

The Second Letter:

Al-Risala (Al-Risala al-Thaniya), 1 October 1933

From Professor Tawfiq al-Hakim to Dr. Taha Hussein

My dear Doctor,

I have read the reply, and once again I contemplate what is in your right hand. That staff is a remarkable instrument: whatever you touch with it turns into the truth — a great truth that swallows every opinion and snatches up every argument. That is the staff of Mastership. I was never unaware that you carry it in this age.

We are in agreement. There is no disagreement between us on the goal — it is what we seek. There are details on which I part from the Doctor, and I shall not return to them. I am frightened of looking backwards, lest I be turned into a pillar of salt — or even a pillar of gold. Sometimes my soul turns away from a fixed idea however immortal it may be, and I find pleasure sometimes in scattering thoughts idly from the window of a train.

Our letters are, in truth, nothing more than the stirring of dust on a smooth ground strewn with gravel. We are not handing down judgements with these hasty writings. We are merely raising questions and tossing forth hypotheses that future researchers will pick up and gather when the generations awaken.

We are agreed, then — or we ought to agree in any case — and turn our attention to something new. The search for what is new is, in my view, what deserves the effort. And today the new has been opened for us by Professor Ahmad Amin. He told me one evening that he is writing a book on the principles of criticism, and would honour me with participating in the inquiry from some of its angles.

Criticism? A word that rang in my ear. And I recalled at once that my first letter to the Doctor had for its subject (creation). And I said to myself: what prevents us from completing the discussion in a second letter whose subject is (criticism)? And the matter revealed itself to me as a great question: shall we consider criticism like creation — subject to the authority of the three intellectual currents the Doctor mentioned: the ancient Egyptian current, the Arab current, and the European current? Or shall we consider criticism like science — not subject to such influences?

As for me, I shall not answer this question immediately. I am writing without knowing where my pen will set me down. Let me first improvise some variations on this melody without concerning myself for the moment with the goal. For the goal is sometimes cheap beside the means — at least in the view of art. Because in art the goal does not justify the means.

Life likewise — that artistic work wrought by the Creator — is it anything other than a firm-structured means? Does it have a meaning in anything other than that plain path whose beginning is fog and whose end is fog? A geometric line drawn on the tablet of existence: how did it begin, how did it end? That is not the concern of geometry. It is a line between two points, and that is enough.

We have no business asking about the goal of life, or the goal of art, or the goal of science. The goal does not matter. The whole meaning lies in the means. Life is the road. Science is the method. Art is the style. As for the goal — there is no goal. And can we hope from science or from art or from life for an absolute goal, some day? Impossible. We are nothing but the style of the Creator. The universe is nothing but style. Style is everything in every creator and in every creation.

The Creator is too great to confine His eternal will within limits — "goal" being a word that in itself signifies the meaning of ending. It is my belief that the word "goal" is the invention of the small human mind. This bounded mind that always places everything within limits and insists that everything must have a beginning and an end. Immortality lies in style alone. For style has neither beginning nor end — it is something that always is, having no relation with time.

The man of art — who is the lesser imitator of the greater Creator — knows that art does not live by the goal, because the goal, like its name, is perishable. Art lives by style. The goal of building the Pyramids has passed, the goal of building the Parthenon has perished. Burying the dead or worshipping the gods of old — a goal that has died; and only the style of the art has remained immortal in the Pyramids and the Parthenon.

Serving humanity is the goal of science in the view of simple people. If a scientist were asked about this he would smile: "What have I to do with humanity! I am only searching for the secret of the style of the Supreme Craftsman. It is the pleasure of the search alone. It is the method of the search and its style. Were it not for that joy which fills my

soul when the searching eye reveals to me the beauty of God's style, I would not have endured the toil in the cause of science, and science would not have had this elevated meaning." Inventions too are not the goal of science. They are the application of science. Science itself is the pure search, stripped of every goal and every exploitation. The Greeks used to search and not apply. Pythagoras is an example of the immortal style of pure science.

Style, then, is the axis of criticism as it is the pillar of creation. And the word style is spacious and deep as the sea, with all the treasures of knowledge that humanity aspires to in its depths. Perhaps everything granted to the human being of lofty instinct since the beginning of time is nothing but the reflection of the Creator's style in the human soul. This logic we were raised on and to which we return throughout our lives, this sense of cause and effect, this feeling of harmony and proportion, this perception of the connection that binds thing to thing — where did we humans get all this? Is there another source besides the style of the Creator?

Humanity opened its eyes and found it all around her. It exists before her and before creation, just as the design and plan exist before the building. The style of the Creator in making the universe is the sole primordial source of all these attributes: logic, the connection of cause with effect and thing with thing, part with whole, harmony and proportion — attributes that are themselves the attributes of the sound style of every great artistic work. God's style is the first and last teacher. And the first image the human being drew on stones and animal bones was nothing but the declaration of his hidden feeling for those attributes. The first man of art was the first human being who knew logic as an artistic attribute, after logic had been a lofty instinct swimming in the reaches of his soul without his knowing what it was. The logic that built the Pyramids is an exact image of the logic that built the universe.

What is logic? What does logic mean? Its secret lies in that great clear mirror that surrounds us like walls: existence. The finest example of logic in style — upon which the man of art, literature, and science ought to dwell long in contemplation.

Everything in this existence is made on a single method and a single rule. What is the rule on which existence was built? It is the rule on which the Pyramids were built. It is the rule of every construction: cohesion between the parts in a coherent whole. What is the cause of this cohesion

and how is it achieved? A law that I can cast, as mathematicians do, in a simple formula of two words: give and take. Everything in this existence lives on a single pattern. And every life in this existence has a single appearance: give and take in connected, resembling movements — exhalation and inhalation in humans and living beings; acquisition and radiation in stars and things. Give and take is the law of cohesion and connection in the life of the individual and the community and the nation and the nations — in the life of ethics and politics and economics, in the life of matter and spirit, in the life of the earth and the heavenly bodies and the nebulae. There is nothing in existence that neither gives nor takes. There is nothing in existence that gives without taking. Everything depends on everything in this universe. A fortified edifice each part of which supports the other.

And every creation is a construction. And there is no construction without a comprehensive unity, and no comprehensive unity without solidarity between stone and stone, and part and part. This solidarity is the offspring of that law — give and take. And this is not all of the logic in the making of existence; the logic lies in the composition of that law. What sustains give and take? Can there be giving and taking except between similar beings? What would be the situation if the Creator had created another existence on another style, making people who live by exhalation and know no inhalation, creatures that eat without eliminating, and heavenly bodies that absorb heat and light without radiating? What connection could possibly exist between beings created on no single style? No connection; and where there is no connection there is no construction, no creation.

What connection would there be between me and my brother and my son if the Creator had made me from elements other than their elements, making me from dry and wet and making them from light and fire and gas and vapour? What bond would there be if He had made each creature isolated in its matter and form and elements from every other creature? And what pyramid can be built of stones, one of rock, another of dough, a third of paper, a fourth of clay? No bond without resemblance and likeness. No solidarity between parts not homogeneous in composition.

Resemblance is the condition of give and take. Difference likewise is another condition. Can there be give and take except between different beings? What would be the situation if the Creator had made everything like everything, making every man like every man, and every heavenly

body like every heavenly body — the same temperament, the same appearance, the same size? Does not this absolute similarity negate personality? And where there is no personality, there is no give and take, no cohesion and no connection. And is there a bond between me and another except the difference of his person from my person and of what he has from what I have? And is the bond of the heavenly bodies anything but their difference in mass?

Gravity. Love. Is their cause the difference of ratios in forces and shapes? A universe of this absolute similarity could likewise not be built or exist. It resembles a play whose characters have the same name, body, temperament, and fate, who speak the same words, make the same movements, perform the same actions. What relationship could arise between these creatures? Would any one of them feel the existence of another? Would any one of them grasp the meaning of the word "I"?

There must be some difference between beings so that each being may be distinguished from the other. And when persons and things and parts are distinguished, give and take arises between them — the secret of cohesion in every construction. Here then is what harmony consists of: resemblance — but not total resemblance; difference — but not total difference!

Beethoven, who revealed to me six years ago the secret of composing two voices simultaneously: I noticed that he combines two voices that resemble each other — but not in total resemblance — and differ from each other — but not in total difference. And I realised that there is no harmony without this. For had he made the two voices alike in every way, one would vanish into the other and leave nothing to distinguish them but a single voice. And had he made them totally different, it would be impossible for the ear to connect them, they being so distant and discordant. So the basis of harmony in music and art is the same as the basis of harmony in life and the universe: a harmony between the parts that is not total harmony, and a difference between them that is not total difference.

(A further observation in parentheses: my words about the Egyptian and the Arab identities in my first letter are nothing but a desire on my part to sort out the characteristics of the nations of this Arab world, whose literature I fear may dissolve. Love and solidarity lie in what we have differing somewhat from what our neighbouring brothers have. The resemblance is guaranteed by the shared language and the shared

heritage. Let each of us seek his distinguishing personality in his long past in its entirety. The Egyptian in ancient Egypt and the ages that followed. The Syrian in Phoenicia and what came after. The Iraqi in Babylon and what came after and before it — and so on. Each drawing from the womb of the earth on which he lives all the beauties of its nature and all the treasures of its past. Art is the child of the earth. Parentage is the child's to the cradle, and art's to the earth. I speak for Egyptian, Iraqi, and Syrian identity — and so on — not for separation but for connection, not for fanaticism but for love. The day each of us has a strong personality is the day commerce and bonds between us multiply. As for our all dissolving into the personality of the ancient Arabs — that is something that cannot be, because it is contrary to the nature of things. Every land has characteristics from history prior to the Arab era. What shall we do with these characteristics? Shall we tear them up as barbaric savages do, or shall we read them and draw from them what benefits humanity?)

There is no doubt that every land must have a colour, and every land must have a name and a form and a body. And so it was until the days of the Arab state. Syria was different from Iraq, different from Egypt, different from Andalusia. Art and poetry and literature are the clearest proof of the existence of manifest differences, and of the truth of that law: resemblance between those lands, but not total resemblance; and difference between them, but not total difference. How could it be otherwise? And shall we be angered that there should be an Egypt here and a Syria there and an Iraq yonder — just as there was yesterday in the Arab state? The Arab world today ought to be: a comprehensive unity and a solid edifice in political affairs and defence and protection — and personalities of varied colours in affairs of art and creation and invention.

In sum: the style of God in the making of the universe is the sole wellspring of art, the sole source of the human perception of beauty since the beginning of the ages.

As for the critics of the nineteenth century, I do not think they raised their eyes toward this style in inspiration. They prostrated themselves before the idol of science, their reverent eyes gazing in hope toward two beams of electricity issuing from the lenses of its cold, lifeless eyes.

The nineteenth century was the century of the deification of science. Science dazzled the world with successive decisive victories, whereupon literature, art, and philosophy all rushed to it, acknowledging its

supremacy and sovereignty. Everything sought from science an explanation. And science, in the exultation of the victor and the smile of the confident, did not refuse to pronounce on what concerned it and on what did not concern it. And science — which is the science of matter — sought to speak of the affairs of the spirit. When asked about the spirit it said: follow this road — and pointed to the very same methods that had led to victory in the affairs of matter: analysis, synthesis, experiment, measurement, deduction, induction, and so on.

The world was amazed by the theory of evolution and development. And people believed that our origin is from water and living cells and an animal that kept rising in rank over the ages until the ape, ancestor of man, was reached! A beautiful theory, whose beauty captivated minds despite the ugliness of that monstrous ancestor. As for its truth in matters of matter and bodies — that is permissible. But here a question arises: does this theory also hold for the spirit and the affairs of the spirit? The sense of beauty: is it also subject to evolution and development? Yes, yes, yes — so said the English school (Spencer, Grant Allen, Ruskin). These minds, bewitched by the theory of evolution in matter, inevitably produced for humanity a theory of evolution in beauty.

And people marvelled at the theories of geology and zoology and biology and the researches of Lamarck on the influence of environment, climate, and the conditions of life on the nature of bodies — whereupon the French school (Hippolyte Taine) produced for thought and literature a theory of beauty and art in which inspiration and revelation are thermometers and scales of weight! Indeed I see the finger of science, a century before this, guiding the German school to its theory of beauty. Nor did science stop at this guidance and influence — it took into its hands in this modern era the body of beauty itself and worked upon it with the scalpel and the probe (modern psychology). The matter was decided, and beauty passed from the gardens of philosophy into the laboratories of science!

I am not disparaging the methods of science — they are the means of humanity that it possesses and nothing else. And I recall the day I was setting aside time to think about these questions and I laid before myself this naive question: what does the animal know of beauty? A stallion between two fillies — one beautiful, round, grey and white; the other ugly, thin, and lame: toward which does he incline? I had no hesitation in saying with confidence and conviction: toward the beautiful one. What is the basis for the preference? I do not know — and an experiment would

be the decisive judge! But at the time I was thinking pure thoughts in a noisy coffee house where I had supposed I could go for quiet reflection — where was I to find horses and mares on which to conduct experiments? So here I am acknowledging that experiment is a natural human means for attaining knowledge. And I acknowledge that I once felt the need to practise it in matters of beauty. But despite this I do not like to believe simply that theories of science in the affairs of matter always hold in the affairs of the spirit.

Nothing can convince me that the sensation of beauty is the offspring of evolution and development. I have the desire to cry out, without evidence in hand, that the perception of beauty was born complete in the heart of the human being from the moment he raised his sight and insight to the style of God and perceived it. I fear we may fall into error when we apply the theory of matter to matters of the spirit. Can the Doctor accept the words of Ruskin and Grant Allen on the *Iliad* — that the ancients were only concerned with nature and its beauty when it connected with human living, that in the *Iliad* no natural scene was described for its own sake, only for its usefulness to man, whether a fertile place flowing with wheat or rich in horses; that nature was only a frame for events and persons, not something described for its own sake; that nature was loved for its own sake only in the modern era, when sensibility to it awoke — a clear, pure sensibility unsullied by considerations of use or interest?

What shall I say about this? Is it ignorance of the feelings of the ancients? Or a hazardous application of the theory of evolution and development? Are we to truly believe that the lofty feeling for the beauty of nature was unknown to the ancients on account of their proximity to animality? Are we to believe that Homer did not feel the beauty of nature for its own sake? Is this Ruskin speaking? As for me, my words on nature and the ancients have already been stated. The view I expressed in my first letter is that the ancients were closer than we are to nature and to understanding it. The ancients felt themselves to be a part of nature, a note in its melodies. As for Ruskin and Allen — or modern man — he feels nothing but his own human self, separate from nature and from everything.

My evidence: the art of the ancients — the Egyptians and the Greeks. Is this the art of a people who do not feel nature for its own sake and do not grasp its laws and its styles?

To this extent does submission to theories lead? That is why I do not want to give science a free hand to sit upon the throne of criticism without a partner. I love the methods of science. But I fear the conclusions of science. Let us elevate the spirit a little. I do not want to place the spirit under the scalpel of science, for fear that it will cut it open and find it a hollow shell.

And I do not forget the day I witnessed the dissection of a human body for the first time. What anguish on that day tore my faith in the value of the human being! No. I, as a man of the spirit, do not want to be bereaved of the finest thing I live by and for. What always comforts my soul is to say that the mind of science is not enough. To perceive beauty and the spirit we must also return to the heart. I want science not to drive me out of that faith that used to shine in the hearts of the ancient Egyptians — a faith that drew them near to the Creator, so that with their deep and wondrous insight they were the first humans to understand the style of God and penetrate the laws of His creation.

The furthest limit of science is faith. I love that believing, poetic science that was known also by the great astronomers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler — the last drop of that science blended with faith. They looked at the planets as the ancient Egyptians had looked at them before them — not with the eye of the mind alone, but also with the eye of the heart. The heavens and the stars were in their view living creatures. They too felt in the mass of the stars and in this universe in its entirety the creative spirit and the hand of the Supreme Creator.

How magnificent this statement from Kepler — in it a beautiful summary of all that fills my soul: "All creation is nothing but a wondrous symphony in the domain of the spirit and ideas, as it is in the domain of bodies and living beings. All things cohere and are bound by reciprocal bonds that do not unravel. All things form a harmonious whole. God has created us in His image and given us the sense of harmony. Everything that exists is alive and moving, because all things are successive and connected. Every planet and every star is an animal possessed of a soul. The soul of the stars is the secret of their movement, the reason for the love that binds them to each other, and the explanation of the order by which natural phenomena proceed."

Those were men who walked in the wilderness of reason without forgetting the guide of the heart. Those are the truly great scientists!

I see the Doctor has already divined my view after all this preamble. Yes — and I am not afraid to answer the question now and say that the three currents the Doctor mentioned are also applicable to criticism, as they are to creation.

As for the European current in criticism: it is the one based on science. This current has indeed reached us and we have been influenced by it. And some critical works that have appeared in modern Egypt show this scientific tendency. There is nothing wrong with this — indeed it is an inevitable duty — provided we accompany it with additions and other means drawn from our own soil and heritage, if we wish to establish for our literature a personal, complete method in criticism.

As for the ancient Egyptian current: it is the criticism that depends on taste — that is, the instinct for logic and harmony. And in the ancient Egyptians this is the instinct for the inner logic of things and the inner harmony — that is, the law that binds thing to thing. What beauty is there in the Pyramids other than that hidden geometric harmony and those concealed laws on which that mass of stones rests? An intellectual, internal beauty. The style of the Creator likewise does not concern itself with external beauty alone in the creation of nature. What beauty is there in the serpent and the scarab beetle? External beauty is relative — only the human being can assess it. Rather, the inner logic of things is all their true beauty. This ancient Egyptian criterion of beauty — I do not think it has yet influenced our intellectual life or our artistic judgements.

As for the ancient Arab current: it is the criticism whose basis is the taste of the senses — that is, the instinct for apparent logic and external harmony. Beauty for the Arabs is the outward beauty that pleases the eye and delights the ear. Can we imagine the Arabs building pyramids or appreciating beauty in them? The Arabs came to Egypt and spoke of the beauty of its Nile, its land, and its sky, and saw in the Pyramids nothing but something that might contain hidden treasure — as for their construction, that was something not reckoned as art. Beauty for the Arabs is beauty of form above all else. The mosques are like brides that almost strut with grace in their ornaments, adornment for beholders — without this there is no architecture and no art. Poetry is delightful sound, beautiful imagination, elegant meanings, and choice charming words — without this there is no poetry and no art. Beauty for the Arabs is human beauty. Art for them is something made by man for himself and his pleasure. Ancient Arab art is a human, worldly art. Ancient Egyptian art is a divine, religious art. Hence the criteria of beauty differed between

the two arts. One is concerned with harmony that pleases the human being; the other with hidden harmony, without looking toward the human being.

And perhaps the ancient Arab criterion is the one that still reigns alone in Egypt today in questions of poetry and literature. And perhaps the closest example to memory is that judgement the Doctor passed on a line by Professor al-'Aqqad:

It is as a cup from the cups of the immortals...

Not degraded by the mixture of water and clay.

Was not the Doctor's criterion of assessment that sensory taste and external logic that connects words — and he found an incoherent connection between "cups" and "clay" that he heard as something like a buzzing sound marring the purity of the ring? This ancient Arab criterion with its fine needle is remarkable in registering every deviation from the logic of words. But there is, in my belief, another hidden logic that is of concern to the Egyptian criterion. Consider: if the Doctor had referred to it, would he not have passed judgement in favour of al-'Aqqad's line rather than against it? Would he not have seen in it a firm internal harmony — which is all the poet had in mind to convey?

The day I spoke of the blending of spirit and matter in our literature, I ought also to have spoken of placing the Egyptian criterion in criticism alongside the Arab criterion.

In conclusion: I have no doubt taken from you and from your time a measure I have no right to. But had it not been for you I would not have put my thoughts into letters. It is for you that I write. What guarantee you are in the East for the life of thought and expression! And can I ever forget what you have been to me and what you shall be? I place before you my sincerest devotion.

Kom Hamada, 14 September 1933

Tawfiq al-Hakim

Al-Risala (Al-Risala al-Thaniya), 1 October 1933