one adopted by those who have made resisting Soviet communism their justification to exist, deluding themselves and deserting the most sanctified and direct national aspirations. Nonetheless, this opinion is on thing, and claiming freedom for Soviet literature is something else. Indeed, I want to cite a simple example to negate any such claim and to prove that Soviet writers are indeed undergoing a crisis and does not feel the abundance

of absolute freedom that some people, hundreds of miles away, insist they enjoy. Reading the proceedings of the Soviet Writers Congress, which was held this past November, we can sniff the smell of canned expressions and assigned roles from the discussions, suggestions, and (self-)criticisms. I read a book by a writer or a poet named [Alexander] Yashin, which included a confession of special significance. He described the calamity of the 1951 agricultural season in his home village and how the local authority punished severely the directors of a cooperative farm, commenting, "up to this moment I feel the weight of guilt on my conscience before the party and the people of my area, because I lacked the courage of a citizen. I did not attempt to alter something that was very clearly anomalous and improper." With this confession, Yashin exposed what might be labeled the calamity of the Soviet writer, even though he did not dare go on to face the problem and declare what the logic of his confession should have led him to articulate. He lacked the bravery of a citizen, as he said. He still lacks it in this confession as well.

In 1951, Yashin witnesses the local authorities taking unjust measures against the directors of a cooperative farm. Of course, the local authorities in his area follow the orders of the ruling party and fall under its authority. Yashin realizes that his duty, as a writer and citizen, compels him to take measures that would lead him to publicly criticize the party, through his literature, in his region, like writing a story or composing poetry in order to protest to the people via a newspaper, magazine, or public gathering. However, Yashin does nothing of this sort. He does not even produce a veiled complaint against the party members, who surely do not like to wash their dirty laundry in public and prefer to handle their issues secretly. They never acknowledge mistakes publicly unless out of fear of the people's rage or a feeling sufficient security to make public the mistakes they made

in order to, hypocritically, give the image of themselves as modest people who would always tell the truth, even against themselves.

Four years later, Yashin confesses that he is guilt-ridden because he lacked the courage of a citizen. This confession might not have been that serious if it were a problem of one man only, i.e. Yashin's problem. For, in every society, we see people who lack courage—I am certainly accused of such a lack by the people who fiercely defend all aspects of Soviet literature. It would not have been a serious issue if Yashin, once realizing the oppressive measures taken against the directors of the cooperative farm, had the ability to take the case to a newspaper, a magazine, or a public forum to publically criticize these measures, even if such criticism would denounce the representatives of the state and the ruling party. Furthermore, Yahin's confession would not have been a serious issue if he was able to carry out such public criticism without the fear of certain consequences: rejection, prison, removing his works from bookshelves, forbidding him from publishing, losing his income, and accusing him of sabotage and serving capitalism and colonialism. It would not have been a serious issue if Yashin did not fear having his throat slit, and then, four years later or after the passing of another historic period, someone would admit that Yashin was innocent and that it was a politician, be it Trotsky, Beria, etc., who was the traitor and that they were responsible for the writer's unjust death. And, just like that, case closed! The deceased writer should be jubilant that his persecution has, ultimately, led to clearing the name of the state and the party and that another writer would stand in front of the people and the party to confess that he had lacked the courage of a citizen to defend his fellow writer, before this writer himself becomes yet another victim of the state and the party. This is freedom!

I am baffled by you, the people who claim that Soviet literature is free, uncodified, and not dictated by the state and the ruling party. Do not you realize that the exercise of true freedom is not Yashin's self-criticism or a debate between Simonov[48] and Ehrenburg,[49] but, instead, it exemplifies in Yashin, Simonov, and Ehrenburg discussing the state and the ruling party? Freedom involves the state guaranteeing an actual legal immunity for these writers to pose to Melnikov, Khrushchev, and other officials questions like these: why did you remain silent for years while, according to your own statements, you knew that Beria was betraying us? Who is responsible for all the unjust deaths and the squandering of national interests as a result of Beria's betrayal? If you—and, again, I am addressing the people who claim that Soviet literature is free—think that subjecting Melnikov and Khrushchev to the writers' question is too much to ask, then I ask you something else. Find me a single literary work criticizing Beria before the state and the party announced him as an undercover traitor who had been betraying the country for years and years? The minimal task of a "free writer" and a "vanguard writer" is to at least hint at Beira's misbehavior, instead of bestowing upon the conspiring traitor psalms of praise, which the writers continue to sing until the party and state signal to them to change tone. The writers, then, immediately comply, proving that their literature, when it comes to the state and the party, is the literature of tail and servile following, not that of the vanguard. I hope you forgive my vulgarity!

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[48] Konstantin Mikhailovich Simonov (1915-1979), a Soviet author and a war poet, most famous for his poem *Wait for Me*.

[49] Ilya Grigoryevich Ehrenburg (1891-1967), a Soviet writer and translator.

There remains one more question about the issue of didacticism in literature that I need to attend to. People who are suspicious of such didacticism—Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn is one of these people—often use an "aesthetic" excuse to attack didacticism. They often refer to dominant critical currents that seem to creep into literature. They are also suspicious of the prominence of political ideologies, e.g. democratic, socialist, communist, fascist, etc., in literature. They think that these are constraints that didacticism imposes. Those people also want the littérateur to write literature that is free even from the rules of eloquence. They claim that such constraints prevent the writer from creativity and drive him to imitation and artificiality. Let the writer improvise literature, they say, out of his nature and according to his ability, motivated by nothing other than his mood and emotions. And let the reader peruse the resulting literature according to his own taste, uninterested in anything other than satisfying his taste for reading.

I agree with Dr. Ḥusayn, and with those who support him, that this is indeed the most spontaneous literature. But is it possible for such literature to exist in our age? Was it even possible to exist during the ages when communities moved beyond their rudimentary primitive stages to enter a stage of complicated social, rational, and political relationships? The answer is absolutely not! The works of the great masters tell us that those writers and poets all attended to a school of thought they preferred, a style they liked, or a political or social end they aimed for. (Indeed, the biggest favor the new school of literary criticism has done is training us how to investigate these motivations and reveal their traces in the works we read.) Let us take Abū al-Ṭayyib al-Mutanabbī,[50]

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[50] Abū al-Ṭayyib al-Mutanabbī is considered as one of the greatest poets in the Arabic language. Much of his poetry revolves around praising the kings he visited during his lifetime. He excelled in two forms: panegyric and satire. Al-Mutanabbī's panegyrics of

for example. Why do his panegyrics for Sayf al-Dawlah differ from his other panegyrics for other people? I will not delve into all the differences but I want to refer to one of them only. Why is [the poem beginning with] "*ʿAlā qadr ahl al-ʿazm*," for example, free from the unnecessary twists and turns that we see in al-Mutanabbī's other panegyrics for Kāfūr and ʿAḍud al-Dawlah?[51] Why is it that, in "*ʿUqbā al-yamīn ʿalā ʿuqbā al-waghā nadam*," there is a dedicated focus on the topic: no reliance on *ghazal*, no description of the camp ruins, no stopping at natural scenes, and no discussion of al-Mutannabī's psychological complexes and problems—the type of issues we find, for instance, in [the poems beginning with]"*Minn al-jaʾādhir fī zayy al-aʿārīb*," "*Kafā bika dāʾan an tarā al-mawt shāfiyā*," "*Athlith fa-innā ayyuhā al-tulal*," "*Maghānī al-shiʿb ṭīban fī al-maghānī*." What is the source of these differences?

The answer is that, when praising Kāfūr or ʿAḍud al-Dawlah, al-Mutannabī was not feeling the same enthusiasm and the artistic and psychological ease that characterize his panegyrics for Sayf al-Dawlah. But why, one might very well ask? Al-Mutanabbī had greater respect for and showed greater infatuation with Sayf al-Dawlah for reasons that, I think, have to deal with al-Mutanabbī's Arab chauvinism and hatred for the kings and princes of *al-shuʿūbiyya*. He saw in Sayf al-Dawlah the characteristics of an Arab hero who could raise the Arabs from their fall during that age. We can see that al-Mutanabbī

Sayf al-Dawla are among the finest in Arabic literary tradition. After parting ways with Sayf al-Dawla, he joined the court of Kafūr in Egypt in the hope of becoming a statesman. After realizing that Kafūr was playing him with false hopes, al-Mutanabbī left Egypt in 960 and wrote famous lampoons satirizing Kafūr.

[51] ʿAḍud al-Dawlah (meaning "Pillar of the [Abbasid] Dynasty") (936-983) was an emir of the Buyid dynasty, ruling from 949 to 983, and at his height power ruling an empire stretching from Makran as far to Yemen and the shores of the Mediterranean Sea.

consciously and deliberately included this hope in his poetry. Congratulating Sayf al-Dawlah on the victory over the Byzantines, al-Mutanabbī said,

Alcohol, music, and singing distracted
The kings from the victory you've scored.

الهى الممالك عن فخر قفلت به   شرب المدامة والاوتار والنغم!

And,

His [Sayf al-Dawlah's] spirit rejected sleep, while
Others rejoiced at unreal dreams.

نفت رقاد علي عن محاجره   نفس يفرح نفسا غيرها الحلم

We cannot comprehend these two lines unless we understand al-Mutanabbī's abhorrence towards the Abbasids because of their buffoonish pursuit of obscenity and complacency with the mere appearance of ruling, even though it was al-Buwayhiyyūn (the Buyids) who were the actual rulers. And, to cite one more example, after his return from Egypt, al-Mutannabī addresses Sayf al-Dawlah, saying,

You've fought the Byzantines all your life,
When is the promised closure coming?
For more Byzantines are behind your back,
Which Byzantines will you fight?
How wouldn't Iraq and Egypt remain safe,
When your squadrons stand between them and the enemy?
If you order them out of the way,
The Byzantines will be tying their horses to palm trees [in Iraq and Egypt].
Then those who remained in power because of you
Would realize how ignoble and servile they are!
For the one who confronts death
Isn't like the one who pours wine!
To defend your honor, unlike other rulers,
Your sword is always drawn.

انت طول الحياة للروم غازٍ   فمتى الوعد أن يكون القفولُ

وسوى الروم خلف ظهرك روم	فعلى أي جانبيك تميلُ
كيف لا يأمن العراق ومصرٌ	وسراياك دونها والخيولُ
لو تحرفت عن طريق الأعادي	ربط السدر خيلهم والنخيلُ
ودرى من أعزه الدفع عنه	فيهما أنه الحقير الذليلُ
ما الّذي عنده تدار المنايا	كالّذي عنده تدار الشّمول
ليس إلاك يا عليُّ همامٌ	سيفهُ دون عرضه مسلولُ

Here al-Mutanabbī attacks the nominal and the actual rulers of Iraq, the Abbasids and the Buwayhiyyūn (Buyids), and the rulers of Egypt, al-Ikhshīdiyyūn (the Ikhshidid), stating that, had it not been for Sayf al-Dawlah's fierce fighting, the Romans (Byzantines) would have taken over the two countries, and the rulers of these countries who were obsessed with drinking alcohol would have realized how lowly and ignoble they were. He asks Sayf al-Dawlah to switch battles to fight the enemy in his own backyard, in Baghdad and al-Fuṣṭāṭ (Egypt), instead of fighting the Romans of Constantinople.

On the other hand, in what has been labeled a panegyric for Kāfūr after defeating al-Thāʾir Shabīb, al-Mutanabbī says,

> God has ordained you first, Kāfūr,
> And decided none is second to you!
> Why take up arms and spears,
> When your luck strikes with no spearheads?
> If the orbit's revolution displeases you,
> Something will halt its revolution!

قَضَى الله يا كافُورُ أنّكَ أوّلٌ	وَلَيسَ بقَاضٍ أنْ يُرَى لكَ ثَانِ
وَمَا لكَ تُعْنى بالأسِنّةِ وَالقَنَا	وَجَدُّكَ طَعّانٌ بِغَيرِ سِنَانِ
لَوِ الفَلَكَ الدّوّارَ أبغَضْتَ سَعْيَهُ	لَعَوّقَهُ شَيْءٌ عَنِ الدّوَرَانِ

He is telling Kāfūr that he does not need to take up arms because his luck would suffice. After all, it was a mysterious divine will that had made him king. And that same surreptitious intervention will ensure his victory. Ibn Khinzābah has taught us that al-Mutanabbī is, in fact, ridiculing Kāfūr here because he is stripping the Ikhshīdī slave of the virtue of becoming a king and is attributing it to a divine scheme which itself might have been devised to punish the people. It was in the same mocking spririt that al-Mutanabbī, "praising" ʿAḍud al-Dawlah, says,

> The Bedouin with eyes of a young gazelle
> Charmed those who roamed after her.
> If, at the dawn of battle, Fannā Khusr visited her,
> Courtship would surely fail his mission,
> And his regimens would disperse.
> For charming women are fatal!

في مُقْلَتيْ رَشَاٍ تُديرُهُمَا   بَدَوِيّةٌ فُتِنَتْ بهَا الحِلَلُ

لَوْ أنّ فَنّاخُسْرَ صَبّحَكُمْ   وَبرَزْتِ وَحْدَكِ عاقَهُ الغَزَلُ

وَتَفرّقَتْ عَنكُمْ كَتَائِبُهُ   إنّ المِلاحَ خَوَادِعٌ قُتُلُ

Addressing a Bedouin woman, Al-Mutanabbī is saying that, if the king saw the charming Bedouin, he would have become obsessed with her beauty and would have lost control of his armies, even though, al-Mutanabbī warns, such beautiful women are deceptive. How is this a panegyric? Picking a Bedouin woman to praise a *shuʿūbī* king and telling him he would lose control because of her beauty has very little, if any, place in a serious panegyric. In fact, this is among the stingiest satires!

Evidently, anyone saying that al-Mutanabbī was versifying the improvisations of nature, unaware of anything but the need for expressing these improvisations, and that the reader can only enjoy the pleasure of this expression, is presenting an unconvincing case,

to say the least. In all the above-mentioned examples, undoubtedly, al-Mutanabbī is being guided by his environment and age, and he, in return, chose to address his environment and age. This act of mutual didacticism persists in al-Mutanabbī's poetry, and he was conscious of this persistence even during the times when he felt that he was not doing it justice—he said, addressing Kāfūr, in a famous line "for I am pleased with neither you or myself!"

If al-Mutanabbī, in that distant age from ours, could not help but spell out his agenda and have a goal for his poetry, contemporary writers are even less capable of ignoring the consciousness of their age. They are guided by the events of their age, and they influence these events as much as these events impact them. Such writers choose to realize that they represent truth, good, beauty, and duty.

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As to the question of how writers can, with such freedom and choice, remain independent and both guide and be guided without the imposition of a political party or the state, this is a question that has come late in this discussion and I will have to postpone answering it to another article. However, I want to repeat emphatically that literature cannot exist and has no value without didacticism, directing and being directed at the same time, by the writer's consciousness and knowledge. Writers have to remain independent. They have free choice: they must not be forced to write about something or in a certain way. However, they may be approached with the intention of convincing them to endorse a certain cause. On the other hand, writers should become aware of the sanctity of values,

like truth, good, beauty, and duty. All these values converge, I think, in proper patriotism and sound humanism which lead harmoniously to one other and join forces to provide independence, freedom, social justice, and peace for peoples—the ones I primarily care about are the Arab peoples. (This is selfishness, I know, but I should be excused to exhibit it because it is right and permissible!)

4. Idrīs, Suhayl. “Adabunā al-Thawrī.” *Al-Ādāb* 8.1 (1960): 1-2. In this editorial, Idrīs celebrated the “revolutionary state” the Arab nations were undergoing, but he emphasized that the ultimate role a writer could assume during such “a fiery stage” was to help direct this revolutionary state by “creating concepts that would help us revolt against ourselves before we attempt to change anything else.” Idrīs lamented that Arabic literature had remained generally absent from any meaningful engagement with the masses, and that even the progressive output of some Arab writers failed to interact with the “revolutionary state.”

Our Revolutionary Literature

Suhayl Idrīs

Undoubtedly, the Arabs are experiencing a “revolutionary state” (*ḥālah thawriyya*) in their modern history the likes of which, in terms of depth and momentum, they have never experienced. Seeking a new renaissance, the Arabs are forced, in every aspect of their daily lives, to confront root causes necessitated by the radical changes in their lives. Indeed, fiery and dynamic concepts are leading the Arab nation in the search for itself and the attempt to realize its capabilities. And all these concepts derive their essence from a conscious revolutionary mentality that is storming the political, social, and cultural circumstances left to us by centuries of degeneration, stagnation, and ossification. The Arabs have realized that they will gain nothing if, in their quest for the desired renaissance, they merely attribute the reasons for their backwardness to colonialism’s avarice and plotting. For colonialism certainly needs to find fertile ground in order to be able to serve such avarice and weave said plots. Such realization implies that, when all is said and done, we are so weak, insecure, and submissive that we seem so

willing to accept the seeds of colonialism. Therefore, the only viable means to set ourselves free from this mentality is to work tirelessly to change our psyche by creating concepts that would help us revolt against ourselves before we attempt to change anything else. So, insofar as our profession is concerned, the crucial question is this: to what extent have literature and littérateurs taken part in creating these concepts? Has our literature contributed positively to creating the revolutionary situation the Arab society is experiencing at the present time? Or, has it merely reflected what it receives because its role has been limited to reception, excitement, and being influenced by worldly events?

Admittedly, because the two often mix, it is extremely difficult to tell apart the difference between how much literature influences its society and how much its immediate environment influences it. However, we cannot but notice that literature was taken by surprise, more than once, by revolutionary circumstances which either it did not call for or which call was too weak to bring them about. The clearest example for this situation is the most recent Arab revolution in Egypt, for we know of no literary work that led to this revolution or took part in raising awareness for it. In a situation like this one, we realize that the events of life precede literature whose task then becomes restricted to that of a reflecting mirror.

We think that the role of literature, at this crucial juncture in our modern history, cannot be limited to passive reception. Indeed, the above-mentioned events (from which literature was absent and whose occurrence took it by surprise) have already motivated literature to begin carrying its message of influence. In addition, we also think that the revolutionary state will become the chief characteristic of our modern literary output, because the nature of the Arab life is that of revolutionary eruption. The goal of this

upsurge is to provide the Arab nation with a new drive in order to enable it to ascend to its real position among nations. And we can say that the beginning of this revolutionary state dates back to the disaster of Palestine which was the main source for all the political, social, and cultural uprisings that have stormed the Arab homeland.

At this point, we have to call for a literary revolution. We call for such a radical move, because we do not believe in coercion (*al-ilzām*), but in commitment (*al-iltizām*) which springs spontaneously from the writer. Writers have to become committed if they live the cause of their age and indulge in the affairs of their society. However, this call for a literary revolution should not prompt us to overlook the most dangerous issue that modern Arabic literature faces during such a revolutionary stage: intellectual freedom. For writers who are asked, due to the nature of their period, to take part in overturning obsolete concepts and substituting them with revolutionary ones will not be able to perform their duties if they are not guaranteed a sufficient amount of intellectual freedom, which we will not go astray if we say is not available in most Arab countries. This realization requires from the ruling authorities both deep faith in the value of thought and willingness to defend and safeguard it from saboteurs. In addition, the people are invited to defend those who exercise such freedom if they are attacked voicing their views.[52]

If the availability of such intellectual freedom becomes guaranteed for thinkers and writers, our revolutionary period will witness its brightest eras, and it will document

[52] Two weeks ago, a few reactionaries who claimed to defend Islam issued a death threat against me because of a speech I delivered at a gathering organized by Ḥizb al-Katāʾib in Beirut. In that speech I called for national unity based on the belief in pan-Arabism, the secular state, separating Arabism from Islam, and confronting both Muslim and Christian extremists in Lebanon. I want to use this opportunity to express my gratitude to all the Lebanese thinkers who visited, phoned, or telegraphed me to show support. Such encouragement certainly inspires me to continue my struggle for the Arab cause and fighting for intellectual freedom.

an important turning point in our literary history. Only then will modern Arabic literature be able to cope with all the revolutionary stages of the development of the Arab society and be able to read the signals of these stages, drive them, and quicken their birth—thus fulfilling the best message any literature can aspire to carry out.

4. Idrīs, Suhayl. "Naḥnu wa-Sārtar." *Al-Ādāb* 12.12 (1964): 1-3. Idrīs wrote this editorial to celebrate Sartre's decision to reject the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Sartre and Us

Suhayl Idrīs

Since their inception, *al-Ādāb* and its publisher, Dar al-Ādāb, have paid considerable attention to the French writer Jean-Paul Sartre, translating his major works, publishing detailed studies about him, and discussing his opinions and views. The source of this attention was the firm belief that this great thinker is the greatest freethinker in the twentieth century. His sincere defense of freedom causes, especially the question of Algerian independence, makes him worthy of winning our love and admiration. For it indeed profits us, the Arabs, that the greatest freethinker in our age volunteers to defend our cause in Algeria, and it is a gain to humanity at large that Sartre puts his genius and dedication at the service of liberty to defend the rights of the oppressed and expose the tactics of (new and old) colonialism. What makes Sartre even more important in our view is that his positions stem from a comprehensive philosophical system that has made him one of the greatest modern philosophers.

We think, beyond any doubt, that the noticeable avidity of Arab readers in pursuance Sartre's oeuvre points to what they have found in his works by way of essential sustenance for their endeavor to create a new civilization and achieve an independent character. The Existentialist literature, of which Sartre is the best representative, expresses in a deep fashion the suffering of the French generation since the catastrophe of the French defeat in World War II. The widespread proliferation of this type of literature in our Arab homeland may be attributed to the fact that the new Arab

generations find in it similar expressions to what they have been suffering from since the disaster of Palestine. A type of literature should have developed in order to reflect our circumstances and concerns and demonstrate our desire to erase this stain from our history. But, when our newer generations lacked such literature—we might enumerate justifications for its absence—to interact with, they started looking in foreign literatures for that which expresses not only their anxiety, disintegration, and loss, but also their hopes. They managed to find all this in the Existentialist literature in general, and in Sartre's works in particular.

The kernel of Sartre's philosophy points to the idea that human beings must acquire their essence through life and work. A human being is nothing other than what he himself creates, and he is free to create what he wishes, or, rather, he is at liberty to create what he "tends" to create. Therefore, the end of this philosophy, to employ an expression that might distort its real meaning, is *to create* the human being in a new fashion that adheres to freedom and responsibility. Not unexpectedly, we, the Arabs, are in dire need to acquire freedom and shoulder responsibility at such a critical juncture in our history. These two ideas, freedom and responsibility, are the two poles of the Sartrean philosophy. However, this philosophy was subjected to misrepresentation and distortion when it was abducted by a lost generation in France during and after the world war. They made it their behavioral pivot, but they employed only one of the two poles of Existentialism, freedom, in order to do what they wished and left out the other pole, namely responsibility, which is the regulator and monitor of any form of human freedom.

Regardless, no other philosophy, ancient or modern, preserves for the human being, as an individual, all his value in the way that Existentialism does, because it links

this value to human labor exclusively. And it does not assign responsibility to anything save for this labor, allowing the individual to become, first and foremost, the creator of himself because every value springs out of the individual and pours back into him. According to Sartre, a human being has no ulterior root, because he is the root for himself. There is nothing outside of himself that grants him value, because he is the value of himself. And he is forsaken, because he is free. His moves are not dictated by a divine order or by a rational system. Human beings, however, have freedom. And a human being's first reaction to the abyss of freedom he encounters is anxiety and dizziness; but it is out of this freedom that the meaning of his life is born. Indeed, freedom is the great, fertile word that allows us to face life.

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The purpose of this article is not to survey Sartre's philosophy, but it is important for us to respond to some people, especially here in our countries, who falsely accuse Existentialism of being a type of immoral philosophy. In fact, many of these people consider morality to be tribal values that are permanent and overarching with which they measure all situations. However, Sartre's "ethics" wants to be an act of constant creation since the world constantly unveils new circumstances. We have no permanent "wisdom" to safeguard or refer back to. Also, there are no universal values. Indeed, Sartre attacks the "universal" because he believes that there is no fixed, unchanging "essence" that we have to respect, but rather that there is always a new "existence" that we have to justify constantly. Sartre is the writer of an age that severs itself from the idea of traditions,

making civilization an act of renewal, not a process of law preservation, and making life an act of gambling, not an instance of a permanent system. In addition, Sartre wants the ethical act to be an exercise of choice, not obedience.

That said, it is important to advise Sartre's readers that, if they want to understand his philosophy, they have to view his works as an inseparable whole, because, if they only read scattered parts of his writings, they will find a number of negative instances that may prompt the readers to think that Sartre is a pessimist and a nihilist. True, the writings of any existentialist thinker are like a chain whose links connect one another. The importance of these writings stem from the fact that they present us with a vision of the world and of human beings, and, thus, collecting and regulating the scattered pieces of contemporary consciousness. These writings aspire to affirm a stance: exposing the world courageously for human beings. However, Sartre's goal goes beyond this stance. He confronts us with all the reasons that ask us to despair only so that we find, beyond them, a justification for life. Each Sartrean protagonist lives the experience of his freedom. The protagonists are not abstract beings floating in outer space; they are all positioned in a critical (historical, social, psychological, and intellectual) instance of existence. But positioning is not exactitude. It is the field of free choice. It is true that human beings experience "nausea" in front of the formless, irrational, and absurdist reality that engulfs Antoine Roquentin. But, in the final pages of Sartre's *Nausea*, there is record music from which shines the hope for freedom. Melody does not exist in the same way humans and things do, but it represents precision and necessity. Can we not be like melody? Can we not exist but instead "be," like books and portraits, by creating things that are above existence and evade its absurdity and fortuity? Yes, we can. Once we

move from *Nausea*, after affirming such fortuity and assessing what it entails, we discover *The Roads to Freedom*. True, when we read *The Age of Reason* and *The Reprieve*, we are deluged in an absurdly jumbled world, which carries disgust and despair, and from which emerges a suffocating and nauseating smell. But when we encounter many pages of obscenity and sexual description, we will not, for a second, think that Sartre is presenting them for the sake of excitement and pleasure; for him they are a portrait of existence—the first, given, and unintelligible existence that has to change, mutate, and substitute.

Moreover, freedom is the major factor for the essence that creates human reality. The essence is made and acquired by labor, through free commitment (*al-iltizām al-ḥurr*). In the *Roads to Freedom*, we find ourselves in front of protagonists who are far from organizing their affairs and behaviors in accordance with a chosen and designed sketch. On the contrary, they rush to perform gratuitous services and engage in unexplainable behavior that both denies determination and design as well as defies simplicity. Incomprehensible, absurd, or disgusting acts: for instance, a character stabs his hand with a knife, gets drunk, robs a woman, or steals a book from a bookstore front. However, we have to realize that these acts are negative corroborations of freedom or courage— they represent Mathieu's negative freedom. Nonetheless, we see Mathieu in part three and in what has been published of part four walking towards positive freedom because he feels responsible and voices solidarity with others. He found out that freedom has no value except for what it is used for, and that it requires commitment (*iltizām*) and responsibility as well as clear, precise work in a defined situation, whereas, in the *Age of Reason*, he only saw it as an opportunity for gaining freedom. Now he strives to comprehend the

tangible reality where humans work, the same reality that he was always avoiding. He wants to affirm himself after the loneliness and embarrassment he suffered during the defeat, and realizes that it is characteristic of the human condition to contribute changes and substitutions to the meaning of the world. He realizes that he has to work. From atop the tower, he grabs his rifle and starts shooting at the canons and armored vehicles of the German army, thus denying all the gentle reservations in his life and affirming that whoever wants to live has to take risks. Indeed, the freedom in the *Age of Reason* was fake because it was freedom to observe the world without taking part in it. For Mathieu, freedom takes its true meaning in work.

Furthermore, if we survey Sartre's other works--scholarly, fictional, and theatrical--from *Being and Nothingness* to *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, *Behind Closed Doors*, *The Dead Without Burial*, *The Respectful Prostitute*, *The Devil and the Good Lord*, *The Condemned of Altona*, etc., we will find ourselves faced with the same concern: The concern of the human being who looks for freedom through commitment (*iltizām*) and responsibility. We hurtled towards Sartre's biography and works because we found in them lessons in freedom, work, and creation—and we continue to find such lessons in them today as well. More importantly, these works appealed to us because we found their lessons molded in an excellent artistic fashion that is not a form of propaganda and corroboration. They express the forms of anxiety and despair that we sometimes suffer from, but they also offer the hope of salvation through work and responsibility.

Certainly, we have always found the embodiment of this philosophy in the great positions that Sartre, the proponent of Existentialist philosophy, has taken in regard to the

issues of freedom in the world. We cannot forget Sartre's articles and speeches defending the right of the Algerian people to independence, or the fact that he took part in a number of demonstrations in support of this right and to deplore the terrorist, fascist policies that the French officials in both France and Algeria were adopting. We shall always remember Sartre's incitement of the French soldiers to rebellion and mutiny by not going to Algeria. These positions led to accusations of treason, and we all remember the statement that Sartre drafted which was signed by one hundred and twenty French thinkers, which led to his banishment from any government-sponsored event. In addition, his house in Paris was blown up, not to mention the numerous assassination attempts by the secret army organization that targeted him and his partner, Simone de Beauvoir. We also remember his honest and honorable position on the Hungary events, when he decried the intervention of the Soviet forces, even though he had been one of the major sympathizers of the Marxist and Communist thoughts. We also remember his position on racial discrimination in America and his support of the Cuban revolution against the American economic colonialism, as expressed in his *Hurricane over Cuba*. In addition, an excellent book has been published recently which collects a number of articles, speeches, and statements that Sartre has written in defense of the rights of the oppressed peoples, and which also includes one of his most thoughtful analyses of Lumumba and the new colonialism.

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Undoubtedly, awarding Sartre the Nobel Prize for Literature came too late. But we also think that Sartre would have rejected the prize even if he was awarded it earlier in his life, because this rejection is intimately connected with all his positions—the positions through which he wants to prove his freedom, belief in dignity, and indifference to material temptation. Finally, *al-Ādāb*, which began talking about Sartre from its first issue twelve years ago, sees it as its right, and obligation, to assign more pages about him in this issue. We send our reverent greetings and appreciation to Sartre!

CHAPTER TWO:

Commitment Debate in Egypt

Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1889-1973) was the first Arab critic to discuss Sartre's notion of commitment. In fact, it was he who coined the Arabic term we still use today as the standard translation for the French *engagement* and the English commitment: *al-iltizām*. In addition, Ḥusayn's views on commitment shaped the debate on the relationship between literature and politics in Egypt throughout the 1950s. However, there is not a single study dedicated to Ḥusayn's treatment of commitment in Arabic or English. Moreover, there is real confusion about Ḥusayn's position on commitment in the scholarship. For example, Klemm says that Ḥusayn introduced Sartre's *engagement* to the Arab readers "in a neutral way" (53), while Di-Capoa insists that Ḥusayn presented the debate unfavorably and that he was aggressively opposed to it (1070-1071). Yet, a closer reading of Ḥusayn's first piece on commitment reveals that he, in fact, initially endorsed the notion enthusiastically, before rejecting later. Between 1946 and 1955, Ḥusayn's own thinking developed as he adopted *multiple positions* as regards the question of commitment. In the following pages, I will follow Ḥusayn's writings on commitment, first to map out his views on the issue and, secondly, to account for the shift in his position on commitment from endorsement in 1946 to rejection in 1955. In addition, the chapter will study the debate between Ḥusayn and two Egyptian Marxists, ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm Anīs and Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim, on the concept of commitment and the social function of literature.

I. **Ṭāhā Ḥusayn on Commitment**

In August 1946, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn wrote a special editorial for his monthly, *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī*, entitled "*al-adab bayna al-ittiṣāl wa-l-infiṣāl*" (Literature between Attachment and Detachment), in which he described a "sectarian" clash between two schools of thought in France regarding the function of literature in society (373). In the editorial, Ḥusayn said that, since the end of World War II, the French critics and writers were "obsessed" (*mahwūsūn*) with debating the question whether literature should be attached to or detached from the political affairs of the culture in which it lives. Should writers detach themselves from such affairs and recluse to their "ivory towers" (*abrājihim al-ʿājiyya*) or should they "take part in real life" (*yushārikūn fī al-ḥayā al-fiʿliyya*)? The debate was political and not purely literary, Ḥusayn explained, but the reader should not be surprised that the European writers were engaged in it. Just before the outbreak of World War II, the "violent clash between different ideologies vis-à-vis political and social affairs" led to a polarization among European writers (373). The pressure from Communism and Fascism presented a serious threat to Western democracy. Communism gathered supporters and Fascism mustered defenders. "Traditional democracy" (*al-dīmuqrāṭiyya al-taqlīdiyya*), however, was becoming vulnerable because, while it had politicians on its side, it seemed that writers remained hesitant to stand up for it to thwart the Communist and the Fascist threats. At that point writers realized that

> Their freedom was in peril. Their culture might become extinct, and their art could disappear. They realized that they had one of two choices: either vanish in Communism or Fascism and become like the other writers who affiliated themselves with either of the two ideologies; or lend traditional democracy their tongues and pens and join the politicians in defending and safeguarding it (374).

Those writers “felt this very persistently,” Ḥusayn says, and they “were forced to take part in defending democracy,” and stand by its side just like other writers decided to side with either Communism or Fascism. Regardless of which direction writers chose, Ḥusayn explains, this situation meant that writers had “abandoned their ivory towers and descended to the bazaar of politics.” These different affiliations disrupted the dormancy that writers thought characterized their profession entailed. This realization led to “a new literary phenomenon,” which Ḥusayn calls “solidarity in the responsibilities of life” (*al-taḍāmun fī tabiʿāt al-ḥayāh*) (374).

Ḥusayn elaborates on the history of this solidarity by exploring how the end of World War II presented writers with even further complications. Writers “were forced” to put their art at the service of politics during the War, but now that the conflict had ended, the French writers were asking, should writers continue to engage in political questions or should they return to their ivory towers? Ḥusayn admits that the question is challenging, but he assures his readers that it is hardly a new one. The French critics, says Ḥusayn, thought that they were being presented with novel questions about the function of literature and the task of the writer, but they could not have been further from the truth. If they took a “quick look at the literary history of any living nation,” they would have realized that not only do these questions exist but they in fact persist. In France, the question had persisted since the sixteenth century and became more intense with the Dreyfus affair. The concern of the French critics with the issue was sincere, Ḥusayn believes, but their assumption that the challenge was new showed their lack of knowledge of their own literary history (376).

Nonetheless, the French critics' lack of knowledge, which led to the heated debate about the role of literature in society, is in fact useful for Arabic literature, Ḥusayn suggests. The question, Ḥusayn says, is important because it prompts us to think about the relationship between literature and politics throughout Arabic literary history. Ḥusayn says that exploring this question shows us that the greatest eras of Arabic literature took place when Arabic literature was most intimately involved in the affairs of the Arab society: "Arabic literature was strong and alive when it showed solidarity with everyday life. When circumstances forced it towards seclusion, it faded." In fact, one could easily see the earliest examples of this solidarity in the earliest specimens we have of Arabic poetry. The pre-Islamic poet was, after all, a member of the tribe who lived and thrived with his tribe. Even a poet who "broke off this solidarity" and lived the life of a *ṣuʿlūk* (vagabond) did engage in acts of solidarity with fellow *ṣaʿālīk*, Ḥusayn emphasizes. Later on, the advent of Islam institutionalized such participation, and the poet's words became a powerful tool dedicated to defending the faith and promoting its principles. In addition, Ḥusayn continues, the Umayyads and the Abbasids pushed the levels of such solidarity to an even greater limit and made the position of the poet an integral part of the function of the court. In fact, Arabic poetry remained politically engaged even when the Persians and the Turks took control of the Muslim empire, and a number of the canonical works in Arabic literature were written either under foreign occupation or when the these forces were threatening the existence of the Arabs, says Ḥusayn. It was during those times that al-Mutanabbī, al-Buḥturī, and Abū Tammām wrote their most celebrated poems. Even al-Maʿarrī, stresses Ḥusayn, who is often thought of as a detached poet produced a delightfully "social literature of solidarity." Nonetheless, there were times, Ḥusayn

admits, when writers sought seclusion and detachment from society, especially during the times when the Persians and the Byzantines controlled their lands. Those were unfavorable times for Arabic literature because the seclusion of these poets gave rise to inferior poets and foreign speakers of Arabic to dominate the literary scene. The result was catastrophic: Arabic poetry became riddled with *ʿujmah* (foreign accents) and inferior versification (384).

Ḥusayn seems to have realized that he was making too broad a statement about Arabic literature; therefore, he soon pointed out that the engagement of literature does not mean that writers produce openly political or socially charged literature throughout their lives. This is a superficial understanding of the writer's attachment to society, he says. Ḥusayn stresses that "it is ridiculous (*ḍarbun min al-sukhf*) … to … imagine the connection of life to literature in this way" (383). Writers, he says, are human beings after all. Even more, writers are artists, and such people tend to have "keeness of senses, the delicacy of feelings, and the proper temperament," and such qualities compel writers to "not forget" themselves while engaging with society (384). This care of the self motivates writers to write poems that, on their surface, might seem to only address their individual needs. Such appearance is an important aspect of literary production, Ḥusayn says, because it highlights two aspects. First, no matter how attached a writer becomes to society, he continues to write poems about personal experiences and deal with topics that are of particular personal interests to the writer. Secondly, however, this experience does not point to "the writer's detachment from life and seclusion in an ivory tower;" on the contrary, it indicates that the writer is open to "receiving impressions from many sources" in order to incorporate them into his writings, whether in prose or verse. Men of letters,

Ḥusayn boasts, sport both higher sensibility and superior mental faculties to perceive, process, and incorporate those impressions. However, even with their most personal products, Ḥusayn intriguingly emphasized, writers are also still attached to society. He says that the very personal of these poems might be the most engaged with society. Ḥusayn ridicules people who view Abū Nuwās as a self-centered, detached poet who cared only about wine and drunkenness. First, Ḥusayn says, although the poet seems mostly concerned with wine, he engaged with life through his panegyrics and satires, which stem from and depict everyday life. Secondly, and most importantly, Abū Nuwās was most engaged with society and the politics of his day in his most drunken poems, because "he was member of a class which endorsed drunkenness and committing sins" (383-4). Abū Nuwās was actively participating in the affairs of society through his involvement with this class of alcohol-loving class, and his involvement was both sincere and powerful. He was putting to verse the very life that he and his companions were living, Ḥusayn stresses. In addition, Abū Nuwās's *khamriyyāt* (wine poems) should not be treated as a condemnation of the individual poet, but as an indictment of a corrupt political system which forced a whole class of people to a life of drunkenness and looseness. Ḥusayn says that Abū Nuwās was holding "a mirror up to his age," and his *khamriyyāt* reflect a very important aspect of the Abbasid court as well as social life.

Ḥusayn uses this idea of reflecting the age as a point of departure to attack those who thought Arabic literature was not actively engaged in the affairs of society. If a critic believes that "the man of letters is an image of his age and that he is holding a mirror up to his environment, and that literature is one of the sources of history," then, that critic should necessarily believe in the fact that "literature is attached to life, taking part in it,

and is portraying it" because these characteristics are the ones that qualify literature to become one of the sources of history. Otherwise, if there is any doubt about this qualification, that critic should stop ascribing such historical claims to literature. So, if we accept that Arabic literature is one of the sources of Arab history, "it becomes ridiculous/stupid (*min al-sukhf*) to claim that Arabic literature was detached from everyday life," even during the ages when it seemed it had secluded itself from public participation and halted interfering in the lives of people (386).

However, Ḥusayn is quick to point out that, while the involvement is certain, the level of engagement varied throughout the Arab history. For example, he admits that literature was least attached to everyday life when "non-Arab tyrants dominated the everyday life of the [Arab] peoples." The despotism of such ages marginalized the Arabs, and Arabic literature was tainted because of the *ʿujmah* that those rulers and their entourage introduced to the Arabic letters. Nonetheless, Ḥusayn tells his readers, we should appreciate this period of our history and take lessons from this inferior level of attachment. Ḥusayn emphatically says that the period teaches us two important lessons for the state of literature in the present time. First, literature does not have control over the level of its engagement with society; it is politics, regrettably, which has the upper hand in determining this level of attachment. Secondly, there is a correlative relationship between politics and literature throughout the Arab literary history: When the Arabs enjoyed strong political power, the literature they produced was not only of superior quality, but was most intimately and effectively attached to society—the Arabic literature of the first century after Hijra is an example of this type of literature, Ḥusayn says, when the involvement of literature coincided with political might. As an example of the other

end of the spectrum, he says that because of the despotic and corrupt rule of the Ummayads, many writers and poets "were forced to abandon politics and avoid public affairs" (387)

Realizing the correlation between literature and politics should provide contemporary Arab governments a valuable lesson as well. Ḥusayn says that if the state wants thriving, highly engaged literature that both reflects and matters to the lives of people, it has to step in to ensure the right conditions for the production and consumption of such literature. The duty of the state is twofold, Ḥusayn elaborates. First, it has to exercise good governance and should not monopolize "political rule, domination, literature, art, philosophy, and science," which leads to creating "a superior class of people" that enjoys the "pleasures" of power and knowledge while depriving regular people from these pleasures. Not only is this a form of unjust rule, but, as far as the literary scene is concerned, it would create a schism in the field of literature, because if literature is supposed to engage with the lives of the people, the question becomes which life should it address, "the life of the [lower-class] people … or the life of the masters"? Secondly, the state has to shoulder its responsibility to maintain the proliferation of literature that is of superior quality. Many men of letters produce high-level literature and engage with the lives of the people. However, in order to complete the literary cycle, they need the appropriate reception to guarantee that their work is appreciated, which in turn would motivate them to continue writing superior literature. Such reception remains limited if the state does not implement programs to educate the masses. It is the duty of the state, Ḥusayn emphasizes, "to prepare the people to take part in the public life first and understand and appreciate literature secondly" (386). If the state fails to achieve these

steps, it should not "blame literature" if it does not take part in the public affairs and become less relevant to the lives of the people.

Absent such support, Ḥusayn warns, Arabic literature will degrade. He discusses the rise of popular literature in previous centuries, saying that it was both a response to a demand for "popular" literature and also a form of protest against the despotism of the elite. Unjust rule divided the people into elite and masses, Ḥusayn complains. The elite enjoyed refined literature, whereas the masses had their inferior literature. The popularity of an otherwise inferior work like the *Arabian Nights* among the people during those times explains its wide appeal to the masses. Fortunately, Egypt in the twentieth century moved beyond this model, Ḥusayn says. Most of the modern men of letters—with the exception of "one or two litterateurs who have tried … to dwell in ivory towers"—realized that they had would enjoy greater readership among the people if they approached them properly. That is why there was a rush among writers to appeal to the people. For example both Aḥmad Shawqī and Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm started their careers as court poets, but the 1940s saw their poetry "sung in stadiums and published in newspapers" and the reach of their poetry went beyond the "class of masters … [to reach] the hands of people who had no power or position." Ḥusayn explains this tendency by saying that World War II and the "Egyptian revolution" played a decisive role in "tearing down the differences between classes" These historical moments were accompanied by two things. First there was a strong tendency among writers to approach the people—a tendency that matched the desire of the people to read and listen to these writers. Secondly, there was a thriving political life in Egypt. A new, robust "political life" gave rise to a number of political parties and "the Egyptians became divided among those parties. Therefore, on

the one hand, we experienced a return back to the life of the Arabs—we have political parties which have their own writers and poets—and, on the other hand, we have leaped towards modern European life" with such robust political life (387). Ḥusayn concludes the editorial with the optimistic note that the close relationship between Egyptian literature and Khedive politics would boost the status of literature and would make it even more attached to society.

Less than a year later, in July 1947, Ḥusayn wrote yet another editorial for *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī*, under the suggestive title "*Mulāḥaẓāt*" (Notes), signaling to the reader that this editorial should be read in tandem with former year's editorial, "*al-adab bayna al-itiṣāl wa-l-infiṣāl*," discussed above. Ḥusayn said that when he wrote about the French debate on the function of literature in society in August 1946, he thought that he would not have to visit the subject again because he supposed "the quarrel had ended or, at least, it was on its way towards conclusion" (9). The quarrel, Ḥusayn reminded his readers, was about the "commitment of the writer" (*iltizām al-adīb*) and the responsibility (*tabiʿah*) the writer shoulders when producing committed literature (9). However, Jean-Paul Sartre "has resumed discussing this question a few months ago in his review, *Les Temps modernes*, in the form of a detailed study, entitled "What is Literature?" … I have thus far received most of what has been published of the study during the February and March issues of this year" (9). Ḥusayn said that the last part of the Sartre's study, "For Whom We Write?" was published in the April run of *Les Temps modernes*, but he had not received that issue yet. This editorial includes the first use of *iltizām* as a translation for Sartre's *engagement* in the Arabic literary discourse. Yoav Di-Capua mistakenly dates the use of *iltizām* as a translation for the French *engagement* to Ḥusayn's editorial "*al-*

adab bayna al-itiṣāl wa-l-infiṣāl" (1070). In the 1946 editorial, there is no mention of *iltizām*. Instead, Ḥusayn used the expression "*al-taḍāmun fī tabiʿāt al-ḥayāh*" (solidarity in the responsibilities of life) (374) to describe a "new literary phenomenon" (374) in France which promoted "*al-adab al-mutaḍāmin*" (solidarity literature) and condemned "*al-adab al-muʿtazil*" (detached literature) (378).

Ḥusayn emphasized that he would not have revisited the issue of commitment "had it not been for the fact that the study Sartre has been publishing is *really valuable*" (10; my emphasis). He begins his analysis of "What is Literature?" by admitting that, while he dislikes Sartre's aggressive and sarcastic style, he agrees with him that literature fulfills important social and political functions and that writers are attached to the environment in which they live. However, Ḥusayn objects to Sartre's dismissal of the "other arts" from taking part in commitment (12). He acknowledges that "there is a huge difference between the declarative aspects of literature and the implicit nature of arts" (13), but he says that, if we are prepared to ask poets to declare commitment, we have to extend such invitation to artists, because the artists "who had portrayed religious rituals or built mosques and churches" were already committed because they were "influenced by the environment in which they lived and, in turn, they influenced this and other contemporary environments" (12-13). In addition, Ḥusayn objects to Sartre's exclusion of poets from the requirements of commitment. Ḥusayn stressed that Sartre is correct in pointing out that "words for the prose writer are mere means, but they are meaningful ends for the poet," but he says Sartre cannot use this broad statement to exclude poets from commitment, because, first, "humanity spoke poetry before it did prose" and poets remained committed since the dawn of civilization before people knew literary prose

(13). "It is stupid," Ḥusayn stressed, "to say that the bards of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* … were not committed" (14).[53] Ḥusayn believed that this historical fact discredits Sartre's attempt to ban poets from commitment. In addition, there have been prose writers "who are poetic and use words as ends for themselves" (14), but Sartre does not take those writers into consideration when talking about commitment. Ḥusayn concludes his short editorial by affirming his agreement with Sartre's call for commitment and reminding the reader that the exhibition of commitment should be, above all, "appropriate" (21). By appropriate, Ḥusayn says he means three things: First, the committed writer has to be mindful that "he has responsibilities for his art (*muḥtamil tabiʿātah amām al-fan*);" Secondly, he has "responsibilities towards etiquette and common sense;" and, thirdly, if the committed writer's topic deals with "the affairs of a certain group of people, … he has [certain] responsibilities towards this group" (21). So, if a poet, for instance, decided to become politically committed, Ḥusayn said, he has to be mindful that he has to remain loyal to the art of poetry and must accept the consequences of his commitment before the political group with which he chooses to affiliate (21). Ironically, Ḥusayn promised his readers that he might revisit the issue of commitment further after reading the final part of Sartre's study, "For Whom We Write?" (21).

However, a few months after the 1952 Revolution, Ḥusayn wrote a short article, "*al-adab wa-l-ḥayāh*" (Literature and Life), in which he reversed his position on commitment. In this article, he declared that the contemporary debate about the function of literature was much ado about nothing. He said that the issue was not worth discussing at all; however, he asked his "serious readers" to pardon him for engaging with the topic,

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[53] Compare this statement to the entirely opposite one he made when discussing the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in his "The Man of Letters Writes for the Elite," especially on page 10.

which he stressed he would not have discussed had it not been for the fact that it had been talked about insistently since the success of the 1952 coup in Egypt. The issue at hand, Ḥusayn says, is a deceivingly simple question: "Why do poets and writers produce?" He says that the question is futile because the answers is readily available for him and for those like him who "are well versed in literature." The answer, simply, is that

> The man of letter produces because his nature requires him to produce and because the environment around him demands production from him. Or, maybe, because God has created the human species with a number of social phenomena, and one of these phenomena is that men of letters produce and people listen to or read their production (27).

Every community has a form of literature, Ḥusayn says, and the variation in form is dictated by the environment, the mastery of production, and the astuteness of reading or listening to the product (27). However, any form literature takes is closely related to the environment that hosts and gives rise to it. "Literature, therefore, is humanistic," declares Ḥusayn, "because if it does not portray the lives of people, it is not literature at all. In fact, there is not literature on earth that does not portray the lives of its people." Such understanding of literature is characteristic of Arabic letters, and that is evident in the oft-repeated description of pre-Islamic poetry as "the record of the Arabs" (28). Ḥusayn says that this statement is true of Arabic poetry of all ages, not only of the pre-Islamic poetry, because literature is one of the most important sources of history. In addition, he says that he takes this statement to imply that poetry is superior to history. Not only does literature record events like history, it documents things, like feelings and emotions, which history books fail to grasp. Literature, Ḥusayn says, "depicts the life of souls, hearts, and tastes in a ways that history is not capable of depicting" (28).

This is true of recording the history of Egypt at the present time, Ḥusayn thinks, because literature is even closer to the lives of the people than it ever has been. After the "sovereignty of the people materialized" and access to education broadened, literature now reaches "classes it has not before." The present time is a true example of the assertion that literature stems from the people and goes back to them. Literature reaches those classes "in order to relay images of their lives to the writer" and, after the poet amplifies the examples of the good in these images and presents them in an aesthetically pleasing form, literature "goes back to the people in order to return these [modified] images back to them" (30) Indeed, this closer relationship between literature and the people that further proves the superiority of literature over history, and explains what made it the more expressive record of the Arabs. For the pre-Islamic poet of the first century after Hijra "did not recite poetry for any specific class, but he recited it to everyone who could understand it and had a taste for it" (30). The sociocultural circumstances of the pre-Islamic society meant that everyone in the community both understood and enjoyed the poems of the pre-Islamic poet.

Intriguingly, Ḥusayn points out, it is this close relationship between literature and its environment that was causing confusion among the newer generation of critics who condemn pre-Islamic poetry because, they think, it was out of touch with the realities of its society. Those critics were ignorant of the historical distance between us and the *Jāhilī* poets. Of course we find this poetry difficult and certainly we neither understand it nor appreciate it unless we "equip ourselves with [appropriate] education, studying, and effort" (30). Above all, Ḥusayn says, we have to respect the fact that the pre-Islamic literature was depicting its society and, most importantly, it was produced and consumed

in accordance with the *Jāhilī* norms. We have to accept that that literature was depicting the lives of *those* people, not ours, for "it neither stems from nor depicts our lives" (30). If those critics came to comprehend this fact, they would realize that the classical poetry they despise is the very literature that supports their claims for the social involvement of literature. But they refuse to do so, and they engage in anachronistic fallacies that continue to distort their understanding of classical literature. The new generation of writers is self-centered, Ḥusayn complained, because they seem to call for "abolishing the past, uprooting human history, and establishing a new humanism that adheres to the principles of this [modern] life" (31). Not only do they want Ḥusayn and his other senior men of letters to adhere to their new methods of evaluating literature; they want the past poets and critics pay heed to their views as well.

There is certainly value to Ḥusayn's objection, but he seems to conflate *understanding* past literature and *accepting* its values. Of course, we would be amiss if we impose a presentist reading of say, al-Mutanabbī's satires of Kāfūr al-Ikhshīdī and attempt to understand them on our own terms in accordance with the values and realities of our time rather than those of the environment of the poems. Our understanding of the satires would certainly be impaired, not only because the political and social circumstances have changed, but also because the structural features of poetry and language have not remained the same. However, our efforts to understand the poems should not prevent us from judging the kind of life and actions the satires portray. In other words, we do not have to agree with everything in the poem that corresponds faithfully with the values of its time. Ḥusayn seems to make such an assertion. Such imposition might lead us to read works of art unethically. What if the work endorses

slavery or promotes racism? How can we agree with misogynistic texts that during the time of their composition reflected accepted norms but in our time, violate our norms? Just because I absorb the norms of al-Mutanabbī's in order to understand the satire he wrote when he left Egypt does not mean I have to accept the racism he exhibits towards Kāfūr al-Ikhshīdī just because al-Mutanabbī wrapped his racism in aestheticism. But this is what Ḥusayn seems to be implying. Ḥusayn does not accept that it is our duty to understand past literature on its own terms. He says that he does not care if "a poet was a liar or a truth teller" (32) because the immediate environment of the poem—the ruler, the empire, and the poet himself—would vanish. What matters, then, is that "poets truthfully portray the higher ideals" when they write panegyrics, for example, and they do so with superior aesthetic quality. Beauty is eternal, says Ḥusayn, and "the secret behind the centrality of the literary and artistic heritage to the cultured humanity is that it portrays beauty for humanity—beauty that is eternal" (32).

However, Ḥusayn quickly glosses over this point in order to discuss how the younger critics did not understand the question of the relationship of literature to life appropriately. Of course literature is closely related to its environment, he says, but its aesthetic appeals make it transcend such locality. However, the attachment of literature to a certain environment and a certain age does not mean that when the age passes or the ruler vanishes that we bury the literature that was produced during that age. Otherwise, says Ḥusayn, we would have lost "the record of the Arabs". And, by the same measure, we would have abandoned Shakespeare, because the royals he praised had vanished. And, more pertinently, we also would have to obliterate the pre-1952 Egyptian heritage because "it was produced for kings or during the monarchy… because the [1952]

revolution sacked a king." Such logic is flawed, Ḥusayn emphasized, but it is being propagated by people "who accept usurping these [post-revolutionary] circumstances in order to propagate their call and win the support of the masses. In fact, many of them delude themselves by believing that they are pleasing the revolution by such views and that they are currying favor with its men" (33). Little did those people know, because had they discussed any of this with "any man of the men of the revolution … they would be rebuked and reprimanded" because none of the revolutionaries believed in "any of these [claims] or anything even close to them" (34)

Ḥusayn concludes the article by saying that "of course none of the contemporary writers would now think of eulogizing the monarchy or praising the feudal system" (34). However, he instructs the younger generation of critics to agree with him that "the Egyptian people are living a new life, and that the new literature should correlate with this new life, portraying its realities and directing it (*yuwajjihuhā*) to where it needs to go, enlightening them to avoid what is harmful, and informing them of what they lack so they start seeking it" (34). Such has always been the role of literature, Ḥusayn says, because "literature was created for the sake of life, and it has always lived [faithfully] for life" (34). So, the post-revolutionary literature will not be different, in essence, from past literature because it would continue to portray the values of contemporary society. The contentious issue, Ḥusayn says, was whether the new literature would maintain the aestheticism and sublimity of Arabic literature or would it "be written in weak language, boring styles, and low language like the one used in the streets, cafés, and clubs?" (34)

Ḥusayn did not answer the question, but he soon afterwards resumed his assault on the "younger generation of critics" in "*ṣūrat al-adab*" (The Form of Literature), an

article he wrote for the daily *al-Jumhūriyya* on February 2, 1954. Ḥusayn said that he wanted to stir yet "a new quarrel among men of letters" (45). He wanted to examine whether the goal of literature is materialistic or spiritual. In other words, Ḥusayn asks whether people should see literature as "a means to satisfying needs and reaching goals … in their material everyday life," or they should "transcend such needs and goals … in order to satisfy other goals which their hearts, minds, and tastes require" (45). This is the question which Ḥusayn wants the "younger generation of writers" to answer because, he said, he knew "what the older generation" thought of the question (46).

Ḥusayn was quick to point out that he was stirring this debate not for the sake of raising it: "what pushes me to [raise the question] is the tendency I am noticing among young writers to slack in expression as well as thinking" (47). He says that he understands, but does not forgive, some of the reasons behind such slipshod tendency. One, for example, had to do with the changing profession of writing; and another reason relates to how some younger critics were uncritically espousing certain views about the function of literature. "I know we live in the age of speed," Ḥusayn unhappily contended, adding that there was greater pressure on writers to push their manuscript to the publisher before they had reached the level of sharpness he would otherwise want to see in these works. Much of this had to do with literary journalism. "Many of us write literature for publication in the newspapers," Ḥusayn confessed, and this new tendency to write for newspapers brought a number of challenges with it because writers now had to curtail both the process and the product of literature to the "necessities" of journalism, like "speed, precision, and systematicity" (47). The marketing model of newspapers added further incentives for writers to appeal to the widest masses at the expense of the

anticipated high quality of literature. Thus, journalism developed a kind of literature of its own that was between “the vulgarity of [everyday] speech” and the sublimity of “high literature which demands hard work from its writer” (48).

However, just because journalism wants to adapt its own version of literary writing, it should not follow that belles lettres should succumb. “Literature,” declares Ḥusayn, “should be, above all, resistance” (47). It should resist any demeaning attempt by journalism and, equally important, it should remain invincible to weaker writers: “[high] literature should not succumb to the whims of writers; on the contrary, writers should respond to the calls of literature” (49). Furthermore, literature should not aim to appease readers through easy expressions and plain content. It should aim to please and profit them by “lifting them” to enjoy it. In short, literature has to be “sublime and difficult,” Ḥusayn declares; it should challenge the readers. Serious readers find the ultimate pleasure in arriving at the meaning of the text after grappling with it, instead of the text easily giving away its meaning with no due effort on the part of the reader.

Moreover, closely related to the question of difficulty is the issue of beauty. Literature has to be aesthetically pleasing. And herein lies the most contentious point of the debate, Ḥusayn admits. “Literature has to be beautiful; but what is the source of its beauty? Does it lie in its tropes, language, system, or style? Or, is it in all of them?” (49). This had been a point of continuous debate among critics. Many of the classical critics, for instance, did not like the poetry of Abū Tammām because of his excessive use of tropes and forced metaphors. On the other hand, Ḥusayn continues, there were other critics who were infatuated with Abū Tammām for these very reasons. They appreciated the fact that he introduced a new trend into Arabic poetry and they enjoyed deciphering

his poems, because they felt that when they understood a line of his poetry, they were "digging hard-won pearls from the bottom of sea" (50). This disagreement is hard to resolve, he declares. To his mind, the reason is that it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what makes a work of art beautiful. It is like when you like a painting, Ḥusayn says, you are always not sure why you like it: is it the colors? The arrangement of the colors? Or something else. The same is for music. You don't know whether you like it because of its melody, its singer, or its words. You might think it is beautiful because of the totality of these elements or because of one of these components. Literary aesthetics follows the same model: a work of art might be aesthetically pleasing because of "the language, tropes, systems, or style. Or because of all of these [elements]" (52).

That said, the source of the beauty of literature might be undecidable, but what is certain, Ḥusayn emphatically says, is that "the form and the content of literature are inseparable" (53). However, Ḥusayn says that he disagrees with the classical metaphor for the inseparability of the components of a sublime work of art as a beautiful body clad in a correspondingly beautiful dress. Although he agrees with the meaning of the description—that the form and the content of literature are aesthetically pleasing equally—he disagrees with the metaphor, because it assumes that someone can actually break literature down into two distinguishable components. Neither the form nor the content of literature means anything by themselves separately, Ḥusayn argues, and it is only when they are presented as one, and understood as inseparable, can we judge a work of art appropriately (53). This totality is certain, he says, and it is impossible to break it down. In a clear jab at two Marxist writers, ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm Anīs and Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim, Ḥusayn ridicules those "scientists, especially the chemists," who try to apply

"laboratory methods" to the analysis of literature. These methods are incompatible with the nature of literary criticism, Ḥusayn says, because whereas scientific facts are indisputable and absolute, critical opinions are based in interpretation, meaning that they are open to discussion and argument. In fact, Ḥusayn stresses that even his assertion of the totality of the work of art is open to debate, and that he hoped to hear what the younger generation of critics had to say about the issue (54).

II. Marxist Intervention: Anīs and al-ʿĀlim

Anīs and al-ʿĀlim understood the jab from Ḥusayn's "*ṣūrat al-adab*" and they were quick to respond. In "*Al-Adab bayna al-ṣiyāghah wa-l-maḍmūn*" (The Form and Content of Literature), they complained that Ḥusayn's article was symptomatic of the misleading critical trend that "the doyen of [Arabic] literature and his disciples from the old *udabāʾ* have carried its burden for the past twenty five years" (39).[54] The issue at hand, they say, is the "nature of relationship between the form and content of literature" (39). Those old critics "have popularized a faulty understanding" of the relationship between the form and content of literature. This defective understanding stems from the "stagnancy" of their outlook to literature, which shows their lamentable "severance from the movement of life" (39). This article, they stressed, was not merely a response to Ḥusayn's call but indeed a retort to the "old school" of criticism which had "sedimented in our national being blunt critical rules" which had sedated literary criticism and killed off any prospects of creativity.

[54] Anīs and al-ʿĀlim published the article in *al-Miṣrī* newspaper in February 1954. It was reprinted in their influential collection of articles, *Fī al-Thaqāfah al-Miṣriyya*. I have used the latter reprint for the purposes of this chapter.

Those old critical rules were behind Ḥusayn's theorization that "language is the form of literature; tropes are the content of literature" and that "the form and the content of literature are inseparable" Ḥusayn is wrong, they stressed, in his understanding of the elements of literature as well as his envisioning of the relationship between these elements. Limiting the form to language and tropes to content "does not indicate proper understanding of the reality of the literary phenomenon," they said. For one, language is only one aspect of an exceedingly complex literary form. The old school has a flawed understanding of literary form because they seem to equate it with style, which is an "external aspect or one of the functions of form". Likewise, tropes are not the content of literature; they are only "one of the tools of content." Anīs and al-ʿĀlim say they understand why Ḥusayn and his colleagues conflated these tools with categories, nonetheless. They relied on outdated and irrelevant stipulations which they inherited from the old Arabic literary criticism which busied itself almost exclusively exploring tropes and investigating eloquent literary statements. The *udabāʾ* school adhered closely to these practices, and despite "the cultural development and the countless critical enterprises," Ḥusayn was repeating this "too ancient a critical position" (40). Not only was Ḥusayn institutionalizing outdated and largely irrelevant ideas about criticism, he and fellow *udabāʾ* had killed off creativity because of the practice of ignoring the totality of the poem and dwelling on individual lines and witty phrases. These practices, Anīs and al-ʿĀlim complained, were "the source of the dormancy, insufficiency, and impotence" of modern Arabic literature (41).

Anīs and al-ʿĀlim said that they wanted to move beyond the doctrines of the old school of criticism. So, they declared that although they were "presenting [their] position

about this [particular] issue" discussed in Ḥusayn's article, they were, in fact, broadly "defining [their] position from the old school as well" (39). Certainly, Anīs and al-ʿĀlim say, "literature comprises form and content," but they could not agree with Ḥusayn's understanding that form means language and content equals tropes. The form of literature "is not language; it is an internal process which lies at the core of the literary work," which contributes to the "organic" structure of the work of art. Such a "functional understanding of literary form," Anīs and al-ʿĀlim claim, "reveals the relationship and the necessary interaction between it [the form] and the content," which is not mere tropes as Ḥusayn proclaimed, but are "events." Tropes can be useful, Anīs and al-ʿĀlim point out, but they remain "fossilized values" that are, by themselves, not fit to form a proper content for a literary work. The events of the work, however, might utilize some of these tropes and bring them to life. These events, they emphasize, need not be real events, but they do "take place inside the literary work itself" (41). Ignoring the dynamic relationship between the form and the content results in weak works of art. Anīs and al-ʿĀlim declare that the schools which attend to form at the expense of the content like cubism, are "incomplete schools," so are the ones that concern themselves with the content while paying little attention to form, like Surrealism and Futurism. Successful works find the right balance and exhibit "a synergic relationship" between form and content (44).

However, a successful work is not necessarily a commendable one. The right balance between the form and the content should lead into a clear goal. "At its core, the content of literature," Anīs and al-ʿĀlim stress, "consists of events which reflect social events and happenings" (44). The two authors cite four examples of successful works whose values vary. In *Ulysses*, for example, James Joyce successfully depicts the

"disintegration and decadence which characterize modern civilization through the use of "a number of tools," like the internal monologue, the free association of ideas, and anachronism. However, Joyce's choice of this form has compelled him to stop short of "revealing the other progressive aspects of this civilization" (41-42). Compare *Ulysses*, Anīs and al-ʿĀlim suggest, to Ilya Ehrenburg *The Storm*, and you would find "a huge difference" between the two works. Ehrenburg's novel does not depict a "sick reality;" it portrays a "battle," in which Ehrenburg deploys a series of scenes "along the wide front across Paris, Berlin, and Kiev" which is unified by the "unity of the battle." Had Ehrenburg employed the same form that Joyce opted for, the events of his novel would have become "a dwindling movement inside his characters," rather than "a developing and ascending movement" (42). The same disparity, Anīs and al-ʿĀlim elaborate, exists in poetry. For example, T.S. Eliot also uses the internal monologue, free association of ideas, and rapid impressions that Joyce employed in order to portray the calamity and hollowness of modern society. The form he chose limited him the same way Joyce was because, "when depicting the crises, contradictions, and surrender of the modern human conscience, Eliot stopped short of revealing the other aspect of this conscience and what develops inside of sincere efforts [which aim] for struggle, liberation, and construction" (42). On the other hand, a poet like Vladimir Mayakovsky is also a masterful poet, but, unlike Eliot, he "glorifies the modern industrial civilization and contemplates the progressive movement of history," and his poetry exalts "the will of man" and motivates him toward "construction, freedom, and the proper life." Both the form and the content of his poetry "collaborate" to deliver this message. Had Mayakovsky chosen the form that

Eliot did, his otherwise "live" poetry would have "receded to become sick and incompetent" (43).

Anīs and al-ʿĀlim lamented that they could not point to similar examples in modern Egyptian poetry. Ḥusayn and the old *udabāʾ* had encouraged poets to concentrate on writing eloquent lines of verse without paying attention to the totality of the poem or its social message. There seemed to be some prospects that the new Egyptian fiction could deliver a powerful social message, but it had to move beyond the doctrines and the models set by the older generation of critics (45). Chief among these models that younger writers should not follow, Anīs and al-ʿĀlim emphasized, was the relationship between writers and their society.

In "On Realist Literature," Anīs says that the classical theorization about the relationship between the writer and his environment is both limited and confining. Of course, he explains, the writer is deeply influenced by the place of his upbringing, and his worldview would reflect in more ways than one the ideals of that place. However, limiting such worldview to the writer's environment is not always accurate and, in fact, not desirable. A writer who grows up in an Egyptian village, for example, is not limited to the views of that village, Anīs insists. In fact, the writer must have "a comprehensive understanding of the Egyptian society as a unit" in order to understand the "competing forces" in that society (32). If the writer limits his writings to deal with his village, his work would be realist in only a narrow sense. Such a writer, Anīs says, would be akin to Francois Mauriac. Reading Mauriac's works, Anīs explains, one can get a good of the life of Gironde's upper class society, but no one can have a broad understanding of the French society because the works are too concerned with the Gironde's upper class life.

Anīs believes that “the banality of Mauriac’s art is its narrowness in the field of human experience,” because Mauriac succeeded in laying out the problems of that specific class in that particular French region, but he failed to figure out any solutions to these problems within the broader French context (32). This is the reason behind Mauriac’s pessimism, Anīs thinks, adding that Mauriac’s realism is the problem. He managed to portray the life of Gironde’s upper class society, but “he could not move forward a single step afterwards. He condemns the social experience he lived through during his time in Gironde, but he cannot see in France any social force with which he could entrust the future of humanity” (32). That was the reason behind his pessimism. But Mauriac’s pessimism is misinformed, Anīs emphasizes, because Mauriac could have looked for solutions elsewhere in the French society: “there were the working classes which, along with their allies, were waging the battle of freedom” (32). These classes represented “the hope which revives hope in the future of humanity,” but Mauriac missed out on the opportunity to include this hope in his works because of his limited understanding of realism.

Anīs dwells on Mauriac’s problematic understanding of realism as a starting point in order to take issue with the way the well-known Egyptian writer Iḥsān ʿAbd al-Quddūs envisioned realism in his work. Anīs complains that Quddūs’s heroes are “characters who are falling to moral dissolution, psychological rotting, and inner deterioration” (32). He protests that when al-Quddūs was once asked why would he make prostitution the major theme in his novels, his response was simplistically shallow: “I cannot do otherwise; this is reality” (33). Anīs agrees with al-Quddūs’ conclusion—that he is depicting reality—but he disagrees with his premise. In other words, Anīs thinks that al-Quddūs can (and, in

fact, should) do otherwise. Of course, Anīs believes, prostitutes are part of Cairo's life, especially that of its upper class, but there are other aspects of Egypt that al-Quddūs should have concentrated on instead. Such a limited understanding of realist literature, Anīs complains, presents modern Egyptian literature with a number of challenges.

In "*Min ajl adab wāqiʿī*" (Towards a Realist Literature), Anīs points out to one of these challenges which takes the form of a paradox that characterizes modern Egyptian literature. On the one hand, realism is in full sway and the majority of the Egyptian writers claim they belong to this tradition. So prevalent is the tradition that even writers who do not believe in realism would not dare attack it (35). On the other hand, however, modern Egyptian literature has failed to portray everyday Egyptian life: "Why do people not see their lives in the mirror of modern Egyptian literature … and their [lives'] relationship to the Egyptian society?" Anīs asks (35). He attributes this paradox to two issues. First, writers have to understand realism as a compromise between their personal experiences and social realities. "Any writer who does not try to understand his personal experience in the light of the general [social] reality is a weak writer." Anīs cites as an example Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's play *Praxa*. In this play, Anīs complains, al-Ḥakīm debases women and ridicules their "inalienable rights to equality with men." Despite the progress women have achieved in modern Egyptian society towards sharing social responsibilities and privileges with men, al-Ḥakīm chooses to ridicule women's aspirations because, Anīs contemplates, "in his personal life, al- Ḥakīm might have had some unpleasant and unsuccessful encounters with women." Because al- Ḥakīm claims that he is writing realist literature, he should have realized that his writings should be a compromise between personal experiences—in this case, his supposedly unsuccessful relationships

with women—and the greater social context of such experiences—that is, understanding the progress towards women rights in Egypt as “a part of the global feminist movement that the movement towards capitalism has imposed” (36). Only then, says Anīs, can writers assume they are writing realist literature.

The second reason behind the paradox of modern Egyptian literature has to do with misunderstanding the role of selection in the creative process of writing. Realism, Anīs explains, is sometimes misunderstood as chronicling the details of life as they are:

> Writers do not document the entirety of their daily lives, from the moment they get up in the early morning till they go to bed at night. If they did that, their writings would have been a laughable mumbo jumbo no one can fathom. Writers select some personal experiences and, by virtue of the strength of their art and imagination, they bring them together in order to form a whole unit. (36-37)

Anīs is saying that the characters of the drunkard and prostitute do belong to the Egyptian society and, accordingly, they could be part of Egyptian literature, but the way writers use the characters and deploy their functions is what makes the difference between, say, al-Quddūs’s novels and Bernard Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren's Profession* or Maxim Gorky’s *One Autumn Night*. Shaw and Gorky highlight the positive aspects of the prostitute’s character, whereas al-Quddūs sees only the demeaning aspects of the prostitute’s life. The difference, then, is not that of “principle”—all these writers chose prostitutes as central characters in their works—but that of “style,” Anīs adds.

III. Ḥusayn’s Reply to Marxist Intervention

Clearly, “*Al-Adab bayna al-ṣiyāghah wa-l-maḍmūn*” infuriated Ṭāhā Ḥusayn. In March 1954, he wrote a response entitled “Yūnānī fa-lā yuqraʾ” (It is Greek; It cannot be

Read).[55] Ḥusayn says that when Anīs and al-ʿĀlim's article landed on his desk, he read it once but could not understand what it said. So, he wondered "why cannot I seem to understand what they say?" and decided to re-read the article. He still could not figure out its meaning, and he tried a third time, but to no avail. Finally, he decided to ask his readers to help him understand what those two critics were saying in their article. He quotes a long extract from Anīs and al-ʿĀlim's article, and highlights this central paragraph,

> The form of literature, as we see it, is neither the dull style nor the language. It is an internal process in the core of the literary work in order to formulate its content and show its foundations. We do not describe the form as a process to refer to the effort that the writer exerts in order to formulate the content or to give form to, but to what characterizes the form itself inside the literary work. It is a coherent movement in the core of the literary work through which we see the work's cycles, pivots, and turns. Through it we move inside the literary work from one expressive level to another until we have a complete literary construction as a living organic creature. Such functional understanding of form reveals to us the necessary integration and interaction between the form and the content. So, the content of the literary work is not tropes, as the doyen of literature and the old school say, but events that happen and are realized inside the work of art itself. Literary taste takes part in their happening and realization.[56]

"Is this Arabic or Syriac?"[57] Ḥusayn mockingly asks adding, "What is the core of a literary work? What are those internal operations that take place inside the core of the

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[55] Ḥusayn's title is a close Arabic translation of the Latin "Graecum est; non legitur." It is said that when the medieval monks who were copying old Latin manuscripts to preserve them would not figure out a part of the manuscript, they would write in its place "Graecum est; non legitur" (it is Greek; [therefore] it cannot be read).

[56] The extract is from Anīs and al-ʿĀlim (41). Because Ḥusayn aims to show the incomprehensibility of the passage, I've followed the Arabic original closely in translating the passage.

[57] The expression, "*aʿarabiyyun hādhā am sīryānī*?" is the Arabic equivalent for the English idiom "it is (all) Greek to me."

literary work?" The above paragraph, Ḥusayn says scornfully, is the type of writing that the medieval scholars would have dismissed with the stamp, "It is Greek; It cannot be Read" (56-57).

He says that he could not respond to Anīs and al-ʿĀlim's "comical and confusing treatise," because it is full of "enigmas whose heads and tails I cannot tell apart" (58). However, he had read al-ʿAqqād's retort to the two writers, and he said he would use the clarity of al-ʿAqqad's piece to address some of the issues, confusing as they might be, in Anīs and al-ʿĀlim's article. Ḥusayn stops at the idea that the content of literature should have a social content. Those younger critics did not understand what it meant for a work of art to have a social content, Ḥusayn laments, because for them "literature must not describe the nature in which we live … Rivers, trees, mountains, plains, valleys, animals … [or] the feelings, emotions, or psychological state of the individual … are not fit as a subject matter for literature, because they are not social events or happenings" (59). First, literature is not about satisfying material needs. It deals with values like "the good and evil, right and wrong." Values are not "food, drink, houses, or clothes" (60). Anīs and al-ʿĀlim want the writers to dedicate their works to talking about material things and social services. Ḥusayn says he does not object to works that present a social message, but he is against *limiting* literature to writing only about social issues and services. Literature is a much wider human phenomenon and no limits could be set on its subject matter. The criterion for a work of art should therefore be the aesthetic appeal of the work. If the work is well written, Ḥusayn says, he pays no attention to whether it deals with a social or a spiritual subject: "I like the literature which portrays social events or happenings if it depicts them well; and I like the literature that portrays nature and the life of the spirit …

if it depicts them well" (60-61). This openness, Ḥusayn stressed, is the reason why he enjoys Eliot's poetry and Joyce's novels as much as he likes Mayakovsky's poetry and Ehrenburg's fiction (61).

Ḥusayn thinks that Anīs and al-ʿĀlim were merely looking to start a fight. They objected to his statement that tropes are the content of literature. But, Ḥusayn emphasizes, they failed to explain what their counter position was. They said that they enjoy how Mayakovsky "glorifies industry," and Ḥusayn mockingly says that, by confessing this, Anīs and al-ʿĀlim are, in fact, agreeing with his statement. You read Mayakovsky's poetry book, Ḥusayn patronizingly explains, and you find tropes and figures that *represent* the factories, machines, and workers. You read the work, and before you are language and tropes. This is how literature works. Do Anīs and al-ʿĀlim aim to cram "the huge factories, the heavy machinery, the workers, bosses, engineers, products, and the people who benefit from those factories … into the two boundaries of a book?" (61). So, Ḥusayn concludes his rebuttal, unless Anīs and al-ʿĀlim really want writers to do this impossible task, there should be no debate on the question of the content and the form of literature. It would take Anīs and al-ʿĀlim some time before they could respond, however. Their political views were getting them in trouble not only with Ḥusayn and his disciples. In September of 1954, the Revolutionary Command Council in Egypt issued a decree firing Anīs from the Department of Mathematics and al-ʿĀlim from the Department of Philosophy at Cairo University. Anīs moved to Lebanon to teach statistics and write a series of articles on the modern Egyptian novel in *al-Thaqāfah al-Qaṭaniyya*, the Lebanese Communist Party journal. As for al-ʿĀlim, he turned to writing essays in literary criticism for a number of journals, most notably, Suhayl Idrīs's *al-Ādāb*

(17-18).[58] Both continued the quarrel on the social function of literature with Ḥusayn's colleague, Maḥmūd al-Aqqād.

III. Ḥusayn-Khūrī Debate

While Anīs and al-Ālim were scrambling to build new lives, Suhayl Idrīs arranged with the UNESCO bureau in Lebanon to host a debate on the question, "For Whom Men of Letters Write?" On October 18, 1954, Idrīs sent a letter to Ṭāhā Ḥusayn inviting him to take part in a debate on the question. Idrīs told Ḥusayn that he "might not be wrong if I claim that Dr. Ṭāhā believes that the man of letters has to write for the elite," before backtracking to confess that "asking the question in this form might be a mistake, because there might be some people who believe that the man of letters writes for both the elite and the masses." However, Idrīs said that he thought Ḥusayn was "more inclined towards one of the sides of the issue than the other," and that what was important for him was that Ḥusayn accept the invitation, regardless of which side of the debate Ḥusayn supported. Idrīs asked Ḥusayn to inform him of "which of the two sides you choose, so that we can choose the other debator" (255-6). Ḥusayn accepted Idrīs's invitation and the latter sent a follow-up letter to Ḥusayn on December 9, 1954 informing him that "the great Lebanese writer Raʾīf Khūrī will deal with the other side of the debate, i.e. 'We Write for the Masses'" (266). The highly anticipated and widely

[58] From Lebanon Anīs wrote to al-ʿĀlim informing him that "a number of Lebanese writers" had suggested that they publish their many essays in a single book. The Lebanese critic Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Dakrūb helped edit the essays, which were published in 1955 in *Fī al-Thaqāfah al-Miṣriyya*, the book for which they are chiefly known. Serendipitously, the book was published a month after the Ḥusayn-Khūrī debate, which might have contributed to the wide circulation of the book. For more details, see the "New Introduction," which Anīs and al-ʿĀlim wrote in January 1989 for the third edition of *Fī al-Thaqāfah al-Miṣriyya* (15-24).

publicized debate between Ḥusayn and Khūrī on the question "For Whom Men of Letters Write?" took place in Beirut, in April 1955.

In this debate, Ḥusayn completely reversed his position on commitment. He now opposed it entirely. Ḥusayn began his contribution to the debate, entitled "*Al-Adīb yaktub li-l-khāṣṣah*" (The Man of Letters Writes for the Elite), by saying that the debate itself was frivolous. He told the audience that Suhayl Idrīs had invited him to take part in a debate on "writing for the elite versus writing for the masses" and that Idrīs asked him to take the side of writing for the elite. Husayn agreed to be part of the debate just so that he could be in Beirut because of his "pining to visit and salute Lebanon." In fact, he said that he did not even discuss the items of the debate with the organizers because he "never believed in such a debate," since, when it comes to literature, "there is no masses versus the elite." Such concern with the question is foreign to Arabic literature, he asserts, adding that it was being discussing profusely because of the proliferation of "modern (and dangerous!) views with which the Europeans have been preoccupied for a long time." Ḥusayn said he was unconcerned with these views for two reasons. First, these views did not make any valuable contribution to literature, because "literature had existed prior to the emergence of these theories." Neither Sophocles nor al-Mutanabbī were concerned about these views when they wrote their masterpieces that countless generations of readers had been enjoying for centuries. In fact, "From antiquity until the beginning of this age [the twentieth century], none of these ideas occupied the minds of writers when they were working on their masterpieces." Arabic literature, in particular, thrived for centuries without any such views. So, Ḥusayn asked the audience, why were they debating an issue that did not pertain to Arabic literature at all? More importantly, he

continued wondering, why were they debating an issue that was entirely made up: “Why, as the French say, ‘*chercher midi à quatorze heures*’ [literally, “looking for noon at 2 pm.,” meaning to look for complications when there is none]?” (9).

His response was simple: politics. Politicians, he lamented, wanted to control all aspects of the Arab intellectual activities. For Ḥusayn politics was synonymous with corruption and the manipulation of public opinion.

> New political opinions and theories have called upon some politicians to control the lives of people --and they have indeed done so. … Those politicians wanted to influence literature and impose their political theories on it. Thus emerged ideas like didacticism in literature, writing to the masses versus writing to the elite, and committed versus un-committed literature. … All these ideas were created by politics. Nothing other than politics (9).

The most frivolous of these views, Husayn said, were the idea of “didacticism” and the idea that literary audience could be split into an elite and masses. Ḥusayn dedicated the rest of his lecture to discredit these two ideas.

If didacticism is intrinsic to the production of literature, Ḥusayn wonders, how come that Sophocles and al-Mutanabbī wrote their masterpieces without any didacticism? He asks the audience “Do you think that [Sophocles] penned [his] tragedies in the manner he did merely because Mr. So-and-so was calling for this political interest, whereas another Mr. So-and-so was advocating for a different interest?” Not at all, Ḥusayn affirmed: “Neither politics nor politicians had control over this poet”. Genius, he stressed, not didacticism was the drive behind Sophocles’ great literature. Sophocles “practiced this art well” and exercised unique “mastery of this art [of playwriting],” which allowed him to produce a masterpiece like *Oedipus Rex*. “No pre-conceived theory guided” Sophocles he wrote the play, Ḥusayn affirmed (10).

Then, Ḥusayn moves to discuss the question of dividing the reading public into elite and masses. First, he says, such division is only in the mind of those who are uncritically importing European critical theories. For pragmatic reasons, the classical poets never thought of such a distinction when they penned their works. Writers, says Ḥusayn, "by their own nature, are ambitious, conceited, and keen on winning the hearts and minds of all the people they can reach." They would never divide the reading public into two incompatible blocks and lose the opportunity to gain more readership. Only at the present time do people talk about whether a certain poet wrote for the masses or for the elite. Even the method those critics use to gauge such division is flawed. They think that the more readership the writer attracted, the closer he was to the people. Such an understanding cannot be further from the truth. It was not the majority or the minority which determined the writer's readership and reception; it was, in addition to the writer's talent "circumstances …and luck!" (11)

Furthermore, Ḥusayn says that Khūrī is misrepresenting his position on the issue. Ḥusayn does believe that literature should be "directed towards those who were capable of understanding and evaluating it as well as being affected by it." Poetry, for example, should not debase to the level of some modern Arabic poems which are mere versifying and lack any aesthetic appeal. Literature should not be debased so that everyone, educated and non-educated alike, can understand it. The task of the writer should be to raise the people to the level of sublime literature, not to debase literature to the level of illiterate people. Ḥusayn stresses that poetry should be written for the cultured so that it does not debase and, in return, improve the aesthetic as well as the intellectual faculties of the masses who approach such literature. There is nothing new in this view, he

stressed, because this has been the consensus among Arab critics. But if Khūrī insists on dividing the reading public into two groups and demands Ḥusayn to voice view on which group the writer should write for, then, Ḥusayn says, he is saying that the writer writes for the elite: "If Mr. Khūrī labels those people, i.e. the people who can read, understand, and appreciate literary works, the elite then, yes, the writer writes to the elite" (13).

Ḥusayn says he understands the urgency behind Khūrī's question. It is the idea that writers should declare affiliations. Such calls for so-called commitment would not have troubled him had it not been for the rapid spreading of these ideas and their attempt to sabotage Arabic literature as he knew it because their proponents have a fundamentally "mistaken understanding of the literary history, and the Arabic literary history in particular". He complains that, for example, "many writers and poets [who write panegyrics] suffer in Egypt" because of the propagation of certain ideas about literature which expound "the resentment of panegyric and the displeasure with both those who praise and those praised." Such view damages the future of Arabic literature and, more dangerously, distorts the Arab literary heritage. The type of committed poetry those advocates demand is, by its very nature, local and temporary, whereas great literature is universal and eternal: "Case in point, those poets perished and their patrons vanished, but we still read the poetry those poets composed and we still find pleasure in reading it." Had those poets wrote exclusively to a particular audience, i.e. the elite or the masses, in the manner than the proponents of commitment want, the poems would have dealt with only local issues and would have lost their universal appeal. The classical poet did not heed to any such divisions, he merely "thought of his art and the purpose (*gharaḍ*) of his poem" (13-14).

One the other hand, such resentment for panegyric is harmful. The source of this resentment lies in misunderstanding the Arabic literary tradition. For centuries, Arabic poetry used set rules of techniques. One of these techniques is the purpose (*gharaḍ*) of poetry. Panegyric is one of the major purposes of poetry, and such resentment would surely degrade this purpose. The exponents of commitment do not realize that not only are panegyrics an important aspect of the experience of writing poetry, but that classical Arab poets used them to mock the very rulers they praised. Al-Mutanabbī, for instance, was mocking Kāfūr al-Ikhshīdī in the panegyrics he composed for him, and the poet who told Hārūn al-Rashīd "Such is the fear you instill in the unbelievers that/Their unborn sperms dread you" was, in fact, taking advantage of al-Rashīd's conceit. The poet had the joy of mocking al-Rashīd and, at the same time, reaped prizes from him as a reward for the poem. The poet, like many classical poets, used their poetry to make financial gains through panegyrics. They fooled the ruler, received financial support, and, most importantly, did not sacrifice the aesthetic appeal of their art. That is why, Ḥusayn assured his audience, people find appeal in these poems long after both the ruler and the poet perished. Such is the appeal of classical poetry that even the proponents of commitment find pleasure and profit in reading it, even though, Ḥusayn stressed, they pretend that they do not read it (14).

Ḥusayn concludes his contribution by objecting again to Khūrī's call for didacticism in literature. He says that the proponents of commitment were in fact deceiving their readers by cloaking ideology in literature, because he believes that "Guided literature is meant to be advocacy literature, whose goal is to market to people the dictations of certain political parties, be it socialist, or communist or democratic."

This is the type of literature to which commitment leads. To Ḥusayn's mind there are two types of didacticism. The first is where the poet is guided by his temperament and talent; and Ḥusayn thinks this is a commendable form of didacticism because it leads to true expression of feelings and ideas in literature. The other type of didacticism, however, is the dangerous one. It involves dictation on the poet by outside forces, be it political parties or the populace. This kind of "imposed didacticism cannot allow the creation of genuine literature that is free from fabrication and sycophancy." This, unfortunately, is the kind of literature that Khūrī and others were propagating and it will surely bring Arabic literature to its knees, because poetry will become a mere tool at the hands of the corrupt politicians. In fact, the idea of didacticism itself emerged because "politicians (*al-sāsa*) wanted to influence literature and impose their political theories on it." Those politicians will continue their efforts to dominate literature by imposing divisions like "writing to the masses versus writing to the elite, and committed versus un-committed literature" (15-16).

This obsession with the effect of politics on the *quality* of literature remained a constant concern throughout Ḥusayn's later writings. In fact, it was this obsession which prompted him to change his mind with regard to the question of commitment from enthusiastic endorsement in the editorial he wrote for *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī* in 1946 to complete disavowal during his debate with Khūrī. Ḥusayn was sincere to his profession as a man of letters, but he had a flawed understanding of literature. He thought that literature was an institution that could transcend any ideological limitations that modern society imposed on it. He thought of literature as a separate being that existed outside time and space. There was an aura to literature that not everyone can produce and, more

importantly, not everyone can (or should!) understand. Political literature, Ḥusayn felt, was tearing down this aura, and that was the main reason he opposed commitment later in his life.

APPENDIX I: TRANSLATION OF KEY DOCUMENTS

1. Ḥusayn, Ṭāhā. "Al-Adīb Yaktub li-l-Khāṣṣah." *Al-Ādāb* 3.5 (1955): 9-16. This is a transcript of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's contribution during the UNESCO-sponsored debate, For Whom the Man of Letters Writes?, held in Beirut in April 1955. *Al-Ādāb* reproduced the complete texts of the debate and published them in its May 1955 special issue, appropriately titled "Literature and Life."

The Man of Letters Writes to the Elite

Tāhā Ḥusayn

Ladies and gentlemen, I have to be honest and share something with you before carrying on with this dialogue. I have not committed (*altazim*) to defend the elite nor do I commit to defending the masses. The whole issue came about when I received a kind invitation from Jamʿiyyat al-Maqāṣid al-Islāmiyya (the Islamic Goals Association), signed by my friend Suhayl Idrīs, informing me about an upcoming debate about writing for the elite versus writing for the masses. Mr. Idrīs asked me to talk about writing for the elite. Here, I have to be honest again: my longing to meet you and my pining to visit and salute Lebanon—after all the good and kindness I have received from this country—prompted me to accept Mr. Idrīs's invitation and agree to everything he asked for since it would allow me to visit Lebanon to meet and listen to you.

We have to keep this in mind, because this debate (or battle, combat, or enmity) is, I believe, something artificial whose base or origin I do not know for a very simple reason. It is my belief, as shown in my various writings, that there are no masses, and no elite who oppose them. When it comes to literature, instead, there is literature considered

by readers, who either like or dislike it. I have never perceived anything beyond this conception. For I am not one of those people infatuated by modern (and dangerous!) views with which the Europeans have been preoccupied for a long time. Indeed, they have been busying themselves with these political theories, which have changed their lives in this modern age, since their inception. I completely ignore such preoccupation, because literature existed prior to the emergence of such theories. Literature has influenced the lives of peoples and nations in many different ways. It has aided in their development. It has done all this without literary authors pausing to ponder whether they were writing for the masses or for the elite. Nor did they ever imagine that they were the ones doing the guiding or being guided. From antiquity until the beginning of this age, none of these ideas has occupied the minds of writers when they were working on their masterpieces. So, what has happened to humanity? What has happened in the human mind? Why do we split hairs about the matter now? Why do we, as the French say, *cherche midi à quatorze heures* (meaning to look for complications when there are none)?

Nothing has happened to cause all this. But new political opinions and theories have called upon some politicians to control the lives of people --and they have indeed done so. And you all know that, when politics takes control, it cannot survive and force its power unless it has proponents who back it, believe in it, propagate its theories and instill them in the minds of the people. Those politicians wanted to influence literature and impose their political theories on it. Thus emerged ideas like didacticism in literature, writing to the masses versus writing to the elite, and committed versus un-committed literature. Gentlemen, all these ideas were created by politics. Nothing other than politics.

So, please allow me to be free--allow me to be free in the widest and deepest meaning of the word. And rest assured, if you frankly tell me that you would not allow me such freedom, my reply to you will be very simple: I will exercise freedom with or without your permission!

What is the nature of the problem raised by Mr. Suhayl Idrīs and detailed by my friend Mr. Raʾīf Khūrī? What is this problem? Let us leave aside our present time and all its circumstances which influence, in various ways, writers and their literature. Let us move back in time into an ancient age that is far away from these circumstances and choose any writer from antiquity. Let us, for example, choose Greek playwrights of tragedy. Who directed those writers? Were they being guided? Or were they guiding?[59] Or were they both guiding and being guided, to use expressions that Mr. Raʾīf seems to like? Who directed a playwright like Sophocles, for example? Do you think that the aristocratic party or the democratic party in Athens arranged with Sophocles to write *Antigone* or *Electra* in the way he did? Do you think that he penned these tragedies in the manner he did merely because Mr. So-and-so was calling for this political interest, whereas another Mr. So-and-so was advocating for a different interest? Or, is it because his tragedies would sit well with one of the rival parties that were competing in Athens?

As far as I am concerned, I am convinced that, when writing *Antigone*, Sophocles paid no attention to Pericles or any other politician, nor did he think about the democratic or the aristocratic parties. Instead, he found before him a magnificent old Greek myth that had been passed from one generation into another. In addition, he realized that the political and the religious order in Athens which mandated the celebration of a different

[59] Ḥusayn is sarcastically echoing Khūrī's *tawjīh* (didacticism) here.

god each year stipulated that a festival be held every year to celebrate one of their gods—for instance, Athena in a tragedy or Dionysus in a comedy—and that poets would compose a number of works to be performed publicly in a theatre. Sophocles felt both the inclination towards and the mastery of this art, and so he practiced this art well. He utilized the old myth to create his play and the other four stories which influenced all the literature that was written after *Oedipus Rex*. Neither politics nor politicians had control over this poet. They did not have a say, to use terms Mr. Khūrī likes, in his viewpoint, form, or content; they had no control over his subject matter or meaning—to use the two terms we old critics like to use. No one thought of directing Sophocles to write something, nor did Sophocles think that somebody was guiding him. But, instead, he saw before him a myth, and he made use of it. He used it in a manner that was in line with his nature, temper and behavior, a manner that was consistent with the dominant philosophical currents of the age in which he was living.

So, during antiquity, in ages distant from us in time and place and different from ours in influences and circumstances, significant groups of ancient writers managed to produce masterpieces without pondering about any of the nice talk to which we have just listened because none of this ever crossed their minds. In fact, their age did not allow the emergence of such ideas. Do you think that anyone had directed Homer or gave didacticism to those who produced the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*? What was the direction which forced those people to produce these works? Even more, do you think that Homer and his compatriots who completed the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* after him thought for a moment in the form and the content, or, as we say, in the expression, meaning, and style of the work? Did they think about in any aspect that critics discuss repeatedly since the

inception of criticism? I assure you that nothing of this sort crossed the minds of those writers. They were pushed towards their literary production, first, by their nature, and, secondly, by their life and the lives of their peoples. They tried to portray the life of their people. No person and no pre-conceived theory guided them. In fact, they did not have any theory about literature or aesthetics. Nothing of that sort at all.

How about our own classical poets and writers--who directed them? Were they guided by any theory that was imposed on them? For the *Jāhilī* age, I know none of its poets who knew any type of theory, criticism, literature, or any of the things we are talking about nowadays. As for the early Islamic periods, our poets went with their nature: some rushed towards partisan politics, whereas others stayed aloof from political parties and dedicated themselves to their art. Certainly, politicians manipulated some poets and provided support for them because the latter praised them and propagated their ideas. All this is normal and well known. However, what remains unquestionable is that no poet was confronted with any artistic theory to compel him to ponder composing his poetry to the masses or to those elite whom Mr. Suhayl Idrīs and Mr. Raʾīf Khūrī created out of nowhere. None of those poets thought of the masses or the elite. Rather they thought of art and the purpose (*gharaḍ*) of the poem.[60] They added nothing more, save skill and craftsmanship. Let us, for instance, look at the case of ʿUbayd Allāh ibn Qays al-Ruqqayāt. He was a Qurayshī poet who believed strongly in Quraysh,[61] despised any authority other than Quraysh's, loathed the Umayyads because they relied on Yemen to

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[60] Ḥusayn is referring here to "*aghrāḍ al-shiʿr*" (themes of poetry), a heavily-studied classical term used to classify the general themes of poetry. For a brief overview of these themes, see Allen 83-122.

[61] A powerful merchant tribe that controlled Mecca in Pre-Islamic times. Prophet Muhammad was born into the Banū Hashim clan of the Quraysh tribe.

strengthen their rule, and disliked the ʿAllawiyyūn because they relied on the Mawālī to strengthen their doctrine in the eastern flank of the Islamic empire.[62] He was part of the Qurayshī aristocracy which lived in the pre-Islamic era and, after the emergence and dominance of Islam, he knew how to benefit from the new circumstances. That is why he defended ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr[63] who wanted to make his authority exclusively Qurayshī by depending on Quraysh only and disregarding Yemen and the Mawālī. So, I ask, who was guiding Qays al-Ruqqayāt? What was the theory that influenced him? The only certain thing we know is that Qays al-Ruqqayāt was only influenced by his dedication to Muṣʿab ibn al-Zubayr, his belief in Quraysh's dominance, and his fondness of those *ruqqayāt*, after whom he was nicknamed.[64]

Moreover, take any of our classical poets you like—be it the eulogists, satirists, or political poets—you will never find they ever thought of the questions of the masses versus the elite. But the real problem is not this. The issue is to whom did they write? They did not think of the issue, so let us think for them. Did they write their poetry to the people they praised and satirized? Did they compose their political poetry for politician leaders? As far as I am concerned, they did not think of writing their poetry for those people; rather, their poetry was directed towards those who were capable of understanding and evaluating it as well as being affected by it.

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[62] During the early Islamic era, the term *mawālī* (singular *mawlā)* was used to refer to new non-Arab converts to Islam. In pre-Islamic times, the term originally applied to any form of tribal association.

[63] ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr is son of al-Zubayr ibn al-ʿAwwām and Asmāʾ bint Abī Bakr, daughter of the first Caliph Abū Bakr. He led a rebellion against the Umayyad Caliphate but was defeated and killed in Mecca in 692 AD.

[64] *Ruqayyāt* is plural for *Ruqayya*. Qays al-Ruqqayāt is said to have courted three girls with the name Ruqayya, hence the namesake Ruqayyāt.

There are statements in this debate whose foundations are wrong—please forgive my abruptness! There is a mistaken understanding of the literary history, and the Arabic literary history in particular. I wonder if you have here the same problem from which many writers and poets suffer in Egypt, namely the resentment of panegyric and the displeasure with both those who praise and those praised. There is talk that panegyric epitomizes the poet's profession, stating that poets offer to sell their poetry in addition to their souls and ethics. Such talk did not emerge with the latest revolution in Egypt, but it has been going on since the beginning of the modern Egyptian age in the early years of this century. I assure you that all this is, in fact, mere useless absurdity. Of course our poets had praised rulers, and they did indeed go over the top with their panegyrics. But let us take a look at the poets who were selling their poetry. Let us look at the caliphs and princes who believed in such panegyrics, and who paid masses of money to hear them. Let us investigate the two parties and ask, which of the two is the true fool? The answer is certain: those kings, caliphs, and princes were the idiots. The poets played with them, and made fun of them. In exchange for lucrative prizes, those poets would recite poetry that only a conceited fool would believe. What is more astonishing is that those caliphs indeed believed such poetry and paid big money for lines they never understood. When a poet told Harūn al-Rashīd

> Such is the fear you instill in the unbelievers that
> Their unborn sperms dread you.
> و اخفت اهل الشرك حتى انه　　　　لتخافك النطف التي لم تخلق

Al-Rashīd would dance with utmost joy to such poetry and bestow on the poet the most valuable and precious of prizes. But the poet or the patron was the fool? Certainly not the

poet! The poet was not so naïve to think that al-Rashīd could frighten sperm. It was the Caliph who was fooled by his conceit and power that he actually believed that he could startle the sperm before it was created. And when another poet tells him:

> O Muḥammad's cousin, two things censor your enemy:
> The light of morn and Darkness.
> If he is up, you frighten him,
> And when he sleeps,
> Dreams brandish your swords on him.

و على عدوك يا ابن عم محمد رصدان ضوء الصبح و الاظلام

فاذا تنبه رعته و اذا غفا سلّت عليه سيوفك الاحلام

Believing the poet, the caliph rewarded him. Again, the poet was not the fool. Rather, it was the fool who allowed himself to be deceived by such words.

Certainly, no one exemplifies what I am talking about here better than Abū al-Ṭayyib al-Mutanabbī.[65] He ridiculed the majority of the people he praised—the clear exception being Sayf al-Dawlah al-Ḥamdānī. Al-Mutanabbī exaggerated so much in his praise making one a dwelling place for a spirit from Allāh, or likening his patrons to prophets like Moses and Jesus. But, deep within himself, the poet disdained and disparaged them. So, which of the two parties was selling himself and his ethics, and accepted to devalue his dignity for the other? I would say those rulers are the losers in this case. The poet lost nothing. Even more strangely, to bring us back to the ridiculous

[65] Abū al-Ṭayyib al-Mutanabbī is considered as one of the greatest poets in the Arabic language. Much of his poetry revolves around praising the kings he visited during his lifetime. He excelled in two forms: panegyric and satire. Al-Mutanabbī's panegyrics of Sayf al-Dawla are among the finest in Arabic literary tradition. After parting ways with Sayf al-Dawla, he joined the court of Kafūr in Egypt in the hope of becoming a statesman. After realizing that Kafūr was playing him with false hopes, al-Mutanabbī left Egypt in 960 and wrote famous lampoons satirizing Kafūr.

talk I referred to, when those poets were praising or satirizing rulers, where they really considering those rulers and nothing else? Or were they thinking about composing magnificent poetry that would amaze everyone who would read or listen to it? Before thinking of politics and of those whom they praised or ridiculed, they thought of the people—the masses who would read and sing the poem.

Gentlemen, I believe that the praise poets did not think of their patrons the way they thought of their readers and listeners. Case in point, those poets perished and their patrons vanished, but we still read the poetry those poets composed and we still find pleasure in reading it and, with some of those poets, we find utter joy and splendor. Al-Muʿtaṣim[66] is long gone, and so are Abū Tammām and all the people who heard him recite his *ʿAmmūriyya* (Amorium) poem.[67] However, the poem still charms us, probably more so than it did the people who heard it directly from Abū Tammām.

So, there is nothing new in the debate as to whether a writer should write to the masses or to the elite. Nothing new at all. I know of no writer or poet who wrote a piece or composed poetry while thinking of a particular group of people and of nothing else but that group. What I know is that, first and foremost, the subject matter imposes itself on the writer: it persists so strongly that the writer or the poet cannot but produce it and disseminate it to people orally or, in our age, have it published and distributed. So, the writer does not write to himself. Many writers deceive themselves by saying that they

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[66] Al-Muʿtaṣim, son of Harūn al-Rashīd, was the eighth Abbasid caliph, ruling from 833 to his death in 842.

[67] Ḥusayn is referring to the famous poem "*Wā Muʿtaṣimāh*," which he wrote after the The Sack of Amorium by the Abbasid Caliphate in 838. It is said that al-Muʿtaṣim ordered the conquest, which is one of the major events in the long history of the Arab–Byzantine Wars, after a lieutenant informed him that a female Muslim prisoner had invoked his name, shouting "*wā Muʿtaṣimāh*" (Help, al-Muʿtaṣim!).

write to themselves. This is nonsense! A writer does not write to himself, else why does he need to "write"? He may simply pamper his thoughts and fleeting ideas when they occur to him or trouble his feelings. He does not need to read them in writing. However, when he releases these ideas and feelings out of himself and puts them on paper, he proves that, in addition to writing to himself, he writes to others. In fact, he writes only *because* he thinks of others. He does not write to the elite, nor does he write to the masses. He never even thinks of them. He writes to others, i.e. anyone who can read, anyone who can understand, and anyone who can appreciate his writings. If Mr. Khūrī labels those people, i.e. the people who can read, understand, and appreciate literary works, the elite then, yes, the writer writes to the elite. In addition, and also to use Mr. Khūrī's term, if those who can read, understand, and appreciate literature are labeled the masses; certainly, then, the writer writes to the masses. I make no such distinctions, but I am using the terms Mr. Khūrī is using in this debate. Every writer is very keen on having the larger number possible of readers understand and appreciate his works. Anyone claiming otherwise is either deceiving you or himself—trust me! Writers, by their own nature, are ambitious, conceited, and keen on winning the hearts and minds of all the people they can reach. Anyone telling you that he only writes to a particular group of people is merely trying to say that he is desperate because he is very certain that only a limited number of people would understand and appreciate his writings.

Gentlemen, I am not sure if I discussed with Mr. Raʾīf Khūrī all the suggested items for this debate. Indeed, I think I never did, for the simple reason that I never believed in such a debate. However, I am so keen to tell you all and my friend Mr. Khūrī—and it seems I will never get bored of saying it—that we can agree on this

common ground: If the people who can read, understand, appreciate, and enjoy literature are the minority; it is for this minority, then, that the writer writes. However, if those people are the majority, the writer writes to them.

Strangely, some writers would start writing to a limited minority, but after the passage of time, development, spreading of culture, and heightened awareness among people, the writer would find out that he, in fact, had written to a countless majority. Those who read classical poetry nowadays far exceed the number of those who had read it during that time, because during the age in which our classical poets had lived only a minority of people could read such poetry. Indeed, the same could be said of the ages of the classical Greek or Roman poets, Dante—since Mr. Khūrī has mentioned him as an example—as well as Corneille, Racine, Molière, and Voltaire. Only a small minority could read their works; therefore, those writers and poets indeed wrote to that limited minority. But the world has changed. Education has become compulsory on all citizens, and people have started reading, writing, and educating themselves. Indeed, the people who are reading Dante or Sophocles in our age far exceed the limited number of readers who had read the masterpieces of these writers at the time of their writing.

So, the writer may write to the elite or select the minority, but indeed has his works read by a countless majority. Homer, for instance, wrote his poetry to the Greek. But who reads Homer now? Only the Greek, or the whole humanity? This also applies to Sophocles and all the master poets and writers. They all composed their works for a particular group—let us say they composed them for their own people—but their works have become universal. So, there is no elite or masses, majority or minority. There are only circumstances—and there is luck!—that allow countless majority of people to read a

certain work, or only a limited number of people to read others. Do you think Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī's readers today are equal in number with his contemporaneous readers?[68] Absolutely not! In fact, it never occurred to al-Maʿarrī himself that the whole Arab world, literature specialists or general readers, would have the chance to read, understand, and appreciate his work. The issue, then, is itself not accurate. There is neither elite nor masses when it comes to literature. There is literature that has to be created, superbly and elegantly, with the best subject matter permissible and best form possible. Afterwards, anyone, the elite or the masses, can read it. It was not created for either group exclusive. It was written to anyone who can read, understand, and appreciate it.

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I remain suspicious of the presence of political theories in literature, i.e. those theories that mandate literature should be socialist, communist, democratic, etc. Frankly, I do not understand them, and I do not like them! I hate for any scheme or theory to be imposed on literature. Instead, the writer proves himself and imposes on his nature, temper, and scheme. The supreme law should be the absolute and wide-ranging freedom which connects the writer and his readers. I have repeatedly stated my belief, and I will always reiterate it: I write whatever I like, and I do not allow *any* reader argue with me about what I write or about the way I write, nor do I allow readers impose on me any opinion,

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[68] Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī (973–1057) was a blind Arab philosopher, poet, and writer. He was a controversial rationalist of his time who advocated social justice, and lived a secluded, ascetic lifestyle. He is known for his witty poetry.

theory, or scheme. That said, the reader has the right to read (or not) whatever he wishes. When he does read my book, he has the right to become angry or furious, and he has the right to tear the book apart if he may. All this means nothing to me.

I very much like our friends who adore the theory of guided literature to answer me, do they read classical literatures? Do they appreciate these literatures? What I know is that they read them persistently and that they really appreciate them, I am not sure if they declare this publically or not. What is important is that those who prefer guided literature, i.e. literature directed by political theories or directed by the people—I am not really sure—read classical works. In other words, although they are keen on being guided, thus surrendering some of their rights of freedom and independence, they read classical Arab, Greek, Roman, and Indian works in addition to masterpieces by Montaigne, Shakespeare, Corneille, Racine, and Molière. Indeed, they might find delightful pleasure despite their awareness that this classical literature was not guided in the sense that they understand, or in the sense they want.

Do not you see the sharp contradiction between what those gentlemen want and what they do? They surreptitiously enjoy unguided literature, but, when they intend to create literature, they insist that they constrain themselves and become guided. What would you call this contradiction? In fact, what would *they* call it? For me, I call it contradiction, on one hand, and, on the other, squandering the writer's freedom.

In any case, let us unequivocally, boldly, and fearlessly tell the truth: Guided literature is meant to be advocacy literature (*adab al-daʿwa*), whose goal is to market to people the dictations of certain political parties, be it socialist, or communist or democratic. I do not ever want to deceive myself, nor do I want anybody to deceive

themselves. I do not like to flatter the people in order to subjugate them to what they should not submit. I do not say that my writings are from the people, of the people, by the people, and for the people so that people would hear this claim and read my writings in which that I tacitly propagate the principles of a certain political party. I would be deceiving and manipulating the people in order to recruit them for a cause that I think they should not be recruited for. The issue is easier than this. Guiding works in one of two ways. Firstly, the writer is intuitively guided by his nature and directed by his own temper and character. Surely, he might face humiliation, harm or indeed torture—such is his fate and this is the nature of the writings that aspires to be called literature. The other way in which guiding works involves a writer who receives directions from others, be it from an individual, a political party, a government, or a group. Such didacticism should have nothing to do with literature! Such imposed didacticism cannot allow the creation of genuine literature that is free from fabrication and sycophancy.

And, again, let us be honest here: Do you like for the writer to be deceptive or deceived? So, let the writer be guided and let his course be with those who guide him like the one taken by Abū Tammām and al-Mutanabbī who manipulated the people they eulogized. Or do you want the writer to be open, stand for the truth, and seek the good (if he wishes so)? I want you to know that I am the most avid readers of guided literature—guided, that is, by all the various ideologies forced on literature nowadays. In fact, I read a lot of the communist literature, much of the socialist literature, and some of the literatures influenced by Fascism. However, and please forgive me for saying this, I have seldom felt any sincerity in these guided literatures. And I feel sorry and pity for a few

talented writers who are certainly capable of creating distinctive literature, but their circumstances forced them to become guided and degraded the value of their work.

Now, let us consider the story of the ivory tower and those authors whose writings are the opposite of what the people want (or, at least, the writings fail to portray what the people want). What kind of nonsense is this? First, what are the people's needs? Who can determine or address the people's needs at any particular time? Do the people need to eat after hunger, clad after nakedness, drink after thirst? Do the people need to satisfy all these materialistic needs that the social system and justice betrayed? Do you think that they need only these materialistic needs? Do not the people have mind, taste, heart, and feelings? How would the *ghazal* of love poets contribute to feeding the hungry? When a hungry person reads the poetry of, say, Kuthayyir[69] or Jamīl,[70] he will find nothing in this poetry that would fill his stomach. Are you, then, sure that he does not need to read such type of poetry? I think he exceedingly needs to read this poetry, and I believe that people, by their nature, are wiser than conflating things that should be kept separate. The people distinguish between what satisfies their bodies and what nourishes their minds, and they are keen, when equipped with some education, on nourishing their souls as well as satisfying their bodies. Why do not we mention some historical facts? Do you really think that the first-(Hijrī-)century poets wrote *ghazal* poetry because they were in deep love

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[69] Kuthayyir (c. 660 – c. 723), commonly known as Kuthayyir ʿAzza, was an Umayyad poet who famously wrote about his unfulfilled love to a married woman named ʿAzza

[70] Jamīl (d.701), also known as Jamīl Buthayna, was an Umayyad love poet who sang about his futile love to Buthayna. Kuthayyir and Jamīl were renowned for the poetic tradition of chaste-love poetry (*shiʿr ʿudhrī*).

with a Laylā,[71] a ʿAbla,[72] and other dames? No, I am certain that these poets used the *ghazal* to cope with poverty and console themselves about distant wishes they could not fulfil. Probably, because they could not nourish their bodies as needed, they satisfied their souls. Let us be fair, then, and agree that when we talk about the people, we should not merely think of food, drink, and clothes. I do think that it is indeed a crime to subject people to hunger, poverty, or abjection so long as the land produces and the human labor can produce enough food to feed all people. Furthermore, I do think that it is a crime when a single person sleeps hungry, and I strongly believe that, as some of our contemporaries say, the hunger of one person disturbs the balance of the whole world. However, all this is one thing, and limiting literature along with the writer's mentality and approach to this aspect of life is an entirely different thing. Many of us read the works of some ivory-tower writers, who secluded themselves and wrote things that concerned them only, and find in it much pleasure and many ideas that we agree with. Why? Because we admire high ideals and like beauty *per se*. We do not always need to make everything a means or an end. We may see literature as an end for itself. We do not necessarily need to mobilize literature or art to serve a certain purpose. Indeed, art benefits us in our material life whether we wanted this or not. Science invents for us theories and laws that allow practitioners to invent different tools. But, please, allow some scientists to like science for nothing other than the fact that it pleases them; because of the knowledge, just as such; they are happy with knowledge regardless of the results it

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[71] The beloved of Qays (also known as Majnūn Layla, meaning the one crazed by Layla's love). Qays unfulfilled love for Layla is the subject matter of the famous story of Layla and Majnūn.

[72] ʿAbla is the beloved of ʿAntar, the preeminent pre-Islamic Arab knight and poet famous for both his poetry and his adventurous life. ʿAntar is one of the *muʿallaqāt* poets.

leads to. The results might be nothing or the machines that have materially advanced the world. Allow a scientist who dwells in a laboratory to be satisfied with the results of the experiments he carries out, leaving it to others to make use of these experiments in inventions and explorations in the material life that you all know very well. Allow writers the same thing, then! Let the writer produce, in accordance with his character and the type of life he leads, and afterwards take his product and do what you please with it. Commend him if you like his product, and condemn him if you do not. But let him produce, because he is a writer! And remember that Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī, may Allāh have mercy on his soul, used to ridicule those who thought that bees are meant to serve humans by producing honey for them to savor. He said that bees did not make honey so that humans can enjoy consuming it; they produced honey for themselves. Consequently, we should not view the writer as a servant whom we direct towards a certain end. On the contrary, we should see him as an active element that produces what he can so that we can benefit from what he produces, and nothing more.

Do not ask me, then, who has won this debate. If by the elite we mean those who can read, understand, and appreciate literature, then I am the winner. But you have to keep in mind that such elite changes with the change of time and circumstances. Indeed, one day the whole people might become such elite when they all become literate and educated. However, if by the elite we designate a specific group of people, of course Mr. Raʾīf Khūrī wins, and I would look so foolish that I would be ashamed of standing here before you.

So, let us agree before we move on that we have to be careful when using terms like the elite, the masses, the people, didacticism, etc. Let us make sure that concepts like

these do not spoil literature and drive it off course. I am elated that Mr. Khūrī used these terms with precaution. He did not want literature to degrade down to the level of masses, nor did he want literature to transgress its aesthetics and high ideals of magnificence and beauty. So, we are in agreement on this issue, whether he accepts this or not. We are in agreement for a simple reason: the writer does not sacrifice artistic magnificence, nor does he sacrifice the subject matter—or the "content," to use a term Mr. Khūrī prefers, since we are in agreement—is concerned. Since this debate is being recorded, I want you to be my witnesses that, if we agree that they should not sacrifice their art for the sake of readers, writers would only write to the elite.

But nowadays when such a statement finds its way to newspapers and is read by both people who understand it and those who cannot, it leads to dire consequences because many people believe strongly that literature should be written in a way that allows everybody to understand and appreciate it. Writing in formal (*fuṣḥā*) Arabic, therefore, is meaningless because the general public do not understand Arabic unless it is deliberately simplified for them, its grammar violated, and pushing it to the colloquial (*ʿāmiyya*) closest to the people's everyday language, which vary by geographical location. Therefore, the masses, or a lot of those who hear about such theories, think that literature must be degraded and brought down so that all people may understand it. As far as I am concerned, and I think that Mr. Khūrī agrees with me on this, literature should not be brought down to the masses, because the first principle, the first task, for any literature, science, or any form of knowledge is to lift people up, not drop down to the level of the masses.

Regardless, I want to apologize to you for talking so long without addressing all aspects of the issue. I also want to apologize to Mr. Khūrī for any harshness or imprudence. I want to assure him that I venerate him and respect his views, whether I agree with them completely or accept only a few of them.

2. "Muqābalah Adabiyya maʿa Sārtar." *Al-Ādāb* 14.1 (1966): 5-7. *Al-Adāb* reprinted an interview with Sartre prior to his 1966 visit to Egypt. It prefaced the interview with this paragraph: "In its 12/25/1965 issue, the Egyptian newspaper, *al-Ahrām*, published an important interview with the great thinker Jean-Paul Sartre, who will visit the United Arab Republic at the end of this year. He will also visit the Palestinian refugee camps before visiting Israel[73]. It is *al-Ādāb*'s pleasure to request permission from *Al-Ahrām* to re-publish this important interview."

Sartre on Literature:

An Interview

What surprised me the most was his respect for appointments. Sartre came early to the interview, arriving five minutes before I did. He was a pleasant person, and he made sure that my seat was comfortable. This giant figure was tried by the French authorities for his support of the Algerian war of independence. He told the judge, "you summoned me today as a witness, but, in fact, I am a defendant. I envy those young heroes who managed to aid the Algerian revolutionaries. I advise you, if I may, to consider me a defendant in this case." The judge did not dare to send Sartre to prison, fearing that thousands of people around the world would declare the death of freedom. When this giant welcomed me into his house, he was very polite. He was shy (*khajūl*). He

[73] Our readers remember that, after Sartre declared his intention to visit Israel a few months ago, *al-Adāb*'s editor-in-chief invited Sartre to visit Lebanon and the Palestinian refugee camps. Sartre's acceptance of the United Arab Republic's [i.e. Egypt's] invitation fulfils the wish of all those who believe in his free, truth-seeking thought.

answered my questions with his well-known committed enthusiasm (*ḥamāsahu al-multazim*).

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Al-Ahrām: Let us begin by taking about the future. I want to ask you about your imminent visit to Egypt for which a lot of Arab intellectuals are waiting impatiently.

Sartre: I think I will visit Egypt in December 1966, right after coming back from a trip I had already planned to Japan. The trip to Egypt will allow me to meet Egyptian intellectuals and talk to them openly. In addition, this trip will be a welcome opportunity to see Egypt for the first time in my life.

Al-Ahrām: Let us, then, go back a little in time to talk about the past. I want to clear the confusion surrounding an issue. For many years, some people thought that you refrained from talking to the revolutionary Egyptian avant-gardes, even though those vanguards were resisting the Western policy efforts to drag us to unwelcome military coalition, whether the Baghdad Pact or the Central Treaty Organization. Would you mind explaining the reasons behind your decision to keep your distance from them?

Sartre: You are, in fact, asking a question about a historical issue, namely the relationship between the Leftist French intellectuals, myself included, and a revolutionary movement that cannot be viewed as a constant thing, but as a movement that always develops to move towards its desired end. Clearly, I have not refrained from interacting with the Egyptians who struggled for the revolutionary cause. In fact, some of the supporters of the new revolutionary regime in Egypt have come to meet with me. I

remember that some of them talked about how necessary it was for me to visit Egypt. Unfortunately, however, due to the unstable and fluctuant nature of revolutions, certain circumstances led to the imprisonment of those people around the time that I was planning my visit. So, I canceled my trip because I found myself unable to ascertain the decision I had to take regarding the fluctuant Egyptian revolution. In addition, my information about the revolution was both distorted and incomplete. Therefore, it was impossible for me to make a final judgment before some time passes. That was the reason behind refraining from interacting with the Egyptian revolutionary cadres because I did not want to talk about something I only know distorted and incomplete information about (because I might unknowingly take a position that could offend a certain group). In other words, I might commit myself to a position without knowing all sides of the issue. So, when some people invited and encouraged me to visit Egypt, it seemed impossible for me to oblige because a number of those people—especially, the Leftists among them—were jailed. As you know, revolutions are complicated phenomena that develop and experience different difficulties in order to reach their goals. What is clear to me today is the dominance of the positive elements of the situation which prompts me to hold conversations and interact with the Egyptian revolutionaries. That is why I am talking to you now without any fear or reservations. Indeed, it seems that a number of revolutionary goals have been achieved which, in turn, have led to the spread of awareness in the Egyptian society. This campaign has been going on determinedly, and it warrants open applause now. Particularly, I have to admit that the revolution, which in the beginning seemed like a bourgeoisie takeover of government, has indeed led to uplift a number of other social classes to maturity. And this is great. These classes are now capable of

expressing their will within the framework of the revolution. This is the reason why it is very important for me and other intellectuals to meet Egyptians.

Al-Ahrām: Despite the burdens it has to shoulder in order to effect economic and social development, Egypt has managed to play a revolutionary role, whether in the Congo or the Arab south. In fact, it has constantly pushed its capabilities to the limit in order to offer help. For example, the President of the United Arab Republic, Jamal Abd al-Nasir, invited the Congo revolutionaries in an effort to unite them into a consolidated front. In spite of all those revolutionary efforts, we feel that French Left has remained unaware of the importance of these efforts and, therefore, it did not offer the support that it should have.

Sartre: There are a lot of things you should know about the French Left. The preliminary relationships the left has with the Third World ideologies and techniques are both difficult and complex. These relationships will not be the same in all situations, of course. In Egypt there are different problems than the ones in other countries. Clearly, the inception and form of Third World problems will be in accordance with the specific needs of these countries, which unfold during the development of these countries. Such problems always have their own distinctive qualities. These problems and their particular qualities often cause confusion and disagreement among us—specifically, I mean the French leftists who have grown accustomed to weighing issues according to different criteria. However, all these points should not lead to faulting either the French Left or the movement towards development in the Third World. They do, nonetheless, uncover the scope of difficulties that faces any attempt to bringing the French Left and Third World leftist movements together. This is exactly the reason why such approximation should be

established soon. And this is particularly the reason that prompted me to wait so long before allowing myself the pleasure of visiting Egypt.

That said, there are a number of specific models—democracy, for instance—that are necessary for us. However, we also realize that there are very dire issues that emerge in a society that is beginning to find its way towards industry and moving from underdevelopment to development. Such issues cannot be dealt with without central institutions. We know all this. Certainly, I do not suggest Third World countries blindly adopt our form of democracy. Such form of democracy might be hardly implementable without reaching a certain degree of revolutionary development. Therefore, the type of democracy I wish for you is not traditional bourgeoisie democracy; but it is a form of democracy that allows the masses to express themselves. It seems that such democracy requires a degree of political maturity, which, I think, has been achieved in Egypt.

Al-Ahrām: If we take a look at the world today, we would sense a dark feeling about the attempt by the reactionary forces, backed by its ability to launch aggressions, to hinder or halt revolutionary movements. In your opinion, what are the root causes for this crisis within the revolutionary movements? Related to this question, also, what role do you think Cairo should play given its unique position among other capital cities in that it still enjoys the freedom of movement?

Sartre: In my opinion, the main reason behind freezing some revolutionary movements is that peaceful coexistence has, in fact, benefitted the Imperialists more so than it has the Socialist bloc. And this is understandable. Peaceful coexistence entails establishing good relations which, in turn, leads to preventing conflicts. The colonialists

consider waging war as a last resort. That is why the colonialist forces have recently intervened militarily in the Congo, Vietnam, etc.

So, what we are facing is a situation that we all have to rectify—in fact, it is on its way to rectification. I personally do not think that the Socialist bloc would not change its policies, especially since the Vietnam War. But there is also the other reason, which Franz Fanon has revealed, that, in a number of countries which fulfilled their revolutions and achieved independence, a class of *petite bourgeoisie* immediately took form. This class, which works for the benefit of the new colonialism, allowed the latter to create the need for forming an army. That is why independence is merely nominal for some countries which achieved it, with the exception of a handful of countries that maintained its revolutionary energy after achieving independence. In cases like these, it is very important that the countries be more developed, that is, bourgeois should have already existed in it, in order to uplift the low classes to the degree of maturity. It is also extremely important for these countries to gradually eradicate the power of the classes that dominated during the colonial period. Clearly, this problem in Egypt is on its way to solution, i.e. the formerly oppressed classes are struggling to replace the other formerly dominant classes. That is why the role of Egypt in international politics is always that of a revolutionary ferment (*khamīrah thawriyya*). Personally, I have been in solidarity with Egypt since the Suez Canal war.

Al-Ahrām: This concludes the issue of revolutionary currents from the outside. Now, we need to talk about your philosophy with which many Arabs have become familiar for a long time now. You know better than I do that your Existentialist philosophy remained misrepresented and misunderstood until you published

Existentialism and Humanism. So, in an attempt to appraise your book, would you tell us what the essence (*māhiyya*) of existentialism is?

Sartre: Existentialism is one of the philosophies of freedom. By "freedom," I mean the freedom of action. It is not unbounded freedom, freedom to choose arbitrarily, or freedom of random associations. Being free entails being directly responsible for actions. The central question of Existentialism is one of action. In other words, the "negative discomfort," in this aspect is in accord with Marxism (as long as Marxism does not abandon the issues of commitment and responsibility). That is why I have lately asserted that Existentialism is only a temporary moment of truth. You know that, in one of my plays, I wrote "you are only your life … you are only what you make." In other words, the existentialist man is determined only by his work and actions, and his goal, consequently, is to affirm the freedom of the work and actions through involvement with the people around him, because no man can be free alone. A free man exists in a free society. We are free indeed because we struggle for the outcome (*al-ṣayrūrah*). The first form of our freedom is the freedom to make decisions. It is a form that the progression of societies has distorted. In order to realize the definition of man as a being who principally does work and is socially committed, we have to destroy the divisions between classes and nations, because it is these divisions that give the world its current image.

Al-Ahrām: We have to go back and talk again about Egypt's position regarding a number of revolutionary movements. From a politically objective perspective, do not you

think that United Arab Republic's support of the republicans in Yemen was to defend desperate revolutionary forces?[74]

Sartre: I think Egypt's help for the Yemeni revolution far exceeds what other Socialist governments have offered under similar circumstances, e.g. the unsatisfactory aid that our French government offered during the Spanish war, irrespective of our will and capabilities at the time. The Egyptian position on Yemen is much more decisive and revolutionary than that of Léon Blum's government regarding the Spanish war. However, it is safe to say that, in this issue, we are talking about similar positions.

Al-Ahrām: There is much talk about the crisis of the European left, especially the French Left. The crisis manifests itself before us in the dwindling revolutionary spirit and the spread of political opportunism about certain issues. Do you think we can attribute the reason of the crisis to this crucial problem: the European Left does not have the ability to understand many of the Third World problems, because of the lack of real dialogue between the European Left and the revolutionary vanguards in, say, Africa and Asia?

Sartre: This is a very complex question. But, as a point of departure, I have to point out that the problem of the French Left is its fragmentation. It is, in fact, the problem of the French society. One of the reasons behind the fragmentation of the Left is that the majority of the powerful figures in the French Socialist Party have different interests than those of the Communist Party. However, the real problem does not lie in the leadership. The main issue is that of confrontation in a society whose industrial system was formed at the point of departure, and it stopped there. Life stopped at the borders of this departure, which has led to the stagnation of those confrontations and

[74] The reference here is to The North Yemen Civil War (1962-1970) fought between royalists and supporters of the Yemen Arab Republic. Egypt supported the latter faction.

conflicts. This situation might change. But the latest elections have proven the difficulty of unity among parties that call themselves leftist.

The reason that the Communist Party's position on the Algerian war was not what it should have been is that the party tried, before anything else, to unify the Left. It attempted to collaborate with the Socialist Party, even though the supporters of the latter party did not want such collaboration. Important as it was, of course, this reason was not the only cause for the crisis, for there is also the issue that the evolving Third World problems are, in fact, new problems that necessitate new solutions and call for new ideological forms in order to contribute viable solutions. All these steps stem from the state of affairs in those countries. On the other hand, "our left" has formulated its principles, thought, and tactics long time ago. It has often found itself thrusted into verbal altercations or ideological confrontations. In addition, there are times when the left had to deal with conflicts that revealed its inability to understand the issues at hand, especially when it came to questions about other developing countries. Let me elaborate here. Our main concern when it comes to the newly independent countries is supporting socialism and democracy. We ignore the fact that these countries cannot carry out such massive effort without deep and centralized unity. However, we still wish to see instant realization of democracy in these countries. I am not calling for a return to bourgeoisie democracy. No, I am calling for the inclusion of more groups and classes of the people to take part in creating their own history.

It seems that, for Egypt, the formerly oppressed and downtrodden classes have achieved maturity now, and they are capable of replacing the historically affluent classes

in a comprehensive movement—we have to admit, however, that were deceived by similar movements, which led to misrepresenting the question of democracy.

Al-Ahrām: Thank you! Please allow me to move to a more practical issue. I want to ask you about the upcoming special issue of *Les Temps modernes*, which would be dedicated to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Would you mind telling us what you think about that special issue?

Sartre: If this issue of the journal achieves success, it will be an important work that may help clarify the conflict. It will be a mass-media event because, for the first time, we are going to present both views of the conflict, while remaining completely unbiased on the issue. We want the concerned parties to express their viewpoints so that the general public, in France and Europe at large, can understand the problem. I am committed to maintaining such unbiased stance. That is why I am visiting you in Egypt now and will soon visit the Palestinian refugee camps. Afterwards, I will visit Israel so that I see the conflict for myself. It is in this spirit that I will edit the special journal issue.

What really complicates matters further is that there is no conversation between the Arabs and the Israelis because the elements that would enable such conversation are absent. And it is not our role to evaluate such a conversation should it exist. What we will do, however, is presenting the two opposing viewpoints objectively. We will also present these viewpoints responsibly by selecting the most capable people to expressing them.

Al-Ahrām: I want to thank you on behalf of all the people who are looking forward to meeting you in Cairo. Do you have anything you want to tell the Egyptian people?

Sartre: You know in advance what I want to say. I hope the Egyptian people will continue their role as a revolutionary element in the African continent and the world. I wish Egyptians the patience, which they seem they do have, it takes to build socialism in their country.

CHAPTER THREE:

Commitment in Iraq: From a Communist Concept to a Pan-Arab Slogan

In this chapter I investigate the development of *engagement* discourse in Iraq from the 1950s through the 1970s. During those formative decades, I argue, there were two working interpretations of Sartre's "concept" in the Iraqi literary scene: one which adhered to a Pan-Arab Nationalist framework, and another communist interpretation which presented the concept as being synonymous with social realism and, hence, establishing strong affinity with the Iraqi Communist Party. I show that those two representations of the concept correlated closely with the unfolding events of modern Iraqi history. When the communist party was operating (either as a tolerated opposition party during the monarchy, 1921-1958, or as an active participant in the affairs of the state during General Qāsim's rule, 1958-1963), it popularized Sartre's engagement as a communist one, often exaggerating Sartre's affiliation with communism. On the other hand, when the Arab Nationalists took state power brutally suppressing the Iraqi Communist Party, they propagated a pan-Arabist version of commitment. Such propagation involved, on the one hand, discrediting the communist version of commitment as a foreign concept that was incompatible with Arab culture and, on the other, celebrating the Baʿthist adaptation of *iltizām* as intrinsic and emanating from indiginous Arab *turāth* (tradition). In the chapter, I show how Nāzik al-Malāʾika's "*al-adab wa-l-ghazū al-thaqāfī*" (Literature and Cultural Invasion) fulfilled the former task, whereas Mukhallad al-Mukhtār's "*Ḥadīth fī al-fann wa-l-iltizām al-thawrī*" (On Art and Revolutionary Commitment) carried out the latter. The chapter also studies ʿAlī al-

Wardī's *Usṭūrat al-adab al-rafīʿ* (The Myth of Refined Literature) and al-Sayyāb's "*Al-iltizām wa-l-la-iltizām fī al-adab al-ʿarabī al-ḥadīth*" (Commitment and Non-Commitment in Modern Arabic Literature) in order to trace the mutation in the meaning of Sartre's *engagement* in Iraq from a communist concept to a Pan-Arab one.

I. Communist Commitment

As a critical concept, commitment entered Iraqi discourse on the political function of literature through two channels. One was the Lebanese pan-Arabist literary journals, most prominently *al-Ādāb*; the second channel was more direct, that is through the Arabic translation of Sartre's writings from either French or English. Those two channels which transported the notion played a role as well in determining the meaning of *engagement* in Iraq. What I mean by this is that while the Lebanese *al-Ādāb* introduced a Pan-Arab Nationalist understanding of commitment, the translations, carried out mostly be communists or communist sympathizers, presented commitment as a term synonymous with social realism. These communist writers emphasized Sartre's affiliation—actual and perceived—with the French Communist Party. So, the means of transmission (or transference—to continue the journey and travel metaphor) played a role in the reception of the notion. When this Nationalist version of commitment was introduced to the Iraqi cultural circles through *al-Ādāb*, it initially failed to muster the same footing it was holding in Lebanon. To be sure, the communists had already introduced the doctrine of social realism and published a number of popular works that fell within that category.[75] In addition, the few pieces introducing Sartre's *engagement* to

[75] See, for example, Bashkin's "Advice from the Past: 'Ali al-Wardi on Literature and Society," especially pages 17-22.

the Iraqi reading public were published in communist newspapers which introduced commitment along the lines of social realism and emphasized Sartre's affiliation with the French Communist Party. Such communist understanding was evident in the first serious Iraqi debate on the issue of the application of Sartre's *engagement* into Arabic literature which took place in 1957 between sociologist ʿAlī al-Wardī, a communist sympathizer, and literary critic ʿAbdul-Razzāq Muḥī al-Dīn, a pan-Arab Nationalist. The debate began when al-Wardī wrote a series of articles in a Baghdad newspaper, *al-Ḥurriyya*, attacking some aspects of the Arabic literary heritage. The articles caused fury among the Iraqi literary critics--something al-Wardī had hoped for. After months of back-and-forth debates, al-Wardī collected his articles, along with what he labeled "the best and most worthy counter arguments" (7) and published them in a widely-read book, *Usṭūrat al-adab al-rafīʿ* (The Myth of Refined Literature). In it, al-Wardī continued his systematic attack against the institution of literature which, to him, had resisted the call for a socially-engaged literature. Al-Wardī agrees with Sartre that writers have a moral obligation to address problems in their societies because they can use language to articulate these problems and "move History along" (296). Al-Wardī believed that the new generation of Arab poets and writers seemed ready to address, and interact with, such problems in their societies, but they were faced with a privileged class of literary critics who proved debilitating. Al-Wardī said that academic critics constituted one of the major hurdles in the course of Arabic literature which was preventing it from interacting with the demands and aspirations of the people. He was befuddled, however, that such obstruction was happening at the time when both critics and poets boasted about how their writings were springing out of the people and spoke back to them. This was an

illusion, al-Wardī stressed. To maintain this illusion, it was in the interest of the ivory-tower writers to exalt ancient Arabic poetry, al-Wardī believed. The classical Arabic poet was the mouthpiece of the tribe and, subsequently, of the state. The society at the time gave the upper hand to the artistry of poetry, and poets had a say in almost every aspect of life—an opportunity that was not open to everyone else in the society. Whereas poets dealt with most aspects of everyday affairs, only fellow poets—and the emerging class of critics—were allowed to deal with the art of the poet. No one else had the privilege to discuss the poet's art. Contemporary poets and critics, al-Wardī said, wanted to maintain this privilege. That was why they fiercely resisted his attempts to look at poetry from an engaging sociological point of view. Those critics thought "that *al-adīb* (the man of letters) may deal with any subject matter and write on any other discipline, but only he [the man of letters] may write about literature and no one else should be allowed to deal with it" (55). It was not uncommon for disciplines, especially well-established ones, to resist intrusion from other fields of study, al-Wardī stressed. However, this resistance was unwelcome in poetry not only because of its humanistic nature which forces it to deal with other disciplines, but also because of its relationship with power.

Certainly, al-Wardī stressed, poetry and power remained hand in hand especially during the Umayyad and the high Abbasid eras—the two eras most exalted by literary critics. Al-Wardī agreed that poetry represented an important aspect of pre-Islamic life and that it was "the Arab's most significant art. Indeed, it might have been their sole art" (94). He ridiculed Aḥmad al-Ḥūfī's claim that the reason behind the Arab's excellence in poetry was geographical, and that the desert "was the kernel of [Arabic] poeticism" because the Bedouin poet observes the "smiling moon" at night and wakes up to the

rising sun at dawn, frolicking in the light of both the sun and the moon—all these helped refine the Bedouin's character because "light impacts the human being's character more than it does his body" (94). "What kind of nonsense absurdity is this?" al-Wardī mockingly said, adding that he could not hold himself "from laughing at this empty pedantry" which characterized the flawed work of many Pan-Arab critics who ignored the study of society when dealing with poetry and attended to chauvinistic interpretations of the political functions of literature. He wondered "if the beauty of nature was the reason behind poeticism, why were the Swiss not more poetic than the Arabs? … Is the burning sun of the desert more conducive to lyricism than the lush scenery of Switzerland?" Not geography, said al- Wardī, but the nature of the Bedouin life which was the reason behind the flourishing of poetry. The Arabs were nomads who needed constant travel and relocation. The art of language was the only art form that they could take with them when traveling from one place to another. The Arabs "knew very little about writing, painting, sculpturing, music or any other art form, because these forms require multiple tools, and the nomads were not able to carry them during their travel" (94). On the other hand, poetry was very easy for the Bedouin to excel at because it is an art of language that, due to its rhyme and rhythm, is easier to memorize and produce.

Naturally, this oral art form soon became politicized, and it soon became the means of expression at the disposal of the public. To counter this reality and to suppress the voices of the commons, al-Wardī thinks, the category of refined literature (*al-adab al-rafīʿ*) was invented for especially serving these political ends. The wisdom that dominated classical Arabic literature was that "he who seeks will surely find" (*man jadda wajad*). The idea is that money, status, and peace of mind were all out there: Those who

worked hard would be rewarded with the blessings of life; those who lacked those blessing had brought it upon themselves because they did not work hard—they did not seek, and, therefore, they did not find. As in life, al-Wardī said, so was in literature. If hard work was the differentiating factor in the lives of people, the signs of hard work—rhetoric--was the factor of merit in literature. Elite critics approached literature with the same mentality that permeated their understanding of life. Those critics thought what made literature worthy was the way words were put together which "transcended the level of understanding of the poor and undertakers of menial jobs" (247). Meanings, like blessings, are "laid out in the road" (248) for everyone to gather, and those with prudence and luck would know how to put meanings together well and "master their manufacturing." Al-Wardī lamented that this classist view remained dominant in the ancient debates about literature, and that it was still holding its force in contemporary debates about the topic. Al-Wardī accused the pan-Arab intellectuals and activists of cloaking this classist view under the cloak of the call for Nationalist committed literature, which was rather harsh and frankly unjust. He called for fellow writers and budding critics to abandon such view and to champion committed literature which interacted with everyday life, not one that talked about past Arab glories, both real and imagined.

Al-Wardī's call for such a radical role for literature was enthusiastically picked up and amplified by, for example, artistic manifestoes published by the Baghdad Group for Modern Art and the intellectuals who attempted to directly engage the anti-colonial political struggle through their activism and involvement with the Iraqi Communist Party,

which used the term *al-muthaqqafūn al-aḥrār* (free intellectuals) to describe them.[76] Orit Bashkin argues that the 1940s and 1950s witnessed the development of two public spheres in Iraq: one of them was that of the state, "whose intellectuals operated in the government's ministries, the universities, and the press. The second was that of the opposition, which operated in communist cells, reading clubs, reading salons, and newspapers as well as in labor and student organizations." For the most part, it was opposition intellectuals who had the greatest influence on cultural debates of the period. They dealt with questions of social justice and progress, combining anti-colonial politics with aspirational ideas for social reform, especially with respect to the plight of peasants and the rights of workers. Those writers, however, remained mindful of their profession as writers. Therefore, they engaged the aesthetic relationship between form and content, attempting to formulate new aesthetic genres and styles in Arabic that would be socially and politically committed while not abandoning conventional artistic standards. While social realism became a powerful medium through which to express the social conditions of Iraq's poor, modernist prose and poetry arose simultaneously, resulting in a diverse body of aesthetic experimentation and critical debates on the relationship between politics and aesthetics, which played out in the many journals and magazines published in this period.

II. Nationalist Commitment

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[76] Iraqi sculptor Jawād Salīm founded the Baghdad Group for Modern Art in 1951. The group helped establish a thriving art scene in the region. After Salīm's untimely death in 1961, his protégé, Shākir Hasan Āl Saʿīd, led the group.

This communist meaning was challenged by the pan-Arab nationalists. In addition, it was attacked by one of the most influential Iraqi poets at the time, Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb, after his break from the Iraqi Communist Party. He penned a piece entitled "Commitment and Non-Commitment in Modern Arabic Literature" which he originally delivered as a lecture for a conference in Rome organized by the Congress for Cultural Freedom in 1962.[77] Al-Sayyāb begins his lecture by pointing out that commitment is not a new topic. Ancient critics classified literature into two different types: objective (i.e. committed) and subjective (i.e. non-committed). The "major poets," al-Sayyāb claims, from Homer to Shakespeare remained "objective, i.e. committed, until the end of the seventeenth century." Likewise, the pre-Islamic Arab poets were "committed, without being called to become one," because of the nature of the Arab society, on the one hand, and the function of the poet as the "spokesperson of the tribe," on the other. The poet used his art to put to words the sentiments of the tribe during times of both peace and war. The ancient Arab poet was, according to al-Sayyāb, "committed without being asked to be so," because he was the spokesperson for the tribe and the keeper of its oral history: "when the tribe is angry, the poet expresses its anger; if it is sad, he depicts its sadness; if it derelicts when it is attacked, he would stir enthusiasm in its members, and call them to take revenge and defend their dignity." (221) The advent of Islam boosted the need for commitment for two reasons. First, the new religion needed its poets to defend the faith, propagate its ideas, and satirize the pagan society. Secondly, the Muslim poets "would be embarrassed" (221) to publically court Muslim sisters or satirize

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[77] Congress for Cultural Freedom was a CIA front created in 1950 that used cultural programming and networking to contain the popular front networks and programs of the Communist party in Europe, Latin America, South Asia and the Middle East.

fellow Muslim brothers or boast his superior ancestry over other Muslims. This form of commitment, al-Sayyāb says, led to artistic stagnation, of the same type that affected the Russian literature after the Bolshevik Revolution when the state imposed on the writers the topics of writing along with the viewpoints they had to adopt. The advent of Islam solidified such committed inclination of poetry because, on the one hand, the new faith needed the support of poetry and, on the other, the Muslim poets had departed with any "subjective" themes that had written before converting to Islam because their new faith discouraged some of the licenses they took with their poetry (and life) and also because those poets felt the need to concentrate their efforts to support their faith.

The sure grip of Islam on the region couples with the founding of cities, however, soon led to more relaxed form of life, which led to the resurgence of subjective poetry in the form of licentious lust poetry as well as vindictive flyting poetry. During the Umayyad caliphate, for instance, Arabic poetry regained its older forms, especially in the newly-established cities, with Umar bin Abī Rabīʿah's erotic love poetry, al-Akhṭal's wine poetry, and Jarīr and al-Farazdaq's satiric flytings. These forms flourished in the cities during the Umayyad era because "the religious motivation started to wane" (221) and the city dwellers began to enjoy superior economic conditions compared to the Bedouins, "whose poets depicted their deprivation from wealth and power through Platonic-love poetry which has nothing but pain, complaining, and tears" (221). Nonetheless, Arabic poetry continued to be the conduit of political debate between the Umayyads and the Hashemites, and it was this debate that led to the writing of "first-class political poetry" (221). This phenomena of championing political poetry continued to the Abbasid era, and the best examples of this "objective trend" were none other than the

formidable poets of the age: al-Mutannabī, Abu Tammām, and al-Maʿarrī. Indeed, there were noticeable exceptions with poets like Abū Nuwās,[78] Muslim bin Walīd,[79] and al-ʿAbbās bin al-Aḥnaf[80] who sought to "express their own personal concerns" at the expense of the concerns of the general public. However, these poets, says al-Sayyāb, represented a minority that "deviated from the line of Arabic poetry, i.e. its objectivity and commitment, because they, or at least most of them, were the intellectual poles of *al-shuʿūbiyya* movement" (222).

The real blow to the commitment of Arabic poetry came with the down of the "age of intellectual decadence" when the majority of the main poets turned their back to politics and became obsessed with language play, especially witty antithesis and paronomasia, and with writing meticulously-rhymed poems to assert the poet's mastery of the language. However, the nineteenth century brought a few highly-committed poets, like Maḥmūd Sāmī al-Bārūdī and Ḥafnī Nasīf, who recessitated Arabic poetry and brought back to it the objectivity that had characterized it before the dark ages. These poets paved the way for the advent of more committed poets, like Aḥmad Shawqī, Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm, and Khalīl Muṭrān, whose occasional poetry brought back the centrality of poetry to public life.

Al-Sayyāb claims that the communist propagation of commitment led to the inception of the free verse movement. Political events, like the Palestinian *nakbah* and

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[78] Abū Nuwās (756–814) was one of the greatest classical Arabic poets, who also composed in Persian on occasion. He is well known for his wine poetry.

[79] D. 823, a second-tier Abbasid poet.

[80] Al-ʿAbbās bin al-Aḥnaf (712-807) was an Abbasid poet known for his chaste (*ʿudhrī*) love poetry.

the Algerian war of independence, coupled with the rise of "committed poetry" led to the rise of platform poetry, which in turn fueled the need for the rise of free verse. With a "violent communist campaign," al-Sayyāb complained, the communist poets popularized combative and struggle poetry which attracted even the anti-communist audience. Poets affiliated with pan-Arab parties—al-Sayyāb calls them "the non-communist committed poets"—used this attractive form of poetry to popularize their political slogans. Trying to decipher the differences between communist and pan-Arabist poetry is literally arguing semantics, al-Sayyāb pointed out, because both groups would promote the same social ideals using vocabulary consistent with their respective lexicon: the communists talked about "peace, laborers, and the red flag;" the Nationalists were singing "Arabism, activism, and freedom fighters" (227). Al-Sayyāb seems to imply that the rise of this category of committed poetry coincided with the formation of political parties in Iraq, and he is not incorrect. The rise of organized political parties goes back to the aftermath of the 1920 revolt. Because although the British were aware of the general dissatisfaction with their occupation of the country, they hardly anticipated such a high-stake revolt as that of the 1920. Therefore, in attempt to regulate political dissent, the British advised King Faisal I to allow the formation of political parties. The King agreed and, in 1922, he decreed the license to form political parties. Soon afterwards two opposition parties applied for licenses: *al-Ḥizb al-Waṭanī al-ʿIrāqī* (Patriotic Party of Iraq) and *Ḥizb al-Nahḍa al-ʿIrāqiyya* (Iraqi Awakening Party). Both parties demanded immediate independence from the British mandate and, through their newspapers *al-Mufīd* and *al-Rāfidān*, called for the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in Iraq. At the first anniversary of the ascent of King Faisal I in August 1922, the parties organized a massive

anti-British demonstration that demanded, in addition to independence and constitutional monarchy, the formation, through free and honest elections, of a "founding council" that would be in charge of ratifying accords with the British government. In a defying anti-British rhetoric, both Muḥammad al-Baṣīr of the Patriotic Party of Iraq and Muḥammad Ḥasan Kubba of the Iraqi Awakening Party emphasized that any other body was not authorized to negotiate or ratify any accords. Sir Percy Cox, the British High Commissioner who was present at the ceremony, nullified the licenses of both parties and ordered the deportation of their leaders to Hengam Island in the Persian Gulf. And, in order to fill the political vacuum left by the dissolution of those two parties, a pro-British party, *al-Ḥizb al-Ḥurr al-ʿIrāqī* (the Iraqi Free Party) was soon formed, calling for signing an immediate agreement with Britain.

The opposition political parties helped maintain anti-government stances throughout the first half of the twentieth century. However, they remained far from capable of any significant change at the top of the political spectrum and the licensed ones among them remained pinned to a single leader who represented the dictatorial voice in the party affairs. One may immediately think of Jaʿfar Abū al-Timman's *al-Ḥizb al-Waṭanī* (the Patriotic Party), Yāsīn al-Hāshimī's *Ḥizb al-ʾumma* (the Nation's Party), and Kāmil al-Chadarchī's *Jamāʿat al-Ahālī* (the Peoples Group). Indeed, it was the personal loyalty to the party leader which kept most of these parties at odds with one another despite many of the common goals that their communiques call for implementing. Such fragmentation and weakness suited the monarchy conveniently. However, after the obvious failure of the opposition to bring any significant change, especially in the wake of the formation of the Baghdad Pact and Egypt's nationalization

of the Suez Canal, a number of leftist parties, notably the Iraqi Communist Party, the Baʿth Party, *Ḥizb al-Istiqlāl* (Independence Party), *al-Ḥizb al-Waṭanī al-Dīmūqrāṭī* (Patriotic, Democratic Party), formed *Jabhat al-Itiḥād al-Waṭanī* (the National Unity Front) in February 1957. The Front parties, especially the Iraqi Communist Party, played a significant role in backing the 1958 coup which dethroned the monarchy and declared Iraq an independent republic.[81]

Al-Sayyāb claims that the Nationalists, however, were aided by Sartre's concept of commitment, and they used it to challenge the apparent communist monopoly over political poetry. Sartre helped the Nationalists in two ways, according to al-Sayyāb. First, Sartre's concept proved that "realist and committed literature was not exclusive to the communists." In other words, a writer does not need to be affiliated with communism in order to write socially engaged literature. Secondly, the institutionalization of *iltizām* as the standard translation of Sartre's commitment meant that the communists could no longer claim exclusive use of the term. Al-Sayyāb seems to suggest that the Nationalists were benefiting from the previous conflation of commitment and social realism, since they could cash in on the the communist effort to make the term affective. This obsession with commitment has delivered a long-lasting blow to Arabic literature. The damage, however, is not formal only. The more serious problem lies in creating partisan artists who blindly follow their political parties. These party-loyalists contaminated the cultural and intellectual life; and, on the other hand, they have marginalized any genuinely committed artist who has no party affiliations. Al-Sayyāb laments such "societies which are dominated by intense partisan fanaticism that borders insanity!" (227).

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[81] For more details, see Yūsuf Izz-l-Dīn.

The tumultuous yet successful introduction of commitment as a communist notion was short lived, however. This failure yet again highlights the intimate and contentious relationship between aesthetics and politics in Iraq during the eventful decades of the 1950s and the 1960s. After enjoying two years of official recognition as a political party with representation in the cabinet (from 1958-1960), the Iraqi communist party fell out of favor with General Qāsim, Iraq's military ruler. Things got even worse afterwards. The party was banned again in 1963 and remained so until 2003. And that ban was real. I am saying this because the party was banned throughout the modern history of Iraq, except for the five years of the first Iraqi republic, from 1958 to 1963. However, whereas sympathizers with Marxism would more or less get a slap on the wrist for voicing radical ideas in earlier years, the punishment for joining the Iraqi Communist Party or spreading its ideas during the Baʿth rule was execution--death. Of course, such extreme (but real!) constraints on the communist party surely led to recession in both party activity and engagement in public life. Not only commitment or social realism, but all other communist concepts (like notions of freedom, class, welfare, consciousness, etc.) waned and ultimately gave in to alternative interpretations. Each of these changing notions is worth studying, but for my topic, I should point out that commitment gave in to the pan-Arab Nationalist interpretation of the concept, especially given that as the ideas/slogans of the ICP were repressed, those of the Arabists found favor and patronage with the Iraqi state. Now, that happened because of the brutal constringing on the communist party and also the felicitous introduction of the Lebanese version of commitment, which was a pan Arabist one as we have just seen. But also what really helped the Nationalist notion of commitment to overshadow and then completely replace a social-realist version of

commitment is the *very type* of the Iraqi version of pan-Arab Nationalism during the 1950s through the 1970s. The pan-Arab Nationalist discourse in Iraq is unique vis-à-vis similar debates in other Arab countries. Such uniqueness in Iraq helped popularize it and gave it a momentum that it arguably would have otherwise lacked immensely. Scholars like Orit Bashkin as well as Amatzai Baram, Eric Davis, and Uriel Dann have already studied those unique aspects. I do not want to go into the details of this aspect for both time and thematic constraints, but suffice it to say that Pan-Arabism was transformed in the 1950s and 60s Iraq because of its hybridization with Iraqi patriotism and, concurrently, the various elements of Arabist discourses which were integrated into local and patriotic perceptions of Iraqi nationalism. The Pan-Arabists in this period often cultivated the notion that Arab nationalism did not entail an ethnic origin but rather the ability to adopt the Arabic language, as well as Arab history and culture, as a marker of one's national and cultural identity. The attempts to adapt Pan-Arab discourses to the specificities of the Iraqi milieu and to build coalitions with as many of the nation's groups as possible meant that the sectarian, anti-Shīʿī, and anti-Kurdish notions that colored Baʿthist discourses in later years were not as prominent in this period. This collective and pacifist approach to nationalism during a time of turmoil and danger widened the appeal of pan-Arab Nationalism. That growing appeal, surely, also meant a growing interest in the concepts of the Nationalist movement—one of such concepts was commitment, which by now, had been appropriated by Arab Nationalism and distanced from its early Communist adoption. Multiple factors were in play then: the robust introduction of a pan-Arab version of commitment through the Lebanese journal *al-Ādāb*; the persecution of the communist party and its sympathizers; and the presentation of a

more patriotic and appealing version of pan-Arab Nationalism, which was backed by the state. All these literary and political factors contributed to the shifting meaning of commitment from a communist into a nationalist one.

And for evidence of commitment's newly established Nationalist bearing, we need to look no further than the famed fifth Congress of Arab Writers, held in Baghdad in February, 1965 under the apt title "the Role of Literature in the Battle of Liberation and or Development."[82] The Congress was organized under the auspices of ʿAbd al-Salām ʿĀrif, the President of Iraq, and a staunch Pan-Arabist. ʿĀrif opened the congress himself with a long and tedious speech about the revolutionary role of literature in resurrecting the Arab nations and "pushing forward the wheels of their development" (21). President ʿĀrif had tasked a preparatory committee with organizing the congress and he picked none other than ʿAbdul-Razzāq Muḥyī al-Dīn to chair the committee, who was, of course, the same literary critic who had not long before has a debate about commitment with the Marxist sociologist ʿAlī al-Wardī. If anything announced the radical shift that had just occurred around the term "commitment" in Arab and Iraqi letters, it was this event. The same critic who, a few years ago, surrendered to the powerful force of the communist understanding of commitment in the Iraqi cultural scene was now comfortably organizing the biggest Arab cultural event at the time around his (and the state's!) pan-Arab Nationalist interpretation of commitment. Times had changed, and commitment was now used throughout the congress contributions as an unambiguous Arab Nationalist concept. The seven-day Congress comprised of four panel topics: Literature and Palestine, Literature and Tradition, Literature and Revolution, and, finally, Literature and

[82] For conference proceedings, see *al-Ādāb*'s March and April 1965 issues.

Construction. The topics seemed like plucked from President ʿĀrif's Nationalist agenda. By the time the panels were over, there was very little room for doubt. If commitment had once seemed like a communist concept, it had now been nationalized and appropriated for exclusive use by the intellectuals of the emergent Arab Nationalist and subsequently Baʿathist State.

One of the contributions to this conference was a piece by the celebrated Iraqi poet Nāzik al-Malāʾika, in which she attacked the Arab adaptation of concepts by Western writers such as Sartre (363-380). She advised her colleagues to remain suspicious of those Western concepts, claiming that they were part of an "intellectual invasion" which aimed to "sabotage the soul of the [Arab nation]" and "cut off [its] roots to tradition" (364). In *al-Rūḥ al-Ḥayya*, Fāḍil al-ʿAzzāwī says that the Iraqi writers and artists of the 1960s and 1970s were systematically attacked by the dominant political parties of the period. Al-ʿAzzāwī thinks that those parties were uneasy about accepting "a cultural movement which not only worked independently of those parties, but also posed a real challenge to their ideologies and worldviews" (345). In addition, al-ʿAzzāwī believes that the attack on non-affiliated writers and artists was part of a consorted effort to discredit any writer who did not expressly support the National Progressive Front.[83] Al-ʿAzzāwī says that, in addition to undermining the writers' practices, dominant parties, especially the Baʿth Party, used carefully crafted vocabulary to attack unaffiliated writes, such as "enmity to the Revolution, ideological apostasy, blind imitation of the West,

[83] The National Progressive Front (*al-Jabha al-Waṭaniyya at-Taqaddumiyya*) was formed in 1974 as a coalition between the Arab Socialist Baʿth Party, the Iraqi Communist Party, the Kurdistan Revolutionary Party, a pro-government section of the Kurdish Democratic Party, and miscellaneous independents. The Baʿth dominated the Front, which became weaker after the Iraqi Communist Party withdrew from it in 1979.

disregarding *turāth*" (345). Interestingly, these were the very vocabulary that al-Malāʾika used in her "al-adab wa-l-ghazū al-thaqaāfī" (Literature and Cultural Invasion).[84]

In this piece al-Malāʾika warned her fellow writers that the Arabs had managed to end military occupation, but they were living under "intellectual occupation" (363). Such occupation was exceedingly dangerous because, whereas military occupation destroyed repairable things like buildings, intellectual occupation "aims for the soul and roots of the nation … and defaces the character of the nation" (363). This was a new phenomenon, al-Malāʾika said. The Arab nation was subjected to military occupations in the past, but it had managed to fend off all attempts of intellectual occupation because it was "a source of knowledge and enlightenment for the world." In fact, even when the Persians subjected the Arabs to extended periods of military occupation, the Arabs were "simultaneously occupying the Persians intellectually." The "thousands of Arabic words in the Persian language" was an attestation to the efficacy of that intellectual occupation. Now, however, the Arabs lost the intellectual superiority because of "prolonged centuries of occupation which frayed and paralyzed" them. In addition, the Arabs took a "negative stance vis-à-vis such occupation, … [because] we let them to alter the setup of our houses and change the design of our cities. We allowed them to pass unto us the manners of their society to the extent that we ended up imitating them in the way we talk, dress, and eat." Such blind imitation of and infatuation with the West was evident in the outlets of Arab intellectual output.

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[84] The article was published in the Government-sponsored publication of the conference minutes as *Dawr al-adab fī maʿrakat al-bināʾ w-l-taḥrīr* (the Role of Literature in the Battle of Liberation and or Development)

> The past few years witnessed the worst of such deterioration to the extent that when we read through Arabic journals and newspapers, we would encounter an article about Arthur Miller, next to an article about Pierre Corneille, followed by an article about [Giordano] Bruno and another one on Voltaire. We marvel that our thought has become so restricted to the writings of the West and that we only talk about them as though we do not have an intellectual tradition of our own. In addition, the writers of said articles would not take an Arab stance in their writings; they adopt the same position as that of the Western writer they discuss. If we translate the journal to Western audience, they would not have encountered any new ideas. (364-365)

What disturbed al-Malāʾika the most was that the majority of these views were not in line with the Arab character. She believed that such views convinced many budding Arab writers that "if we want to build Arab literature, we have to disavow the entirety of our past and our heritage and to unquestionably transpose the Western tradition." This misleading conviction had led the young writers to blindly "take, quote, and imitate" Western writers. Al-Malāʾika viewed this as an imposition on Arab culture that the Arabs should do better without. She was quick to point out that she would not be so alarmed had such practices occurred in an environment of conversation and equal exchange. But the Arab culture did not have a clear "civilizational character" at the time and such blind imitation would just lead to the formation of the Arab character in the wrong direction—one that would take it away from heritage and forth into blind imitation of the western ideas and practices (365).

Al-Malāʾika thought that the Western intellectual occupation had targeted three areas: the Arab morality (365), Islam (369), and the Arabic language (371). She believed that the most devastating blow was delivered to the moral sense of writers. "We have lost the moral touch in our writings," decried al-Malāʾika. Arab thought, she added, was distinctive in its emphasis on morality and the common good. She said that "for the Arabs, literature (*adab*) remained synonymous with the discipline (*adab*) of the soul, for the man of letters was the person who recited poetry and prose which elevated the soul and uplifted morality" (365). This moral presence in literature was realized throughout the pre-modern ages in the practices of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs who insisted that their offspring become well versed in literature, the writings of Ibn ʿArabī, as well as the popular stories from Arab folklore such as the story of Sayf bin Dhī Yazn (365). Only in the modern age did *adab* lose its moral bearing, said al-Malāʾika, because of the prevalence of the Western understanding of literature, which stripped literature of its moral component rendered it to merely "information and science" (366). She believed that such separation of literature and morality was certainly foreign to Arab culture but it is neither new nor as offensive in Western culture. After all, al-Malāʾika said, the separation went as far back as Aristotle who believed that the aesthetics of literature did not have moral bearing. In fact, "for Aristotle, morality did not pertain to literature; it is possible to have aesthetically pleasing literature which has immoral content" (366). Such understanding of literature "dominated the European thought," al-Malāʾika asserted, and received occasional assertions from major critics and philosophers, such as Lessing, Croce, and Zola.

In fact, al-Malāʾika believed that Naturalism was particularly destructive. Arab writers began imitating Zola in portraying a world devoid of morality. That was why, al-Malāʾika said, Arab writers were producing sexually charged stories and depicting characters who mistreated their parents and disrespected their teachers. Contemporary Arabic novels abounded in profanity, al-Malāʾika bemoaned, and "authors are presenting hero types who badmouth, rude, and lusty" (367). Al-Malāʾika complained that highlighting and emulating these characters became a "mark of the new culture" (368). Such hero characters, al-Malāʾika stressed, "contradict the discipline (*adab*) of the Arab soul that our tradition (*turāth*) has conveyed" (367). The prevalence of such sex-filled literature, al-Malāʾika warned, entailed three "dangerous" implications. First, this "decadent literature … conflicts with the pan-Arab call which the Arab community now lives for, because pan-Arab nationalism means life and development, whereas sex literature (*adab al-jins*) is suicide and destruction" (368). Secondly, such literature did not reflect the lived experience of the Arab society, because "the average Arab individual still believes that honor supersedes all other issues … and things like chastity and politeness are considered high ideals by the Arab family." The writers who wrote according to ideals and practices contrary to these ones were infusing their narratives with non-Arab ideals and thrusted them onto Arab society. Those writers did "depart from our environment, and their mirrors reflect ghosts and shadows that lie outside the Arab homeland" (369). The last of these dangerous implications, al-Malāʾika continued, was that these writings represented a "deviant literature, … because amplifying the role of sex in life emanates from deviation from human nature. The sound man is a balanced mix of reason, soul, passion, and desire—no one component dominates over another."

Intellectuals should condemn the show of any sign of imbalance, al-Malāʾika told her colleagues, because if such "deviance" was allowed in individuals, the situation would soon become prevalent in society, and herein lied the problem: "the perfection of society depends on the majority of balanced individuals who satisfy each of these components appropriately" (369). Allowing literature to portray a society where the imbalanced individuals abound was not acceptable, al-Malāʾika insisted.

Such "deviation from morality," al-Malāʾika insisted, was a symptom of "the deviation … which afflicts our modern mentality … because of the rush to translating Western literature into Arabic." Such deviation, al-Malāʾika bemoaned, affected the Arab view of Islam: "we have adopted the Western view of religion" (369). In Europe, al-Malāʾika explained, religion played a marginal role in the formation of thought: "Westerners believe that religion is for God; literature for life. It is as if life itself is not for God." Such distance existed because of the inability of Christianity to integrate into society, al-Malāʾika claimed, for Christianity mandated a form of idealistic life which dictated life-long abstention and rejection of marriage. In addition, Christianity "had failed to convert Westerners away from the paganism of their ancestors. … Westerners idolize Jupiter in everyday life, but pray to God on Sundays in the church" (370). Such separation did not exist in Arab life because Islam remained a cornerstone of Arab life and it was "closely connected with Arab thought" (369). However, in recent years, al-Malāʾika complained, "the invaders and their stooges in recent years have been asking us to uncritically endorse Western culture in its entirety, … and one of the things we have taken from them is this strange separation between religion and life" (370-371). Beginning writers were "spreading" ideas from the West which were causing some

readers to doubt the principles of Islam and motivating them to adopt a state of apostasy due to "mere imitation [of Western practices] and transport [of Western ideas]." If such ideas and practices were not deterred, al-Malāʾika warned, "the Arab spirit would be lost altogether" (371).

Moreover, al-Malāʾika said that targeting Islam coincided with the assault on the Arabic language. The invaders, al-Malāʾika charged, managed to "weaken our language by the means of translation … . Some suspicious organizations and insidious groups (*jamāʿāt*)[85] have been keen on assigning major works from the Western canon to incompetent translators" (372).[86] The weak translations produced by those unskilled translators propagated a weak style of writing which beginning writers tried to emulate. Had such works been translated by skilful translators who were well versed in both Arabic and the source language, the translations would have, in fact, contributed to the richness of modern Arab culture, because "when translation is carried out in proper Arabic, the translated work would contribute to the Arabic language" (372). That said, al-Malāʾika enumerates five examples of the *ʿujma* (foreignness) caused by translation: the preponderance presence of foreign terms like ideology, metaphysics, and folklore; the use of Latin grammar in Arabic writing; using Latin sentence structure in writing paragraphs; using incomprehensible figures of speech because of the literal translation of these figures; and imitating the vagueness which characterize the writings of Henry James and

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[85] In the years following the February 1963 coup, the term "*jamāʿāt*" was widely used to refer to the outlawed Iraqi Communist Party. In addition to "*jamāʿāt*," al-Malāʾika uses the term "*shuʿūbiyyūn*" to refer to the ICP (e.g. 375).

[86] Sartre's *What Is Literature?* was translated into Arabic by an armature translator who was a second-year college sophomore. See chapter one.

Walter Pater (372-373). In addition, Malāʾika accused the Iraqi Communist Party of attempting to further deteriorate the state of the Arabic language by calling for the integration of the vernacular in literary writing as well using Latin letters instead of Arabic ones. These "suspicious calls by the hateful [Communists] who intend to tacitly harm Arabism and its language" were particularly dangerous, al-Malāʾika said, because such calls lay at the very heart of the agenda of the invaders who knew that Arabic remained part of the tradition of the Arabs and that "if a separation occurs between us and our tradition (*turāth*), the result would be deterioration the like of which the nation had not even seen" (374).

By targeting the values, religion, and language of the Arabs, al-Malāʾika warned, the "cultural invaders and their conspiring *shuʿūbiyyūn* attempt to kill the Arab morale in order to impose the Western morale—and they are very close from achieving this task." The invaders and their allies use ideals such as "universal humanism and freedom" to deceive budding writers into accepting Western dominance. Recent translated works celebrated universality, al- Malāʾika claimed, and a number of works hailed the advent of "world literature" which would transcend local concerns in the interest of solving world causes. Such universality, al-Malāʾika said, embellished itself with promises of freedom for both writers and readers. Such universality and freedom were Western ideals that were incompatible with the Arab culture, but these ideals are often ascribed to influential Western writers which made them appealing to Arab audience. The worst of those Western influences was "the French Jew writer and philosopher" (375). His views were "imposed" on both Arab writers and readers. The Arabs were infatuated with Sartre, al-Malāʾika complained, because he was famous in Europe. Such fixation on Europe was

destructive, she thought, because "a Western writer could be well-known and influential in Europe, but that does not mean that his ideas benefit us or that his views are in line with our cultural and social life" (375). In fact, al-Malāʾika is very critical of Sartre and she believed that his concepts, in particular, were not useful to the Arab society because, she said, "most of Sartre's views contradict our soul and our culture. We should not adopt any of his ideas, unless we want to destroy ourselves" (375). She decried the fact that "the younger generation … began copying [Sartre's] viewpoints and embraced his views" (376). Al-Malāʾika believed strongly in the role of the writer in society, but she rejected Sartrean engagement. In this piece, her aim is twofold. On the one hand, she advocated against importing Western concepts, especially Sartre's, that did not comply with pan-Arab—in fact, we can safely say Baʿthist—ideals, chief among which is *turāth*. On the other hand, she attacked the Iraqi Communist writers, accusing them of treason and collaborating with foreign cultural invaders.

Using the specter of cultural invasion as bogyman continued throughout the Baʿth rule. However, following the collapse of the National Front and the rise of Baʿth Party as the uncontested ruler of Iraq, the Baʿthist writers managed to appropriate the concept from Communism, and they started employing it as part of the Baʿth vocabulary. Let us, for example, take a look at the use of the concept in an interview with the Baʿthist artist Mukhallad al-Mukhtār published by the Baʿthist literary magazine *al-Ṭalīʿa alAadabiyya*, under the title "*Ḥadīth fī al-fann wa-l-iltizām al-thawrī*" (On Art and Revolutionary Commitment). In many ways, the interview sums up the way in which *al-iltizām* was appropriated by the Baʿthist literary circles. In this interview, al-Mukhtār complains about the "ongoing colonial intellectual invasion," which presented itself in appealing

forms and had managed to deceive Arab artists and writers with “appealing, yet fake ideals” (128). Arab artists, al-Mukhtār explains, need to realize that “those poisonous infiltrating trends and schools” of art are meant to act as “intellectual distractions” in order to force artists to look away from the Arab tradition (*turāth*). Now was the time, al-Mukhtār insists, for the Arab committed writers to become *revolutionary* committed writers. He explains that writers should maintain the close contact they established with the masses and, at the same time, work collaboratively in order to effect “the true and full birth of revolutionary art” (128).

Al-Mukhtār believes that revolutionary art was true to the spirit of the Arab nation, and it would aid it in fending off the foreign intellectual invasion. Revolutionary art, al-Mukhtār explains, needed to include two elements in order to be effective: “tradition and contemporaneity” (129). In other words, adds al-Mukhtār, the revolutionary committed artists needed to have “a deeper realization of all the facets of the Arab tradition” in order to be able to incorporate said tradition in their works by selecting what would serve their communities at the present time. Such task, al-Mukhtār claims, can only be achieved by “a Baʿthist, in the deepest sense of the word,” because only Baʿthists fully realize “the relationship between the past of the nation and its present.” He concludes the interview with a quote from Michel Aflaq that highlights the importance of tradition to present life (129). In essence, al-Mukhtār says that, in order to be committed, artists needed to join (and act within the framework of) the Baʿth Party. This view, to be true, became the Baʿthist narrative throughout the second half of the twentieth century.

APPENDIX I: TRANSLATION OF KEY DOCUMENTS

1- "Al-Ādāb tastaftī: li-man wa-limādhā taktub?" *Al-Ādāb* 2.11 (1954) 4-7. In preparation for the UNESCO debate between Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and Raʾīf Khūrī, *al-Ādāb* conducted a questionnaire in which it surveyed Arab writers and critics about their opinion regarding the question "Why and for whom do You Write?" Two Iraqi critics, Muḥī al-Dīn Ismāʿīl and Nihād al-Tikarlī, contributed to the questionnaire.

Questionnaire: "Why and for whom do You Write?"

1. Muḥyī al-Dīn Ismāʿīl

I think that the *raison d'être* for the majority of the various literary theories lies in their attempt to answer this question. Generally, such attempt has split literary theories into two camps. One camp, which believes in the arbitrariness of literature, prioritizes the role of the so-called inspiration in the act of literary creation, and it has theorized the existence of the enchanted ivory towers floating among the clouds. On the other hand, there is the camp that believes in the humanity of literature. It insists that literature, like any other human activity, is connected organically to the fate and civilization (*ḥaḍāra*) of man.

Given the two options, I think that the second group, which links literature to the fate of man, introduces ethical and humanistic components that are almost entirely absent in the theory of the first camp. The real man of letters takes a decisively ethical stance regarding humanity: he writes to man, realizing the humanness of this man, in order to recognize his own humanness, because the man of letters is part of the process that determines the destiny of the human race.

2. Nihād al-Tikarlī

Let me first answer the second question, “why do you write?” I write because there is something valuable that I want to “uncover” for others. Writing about this valuable thing will not only help me familiarize myself with the thing and with aspects of my own self, it also helps me connect with others and conveys to them my world as well as my ideas. This association might convince them to take part in my projects and the goals I am seeking. Had it not been for the act of writing, the world would have been engulfed in the fog of probabilities and it would have remained unknown to me and to the readers. In fact, even after I realize my world through writing, the world remains partially unknown to me until the readers engage in recreating it in their responses. Such engagement deepens my awareness of my own world. So, I write because I have chosen to realize certain aspects of myself and, in addition, to uncover for others an abstract world which I think is valuable.

As for the first question, “for whom do you write?” I respond that I have to write for the whole humanity. However, this goal is out of reach, because any writer, no matter how hard he tries, will end up addressing a specific group of people, whether he likes it or not. Certainly, class differences as well as the dominant social oppression play an important role in aggravating this situation. But such realization does not prevent me from being faithful to myself and to my humanity. From now on, I will direct my writings to the people who have just been freed from the yoke of oppression. If I write for the sake of man (and not against him), I have to address my writings to every man who both feels his humanity and enjoys freedom from the chains that have kept him tied for a long time.

2- Al-Ḥaydarī, Buland. "Bayna al-kāffah wa-l-khāṣṣah." *Al-Ādāb* 3.7 (1955) 21-22; 77. This is the reaction of the Iraqi poet and critic Buland al-Ḥaydarī to the UNESCO debate between Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and Raʾīf Khūrī. He disagrees with both writers, but he is more critical of Ḥusayn.

Between the Masses and the Elite

Buland al-Ḥaydarī

I do not want to discuss Mr. Raʾīf Khūrī's opinions for two reasons. First, there is a major difference between Mr. Khūrī's way of thinking and mine; and, secondly, I am not one of "his" masses for whom he writes. Indeed, when I was one of the masses, I managed to read only one of his plays, which was written in verse. I assume that he wrote the play to the elite because, if he intended otherwise, he should have written it in prose, maybe in *ʿāmmiyya* prose, and he should have compressed history on occasions and distorted the portrayal of the play's characters so that his readers could project themselves and their daily problems onto these characters and events. Writing about the masses does not mean writing *for* them, and here lie the two major issues of the Ḥusayn-Khūrī debate: style and the subject matter. The communist bent of some of Picasso's paintings did not bring the Communists closer to these paintings and they might have ridiculed the paintings, even when those Communists agreed with Picasso on the paintings' subject matter. Was it Picasso's task to alter the medium of his expression in order to appease the Communists?

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If the basis of Mr. Khūrī's distinction between the masses and the elite is the idea of "writing," he is completely in the dark. The current generation seems to have lost the aristocracy of the idea (*arisṭuqrāṭiyyat al-fikrah*). Van Gogh's shoe paintings are no less great than the paintings of saints and kings by other painters. There are hundreds of books whose protagonists are one of Mr. Khūrī's masses, but behind each one of these protagonists, there are thousands of facts that prove their individual outlook. If we overlook such struggle between the inner self and the outside world, and we concentrate solely on superficial problems in an attempt to unite and guide the masses, we would make it impossible for literature to exhort exemplary counsel. We would divert literature from embodying deep and eternal psychological truths to investigating mutable and superficial states of affairs. Literature, as well as all art, cannot achieve immortality without such profound psychological truths. If Mr. Raʾīf Khūrī insists on writing about the laborer, to the laborer (as a laborer), for the sole goal of didacticism, he is not writing literature at all. He might write something that proves beneficial for a particular time and a specific place, but it is not literature—we might call it so only if we want to be courteous to Mr. Khūrī. Seeking any benefit from a work of art strips it of its "art," rendering it a form of propaganda and advertisement. Such is the effect of didacticism. The work would regain its aestheticism only when it dispels thinking about any ensuing benefits. Frankly, I have to say that the practice of hunting for benefits that Mr. Khūrī calls for by admitting that he "strongly believe[s] in guided and guiding literature," would force us to wake up one day to a new Sparta which is devoid of any art and philosophy.

Mr. Khūrī's argument would make us end up with liturgical hymns, military marches, and narrative essays about trivial protagonists despite what he mentioned in his long-winded contribution of hypotheses, contradictions, and mistakes.

I have noticed that Mr. Khūrī talks to Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn as if the latter is in agreement with all he says, disagreeing with him on the title only. He cites Dr. Ḥusayn's own books to support his argument, not Dr. Ḥusayn's counter-argument. He sneaks into the house through the window and comes out of the door with examples in an attempt to prove his point. He then fakes the politeness of a student, asking, "My Dear Dr. Ḥusayn, for whom do you write, the elite or the masses?"

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I have said at the outset of this piece that I do not want to discuss Mr. Raʾīf Khūrī's opinions because of a major difference in our ways of thinking. I believe that writers, and artists in general, produce their work to the elite as long as the work expresses the writer's (or the artist's) inner self and his outside world. I cannot enjoy or appreciate such work if it does not touch me and I do not find in it echoes of my environment and culture. It is this level of understanding and appreciation that bonds the writer and his audience. It is a special level that results from, say, the prosody of the Arabic poem. We cannot change this level to correspond with the understanding and appreciation of the masses unless we are willing to change painting to photography and literature to newspaper reporting. The more audience the artist attracts, the closer he gets

to the surface of the earth and to the conditions of the masses. Such proximity provides him with the clarity and superficiality that no genuine artist would accept. The individuality and psychology of the artist are as important as the immortal question the artist chooses as the subject matter for his work. Take *Oedipus Rex*, for example, which presents an eternal human problem in which fate exercises a major role. As a reader, I have to feel Oedipus's dilemma, individuality, and determination in order to assess the role of fate. And here lies the variation in judgment. *Oedipus Rex* has been read by countless generation, and it has served as an example for many writers. Had Oedipus lived the stupid conditions of the masses, he would have been dead and unknown to us, just like the millions of those masses. The immortal writer writes for the elite which does not die about issues that do not die.

So, I agree with Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn that the writer writes for the elite. However, my agreement with Dr. Ḥusayn ends there, for two reasons. The first has to do with the organization of the debate itself: the terms of the debate were not carved out clearly and the political aspect of the debate seemed superficial. The second reason has to do with Dr. Ḥusayn himself. He did not act as a party to the debate, but assumed the role of a lecturer who delivers his views while others debate them. Such a role prompted Dr. Ḥusayn to downplay the topic of the debate and to consider it a storm in a cup. However, he agreed to engage in this debate "as long as [he] get[s] to visit Lebanon," because such a visit to Lebanon "prompted [him] to accept Mr. Idrīs's invitation and agree to everything he asked for," even if that meant engaging in a debate whose foundations he was unaware of. He even seemed unsure whether he had discussed with the organizers the main points of the debate—he says "I think I did not discuss [the main points of the

debate] with [Raʾīf Khūrī] at all because I, simply, never believed in this debate." All these points deprived us from listening to Dr. Ḥusayn's usual perceptive analysis and insightful assessment, because, right from the beginning of the debate, he limited our expectations by declaring that "there is literature perused by readers, who either like or dislike it. I have never perceived anything beyond this conception." Undoubtedly, Dr. Ḥusayn has repeatedly gone "beyond this conception" to study and command unique understanding of the political and social milieus of certain periods of literary history. Does Dr. Ḥusayn really pretend he has not perceived the problem behind *The Dark Child*? Has he not noticed the anti-scientific trend in Lawrence and Huxley? Has he not realized the conflict between the realism of Dostoevsky's characters and their understanding of reality? Has he not perceived the problem behind Ivan Karamazov's complaint of the shedding of the "tears of humanity with which the earth is soaked from its crust to its center"? Certainly, all these literary examples map out a direction (*itijāh*), but they do not impose didacticism (*tawjīh*); they imply an attitude, but they do not impose a resolution. The writer's task lies in finding a problem and creating his free characters who seek to realize themselves and find their way out of the problem on their own. The issue, then, is not finding out "who directed a playwright like Sophocles," or whether Sophocles paid attention to "the aristocratic party or the democratic party in Athens." What matters is that Sophocles did not openly support any of these parties, even if he leaned towards one of them through his plotline, character selection, or chorus arrangement. It also matters that Sophocles was so accommodating and erudite that he was able to justify the works of each of his characters. He does not draw a line between right and wrong, or genius and stupidity. Emotions (and material things!) alter

dramatically in the course of *Oedipus Rex* that you cannot choose for Oedipus except what he chose for himself. He is defeated and triumphant at the same time. Now, compare this type of writing to the literature written in the Soviet Union nowadays. You will find in the latter profuse examples of protagonists who are, in fact, slaves talking about freedom and humanity in the narrowest sense possible. They move like the balls on a board of billiards: they lack free will and are directed by a form of social inevitability. The problem these writers present in their works is often superficial and temporary, and it dies at the Soviet borders. In fact, sometimes we find no problem or conflict at all in the work; we encounter events which lead the protagonist to victory in a comical fashion, as if we were watching a bad American movie.

Furthermore, when discussing the structure and meaning of the literary work, Dr. Ḥusayn affirms that Homer paid no attention to questions of form and content. He asks Mr. Khūrī

> Do you think that Homer and his compatriots who completed the Iliad or the Odyssey after him thought for a moment in the form and the content, or, as we say, in the expression, meaning, and style of the work? Did they think about in any aspect that critics discuss repeatedly since the inception of criticism? I assure you that nothing of this sort crossed the minds of those writers. … In fact, they did not have any theory about literature or aesthetics. Nothing of that sort at all.

I cannot affirm with Dr. Ḥusayn whether it occurred to these writers to think of form and content or not, but there is no doubt in my mind that every writer, consciously or not, has a reader in mind. The act of creation is like a mutual daydream between two people. The

writer crafts many of his techniques and turns of phrase to correspond with the liking and understanding of the readers he has in mind.

Afterwards, Dr. Ḥusayn moves to talk about the question of panegyric in literary history. He cites examples of poets and patrons, asking the audience to

> Take a look at the poets who were selling their poetry and at the caliphs and princes who believed such panegyrics and paid excessive money to hear such poetry. Let us investigate the two parties and ask, which of the two is the true fool and buffoon? Certainly, the answer is that those kings, caliphs, and princes were the true idiots. The poets were messing with them and, deep inside themselves, making fun of them.

By showing that they were poking fun at patrons, Dr. Ḥusayn wants to exonerate the poets of the charge of insincerity and of selling their poetry. But he is, in fact, indicting them. What remains of the artist if he loses sincerity and commitment (*iltizām*) to what he says and does? What is the difference, then, between poetry and versifying? And, if we agree with Dr. Ḥusayn that "[b]efore thinking of politics and of those whom they praised or ridiculed, they [the poets] thought of the people—the masses who would read and sing the poem," it follows that they were making fun of the masses as well. Those poets were extolling values in which they did not believe and creating of the patron a god whom they did not worship. I also ridicule the line

> Such is the fear you instill in the unbelievers that
> Their unborn sperm dreads you

و اخفت اهل الشرك حتى انه   لتخافك النطف التي لم تخلق

But I mock it because of the poet's laughable exaggeration—although I realize that such exaggeration was an important feature of the romanticism of post-*Jāhilī* Arab poetry. I ridicule the image, not caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd. In fact, the lines give me the impression that al-Rashīd was a decisive caliph, even if I do not believe that he could scare the unborn sperms of his enemy. In the same spirit, I might enjoy al-Mutanabbī's panegyrics or satires of Kāfūr, but the temporal distance between me on the one hand and al-Mutanabbī and Kāfūr on the other deprives me of experiencing the social issues of the poems. I may enjoy the artistry of the poems, but I cannot experience their occasions. The question that we have to ask, then, is this: What was the impact of these poems during the time of their composition?

That said, I want to remind Dr. Ḥusayn that our concern should not be arguing whether the poet or the politician was the buffoon. The poet is not superficial like the politician; the poet lives his experiences faithfully and gives expression to them staunchly. Certainly, literary responsibility is the highest form of responsibility. Would Dr. Ḥusayn agree to selling himself to an advertising company in order to attract thousands of readers and, after a thousand years, someone would say that Ṭāhā Ḥusayn was making fun of his readers? The issue is not who used whom. Maybe none of them was a buffoon. However, we know that both of them engaged in an inhumane (*ghayr insānī*) business transaction.

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Moreover, Dr. Ḥusayn seems to contradict himself. He makes a reference to Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī who "used to ridicule those who thought that bees are meant to serve humans by producing honey for them to savor. He said that bees did not make honey so that humans can enjoy consuming it; they produced honey for themselves." If Dr. Ḥusayn agrees with this statement, then his examples contract such belief. On the other hand, Dr. Ḥusayn says that "the writer does not write to himself and that if he wanted to write to himself he would not need writing at all." I disagree. I think that the artist produces work for both himself and his chosen elite. It is hard to decide which represents the artist's priority, but I am certain that artists produce works for themselves in addition to their audience. The work of art is an expression of a necessary need, a release of an imprisoned genie, and a cathartic effort, just like crying or writing. It is the process of transforming (and embodying) dream into reality. As for the writer, or the personal "elite," he aids in expediting the process of transformation and help determine the shape of the work of art. He is the observer who determines the dream's points of departure and clad it in probable reality. He is, in short, the first reader and the first critic of the work of art. The weaker this observer is, the closer we get to the world of dreams, and the symbols of the work become more confusing.

3- Kāzim, Jawād. "Raʾī fī al-shiʿr al-multazim." *Al-Ādāb* 3.4 (1955) 62-63. Kāzim agrees with Anwar al-Maʿaddawī's distinction between literature and commitment: the former being an expression; the latter a direction. In addition, he agree with al-Maʿaddawī's view of the singularity (*fardiyya*) of commitment, i.e. one has to listen to the unique inner voice of each committed poet in order to understand the poem's message.

On Committed Literature

Jawād Kāzim

There is a new phenomenon that has appeared on the pages of *al-Adab* lately, i.e. the deep disagreement between critics as well as writers about the aesthetic examples of the modern literature of commitment. The debate occasionally appears in other journals as well, but never as intensely and repeatedly as it does in *al-Adab*. Some critics say that the reason behind the debate is that we are at the threshold of a literary renaissance that would both accommodate such a debate and act as its gateway to becoming a mainstream opinion. I take issue with the debate because some of our respected writers disregard the forewarning of the new reader when they deal with a literary work. However, they soon reveal to the reader beings (*dhawāt*) within which multiple factors operate: social upbringing, the various scientific, spiritual, and cultural sources of their upbringing, and political beliefs--or, precisely, what Nazim Hikmat meant by saying, "I am but a reflection of this world." However, we have to ask whether we have reached the horizon of conflict between principles and values. I personally do not think that we have, despite the grave impacts of these issues on human life.

I strongly believe that the conflict between ideas and principles rarely take place. I am talking here about the ideas and principles that seek to push forward the wheel of Arab development and uplift Arabic literature to a higher, more sublime level. Such conflicts are rare, but they do exist. The question, then, becomes how can we resolve such conflicts between, say, my conviction of the importance of the factors I referred to (which work with every writer unconsciously during his struggle with others to tame nature) and the inability of these factors to produce any intellectual output in the field of the conflict between ideas and theories?

The main reason behind the dilemma is that none of these issues--literary, social, or intellectual--has been subjected to a systematic philosophical study that has a holistic view to life and existence. That is why our intellectual discussions about literature have remained unsystematic and concerned merely with contingencies and side issues, not with establishing a comprehensive intellectual approach. For instance, many of the judgments about contemporary works are limited to dealing with secondary issues, like taking issues with a word or an expression, or objecting to prosody. Most of our contemporary critics ignore the bigger questions, like the writer's success or failure to express his worldview, or whether he is committed or not. Commentators were quick to discard Nizār Qabbānī's "Ilā Ajīrah," (To a Prostitute) as an immoral poem, for instance, but it never occurred to them to consider the immorality of the pampered Arab aristocracy. In fact, we will perception many ideas more deeply if we investigate immoral literature, for instance the literature that devalue women, strip them of their humanness, and depict them as objects of lust. Indeed, we should be investigating these and other aspects of literature that delve into human life. Why do critics and commentators keep

missing such aspects? That is why I say, in the Arab literary scene, there are no intellectual conflicts, but there are mere disagreements on minor issues.

Now that I have established the lack of real intellectual conflict, let me move to deal with the issue of commitment. In particular, I want to talk about the calamity of modern Egyptian committed poetry, which is the result of the blind copying of modern Iraqi committed poetry. With the exception of "Min Ab Miṣrī ilā al-Raʾīs Trūmān" (From an Egyptian Father to President Truman) and a few other poems, Egyptian committed poetry has not come spontaneously and did not depend on a clear dialectical cornerstone. It lacks objectivity and needs a supportive aesthetic theory. Admittedly, its topics are noble and its intentions are grand, but its expression is weak and banal, lacking any aesthetics of poetry. I felt deeply disappointed when, following the lead of the Iraqi committed poetry, the great Egyptian writer, Mr. Maḥmūd Amīn, whom we all respect and admire, discarded al-Faytūrī, an ingenious Egyptian poet, in favor of unworthy verse that is anything but poetry.

Despite our many differences in thought and practice, I have to agree with Mr. Anwar al-Maʿaddawī when it comes to the issue of commitment in literature. Al-Maʿaddawī distinguishes between literature and commitment: the former is an expression; the latter is a direction. In addition, I agree with al-Maʿaddawī's view of the singularity (*fardiyya*) of commitment, i.e. we have to listen to the unique inner voice of each committed poet in order to understand the poem's message. Reality should be merely the point of departure, as Goethe said, which poetry then reshapes in order to give it a lively and aesthetic form. Or, as the French poet Paul Éluard says,

> If the real world does not sink in the poet's head, he will only present to the world abstract and ambiguous things, incomplete dreams, and false beliefs. The poet has to mix his emotions and his imagination with the world, which he has to defeat and change its image.

Although we should not consider Éluard's assessment as the conclusive definition of the function of the social poet, we may take it into consideration when reading, say, committed, realist examples from Lorca's poetry. For instance, who can claim that his "Ballad of the Spanish Civil Guard," which is filled with symbols, does not derive inspiration from the bitter reality of the oppressed? When we read Lorca's poem, Louis Aragon's "Elsa's Eyes," or Nazim Hikmet's poetry, we feel the vibrant reality which they represent as well as the sublime art that they embody.

Such realizations were felt and eschewed by the Iraqi poets for a long time now. So, the question is, then, who caused the dilemma of modern committed poetry? Could it be that the ingenious poet Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb is one of the people who have caused the calamity? I doubt that any educated person would say that he is. Regardless, I keep demanding more of the poetry whose language resembles that of memoranda. I insist on more examples of such poetry so that we may find a way out of such insistent and dangerous literary phenomena! (My apologies to all the people whose names are mentioned here.)

4- Al-Sayyāb, Badr Shākir. “Al-Iltizām wa-al-laʾiltizām fī al-adab al-ʿArabī al-ḥadīth,” *al-Adab al-ʻArabī al-Muʻāṣir: Aʻmāl Muʾtamar Rūmā al-Munʻaqid fī Tishrīn al-Awwal sanat 1961*. Tarabulus, Lebanon: Dār al-Shimāl lil-Ṭibāʿah, 1990. Al- Sayyāb’s lecture at the 1961 conference, which was organized by the Congress for Cultural Freedom in Rome.

Commitment and Non-commitment in Modern Arabic Literature

Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb

The topic of commitment (*al-iltizām*) in literature in general, and in poetry in particular, is not a new one. The ancients had studied this topic, but they used two different terms to describe it. For them, poetry, i.e. all literature, was either objective or subjective, i.e. either committed or not. Indeed, the ancient critics studied commitment less intensely, and we will not be astray if we claim that “commitment” in ancient times was a topic that was investigated more humanely and comprehensively than at the present time. In fact, until the nineteenth century, the major poets remained committed, i.e. objective, and we may mention as many names as needed to prove this observation, beginning with the Greek’s Homer, Sophocles, and Aeschylus to Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Racine, Corneille, Imruʾ al-Qays,[87] Ṭarafah ibn al-ʿAbd,[88] and al-Mutanabbī. As for Arabic poetry, it has only recently known the calls for commitment (or non-

[87] An Arab poet from the sixth century AD. His poem “Let us stop and weep” (*qifā nabkī*) is one of the seven *Muʿallaqāt*, poems prized as the best examples of pre-Islamic Arabian verse.

[88] Another *Muʿallaqāt* poet from the pre-Islamic age.

commitment). The ancient Arab critics divided poetry to categories or "arts"--like love poetry (*ghazal*), enthusiasm (*hamāsah*), panegyric (*madīḥ*), invective (*hijāʾ*), elegy (*rithāʾ*), etc.—and they did not prefer any one of these arts over another. From the outset, the Arab poet was a committed poet without anyone telling him he needed to be one. If Pre-Islamic poetry is the earliest specimen we have of ancient Arabic poetry, the *Jāhilī* poet, then, was the spokesperson for his tribe: when the tribe was angry, the poet expressed its anger; if it was in distress, he depicted its grief; if it showed delinquency when it was under attack, he would stir enthusiasm among its members and urge them to defend their dignity. However, even though his emotions were tied to those of his tribe's, the poet was not a mere cave that echoed back sounds. He reasoned, using his mind and consciousness, the issues at hand. For example, when the destructive war between ʿAbs and Dhubyān[89] broke out and the clanking of weapons was louder than the voice of reason, Zuhayr ibn Abī Sulmā[90] wrote poems that condemned war and lauded the peace that had just prevailed between the warring parties.

Afterwards, when Islam emerged, the new religion imposed commitment on the Muslim poets, even though it did not dictate the imposition openly. Indeed, in the early days of Islam, it was too embarrassing for the Muslim poet to court with Muslim sisters, satirize Muslim brothers, or boast unabashedly his superior ancestry over other Muslims. So, the poet was obliged to dedicate his art to the new faith: to praise Prophet Muḥammad, describe his wars, and attack his enemies. The early Muslim poetry, therefore, suffered from stagnation—the same stagnation that affected the Russian

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[89] One of the longest lasting tribal conflicts in Pre-Islamic Arabia.

[90] Zuhayr ibn Abī Sulmā (c. 520-c. 609), a major pre-Islamic poet.

literature after the Bolshevik Revolution when the state imposed on the writers specific topics and even sketched out literary blueprints for them before asking them to breathe life into these sketches. Of course, the writers breathed not life into these blueprints; they imparted what a machine would perform in order to move a mechanical doll. However, the intensity of the religious spur soon waned. New Arab city dwellers began enjoying luxurious living and they started to engage in acts of impudence that led to the emergence of the erotic *ghazal* of ʿUmar ibn Abī Rabīʿa,[91] the *khamriyyāt* (wine poetry) of al-Akhṭal, and the malevolent invectives of Jarīr and al-Farazdaq.[92] One the other hand, the Bedouins, who were deprived and discontented, remained austere, and their poets depicted their deprivation from wealth and power through Platonic love poetry which expressed nothing but pain, complaining, and tears. Nonetheless, Arabic poetry did not altogether lack poets who championed one political group over another. Take a look, for instance, at the struggle between the Umayyad and the Hāshimiyyūn poets, which led to poetry that may truly be classified as a first-class political poetry.

During the Abbasid age, Arabic poetry seems to have become independent and has diverged from its traditional course to expressing exclusively personal matters—for instance in the poetry of, say, Abū Nuwās, al-ʿAbbās ibn al-Aḥnaf, and Muslim ibn al-Walīd. However, these poets, prominent as they are, were not the only poets during the Abbasid age. Indeed, these poets deviated from the course of Arabic poetry, i.e. its objectivity and commitment, because they, or the majority among them at least, were key

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[91] (644-719), a Meccan poet of the Umayyad era, known for his erotic poetry.

[92] al-Akhṭal, Jarīr, and al-Farazdaq were Umayyad poets known for their invectives and flyting poetry (*shiʿr al-naqāʾiḍ*).

figures in *al-shuʿūbiyya* movement which took any of a number of shapes on different occasions. One time, it called for justice for the poor. At another, it demanded that the differences between the rich and the poor be erased. At yet another stage, it called for the emancipation of women. In fact, on many occasions, they would promote the Prophetic tradition that "there is no superior merit for an Arab over a non-Arab except by piety," proclaiming that, when the Arabs were attending to sheep and camels, the Persians were enjoying lavish civilization. This *shuʿūbiyya* movement has continued to the present day with all its political, intellectual, and religious aspects. For example, here is a poet, who calls himself the "progressive" poet of Iraq, boasting of Salmān al-Fārisī[93] when addressing Iraqi nationalists,

Salman is more honorable than your ancestry;
A self-made man, he is second to none.

سلمان اشرف من ابيكم كعبة　　　　وعصام ما عرف الجدود عصام

During the Abbasid age, the Arab poet continued following the same path that his predecessors had taken. He rarely talked about his feelings, and, when he did talk about them, he would fabricate expressing them. Abū Tammām, al-Mutanabbī, and al-Maʿarrī remain the best representatives of the objective trend of Arabic poetry in the Abbasid age.

However, during the age of intellectual decadence, the Arab poets became obsessed with witty antithesis and paronomasia and with writing meticulously-rhymed

[93] Salman the Persian, a companion of the Islamic prophet Muhammad and the first Persian who converted to Islam. He was a renowned follower of ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib after the death of Muhammad

poems to merely assert their mastery of the Arabic language. This period of Arabic poetry somehow resembles a period of English poetry--the one extending from the end of the seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth century--when the Romantic Movement was just beginning to take shape at the hands of Thomas Gray, William Cowper, and others. Arabic poetry soon cracked the coat of the seed which had kept it hidden under the ground. In its sky sparked poets like al-Bārūdī[94] and Ḥafnī Nāṣif whose poetry did not depart from the general course of Arabic poetry. They were committed poets to the highest level possible during their time. However, it was at the hands of Aḥmad Shawqī[95] that Arabic poetry really regained its objective direction and managed to reclaim its former splendor. Such was the case that no national celebration was complete without the poetry readings of Aḥmad Shawqī, Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm,[96] and Khalīl Muṭrān.[97]

Someone might object to this spread of poetry recitations during national celebrations by asking how the shift of Arabic poetry to occasional poetry represents a comeback to its objective direction. In order to answer this concern, we need to look back at the history of the period and study its political and social circumstances. The scope of this lecture allows for referring to only a few of these circumstances. Poetry had not descended down to the masses—and neither had politics—by the time these poets took

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[94] (1839–1904), known as shāʿir al-nahḍa ("the poet of the renaissance"), is a major figure in the early modern literary and political history of Egypt.

[95] (1868-1932), a major Egyptian poet, known as amīr al-shuʿarāʾ ("prince of poets") of modern Arabic poetry and a pioneer of Arabic poetical drama.

[96] (1871-1932), Egyptian poet known as "shāʿir al-Nīl" ("poet of the Nile").

[97] (1872-1949), a Lebanese poet.

the stage. If there is truism in the statement that committed poets tie their sentiments to those of the masses, and that the smallest movement from the masses would stir the strongest frenzy in the poet, the sentiments of the masses, then, would not be moved had they not been driven by a push from the upper or middle classes. It was implausible for the poet to wait for an inspirational stir from the actions of the masses. It was indeed the poet who moved the masses, not the other way around. The celebrations of national events, therefore, offered the poets with an opportunity to ladle their deepest sentiments, like a farmer scooping water up from a well: the farmer has to ladle the water up, or else it would not flow like it does from the spring.

Shawqī's latter days witnessed the emergence of a new movement in Arabic poetry. The leading poets of this movement were influenced by what they had read of the English and French Romantic poetry: especially the love poetry, the poetry of nature, and the poetry that expresses the poet's distress, happiness, doubt, faith, despair, or hope. These poets, whom we might call the *Apollo* poets, had not read (or, at least, they did not want to read) of Shelley's poetry save "The Indian Serenade," "To a Skylark," and the "Call"[98] without reading his other more important works like "Prometheus Unbound" and the *Revolt of Islam*. They also had not read, or did not want to read, Byron's poems that celebrate the struggle of the rising freedom-seeking European masses. As for the objectivity they familiarized themselves with, it was, in fact, the objectivity of the movement's leading poet, Aḥmad Zakī Abū Shādī,[99] which he called "descriptive

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[98] It is unclear which of Shelley's poems al-Sayyāb means by the "Call." He might be referring to the "*Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*."

[99] (1892-1955) was an Egyptian Romantic poet who led the Apollo society of poets.

poetry," because he used to write poems about the paintings or the pictures he liked. However, the poetry of some of these poets did not lack pan-Arab, national, or local sentiments. The movement was not able to maintain its seclusion from the political events which were unfolding around them in the Arab world. Soon, the magazine *Apollo* ceased publication and the poets around it dispersed. Some of these poets encountered success, especially in terms of fame and attracting women; however, towards the end of their careers, they tried to replace Shawqī, *the* poet of national events and platform poetry. In fact, even ʿAlī Maḥmūd Ṭāhā[100] published an anthology, *Sharq wa-Gharb* (East and West), which depicted Arab and Islamic conquests--topics which differed radically from his former writings. Also, Maḥmūd Ḥasan Ismāʿīl[101] wrote an entire book of poetry, *al-Malik* (The King), to praise King Fārūq.

However, when the communist movement gained momentum in the Arab world after World War II, the Communists were able to issue journals in a number of Arab capitals, like Cairo's *Majallah*, Khartoum's *Umm Dirmān*, Beirut's *al-Ṭarīq*, in addition to a few Iraqi journals and newspapers that did not last long. During that time, the Communists started playing a new tone: dividing all art to art-for-art's sake versus art-for-society's sake. Thanks to their countless supporters whose hands remained always willing to clap, or at least to bear the pain of clapping, the Communist writers managed to reach a rank that they would not have otherwise been able to reach had they not been cheered by supporters. Indeed, a few genuinely creative poets could not resist such communist temptation and they derailed away with the Red current, sacrificing

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[100] (1902-49), Egyptian Romantic poet

[101] (1910-1977), an Egyptian poet.

themselves, their humanity, and everything that writers cherish. Among those poets were the ingenious Lebanese poet Ilyās Abū Shabakah,[102] the Arab (who then was the *Egyptian*) poet ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Qaṭr, and the Palestinian poet Abū Salmā.[103]

The Communists reduced the issue of commitment and non-commitment, or the issue of art-for-art's sake versus art-for-society's sake to a simplified version that hid the core of the cause. In fact, such simplification distorted the meaning of committed literature (or realistic literature, or art-for-society's sake). For example, in 1945, when I was still a member of the Iraqi Communist Party, the Party presented me with an English-language book entitled *al-Mārkisiyya wa-l-Fann* (Marxism and Art) in which the author discusses the issue of art-for-art's sake versus art-for-society's sake. The communist author says that "the art-for-art's-sake advocates say, 'if you draw and color an egg or a clutch of eggs in a nest successfully, your goal is reached. What matters is succeeding in drawing and coloring what you want to paint'." The communist author objects to this argument and retorts that "if what matters is succeeding in drawing and coloring what you want to paint, why will you not, instead of the egg and the nest, paint and successfully color a working-class family whose children cry because of hunger?"

That said, since the topic of this lecture is commitment and non-commitment in poetry and not in art in general, I think it is best to talk about the communist stance on committed poetry—or what the communists call *al-shiʿr al-niḍālī* (struggle poetry) or *al-shiʿr al-jamāhīrī* (mass poetry). Communism believes that there is no valid philosophy

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[102] (1903–47), was Lebanon's principal modern romantic poet.

[103] (1909-1980), pen name for a Palestinian poet whose real name was Abd al-ʿAzīz al-Karmī.

save the materialist dialectical philosophy it advances, and that there are no correct solutions to any problem except for the communist solutions. Therefore, the communist poet—or any poet seeking to please the Communists—is forbidden from introducing any idea that does not adhere to the communist philosophy or suggesting any solutions to any problem other than the communist solutions, whose principles are drawn by the books of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin and whose details are decided upon by the publications of the local country-specific communist party.

Let me cite as an example a few lines which an Iraqi Communist poet wrote about the Palestinian cause—these lines were written before the Soviet Union took its well-known decision about the Palestinian question,

> To you, Palestine, the glory!
> And to glory belongs Palestine;
> From the East to the West,
> Millions salute you!

فلسطين لك المجد   وللمجد فلسطين

من الشرق الى الغرب   تحييك الملايين

What type of weak verse this is! It is incapable of rising to the level of bad poetry! The same poet has a line of verse that garnered a boom of lauding applause and standing ovation like no other. In a poem he recited during *al-wathbah* commemoration—*al-wathbah*[104] is the name Iraqi Communists coined to describe the Iraqi people's

[104] *Al-wathbah*, literally "the leap," is the name describing the unrest and demonstrations in Baghdad in January, 1948 to protest the proposed Anglo-Iraqi Treaty, which was

demonstrations that repudiated Portsmouth Treaty and brought down the government of Sāliḥ Jabr in 1948—the poet said,

For the free Iraq in its *wathbah*
Leaps best in summer and winter!

فالعراق الحر في وثبته يحسن الوثبة صيفا وشتاء

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The Arab Communists did not limit applying their Marxist standards to contemporary Arabic poetry; on the contrary, they went back in time and began applying the criteria of Marxist realism and struggle literature to ancient Arabic literature and poetry. I remember one time during a Communist literary circle, a communist writer started attacking Shakespeare, describing him as "the reactionary poet of feudalism," who dealt with kings, princes, and military leaders instead of writing about workers and farmers. When I objected that Shakespeare died even before Karl Marx was born, he replied that there were a number of "progressive" poets and writers who came before Marx. We should not be surprised by the opinion of this Iraqi Communist, given that the

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signed in the English city of Portsmouth on January 15, 1948. The treaty, which revised the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930, promised British withdrawal from Iraq, but allowed excessive British privileges, something the Iraqi opposition fiercely rejected. The treaty was consequently annulled, and the government of Ṣāliḥ Jabr was forced to resign in response to *al-wathbah* demonstrations. See Marr 64-66

Daily Worker,[105] the British Communist Party's newspaper, took the same stance against Shakespeare, attacking him for not articulating the interests and hopes of the proletariat.

And when the Communists adopted the slogan of World Peace, the literati—along with half-baked writers—began examining the ancient Arab literature for things said to denounce war and call for peace. An Iraqi Communist writer wrote an essay about al-Mutannabī's poem on Shiʿb Būwwān,[106] having the following line as a point of departure,

At Shiʿb Būwwān, my horse marvels,
"Humans abandon this to go to war?"

يقول بشعب بوان حصاني   أمن هذا يسار الى الطعان

The writer concluded that al-Mutannabī was a war monger, whereas his horse was a peace advocate. Although I had ceased to be a Communist-Party member at the time, I commented on the essay saying that al-Mutannabī's horse signed the Stockholm Appeal with his hoof.

Faced with such a fierce Communist campaign, most Arab poets could not resist the tide, and they began writing "struggle poetry" similar to what the Communists were writing. The only difference between the communist poets and most of their non-communist (but "committed") counterparts, was the difference in the use of individual

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[105] The *Daily Worker*, founded in 1930, was the newspaper of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). It was renamed the *Morning Star* in 1966

[106] one of al-Mutanabbī's major poems describing Shiʿb Būwwān, a valley in present-day Iran.

words. Whereas the communist poet repeated words like peace, the working class, and the Red banner; the non-communist poet used words like pan-Arabism, *jīhād*, and *mujāhidīn*.

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The word "commitment" was not used in its current meaning in Arabic criticism until Jean-Paul Sartre used it. Intriguingly, Sartre's call provided the non-communist writers with the argument that realist literature and committed literature were not exclusive to the communist writings. Before Sartre, the Communists had closed the door in the face of non-Communist critics because they claimed any poet or writer who celebrated freedom and justice and condemned suffering and poverty. For example, they claimed the Spanish poet Lorca, and they almost claimed the English poet Coleridge as well.

Both the Sartrean call and the setbacks from which the Arabs suffered—from the Palestinian setback to the ongoing Algerian war—have contributed to eliminating the differences between the two types of commitment in literature, i.e. the communist and the non-communist. This is particularly true as far as poetry is concerned. The emergence of political parties in the Arab countries—and what that emergence has entailed in terms of party conferences, festivals, and demonstrations—has encouraged platform poetry, i.e. occasional poetry. The exacerbating danger of platform poetry might have been among the reasons that led to the birth, and quick spread, of free verse movement. The latter,

however, could not evade the exploitation by communism and other political parties. In fact, the free verse made it easy for many inexperienced poets to line up certain words from the political and economic communist lexicons, pick up slogans from demonstrations, and write out of all this something they call struggle poetry—even though it is neither struggle-like nor is it poetry in any sense. Anyone who wants examples of this type of poetry may take a look at the latest communist poetry collections. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī's poetry book, *Kalimāt la Tamūt* (Words That Do Not Die), might be the most recent of such collections.

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At this point, we have to refer to the immense influence the English poet T.S. Eliot, especially with his poem "The Waste Land," has exercised on committed poetry in modern Arabic literature, communist and noncommunist alike, the good of it as well as the bad. I will not be exaggerating if I say that the modern European city was not satirized harsher or deeper than it was in T.S. Eliot's "Waste Land"--I say this despite the abundance of criticism the communist poets have unleashed towards the capitalist aspects of the contemporary European city. No other poem has received more critical studies and attracted more interest than the "Waste Land."

The communists consider any poet who criticizes the modern city for reasons other than theirs, or from a viewpoint other than theirs, an enemy that needs to be fought. The communists have saved no effort fighting Eliot; in fact, *Science and Society*, the

American communist journal, published an article denying him the description of even a good versifier. I am not sure if the communist poets in the West succeeded in imitating Eliot or not. However, I can say that the Arab communist poets have read Eliot, but they did not understand him. All they knew about him was that he incorporated in his poems lines from other English, French, and German poets. They did not comprehend the depth of what hides behind such incorporation and what contrast the poet intends with the preceding or following text. They also knew of him that he includes into his poetry lines from other poets and that he also employs the local dialect. In addition, they learned that he included in his poetry conversations he might have heard at a café or exchanges he had overheard in a street. Immediately, the Arab communist poets started imitating Eliot in these respects, and, soon, their poems looked like a beggar's robe stitched with patches of clashing colors. One poem would have a section from a vernacular song about dogs dying of hunger coming right after a line describing the spring and its verdancy, followed by a slogan the poet picked up from a demonstration. All of this ridiculous mixture in a single poem!

On the other hand, there was a group of young Arab poets who understood Eliot, and they were influenced by both his spirit and his technique. Those poets saw in the "Waste Land" the most robust criticism of the capitalist society, a criticism that diminishes all the criticism of the communist poets despite their criticism's loathing obscenity. These poets valued equally the poem as well as Eliot's criticism of societies that abandoned their real, sublime man as well as religious values--a criticism that applies not only to the capitalist society but also to the socialist society in the communist countries as well. Indeed, it might even apply, to a certain extent, to the backward and

ailing societies--the Arab society being one. These poets captured how a western poet managed to utilize their symbols, like Tammūz[107] or Osiris,[108] and brought their attention to things to which they had been oblivious.

In addition, the political circumstances of intellectual terror and the absence of freedom that the Arab countries were undergoing helped a comeback to symbolism in order to assist the poets to express their dissatisfaction with the political and the social conditions of their countries, and to articulate their hope for a rebirth that would bring their countries back to life from death. Of course, these poets were committed as well, but they differed from the communist poets--all of whom were, of course, committed--in that the communist commitment was imposed from the outside, whereas the commitment of these poets came internally; they did not abandon art and they did not bring their poetry down from the heights each poet could reach so that fellow Comrade So-and-So could understand it.

This group of genuinely committed poets was subjected to attacks from the left as well as the right. The left deemed the group indifferent to the people and as serving the interests of the bourgeois and imperialism. On the other hand, the extremist right saw it as a group that tries to destroy Arabic poetry by deviating from its traditional meters and composition standards, prompted to do so by a number of factors, including the weakness of their poetic tools and the lack of knowledge of classical Arabic literature. The most important among these factors, however, was the money that imperialism lavished at them.

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[107] The Sumerian god of food and vegetation.

[108] Egyptian god of resurrection.

It is indeed lamentable that contemporary Arabic poetry has not reached the level of realism, as defined by the great English poet and critic Stephen Spender[109] in his lecture, "al-Wāqiʿiyya wa-l-Fann" ("Realism and Art"). The gist of his definition is that genuine realism is that which enables poets or artists to present an analysis of their societies containing as many facts as possible. Beyond this analysis, it does not matter which point of departure these arts have chosen. But the limit the Tammūzī poets have reached in modern Arabic poetry boded of a bright future for them and for the poets who would have followed their footsteps. However, it appears that the Tammūzī poets experienced disappointment which led them to forsake commitment in a manner that made it seem as though they all had agreed to do so--even though they did not, of course. In the latest works these poets have published, one could evidently remark an abandonment of commitment and spot a turn towards dealing with personal and individualistic issues which, if they did not exist in reality, were fabricated. Take a look, for example, at Yūsuf al-Khāl's just-released poetry book, *Qaṣāʾid fī al-Arbaʿīn* (Poems at Forty),[110] Salāḥ ʿAbd al-Ṣabbūr's most recent poems, Adūnīs's latest manuscript, and indeed my own poetry since I am indeed fed up with commitment and I do evade it nowadays.[111]

I will not be exaggerating if I say that genuine commitment will come to an end when the aforementioned poets abandon it altogether. As for who is responsible for this

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[109] (1909-1995), an English poet, novelist and essayist.

[110] (1917-1987), a Syrian poet and founding editor of *Shiʿr* journal.

[111] Salāḥ ʿAbd al-Ṣabbūr (1931-1981), an Egyptian free verse poet, whose 1956 collection of poems, al-Nās fī Baladī (The People In My Country) was among the first examples of free verse movement in Egyptian poetry.

situation--whether it was society, the state, or the literary institutions--we should leave it for future historians to judge, because they will have more to say about the affair.

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The flaw that blemishes Arabic literature could very well be the dominance of poetry over the other literary genres. For the poet still maintains the first-class status among Arab litterateurs, and every Arab writer (of stories, essays, or criticism) still wishes to become a poet. Consequently, the criteria used in evaluating poetry have long imposed themselves on assessing other genres of literature. What is the point of writing a story or a novel about the human feelings of love, hatred, and envy when Aḥmad Shawqī, Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm, and Maʿrūf al-Ruṣāfī are writing poems about Dinshawayy (Denshawai) and about the constitution? For this reason, realism in storytelling was the first trend that Arabic literature came to know from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century. During this period, it was imperative that Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal's *Zaynab* appear in order to portray the life of peasantry.[112] And Ṭāhā Ḥusayn had no choice but to publish *al-Ayyām* (*The Days*) and then the *Duʿāʾ al-Karawān* (*Curlew Call*) to document his childhood and the life of peasants in the Egyptian countryside.

[112] Published in 1913, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal's *Zaynab* is considered the first modern Egyptian novel.

Even the translation movement was influenced by the literary taste that was dominant at the time. For instance, Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm thought that he had a duty to translate, similar to that of writing poetry, when he translated Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* (al-Bukhalāʾ) despite his mere elementary knowledge of the French language. In addition, even Maḥmūd Taymūr,[113] one of the pioneers of short-story writing in Arabic literature and a faithful student of the French writer Guy de Maupassant, who reached the highest level of commitment and realism in his novel *Kiliyūbātrā* (Cleopatra), could not avoid the influence of the "romantic" trend--as understood by Arab writers--because, for the majority of Arab writers (and readers), romanticism meant no more than talking about love, beauty, and nature.

In his book, *al-Fikr al-ʿArābī al-Ḥadīth* (Modern Arab Thought), Rāʾīf Khūrī attributes this early realism to the new values, ideals, and logic that spread immediately after the French Revolution. He says that the Arab writers and thinkers found themselves faced with these new concepts and that they helped introduce them to their readers. People began talking about new ideals--things like the homeland, the nation, nationalism, *al-ʿummah*, pan-Arabism, liberty, equality, and citizenship--because of how the leaders of Arab thought, like Amīn al-Rayḥānī and Adīb Isḥāq, absorbed the principles of the French Revolution, finding in them the healing cure for the chronic Arab maladies. However, the realist trend was immediately defeated by the Romantic Movement, whose pioneering leader was Muṣṭafā Luṭfī al-Manfalūṭī.[114] Nonetheless, as far as storytelling is

[113] (1894- 1973), a prolific Egyptian writer of particularly short stories, but also novels, theatrical pieces, accounts of journeys, and articles.

[114] (1876–1924), an Egyptian writer and poet

concerned, the two trends, the realist and the romantic, coexisted without any significant contribution from either one of them, until Najīb Maḥfūẓ (Naguib Mahfouz) published *Khān al-Khalīlī*--a novel that heralded a new era of great realistic stories.[115]

During that time, neither the Arabic newspapers nor the Arab bookshops lacked realistic stories written according to the communist recipe--like Dhū al-Nūn Ayyūb's stories and novels--or translations of communist stories, like Maxim Gorky's novel *The Mother*, which was collaboratively translated by a few Iraqi communists in 1934. A communist writer coined the name *maqāṣ*, a combination of essay (*maqāl*) and story (*qiṣṣah*), to describe Dhū al-Nūn Ayyūb's writings. Although the standards of communist literature see in the story and the novel the highest forms of literary arts--because of the ease with which to spread the communist ideas through them--this preference of storytelling over poetry did not spread in the Arab societies. The main reason for this lack of popularity is that the working class, which represents the backbone of any communist movement, is still one of the most uneducated classes in the Arab society. Ninety-nine percent of the Arab peasants and workers are unlettered and cannot read a story or a novel that instills the communist ideas in them. In addition, it is exceedingly difficult for a communist cell leader to read Maxim Gorky's *al-ʾUmm* (*The Mother*) to fellow cell members. As for poetry, the task seems easier. The communist poet could recite a poem during party meetings, and the party organizer or the cell leader could read "a poem of the masses" for fellow communists in any party event.

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[115] Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006), an Egyptian writer who won the 1988 Nobel Prize for Literature—he is the only Arab writer to win this prize. He was a prolific writer: he published 34 novels, over 350 short stories, dozens of movie scripts, and five plays.

When many of the communist poets were subjected to the standards of communist criticism, the ghosts of Dostoevsky, James Joyce, and Faulkner remained domineering in the communist writings. We find this instance very clearly in the literary production of the Iraqi storyteller ʿAbd al-Malik al-Nūrī who, in most places, stresses the importance of the internal monologue and the revelations of the unconscious. Indeed, this technique might be the reason behind his disappointingly lukewarm reception among the other Arab communist writers.

With the rise of Communism in the Arab countries after World War II, a storm of “committed” or realist stories hit Arabic literature. Keeping in mind the communist method of writing novels and short stories, we may recognize what kind of novels and stories dominated the scene. The most successful publications among left-leaning novels and stories were Ṭāhā Ḥusayn’s book, *al-Muʿadhdhabūn fī al-Arḍ*, and Mārūn ʿAbbūd’s stories which he published in the Lebanese communist journal *al-Ṭarīq*. This is as far as the genre of fiction is concerned. As for essays, only few committed essays managed to rise to the level of literary writing. The essays by the communist writer ʿUmar Fākhūrī[116] are among the best of these essays. But we should not forget to honorably mention some of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn’s essays in which he addressed a number of political and social issues.

Unsurprisingly, the Arabs are strangers to committed drama that rises to the level of literature. Indeed, the communists have written many “committed” plays--according to their own understanding of commitment--but they have written them in the local *ʿāmmiyya* vernacular.

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[116] (1895–1946), a Marxist Lebanese author and critic.

So, this is the topic of commitment and non-commitment in Arabic literature. Poetry holds the leading spot, whereas drama trails behind at the bottom. Arabic literature has two types of commitment: the communist commitment--which, in fact, should be called *ilzām* (coercion) --and the party-affiliated pan-Arab commitment, which does not differ from the communist commitment, save in a few details. But there is also non-communist, non-partisan commitment which springs from within the consciousness of some writers. These writers have presented wonderful specimens of committed literature, but they were defeated in their own societies which are dominated by intense partisan fanaticism that borders insanity!

Discussions

Ignazio Silone[117]

The Italian novelist Silone spoke, in French, about how the concepts of literature have changed after World War II. He stopped at the concept of commitment, as designated by Sartre, and said that there were four misconceptions that needed to be addressed. First, one must not consider commitment as a set standard or an obligatory service which necessitates deriding non-committed writers. Commitment has acquired the strange connotation of recruiting writers, in the name of literature, to carry out propaganda campaigns for political ends. The second misconception is ascribing ideals and absolutes, like Right, Good, and Beauty, to a certain institution and mobilizing literature, poetry, and truth to serve a political party, the church, or the state. The third misconception is forcing the adoption of commitment in order to serve a political or a social end, because voluntary commitment implies individual independence in terms of opinions and ideas. And, lastly, commitment should stem from personal convictions; it should not be confused with authority and its institutions.

Silone summarized his position as such: committed writers belong to their community, not the state. Such writers should reject the imposition of any commitment by any authority, whether a Zhdanov[118] or a McCarthy.[119] Ultimately, the faithful writer

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[117] Ignazio Silone was the pseudonym of Secondino Tranquilli (1900-1978), an Italian author and politician. He edited *Tempo Presente*, a journal funded by the Congress of Cultural Freedom, a CIA front organization.

[118] Andrei Alexandrovich Zhdanov (1896-1948), a Soviet politician.

[119] Joseph Raymond "Joe" McCarthy (1908-1957) was an American politician who served as a U.S. Senator from the state of Wisconsin from 1947 until his death in 1957. In

who has a personal commitment to a cause is faithful to himself and puts himself at the service of fellow human beings.

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Stephen Spender

Spender said that the impressions about T.S. Eliot needed to be corrected. Contrary to what had been said before, the “Waste Land” was not a condemnation of European civilization as such; the poem was, in fact, decrying the decaying values of the Western civilization, which Eliot believed it was a Christian civilization. The “Waste Land” was more of a historical and moral position than a mere criticism of Europe. Otherwise, it would have been considered a committed poem in the Communist sense! It was a poem with no social message.

Spender commented on the lack of committed literature in England. The 1930s witnessed a type of non-committed literature in the writings of Auden and McKinnis—and indeed in his own writings—because of certain circumstances imposed by Hitler’s rise to power. Spender said that he had to adopt a stance to defend the values of civilization; he had to choose between the evil of communism and the evil of Hitler. Finally, Spender elaborated on the commitment of the contemporaneous English writers,

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the 1950s, he was infamous for his namesake McCarthyism—fueling fears of widespread Communist subversion.

affirming that those writers did not believe in commitment, but they, instead, concentrated on criticizing their society.

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Jamāl Aḥmad

If commitment means connecting people's thoughts to their everyday lives, it is, then, an issue that has remained unknown to Arab thought and has only recently been forced upon us. I should mention some historical evidence which al-Sayyāb did not have the time to cite. Arab thought, with all its different facets, did not depart from the daily Arab life. Poets, sorcerers, priests, and thinkers remained part and parcel of the pre-Islamic life: they reflected everyday life in their writings and sayings. Such intellectual life remained unchanged with the inception of Islam, save for the age of decadence. It seems that intellectual responsibility reached its zenith during the eighth and ninth centuries when Ibn Ḥanbal freely preferred the moderns to the ancient jurists.

Time moved on, and Julian Benda wrote his famous study, *The Treason of the Intellectual*, in which he asked the intellectuals to shy from politics and social life and to indulge in intellectual matters. The issue afterwards moved to Russia, and Maxim Gorky wrote an essay in 1920 about people and culture which might be considered the turning point in defining the role of the intellectual, whom Gorky called upon to serve the new era. It was during this time that Jean-Paul Sartre entered the arena of literature. After living through the French resistance, he started advocating for commitment. For us in the

East, he was the first advocate for commitment we came to know. His call was strong enough that it made us forget any previous calls for commitment. However, I think that the Arab intellectuals did not need Sartre to teach them commitment. Those who have read the Arabic literature of the 1930s would surely remember Ḥāfiẓ, Shawqī, and al-Zahāwī.[120] (I do not know why it has become impermissible to talk about al-Zahāwī, who surely deserve a prominent place in the Arabic literary canon, akin to that of al-Ruṣāfī, because, during his last days, he reached the honorable status of prophets!) In addition to the poets, readers would also remember many storytellers, chief among whom was Tawfīq Yūsuf ʿAwwād, the writer of *al-Raghīf* (Bread).[121]

Afterwards, Dr. Aḥmad referred to Eliot's importance and pointed out that English poetry has not dried yet. And he concluded that commitment is neither all good nor all bad. What is important, Aḥmad said, is intention. More importantly, however, we should continue writing abundantly, he stressed.

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Muḥammad Mazālī

Commitment is one of the questions of literature that we need to address regardless of the circumstances, historical and otherwise, that surround it. That said, we

[120] (1863–1936), a prominent Iraqi poet and philosopher.

[121] Tawfīq Yūsuf ʿAwwād (1911 – 1989) was a Lebanese writer and diplomat. His 1939 novella *al-Raghīf* (Bread) was inspired by Arab resistance to the Turks during World War I.

need to distinguish between the writer as a citizen and the writer as a litterateur (*adīb*). The former is brought up in a certain community in accordance with a social contract which specifies to him the rights he should entertain and the responsibilities he should bear. As an element in making history, he may take political, economic, or social positions, like any other free citizen, inside or outside his country. On the other hand, he may object to the instances that the great novelist Silone has discussed above. But if the writer is honest, he may—indeed, he has to—object to all facets of evil, all aspects of human oppression, and all examples of human aggression happening anywhere in the world. He must not only show feelings in his poetry; he also needs to struggle for new ideals and for a better society. He should also struggle to end colonialism and exploitation.

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Bint al-Shāṭiʾ[122]

Mr. Badr al-Sayyāb has dealt with commitment as a political issue and, therefore, he should have treated it as a study of the freedom of the writer. As for commitment as an aesthetic question, I know that every real writer, as my colleague Mazālī has just said, is committed because commitment is imposed on him as both a human being and a litterateur. He is a social being by nature, and his sociability is the measurement of his

[122] Pen name of ʿĀʾisha Abd al-Raḥmān (1913-1998), who was an Egyptian author and professor of literature.

humanity. In addition, he is not a normal human being; one the contrary, he, as a writer, represents the conscience of his society—hence the unavoidability of commitment. As for whether writers have the freedom to say what they want or they are being subjected to non-literary impositions, this is a topic of the freedom of literature.

I also want to stop at Badr's distinction between subjectivity and objectivity (or what others might call collectivism (*al-jamāʿiyya*) I would like to add that the subjectivity of genuine literature, even at its most personal level, does not negate the objectivity of its social contribution. For example, when a genuine writer deals with a personal topic, like mourning his son or standing at the ruins,[123] we still empathize with the writer because he represents a general human condition. The poet exercises his subjectivity as a member of a group and a representative of it because he kindles the group's sensibility and sharpens its sentiment. Therefore, his subjectivity does not negate his collectivism. By this I mean that he represents his society at the zenith of his passion, the purity of his conscience, and the faithfulness of his sensibility. Subjectivity never negates humanism. The primary issue, however, is that the writer has to be a genuine litterateur (*adīb*).

Afterwards, Bint al-Shāṭiʾ objected to comparing early Muslim Arabic poetry to post-Bolshevik Russian literature. She proved that the Arabic poetry of the period was consistent with the people's feelings and that the poet was waging a grand war using his poetry, because the poet was a prime source of excitement (*al-infiʿāl*)

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[123] Reference to the Pre-Islamic poetic theme of "standing at the ruins."

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Muḥammad Ṣabbāgh

I want to address the inferiority complex which Arabs feel as they confront the Western intellectual ideas. Everything the West comes up with is glorified, whereas anything the East puts forth is inferior. And this is a painful phenomenon that has dominated the discussion so far. Arabic literature will not go on the right course if its writers and thinkers continue experiencing this inferior feeling which has stripped them of their character, morale, and fundamentals. This phenomenon would render Arabic literature unworthy of respect because it does not seem to respect itself—and he who does not show respect for himself will not be respected by others. The various intellectual trends we have heard about in these exchanges on commitment and other related concepts are trends that the Westerners had come up with, but we have adopted them only after the West had studied, analyzed, and ultimately abandoned them.

Do the Arabs have contemporary intellectual schools or trends, different from the West's, which the Arabs may study and analyze in order to ignite discussions around them?

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Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā[124]

I want to comment on what the poet Stephen Spender has said regarding the young English writers who became famous in the 1950s. It seems that the young writers Spender refers to likely have class feelings, i.e. the majority of them are from the working class, and they criticize the ruling upper class that runs the country. But they have the freedom to criticize their society, and they criticize any aspect of the English society in an attempt to muster attention to what can be improved. They do this without either the kind of political commitment al-Sayyāb discusses in his lecture or the type of commitment we understood from Jean-Paul Sartre and others. The issue, then, is not a matter of commitment or non-commitment; it is, in my opinion, a question of having the freedom to criticize. By this I mean that the writer is the very person who gives the freedom to exercise criticism: he criticizes society, condemns civilization, gets angry with it, cries over it, gets along with it, and becomes elated with it. What matters eventually is that he gives this form of freedom to thinking, saying, and criticizing. I always keep to heart Matthew Arnold's view that poetry and literature are the criticism of life.

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Yūsuf al-Khāl[125]

[124] (1919–1994), a Palestinian author born in Bethlehem at the time of the British Mandate. Educated in Jerusalem and, later, at Cambridge University, he settled in Iraq following the events of 1948. Poet, novelist, painter, translator and literary critic. He produced around 70 books consisting of novels and translated material.

There are two theories about literature and art: one is the art-for-art's-sake view; the other is the theory that says art is a means to expressing ideas, feelings, and emotions. The art-for-art's-sake call is futile, because real art involves taking a personal stance that is both crucial and decisive. But if we accept that art is a means, it is important that the writer or the artist have the freedom to employ this means to express his thoughts and feelings under no duress—or commitment—from inherited traditions which dominate society or from the ruling regime. The Arab world is experiencing a challenging time searching for itself which would enable it to rise up to a better life during my lifetime. And, in order for this strenuous search to become fruitful, it has to be a free one by which the Arab mind exercises its full freedom in assessing, criticizing, accepting, and dismissing any idea without subjugation to any political or societal pressure.

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Muḥammad Barrādā (Mohammed Berrada)[126]

I want to pose this question to Mr. Badr al-Sayyāb: Do you think that the Arab writers you labeled as Communists have had any influence on our contemporary literary movement? What I know is that the names you mentioned had no significant effect on the contemporary literary movement, whereas you have tried to portray them as a frightening

[125] (1917-1987), a Lebanese poet of Syrian descent. He founded the *Shiʿr* journal in Beirut in 1957.

[126] (b. 1938) is a Moroccan novelist, literary critic and translator writing in Arabic. He is considered one of Morocco's most important modern authors.

bogeyman in as far as Jean-Paul Sartre's commitment is concerned. I think the question of commitment needs further research because the contemporary critical movement has not given it the fair share of research, which might have emanated from the fact that the series of articles Sartre penned for *Les Temps modernes* about literature was translated into Arabic only recently.

Sartre does not link commitment to any particular party or political institution; on the contrary, he sees the writer as always taking an oppositional stance to governments and political institutions—a type of freedom which Sartre said was necessary for the writer to have. However, Sartre also links commitment to the class question, for any writer, a bourgeoisie or aristocrat, has the right to choose the social class to which he attaches his destiny so that he may defend a viewpoint he deems effective in advancing civilization. Thence my question to Mr. al-Sayyāb. He talked extensively about his view of commitment, but he did not clarify his view of the writer's stance about the society in which he lives. We all know that the Arab society is a backward society which suffers from a number of complex problems and that the role of the writer, the thinker, and the poet has to be more effective than that of normal people. So, I ask, what is your opinion about the free and conscious commitment, i.e. one that is [not][127] linked to a certain political institution, which the Arab writer might take in order to push forward his society and offer prosperous progress to the miserable Arab masses?

[127] I think "not" is omitted in the Arabic text by mistake. So, the sentence should read "… free and conscious commitment, i.e. one that is *not* linked to a certain political institution, …"

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Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb[128]

I am happy that the majority of the discussants agree with my point of view. No one has set to defend commitment, and no one has attempted to defend complete disavowal of responsibility. I am delighted by the contribution of two great writers, the Italian novelist Ignazio Silone and the English poet Stephen Spender, whose experiences have been slightly similar to mine. But I have to respond to some of the objections, one of which is Mr. Muḥammad Barrādā's question about whether the Communist writers I have mentioned enjoy any considerable influence or I am simply portraying them as bogeymen. If I had come from any other Arab country than Iraq, my report would have been different from the one I have just presented. But I have come from Iraq. The writers I mentioned are the ones controlling the intellectual life in Iraq. And they have the upper hand. I am, therefore, justified in concentrating on Dhū al-Nūn Ayyūb, Muḥammad Mahdī al-Jawāhirī,[129] and Sāliḥ Baḥr al-ʿUlūm[130] because of their definitive importance which has voided any other importance.

The other objection Mr. Barrādā has raised is that I did not clarify my position on the writer's view of his society, asking what the role is of the free and responsibly

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[128] (1926 – 1964), an Iraqi and Arab poet. He is one of the founders of Arab free verse movement.

[129] (1899-1997), an Iraqi neoclassical poet. He is known as *shāʿir al-ʿArab al-akbar* (the greatest Arab poet [of the twentieth century]).

[130] The Arabic original mistakenly writes his name as "Sāliḥ Baḥr al-Ghuyūm."

committed writer who is not affiliated with a certain political party in pushing forward the wheels of his society's development. I am neither for nor against this type of commitment. Let us give writers the freedom to write about anything they want. I commend any committed writer whose commitment is correct, i.e. unheeding to a particular political institution, and whose literary production is good. In fact, I applaud him more than I do any self-centered writer. But I object to the practice of some writers who call the literature of any other writer whose viewpoint is different than theirs non-committed work.

5- Al-Mukhtār, Mukhallad. "Ḥadīth fī al-Fann wa-l-Iltizām al-Thawrī." *Al-Ṭalīʿah al-Adabiyya* 6.1 (1980). Baʿthist artist Mukhallad al-Mukhtār discusses his views of "revolutionary committed artists" in this interview.

Mukhallad al-Mukhtār on Art and Revolutionary Commitment

Interviewed by ʿAbd al-Salām Nāfiʿ

Mukhallad al-Mukhtār is one of the foremost young Iraqi artists. We've known him as an artist who seeks a revolutionary pattern everywhere he goes so that he could represent it in his works with the ultimate goal of highlighting, on the one hand, the sufferings of the oppressed man and, on the other hand, the ambitions of the free man who, at the road to revolution, seeks a better future. Al-Mukhtār shows a principled commitment to the causes of man everywhere in the world. It seems that "man" has become the building block of his art. Al-Mukhtār's pan-Arabism has helped him create new works of art worthy of contemplation and discussion, since they represent a historical record of the struggles of the Arab man. Al-Mukhtār's commendable attention to man emphasizes the role of man as the most important material to building civilization and carrying out the revolution—he is both its means and its ultimate end. In this interview, we will try to uncover other aspects of al-Mukhtār's work and discuss aspects of his artistic, pan-Arab, and humanist commitment.

Al-Ṭalīʿah al-Adabiyya: Arab artists shoulder a historic role at the present time because of the multitude of persistent challenges that aim to damage Arab culture and harm the arenas of true personal expression, like the arts and literature, where the role of man as an effective force in building society and civilization is most prominent. What are

the committed artist's major tasks at the present time? And what are the forms with which he faces these challenges?

Al-Mukhtār: Two things determine the tasks of the committed Arab artist in our time: the experience to sort out different topics and the ability to make proper selections. In addition, the committed Arab artist should have a vital interaction and decisive connection with the masses. Such conditions give him the chance to gain access to authentic raw materials for his work. I reject the idea that artists should use their mental capabilities to think higher than the level of normal people, unless the goal behind exercising such metal capabilities is to persuade other people, reveal facts, or highlight tasks and roles.

There is an important point I would like to mention regarding the artist's commitment. If the commitment of the artist grows out of research, comparisons, and daily practice, it will set the artist's responsibilities and will aid him to see the world in a clear manner. It will prompt him to follow how events unfold in the world around him and to take advantage of every work of art out there. It will also help him develop a sense of reading his surroundings and distinguish the permanent influences from the contingent impacts in his work.

The causes of the masses are the artist's raw material. He studies and analyzes these causes and, afterwards, arranges them in a creative way which gives them aesthetic uniqueness within his work. When the artist carries out this task, a form of concordance will result between the masses and the work of art, because the work is the prime form of expression of the spirit of the masses. In fact, the work of art encompasses multiple feelings that are gathered and presented in just one, which is the true and committed

feeling of the artist. This is the point of departure for us, the artists, on our journey to achieve full commitment (*al-iltizām al-kāmil*). We strive to reach the latter since we always seek to document and augment the connections with the masses, because we share their hopes, pains, and joys.

Certainly, working among the masses takes any one of different forms, because the artist is in constant interaction with the masses. He is in a state of permanent positive encounter with the people. The artist's attempt to historicize the causes and struggles of the people is a vital form of history recording. The artist documents the different phases and changes of present history in his art. For example, during the early stages of civilization in Mesopotamia and the Nile valley, the artists had managed to convey the beliefs and practices of the people, from glorifying the gods to the smallest issues that mattered to them. Ancient artists managed to reflect the nature of wars and the might of their great leaders. Indeed, these practices were detailed in many of the Assyrian sculptures. The artist was committed to his society and to the masses at large. This is certainly an example of originality in creation. In addition, had it not been for such artists, we would have remained unaware of many of the major aspects of ancient civilizations. The ancients saw art as a special style of documenting history.

Al-Ṭalīʿah al-Adabiyya: You are taking ambitious and confident steps to establishing a new school of arts, based on the socialist and pan-Arab thought. The new school has decisive connections to Arab heritage and, at the same time, entertains a wide civilizational outlook. Your new and serious experiment certainly faces a number of obstacles which are the result of both the heritage of former regimes and the emergence

of newer parameters that attempt to slow you down. Would you mind talking to us about those obstacles?

Al-Mukhtār: Resisting the colonialist intellectual attacks, which have succeeded sometimes in infiltrating our Arab homeland, necessitates a well-prepared plan that is capable of failing such attacks. Colonialism and hostile states promote specific schools and styles that encourage isolating the combative artist from his society in order to fail his attempts to portray his goals, which are the goals of the masses who suffer from depravation and oppression. The danger that threatens the Arab artist in particular is attempting to resist colonialism alone or, even worse, joining the schools that are promoted by colonialism unconsciously or by accepting the false claims these schools make. Resistance here means our originality and deep-rootedness in addition to the strong belief in the right of our people, and other peoples, to live free of oppression.

The Arab artist's historic task lies in resisting these intrusive schools and maintaining his commitment towards the heritage of his nation, in addition to comprehending this heritage in order to contribute to effecting radical changes in our society. The strength of our resistance depends on our unity and our success in discarding the poisonous intellectual noises that attempt to spoil our principles and originality. Our faith in ourselves and in the bright future of the Arab nation assures us that the result of all the colonialist attacks will be failure.

Al-Ṭalīʿah al-Adabiyya: What are the dimensions of the process of the interaction between the masses and the revolutionary art which has man as its foremost goal? And how can we establish a solid basis for a popular revolutionary art?

Al-Mukhtār: Human concepts find their best expression in the art of committed artists. Non-committed artists are incapable of expressing human concepts because these concepts require direct interaction with the masses in order to explore popular causes. Only committed writers are capable of such exploration. Our generation along with the upcoming generation have to witness the real and complete coming of age of revolutionary art that serves man everywhere. Art that serves man requires an artist who does not use art to escape life; on the contrary, it requires an artist whose works portray a creative act of union between art and life. The artist is a human being first and, so, it is not unfamiliar that he will use his art to defend humanity. The dilemma of revolutionary art today is finding a way to maintain the purity of humanity.

As to your question about establishing a solid basis for a revolutionary popular art, I want to say that art alone cannot establish such a basis. An endeavor like this one is shaped by the culture of the masses and their awareness of the dominant political and social issues. Art is only one factor. What you would need is an active and momentous popular participation and engagement.

Al-Ṭalīʿah al-Adabiyya: Your most recent works represent an important historical record of critical stages that the Arab nation has undergone. These stages witnessed heightened sense of pan-Arab consciousness and popular struggle. In light of these new works, what do you write in your personal agenda?

Al-Mukhtār: I have been like this from the beginning. I have not experienced radical change from one state into another. However, I have developed certain aspects of my style. The works of art that I have been producing merely reflect the circumstances that our Arab masses have endured during its long path of struggle and resistance. The

dangerous stages in the life of our Arab nation that you are talking about give me additional motivation for my humble contributions.

Keep in mind that the Fascist and Zionist powers are lying in wait for us in every corner of this world. I have participated in a number of international galleries outside Iraq, especially in Italy, and I was keen on having my paintings show the different facets of the struggle of the Arab people. However, the above-mentioned powers began monitoring and harassing me. The situation escalated and I was deprived of living in Italy, where I was studying at the time. They thought that they succeeded in destroying my future, but to their surprise my future is now glowing because I linked it to the future of my nation. I will continue to struggle for the sake of the nation's future, until I see all doors open to it.

Al-Ṭalīʿah al-Adabiyya: What is the role of the artists in carrying out the slogan, "Heritage and Contemporaneity"?

Al-Mukhtār: In order for the artist to carry out this slogan, he needs to exert considerable efforts and spend more time, because he needs a deeper realization of all the facets of the Arab heritage. He needs to comprehend the philosophy of the Arab heritage, because without an understanding and appreciation of the philosophy of the Arab heritage, the artist cannot achieve organic unity with the heritage in a developed, contemporary spirit. If the committed artist wants to ascend to the responsibility of implementing this slogan, he has to a Baʿthist, in the deepest sense of the word, and realizes the relationship between the past of the nation and its present. In addition, he has to commit to adhere to systematic methodologies in seeking a better future. Comrade Founding Leader [Michel Aflaq] emphasizes that,

The Arab nation cannot map out a future worthy of its grandeur if it does not look back to its heritage in order to discover in it, through struggle and revolution, what is new and eternal in such heritage. Indeed, our heritage is not something of the past that belongs to history books and museums; our heritage is the record of the genius of the Arab nation.

CONCLUSION

Although commitment dominated the Arabic literary discourse during much of the 1950s and 1960s, it remained a general and up-for-grabs concept. Different groups (even warring factions in the case of Iraq) appropriated the term and used it to fit its agendas. For example, *al-iltizām* meant Pan-Arab commitment in Lebanon, pro-Baʿth stances in Iraq. *Al-iltizām*'s eventful journey in the Arab world, however, was short lived. Three reasons, I think, led to the demise of the concept. First, *al-iltizām* remained a generic and undefined concept throughout its years of dominance. It did not have a specific meaning, despite its effective use by different factions that tried to appropriate it and assume an exclusive use of the term. In other words, the usefulness of *al-iltizām* lies in its uselessness. It was a general term that was liberally appropriated by different political factions, and it remained as such. For example, both the Baʿth Party and the Iraqi Communist Party could claim use of the term because it was already undefined. Secondly, the same ambiguity which allowed *al-iltizām*'s popularity led eventually to the concept's demise. It remained as a such: a generic term to talk about the deployment of literature to serve a political end. And because it was generic and unspecified, it was readily susceptible to be replaced by other slogans, such as the older and more ubiquitous *adab al-muqāwama* (resistance literature),[131] *al-adab al-munāḍil* (combative literature), *adab al-maʿraka* (war literature), etc. Indeed, the deployment of *adab al-muqāwama* and *adab al-maʿraka* played a major role in the demise of *al-iltizām*. The terms gained especially powerful momentum after the Arab defeat in 1967. The final reason for the demise of commitment was Sartre's position on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Sartre's support

[131] The term often refers to Palestinian resistance literature

of the Algerians during their war of independence against the French occupation lent him praise throughout the Arab world. However, Sartre's support of Israel during the 1967 war diminished his appeal, and he was perceived as no different than the host of European intellectuals who eagerly declared support of Israel.[132]

Despite the term's unstable meaning, *al-iltizām* was indeed a central concept in the Arabic literary discourse during 1950s and 1960s. Its introduction by *al-Ādāb* led to debates about the relationship between literature and politics. The concept's centrality is ascertained, for example, by a quote with which I opened the dissertation by M.M. Badawi, the late editor of the *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*. Badawi believed that by the end of the 1960s commitment had already become "an essential part of the vocabulary of any Arabic literary critic for many years," and that the relevance of Arab writers to the canon at the time was gauged by both the type and the degree of commitment they exhibited in their writings (207). However, as my dissertation shows, *al-iltizām* certainly did not have a single or stable meaning that the major histories of modern Arabic literature suggest. If we agree with Badawi's judgment that commitment was, in fact, a key criterion for assessing literary works, we then have to re-investigate this "canon" as well as the very canonicity of said writers and traditions. Recognizing the multiplicity of the meanings of the term in the Arab world should prompt us to closely re-investigate the use as well as impact of Sartre's *engagement*. Such investigation should

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[132] The question of Palestine continues to be an uncomfortable topic for Leftist intellectuals in Europe. See Joseph Massad's article in *al-Ahram* which proposes that "the intellectual and political commitments inaugurated by a pro-Zionist Sartre ... remain emblematic of many of the attitudes of leftist and liberal European intellectuals today," and discusses how the way Sartre and many other European intellectuals on the left "continue to hold on to a pristine image of a Jewish State founded by holocaust survivors rather than by armed colonial settlers."

necessarily reassess the contentious relationship between aesthetics and politics during the second half of the twentieth century.

We should carry out this investigation in order to better understand and assess the contributions of those writers in light of such multiplicity of meanings. More critically, we should conduct such research in order to rectify the injustices which afflicted some people at the time—such as vernacular poets—who still remain under-recognized because of the widely misunderstood and, now we know, unstable concept of commitment that critics and historians alike inaccurately thought was a fixed critical notion.

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