cates that there has been an intense desire all along to communi- with the West, to keep the bridges between the Arabs and ıtern nations intact. If all the arts of an epoch are inter-related, arts of all epochs are inter-related too. Change, in the final ana- ı, is an extension of creativity, a battle against impoverishment— only for one part of the world, but for the whole community nan. For the arts of all nations are equally inter-related. Thus b writers in their intellectual communion with the West have ght not only to take but also to give: theirs has been an endeavour ontribute to those very ideas that make up the spiritual and mental ıate of this century. Many of them, whether poets, novelists, or natists, have even written in the languages of the West. Without eiting their own legacy, they are here to participate in the pool ll legacies: the civilization of today. However chaotic, however of conflict this civilization may be, a fruitful conciliation must nade possible, some time, somehow. Man's creative work, pro- y and widely communicated, may well be the means of doing y with at least some of the chaos and the conflict.

Ghada al-Samman

Commitment in Contemporary Arabic Literature

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When the third conference of Arab writers was held in Cairo in December 1957 with representatives from virtually the entire Arab world, the theme that the participants had been invited to discuss was characteristically 'Literature and Arab Nationalism'. The distinguished Tunisian author Mahmud Mas'adi read a paper on the subject of "Arab Nationalism and the Need to Protect the Writer," which was printed later in the Lebanese periodical *al-Adab* (VI, 1, January 1958). After defining what he meant by Arab nationalism and by literature, Mas'adi said that it was absolutely essential to protect the freedom of the writer without which he would not be able to 'create' and therefore contribute to the cultural element in Arab nationalism, the only element which, as a writer, he is qualified to serve. A writer, he argued, may naturally or spontaneously produce a nationalist poem, a play, or a story. But he may by temperament be disinclined to deal in the political or apologetic aspect of Arab nationalism without, however, being a traitor to it or rejecting its values. He would be rendering a sufficient and honourable service if, in turning completely away from all problems related to Arab nationalism, he was still capable of enriching the minds of his readers, enlarging their vision of the world, sharpening their awareness of life and of their essential humanity. Mas'adi's conclusion was that this freedom of the writer must, therefore, be protected as one of the most sacred of human values. And, he pointed out, it is an absolute freedom which is capable of neither restriction nor limitation. It is not enough to free the writer from the bondage of political responsibility and the duty to make propaganda for certain economic, social and political systems. For fear of totalitarianism, no attempt should be made to confine him within a certain ideology, whether it is Marxist or any other equivalent ideology of the western or eastern variety, or to restrict him to a sense of a particular nationalism which may be too narrow for his great soul, or to imprison him inside one culture rather than another.

> "A writer may find that he grows in humanity by plunging deeper inside himself... to the extent that he may appear to us to be exclusively devoted to what is called art for art's sake or to

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life in an ivory tower. Yet through his art he may still draw us to his greater humanity, thereby raising us as individuals and communities to noble and sublime heights, just as another writer may find that he grows in humanity by enlarging the scope of his individuality through contact with the multitude and joining the lives of the millions." (p. 28).

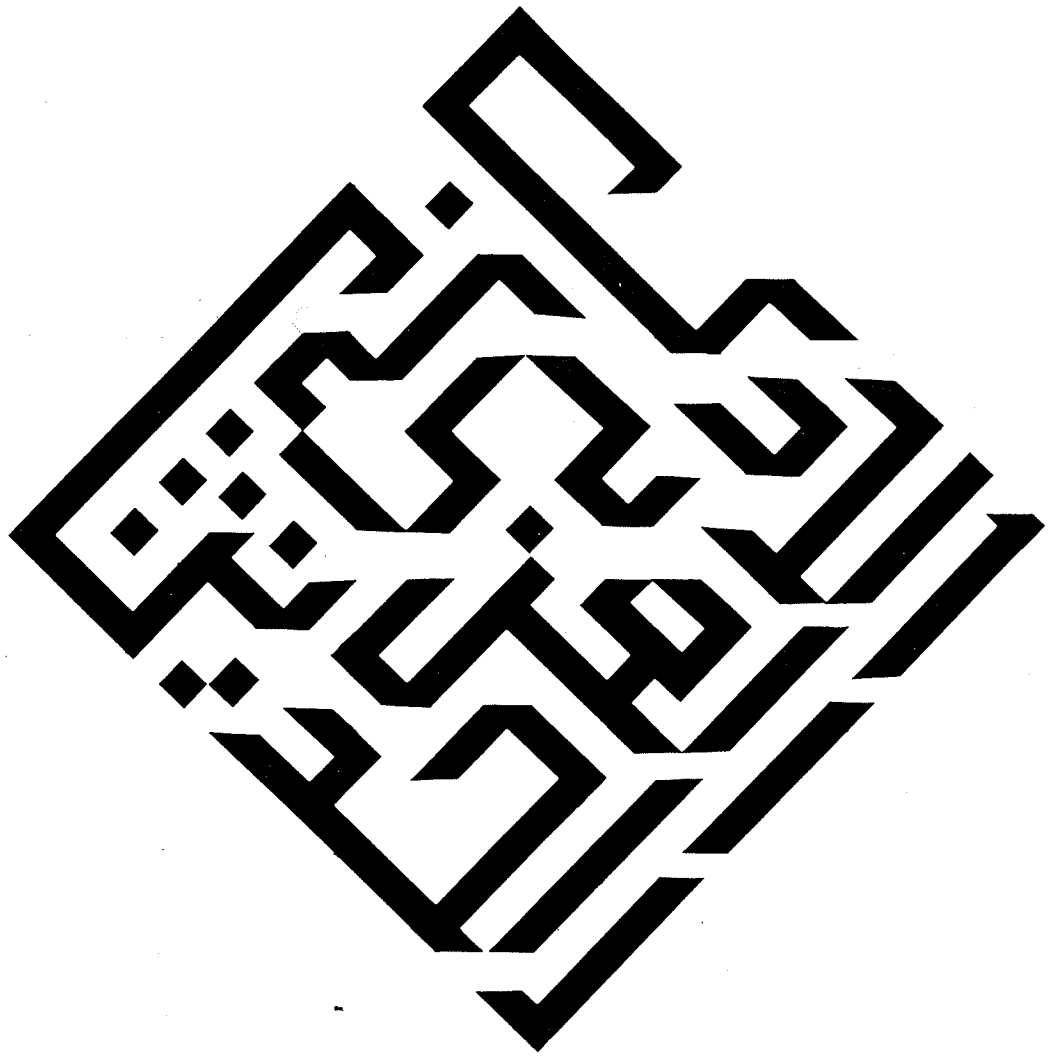
It is important to notice that, despite his plea for the absolute freedom of the writer, Mas'adi's tone was moderate, if not cautious or even apologetic. For this may help us to understand the extent of the 'commitment' of Arab writers in general when we learn from the late Egyptian critic Dr. Muhammad Mandur that the reaction to Mas'adi's paper was vehemently hostile. Although there was a very small minority who, like the eminent scholar Dr. Yusuf Najm, of the American University of Beirut, rejected the current notion of 'commitment' and openly denied that writers could be classified simply as bourgeois or belonging to the ivory tower, the general position of the writers seems to have been best expressed by the Egyptian critic Dr. Abd al-'Azim Anis, co-author of the celebrated work *Fi'l Thaqafa al-Misriyya* (On Egyptian Culture), who maintained that 'unless a writer accepts his responsibility towards himself, his community, his country and nationality, his freedom may turn into anarchy and become a means of bringing about the destruction of our social life.' (See *al-Majalla*, No. 13, Cairo, 1958, p. 19.)

This was the situation more than a decade ago and, although in the meantime many changes, mostly tragic, have taken place in the Arab world, which have profoundly affected Arab sensibility, on the whole, the extent of the Arab authors' commitment has not substantially decreased. The Arabic word *iltizam* (meaning commitment) has been an essential part of the vocabulary of any Arabic literary critic for many years. Since its introduction to the literary scene, most probably around 1950, in an obvious attempt to translate Jean-Paul Sartre's *engagement* (*Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* was published in 1948), the word has grown steadily in popularity and is now repeated *ad nauseam* by every upstart critic. Its meaning has become so diffuse that now it means adopting a Marxist stand, now it expresses an existentialist position, but at all times it denotes at least a certain measure of nationalism, Arab or otherwise. But perhaps the most common denominator in all the usages is, to put it simply and perhaps a little crudely, the need for a writer to have a message, instead of just delighting in creating a work of the imagination.

That commitment, in the wider sense, has become such a dominant concept in contemporary Arabic literature should, however, not surprise us. As in the rest of the developing world, writers in the Arab countries are faced with the problem of commitment in an acute form. Given, on the one hand, the unprecedented ease and speed of world communication, particularly through mass media, and the ever widening gap between

the developed and the developing countries on the other, the respons Arab writer, like all responsible writers of the developing world, been growing more keenly and painfully aware of the need to harnes human activities, including intellectual and literary ones to the overri aims of realizing social and material progress, and of creating a n rational, just and equitable distribution of the available resources opportunities. Two other facts arising from the nature of the A situation contribute towards a further complication of the issue of c mitment in the case of Arabic literature. The first is of peculiar signific to us since our treatment is confined to literature written in Arabi relates to Arabic literary history and more specifically to the pecu character of medieval and post medieval Arabic literature, and it resu in undue emphasis on content being regarded as synonymous modernity. The second is the political experience of the Arabs in mo times, beginning with western colonization and expansion in the n teenth century and culminating in the loss of Palestine in the midd this century, which was followed by the even more stunning dis of 1967.

In the medieval and post medieval Arabic literary (and particul poetic) tradition, both in theory and in practice there was a dispro tionately large interest in the formal and purely linguistic aspect literary works. Form always had precedence over content and in long period of decadence of Arabic literature, stretching roughly f the sixteenth century to nearly the middle of the nineteenth, form e cised a pernicious stranglehold over content. Poetry, particularly tow the end of the period, often degenerated to verbal acrobatics, w professedly artistic prose (namely prose which did not aim directl imparting information) did not fare much better. The novel, the s story, and drama were not known (since these are modern importat from the West) and the only form of imaginative prose was that use the *maqama* or *maqama*-like epistle. The *maqama*, often translate 'session', is a specifically Arabic literary form. Originally it was a told in euphuistic rhymed prose with occasional use of verse, dea with the trickeries of a witty and eloquent rogue. But the maqama w the eighteenth or even nineteenth century Arab authors wrote w mere linguistic exercise, completely devoid of situation or human cha ter interest. In it the thought content was reduced to a minimum artificial figures of speech, strained metaphors, far-fetched and mean less conceits, absurd hyperbole and intricate rhyme patterns were order of the day in prose no less than in verse. Such literature, artif and parochial in the extreme, could only appeal to a narrow circl people: it was far too literary and bookish, dangerously divorced f the warm and concrete reality of life, and therefore utterly lackin vitality. What makes the Egyptian poet al-Barudi the pioneer of



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