

MICHAEL NAIMY AND THE SYRIAN AMERICANS IN
MODERN ARABIC LITERATURE

BY MARTIN SPRENGLING

MODERN Arabic literature, written and read by many cultured men and women today—no mean part of it in these United States—is a factor in modern culture unknown to most non-Arabic Americans. It has been alluded to both by Professor Olmstead and Mr. Mokarzel in the preceding number of the *Open Court*. Its beauty and importance is great enough to have attracted serious attention by great scholars, notably the Russian Krachkovskij, the German Kämpffmeyer, the Englishman H. A. R. Gibb, the Italian Nallino. All four of these and others have published extensive essays on it and some translations. At the University of Chicago the writer and some of his students have been engaged in the study of Arabic literature for something more than ten years. To introduce this significant literary movement to American readers, it will be best to let a representative of Modern Arabic Letters talk to us and lay his own and his fellow-authors' case before us.

The choice of such a representative is not easy, not because there is too little, but because there is so much material to choose from. A native Syrian or Palestinian, living and working in his home-land, might have been selected; but what the writer has available of such as these has already been promised to the *American Journal of Semitic Languages* of the University of Chicago, where it will presently appear in print. In casting about among the Syrian Americans it seemed unnecessary to present to our readers such men as Gabran Kh. Gabran and Ameen Rihany; some of their work in English has been published in America, and, indeed, my friend Rihany will himself appear as a contributor in a later number of this journal. Yet it seemed most apt and most interesting to American readers, that an American writer of and on Arabic literature should present to them its worth and work. And so, guided by the great Russian Arabist, Krachkovskij, the writer decided to introduce herewith a less well-known, but by no means less able and significant member of the American Arabic Authors' Club, whose headquarters are in New York City.

Michael Naimy so writes his own name in English, and we, of



MICHAEL NAIMY

course, follow him in this usage. An Arabic writer, reporting on his work in an article written in English for the German periodical *Die Welt des Islams* in 1930, writes Na'imah. The classical Arabic form, as Naimy himself writes the vowels, would be rendered by Nu'aimah. The popular pronunciation of this form in present-day Syria would be something like Nu'aimy. The more reason all this for letting our young author choose his own English spelling and the pronunciation it suggests.

For fifteen years now, and, indeed, somewhat more, Naimy has occupied a recognized place as a writer and critic in the new world of Modern Arabic Letters. He is well known and widely read in Syria and Egypt as well as among educated Arabs in the Americas. Almost from the very beginning of his career, he attracted the attention of Krachkovskij as representing a somewhat later and rarer strain than the general run of Arabic writers who are at work on the creation of a new and different Arabic literature. The modernism of most truly modern Arab authors for a century past and, indeed, to the present day is signalized on the one hand by the distinctively French, on the other by just as clear an English, chiefly American-English color in its thought, its forms, and its style. Naimy as we shall see, is not wholly uninfluenced by America himself. Yet to the Russian Krachkovskij he gave unmistakable evidence in his work, that through him a clear stream of influence of the great modern literature of Russia was being led into the crucible in which the new prose and poetry of the Arabs is taking shape.

A man out of the common, therefore, and yet not so uncommon among modern Arabic writers as to be unrepresentative, is Michael Naimy, who now shall speak to us first of all in his own English as he spoke to Krachkovskij in a letter which he wrote to the master in Leningrad on May 27th, 1931, and which was published with an introduction and notes in German by Krachkovskij in *Die Welt des Islams* for January, 1932.

Since you give me option, [says Naimy] of writing you in Russian, Arabic, or English, I am choosing the latter because I happen to own an English typewriter—and a typewritten letter is much easier to read than one written in longhand. . . .

I believe that you are one of the first European scholars to give attention to modern Arabic letters which can no longer be brushed aside, or ignored as unworthy of real consideration.

An awakening has finally come to the Arabic-speaking world. Its most potent evidence is to be seen in the honest efforts of present-day writers and poets to charge their words with something of their souls and the soul of life all about them. But a decade or two ago this honesty was all but non-existent. Everything was sacrificed to form; and form, in order to be acceptable, had to follow very closely all the lines set by the ancients, even pre-Islamic times. The consequence was a terrible spiritual and artistic stagnation. Literature—if such it could be called—was entirely divorced from life. It was a trinket, an ornament, a pastime, a series of stunts and acrobatic games, with words for tools and instruments. It was this literary stagnation throughout the Arabic-speaking world that stared me in the face when I left Russia. It was oppressive and offensive in the extreme to one fed on the delicate art of Pushkin, Lermontov, and Turgueniev; on the tearful laughter of Gogol; on the sweeping realism of Tolstoy; on the literary ideals of Bielinsky, and, finally, on the profound humanity of the mightiest, deepest, broadest, and most penetrating of all the Russian writers—Dostoyevsky. Perhaps you can easily understand why my first literary efforts in Arabic were mainly critical. There was hardly any literature worthy of criticism at the time I began to write—about 1913. That literature had yet to be born. The soil for it had to be prepared. But there was much pseudo-literature which had first to be smothered; there were many weeds that had first to be destroyed before the seed of the new literature could take root. That is why my first efforts were to tear down and to remove debris. Happily it was not a vain effort. Others have followed in the same track, and we are now witnessing the birth of a *new* Arabic literature, which is destined before many decades to take a respectable place among the literatures of the world. Today it is very strongly influenced by the West. But some day it shall influence the West. I have faith in the genius of the Arabic language. And I have faith in the basic qualities of the peoples for whom it is a mother tongue. . . .

You want my biography, I can give you only a hasty sketch, a mere skeleton of dates and events. As to the “flesh” that makes the skeleton alive and the human values that give meaning to dates and events, I fear that it would require more than a letter.

I was born November 22, 1889, in the town of Beskin-

ta, Mt. Lebanon. My parents are simple, hard-working, God-fearing mountaineers of the Greek Orthodox faith. I am the third of a family of five brothers and one sister. About the year 1895 a Russian school was opened at Beskinta by the Imperial Russian Palestine Society. My two older brothers and I attended it. In 1899 my elder brother emigrated to the United States and settled in the Far West, in the State of Washington. In 1902, I was chosen from my school to go to the Teacher's Institute in Nazareth, also conducted by the Russian Palestine Society. At the end of my fourth year there, 1906, I was selected to go to the Seminary of Poltava. My purpose never was to become a clergyman, but to go back to Nazareth and teach, or, if possible, to finish the Seminary and later enter a university and study some profession. My favorite subject, even in Nazareth, was literature. Even in those tender years I wrote some poetry. In the Seminary I soon plunged into Russian literature. It was like discovering a new world full of wonders. I read voraciously. There was hardly a Russian writer, poet, or philosopher that I did not read. My inner revolt against the Church and its dry dogmas made me seek and find comfort in Tolstoy's later writings. In less than a year I had mastered Russian to an extent that I was able to write in it poetry which was pronounced, at least by some of my professors, as having much merit. At the beginning of my fourth year in the Seminary, the fall of 1909, there was a students' *zabastovka*. I was made by the students to deliver an oration which put me in the "suspected" class by the school authorities. All the members of my class were suspended for a year, myself included. Early in the spring of 1911, I petitioned the faculty to allow me to pass a special examination for the first four classes. The petition was granted, and I passed my examination successfully and was given a diploma for the first four classes. In March, 1911, I left for Lebanon, where I spent the summer preparing to go to the Sorbonne. Towards the end of the summer my elder brother, who had been away in America for eleven years, came back for a visit. He prevailed upon me to come with him to America. In December, 1911, I found myself at a small town by the name of Walla Walla, in the State of Washington. I immediately applied myself to the study of English, which, in October, 1912, I had mastered enough to be able to enter the University of Washington; in June, 1916, I was graduated from the Liberal

Arts and the Law with the degrees of A.B. and LL. B. I did not follow the law profession, for I conceived a strong dislike for it as contrary to my ideals of truth and justice. In October, 1916, I came to New York to assist in editing an Arabic magazine, called *al-Funūn* and published by Nasseeb Arida, a Nazareth school-mate. The magazine was doing remarkable work in infusing new life into Arabic literature and blazing a new path, but it was not sufficient to support two. So I left it and entered the employ of the one of the Russian commissions purchasing at that time ammunition for the Russian army. There I remained until February, 1918. In May of that year, although a great hater of wars and all manifestations of organized brutality, I entered the American army, feeling that the whole world was aflame and that my life, along with millions of others, might help to stop the conflagration. In June I was sent to France. There I was on the firing lines in the Meuse-Argonne drive from November 1 until November 8. In March, 1919, while still with the Army in France, I was chosen to go to the French University of Rennes in Brittany. The American government, as a gesture of goodwill towards the French, selected about four thousand students out of an army of two million and distributed those students among various French universities, to study, until the end of the scholastic year. In July, 1919, I was back in the States. By that time *al-Funūn*, to which I had regularly and liberally contributed, had suspended publication. The only other available medium of publication was a semi-weekly paper published by another of my Nazareth school-mates, Abd-ul-Massih Haddad. In 1920 *Arrabitat-ul-Kalamiyah* (*The Author's Club*) was organized with Gibran for president and myself for secretary. All its members, only three of whom were really contributing something new to Arabic literature, rallied around Haddad's publication called *As-Sayeh*. We made it a sort of official organ for Arrabitah which never was an organization in the strict sense of the word, but a small band of like-minded men, unafraid of saying what they have to say and, what is more, having something to say. The "spirit" of Arrabitah has become widely diffused through the Arabic countries. My earliest published book is the play *Al-Abāi w-al-Banūn* (*Fathers and Sons*), published in 1918; and *Al-Ghurbal* (*The Sieve*), published in Egypt in 1923. My poems, which have been printed and reprinted in many Arabic papers and periodicals have not yet been published in book form, nor have several of my articles and stories. Of late I have been writing mostly in English, principally poetry. Several of my poems have appeared in the *New York Times*. But I have not written enough to publish a book, since I do not depend on

my writing for a living, but am compelled to devote most of my time to commercial effort in the employ of others. Besides, my literary taste has changed considerably. Only writings that have a cosmic flavor about them, that seek the deeper verities of life, the ultimate and the absolute, hold my attention now. The older I grow, the less interested I become in all forms and appearances which change from day to day and from age to age.

Thus, neatly and succinctly, Naimy describes for us together with his own life the American section of the Syrian contribution to the rise of modern Arabic Letters. He overshoots the mark a bit, as when he seems to say that no Arabic literature worth criticizing existed before this venture, but that is natural in a youthful author. The fine, unselfish earnestness, so characteristic of the movement as a whole, more than makes up for so slight a defect.

And if Naimy's English here and there halts a bit, or rather shows a trace of foreign flavor, not so his Arabic. In fact this flows so simply and so smoothly into fluent, idiomatic American-English, that it seems to the writer and translator of these lines, pure, clean-cut, modern Arabic expressing thought-patterns, in which is interwoven a clear American strain.

We choose here the fine prose foreword with which Naimy, introduced his play *Fathers and Sons*. It is a sincere and earnest statement, whose straightforward, vivid style will not, we hope, lose in translation too much of its quite extraordinary excellence. At the same time it will introduce to Americans some of the great problems which these courageous creators and innovators are facing, and something of the force and manner with which they are trying to overcome these difficulties.

The Arabic text from which we translate was edited by another of Naimy's friends from Nazareth, Madame Kulthūm Nasr Ōde-Vasilieva in a book of *Selections from Modern Arabic Literature*, published in Leningrad in 1928.

THE ARABIC DRAMA

Some (Arabs) rage against the West because of their belief that Western civilization has envenomed with the spirit of libertinism, profligacy, and unbelief our beautiful and pure life, which was luxuriating in security under the wings of angels and saints. Others sing the greatness of the West and call aloud to us, Come, let us serve the West and all that the West has created!

As for us, we think it best to remain neutral between these two parties, leaving to them the privilege of straightening out their controversy with poniards and pickaxes if they please, on condition that they do not interfere with us, if we venture to admit, though it be but one superior excellence of the West—that is the superiority of their literature over ours.

What some have become accustomed to call a “literary revival” among us is nothing but a perfumed breeze which has blown upon some of our poets and writers from the fruit-gardens of Western literature. It has pervaded their fancies and the temper of their minds as new health pervades the members of an invalid on the road to recovery after a long siege of sickness. The disease which had fastened itself upon our tongue for many successive generations was a species of dry-rot, which stopped in it the movement of life, and made of it, after the passing of its ancient glory, a corpse, upon which fed the pens of enslaved epigones of a great race and the talents of versifiers and blind worshippers of the past. Today we have returned to the West which was but yesterday our pupil, to learn from it a pattern, which we have made the cornerstone of our “literary revival.” That pattern is this: That life and letters are twins which cannot be separated from each other; that literature rests on life, and life on literature; that it—I mean literature—is as broad as life and as deep as its secrets; that this is reflected in that and that in this. We have learned, thanks to the West, that it is possible to compose poetry outside of the classic forms of erotic lyric and lovelorn introduction, eulogy and satire, description and elegy, tribal boast and heroic praise. For this reason we find delight in the lilt of some of our modern poets who have dared to step beyond the sacred limits. There has also been transferred to us—thanks to the West, likewise—the story, what is called in English the novel, in French *roman*. We were among the first of the outside peoples to appreciate this type, and we found in it a broad field for the portrayal of life and for the making of our impress on minds and hearts by means of the pen. We learned that prose was not restricted to serried ranks of rhymed phrases, the heaping up of obsolete words found buried in the bellies of dictionaries, and the ornamental use of hackneyed sayings on trite subjects. There arose among us some who tried to depict our daily life in home-land stories.

This was a step in advance.

Yet our "literary revival" is still in its swaddling clothes. The language it speaks to this day is nought but the lisping of babes, still tongue-tied, limited in emotional equipment, weak of sinew. Nor would it be right for us to blame it for this weakness. But we will not conceal the fact that our hope in its future is not strong, when we consider that it has neglected altogether a great section of literature, if the West be consulted for its choice between it and all other branches of literature,—we mean the drama.

The drama has been part and parcel of Western literature since its rise and has been established as one of its pillars. The Westerner has reared for it rendezvous of presentation (theaters), and these have become a part of his daily life like the school, the home, and the church. In the theater his mind, famished and weighed down with the weariness of toil and the worries of life, finds rest and comfort and recreation. From the mires of his wage-earning life, whose mornings and evenings, todays and yesterdays are all alike, his spirit rises to a world in which human emotions, beautiful and ugly, weak and strong, noble and mean, run riot. He sees with his eyes upon the stage human beings like himself plunging into the battlefield of being, uncovering before him the secrets of their hearts and the hidden affairs of their consciences; he finds in these secrets and in these hidden affairs something of the essence of that which he calls "I," and he finds help in some of them toward setting his own mind in order and adding to the store of his experiences. The author and the actor coöperate—the one by his thoughts and the other by his voice and action—to break through the ban of his essential solitude. They enter the corners of his heart and touch its every string and search about in the folds of his conscience and set in motion the machinery of his thoughts. In short, they rouse in him every force of his being, and he becomes aware that he exists and lives. Many a word falls upon his ear, which his mind forthwith embraces and with which his spirit is leavened. To many a movement on the part of the actor does his heart respond. Many a scene shakes his entire being, as the whirlwind shakes the trees from their very roots. It is, of course, impossible to produce this impression on the hearer and spectator, unless the drama presents living scenes of real life, and the actor is able to grasp the idea of the author and his purpose and to translate these ideas and to convey this purpose to the hearer by his voice and action. So the author depends upon the

actor and the actor upon the author; and it is a well-known fact, that the most excellent of dramas in the hands of a poor actor may lose all its strength and splendor, and, conversely, a skilled actor can sometimes cast about a most defective drama a cloak of beauty and power. Hence the West holds high the estate of actors and authors alike. It showers them with gifts and surrounds them with fame in life and makes fair their renown after death.

And what do we?

We still look upon the actor as an acrobat, upon the actress as a harlot, upon the theater as a house of ill repute, and upon acting as a species of jesting and horseplay. Our people have not yet learned to recognize the seriousness of the acting profession, because it has not yet seen dramas, which depict before it scenes from a life which it knows from A to Z. It has not yet seen itself upon the stage. The blame for this falls squarely upon our writers, not upon the people. The bulk of what up to now we have presented to the people is restricted to comparatively few plays translated into Arabic, most of them worthless rubbish, all of them strange to the people, far from their tastes, and remote from their understanding. I do not doubt at all, that sooner or later we shall see among us a native stage, upon which will be represented scenes from our popular life. To this end it is necessary before all things that our writers turn their attention to the life which recurs about them every day, to our own life with its weaknesses and defects, with its joys and its sorrows, with its beauties and its uglinesses, with its evil and its good, and find in this subject-matter for their pens; and it is rich in such subject-matter, if only they know how to search for it.

The revolution which has recently come upon the domain of our letters will presently bring us glad tidings of the arrival of a national theater, even though there be still many obstacles in its path. One of these obstacles, widely spread throughout our social order and deeply rooted in the minds of many, is the idea that the theater corrupts pure morals, especially of girls and women—mercy, goodness! Another is our poverty in dramatic writers and native dramas. But the greatest obstacle which I encountered in writing *Fathers and Sons* and which everyone who knocks at this gate will encounter, is the language of the common people and the place which should be assigned to it in compositions such as these. It is my opinion—and I believe that many will agree with me in this—

that the persons of the drama should speak the language in which they are accustomed to express their thoughts and feelings, and that the writer who tries to make a simple farmer speak the language of collected poems and learned works on linguistry does injustice to the farmer, to himself, and to his reader and his hearer. Nay, he presents his characters in a comic aspect where comedy is not intended and commits a crime against a craft whose beauty lies in depicting man as we see him in the scenes of real life. And here is another matter which deserves careful consideration in connection with the language of the common people: this language hides under its uncouth exterior much in the way of popular philosophy, sayings and beliefs, in trying to transfer which into polished language you would be as one who translates poems and proverbs from a foreign tongue. In this matter we have frequently met opposition from men who carried dictionaries under their arms and were armed with all the books of grammar and syntax and maintained that "all the hunt is in the hollow of the wild ass"* and that there is no eloquence nor rhetoric nor elegance in the language of the common people which the writer could not equal in the polished language of literature. To such we counsel that they study the life of the people and their language assiduously and in detail.

Of all classes of literary composition it is the drama which cannot do without the speech of the people. The knotty problem, however, is, that if we should follow this rule, it would be necessary that we should write all our plays in the language of the people, since there is no one among us who speaks Pre-Islamic or Early Islamic Arabic. But this would mean the abolition of our classical language—a national disaster which we are far from desiring. Then what is the way out?

In vain did I search earnestly for a solution of this difficulty. It is too great to be solved by one single mind. The best method I arrived at, after much thought, was to let the educated persons of my play speak a fully developed language and the simple folk the language of the common people. But I freely confess that this method does not solve the fundamental problem. The question continues to demand earnest attention from our greatest masters of language and of the art of writing.

*The wild ass is difficult game. Hunting him comprises all other manner of hunt. A great matter makes unnecessary and of no account all minor matters.

Another difficulty, before which I hesitated, perplexed and questioning, was the fixing of the popular language in writing in such a way as to avoid ambiguity and uncertainty and to bring out the pronunciation intended. The matter of dialect, which differs greatly according to provinces and places, I left to the ingenuity and skill of the actor. But I shrank back in terror from laying down conventional rules for the fixing of popular speech for this one play alone. Yet we sorely need such conventions, if we would come near to the people and educate them by our pens. The people use sounds for which there are no symbols in the accepted alphabet, e.g., French *e* and *o*, and the pronunciation of *q* in most places as the glottal stop or catch. So we must add to the equipment of our language some conventionally accepted means to indicate these sounds. These conventions must, further, be generally accepted, so as not to occasion confusion and disorder where we desire agreement and unity. Who shall undertake this important task for us? If we only had a Society of Letters or something like an Academy, we would gladly shift this matter to its shoulders.

But even without an Academy, shall dreams come true, and will their zeal for Arabic language and letters lead some of our literati in Syria and Egypt to the creation of a permanent commission to attend to the raising of the level of the language, its preservation, and its modification according to the needs of time and circumstances? It will be best to say nothing further about the *dramatis personae* and the play itself except this, that I tried to analyze in it a limited section of a great, living topic in the life of all peoples in general and of our East in particular, namely the perpetual conflict between fathers and sons, the never-ending contrast between the old and the new. And if my part in this be no more than to induce some of our writers of more abundant ability than mine in the treatment of social subjects to undertake the writing of plays, I shall have attained my goal.

If we wish to raise our literature from the stagnant marshes in which it is mired, it is incumbent upon us that we strive from this very moment to lay a firm foundation for an Arabic stage by cultivating our dramatic tastes and cherishing the native tale, so that, when we truly rise, our rise shall be the rise of a hero waking from a long sleep, not the rise of a weakling, who opens only to stare death in the face.

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This is the noteworthy pronouncement with which Naimy pre-faced his first and thus far his only play, the first serious play to be written by a Syrian American, and one of the first Arabic plays written anywhere.

We are very loath to stop here. We would love to give our readers something of the highly significant defense of the critic and his place in literature and life, which Naimy presented in his book, *The Sieve*. We would love to have our readers share with us something of that admirably simple sincerity strangely coupled with haunting subtlety which Naimy exhibits in some of his beautiful shorter poems. We have no room for more here. Perhaps this tribute to his place and powers will induce this fine fellow-citizen of ours to lay before us in a not too distant future, something of his very own.