

Freedom First...

Al-Hilal, 1 January 1948

"The souls of Egyptian youth most resemble that djinn whom Solomon imprisoned in a sealed vessel of thick brass, set his seal upon it, and commanded that it be cast into the depths of the sea."

You wish to cultivate refined artistic taste in the souls of Egyptian youth: so that they may love beauty and savour it, then create beauty and invent it, then add to their ancient art a modern art, then share in the cultivation of that universal artistic heritage which makes the human being human, endears life to souls, and makes the world a thing of consequence — in spite of all the wretched circumstances that surround it, which would otherwise make it more contemptible than a gnat's wing in the eyes of the noble man, were there not in it things connected with taste that give it worth and significance.

You wish to cultivate artistic taste in the souls of the young, so that they may welcome life with desire and love for it, believing in what it holds — not content merely with what it offers them of gratifying the appetites, satisfying urges, and realising low and near-at-hand ambitions, but going beyond life toward what is nobler than it, greater in consequence, more exalted in station — toward the enjoyment, and the giving of enjoyment, of those sweet fruits in which hearts find rest and souls find refreshment, and which lift people to the heights where they look out upon life with disdain and irony, and with a detachment from it, even after they had loved it most intensely and been most deeply devoted to it — because they now see that it has brought them to the furthest limit, carried them to the end of the course, and they need not fear to leave it, nor it them, now that it has allowed them for a brief or long moment to enjoy and give enjoyment of that beauty which words cannot adequately describe, but whose magnificence the heart feels, forgetting in its pleasures all else.

Then you wish to cultivate artistic taste in the souls of the young, so that they may know themselves, appreciate their own existence, and meet the foreigners they encounter — understanding what those foreigners wish to say and understanding what those foreigners say — without finding in this any difficulty or strain, but finding in it ease and pleasure; and not feeling, in the course of all this, any sense of their own

diminishment, or the impression — or the established reality — that they are inferior to the European or the American in their knowledge of what people ought to know, in their sensibility toward what people ought to feel, and in their appreciation of what people ought to appreciate.

You wish to cultivate artistic taste in the souls of the young, so that they may reach all these stations, and feel that it is among their rights to take pride in themselves, to hold their heritage both ancient and modern in esteem, and to aspire to what their peers in the other advanced nations aspire to — which is to receive from their forebears a noble inheritance, then to nourish it and add to it, and then to pass it on to their children as a noble inheritance for them in turn to nourish and add to, and so to achieve for their country what befits the noble country: a life that grows with the passing of time and increases with the succession of days, and to achieve for humanity what befits humanity: this unceasing elevation and distinguished ascent.

You wish to cultivate artistic taste in the souls of the young — and I too wish to cultivate artistic taste in the souls of the young, because I know as you know that our task in life is nothing other than the cultivation of artistic taste in the souls of the young.

To this task we have dedicated all our efforts; to this task we have given our lives; for this task we have reserved all that remains to us of life.

But you know as I know that our situation in this resembles that of Abu al-'Ala' when circumstances parted him from Baghdad and he composed these lines which the critics consider close to hand at the utmost, yet which you see and I see as distant at the uttermost:

*O her dwelling in al-Karkh — her visit is near,
yet before it lie terrors.*

The critics hold that Abu al-'Ala' did nothing more than compose amorous verse as poets before him and after him had done, remembering his beloved's house and recalling the obstacles that stand between him and visiting her. But you see, as I see, that Abu al-'Ala' had nothing to do with love — that he used his beloved's dwelling as a symbol for his distant ambitions and his remote hopes, and for those impediments that stand between him and the attainment of his desires and the fulfilment of his hopes.

The cultivation of artistic taste in the souls of the young is thus the easiest of things, and yet for all that the most difficult; it is the nearest of things, and yet for all that the most remote.

And what could be easier or nearer than to grant the young what freedom they deserve — the freedom that allows them to accept and to refuse, to love and to hate, to act and to leave, when they themselves will it and not when others will it?

Yet those who stand in the way are many beyond counting: among them is the inherited tradition that compels the young man to think and express and act and feel as he has received from his family and his environment — not as his own soul desires, not as his own nature wishes him to think and express and feel and sense. Among them is the acquired social conformity that compels him to live as people live and forbids him to stand alone or be different, or to do what his peers and contemporaries would find objectionable. And among them is the authority that legislates harsh, oppressive, binding laws, and then devises for their enforcement means yet harsher, more oppressive, and more binding still.

Free the young, first of all — even a temporary freedom — from all these fetters or some of them. Let them think as they wish, let them live as they wish, and guide them through sound example, good conduct, and careful counsel.

And be assured that if you do this you will have prepared their souls for the appreciation of refined art in the finest way possible, and have formed them in the fullest formation. For art needs, before all else, a wide-ranging freedom — the widest freedom imaginable: freedom in the soul of the producer and freedom in the soul of the consumer, as the economists say.

Take any creator in art that you choose and examine his life thoroughly — and you will see that he created only because he was singular, set apart, exceptional, freed from the constraints to which all others had grown accustomed.

Not all people are suited for art, and not all people are capable of appreciation and invention; but it is the right of all people that opportunities be made available to them, and that the means of appreciation and invention be placed within their reach.

And the first thing that must be provided for this is that the young, and youth in particular, be granted what freedom they need — so that they may give full representation to life, with all that it contains of good and evil, of beauty and ugliness, of love and hatred, and may accept that representation by choice rather than by compulsion, and love and hate freely rather than under coercion.

And if this freedom is not granted them, expect nothing good from them, hope for no benefit from them, await from them no excellence and no innovation — but look upon them as you would look upon subjugated slaves, or upon the animal whose instincts are curbed and whose freedom is restricted by the authority of those who have domesticated it and exploit it for their own ends and purposes.

Art is freedom, not bondage.

If you wish the young to appreciate art, and to embody it, and to attempt it, and to innovate in it, make them free — for art is a fruit of the free, not of the enslaved.

What could be easier than making the young free? You wish that, and I wish it. But what could be more difficult than making the young free!

The inherited traditions and the modern traditions, the authority of government and the authority of the community, and the circumstances of life throughout this wretched country — all these forbid the young to be free.

So chant with me then the words of Abu al-'Ala':

*O her dwelling in al-Karkh — her visit is near,
yet before it lie terrors.*

And seek from incantations, talismans, and amulets what may protect you and protect me from that grave and serious accusation — the accusation of inclining toward the corruption of the young.

For what greater danger is there to the life of the young in a country like Egypt than to seek for them some of that freedom which youth enjoys in other countries — countries that have grown accustomed to freedom and cannot console themselves without it, nor bear to be parted from its fruits, sweet and bitter alike.

Then do not forget that you will not grant freedom to the young simply by removing from them their burdens and the shackles that weigh upon them from traditions and circumstances — for it may be that the human being must first be alive before he can be free, and the human being must first be preserved from deprivation before he can live.

So free the young from wretchedness and hunger, and from the preoccupation of thinking about how to sustain themselves; and free them from ignorance, and give them learning and literature and culture; and then make it easy for them to live in paradise, and leave them alone with the world and all that it holds — of joy and sorrow, beauty and ugliness, pleasure and pain.

And be assured that they will sense and feel; and be assured that they will be satisfied and be angry; and be assured that they will know ease and know distress; and be assured that they will take all this in for themselves, and not through the mediation of others.

And be assured that if they receive life with all its pleasures and pains, its sweetness and its events, they will portray what they receive, and they will express it, and they will be affected by it, and they will influence it in turn, and each one of them will be a free, productive human being.

And wherever the free, productive human being is found, there is found artistic taste, and there are found the fruits of artistic taste in both enjoyment and the giving of enjoyment.

Did you go to the university? Did you see the university students as they attend their lectures, listen to their professors, speak to their professors, and speak to one another? Did you find in any of this anything resembling what you know of the affairs of university students in the advanced foreign countries?

Did you not notice the ordeal of the professor when he delivers the lecture, and the ordeal of the students when they listen to him?

The lecture is a heavy burden on the professor, who lightens it by delivering it without love, without devotion, without taste. The listening is a heavy burden on the students, who lighten it by counting the minutes and waiting for the bell that restores to them a shadow of freedom, and leaves them to rush back into the inanity of their talk.

And of what do the wretches talk? Of things that have nothing to do with culture, near or far; of things that have nothing to do with learning, or art, or taste — but only with petty matters and trivial concerns, with near-at-hand pleasures and immediate benefits; and sometimes they touch on politics, brushing only its most foolish edges and staying furthest from anything of substance; and they discuss the daily trivialities that neither advance nor retard the life of communities.

And when they leave the university, they go toward wasted efforts and an empty life — toward the deprivation of the deprived, the misery of the miserable, the patience of those who endure what is hateful, and the despair of those who despair even of the mercy of God.

And if some of them are offered a measure of entertainment and a surplus of pleasures — you know where they seek these things, and you know what connection there is between those pleasures and refined, elevated artistic taste.

And it is the whole truth that we should draw a veil over this.

Did you go to the School of Fine Arts? Did you see the engraving and sculpture and painting and other arts there? The lessons are taught to the students as grammar and arithmetic lessons were once taught. The bell summons them to classes and the bell dismisses them from classes; and a precise system of rules oversees them during and between sessions, with its regulations drawn up and its boundaries defined. They sit by measure and move by measure; they fall silent by measure and speak by measure. A military school — nothing more and nothing less.

How then do you expect refined, elevated artistic taste to take root, or grow, or flourish in these environments that were created only to kill taste — or at the very least to corrupt it?

And what could be easier than restoring to these environments — in the university, in the School of Fine Arts, and in all the schools — some measure of ease and leniency, of gentleness and freedom?

You want this, and I want it — but it is far from reach! Between us and it lie regulations and laws, security and order, and fear — a drowning in fear.

The souls of Egyptian youth most resemble that djinn whom the Prophet of God Solomon imprisoned in a sealed vessel of thick brass, set his seal upon it, and commanded that it be cast into the depths of the sea

— as the storyteller tells us in the Thousand and One Nights.

And the bodies of Egyptian youth are these sealed, thick vessels — except that they are not of brass, but of flesh and blood.

And the difference between these souls imprisoned in their vessels and that djinn is that the djinn found the fisherman who drew his vessel from the depths of the sea, broke his seal, lifted his cover, and allowed the djinn to begin again an acquaintance with the air and the light and freedom.

So until the souls of Egyptian youth find this fisherman who draws them from their vessels, restores their freedom to them, and leaves them to the air and the light and beauty — to enjoy it and to cause the generations after them to enjoy it...

Until this comes to be — allow me to relinquish all hope of cultivating refined artistic taste in the souls of the young as you desire.

Taha Hussein

Al-Hilal, 1 January 1948