

On Criticism

Al-Risala, 15 May 1933

By Dr. Taha Hussein. *Salma and Her Village*: written in French (Madame Amy Kher). *The People of the Cave*: written in Arabic (Tawfiq al-Hakim).

Let the champions of the new and the champions of the old contend with one another for as long as their quarrel can bear, and for as long as they find within themselves the strength to carry its weight and to press on with whatever struggle it demands. For time moves on its way regardless of their quarrel or their reconciliation. Nor does it move alone: it drives some of us before it, and drags others behind it. And it brings both these and those, in the end, to wherever it wills of change, evolution, and renewal — not to wherever they will of standing still, of stagnation, and of excessive attachment to preserving everything old simply because it is old.

This occurred to me after I had finished reading what our friends publish in (*Al-Risala*) concerning renewal and its champions, and concerning conservatism and its adherents. I had also just finished reading a number of these many books that recent months have brought forth — books that pile up before me, growing day by day, pressing upon me to make time for them, to sit down with them and look into them, diverting me from the circumstances of the life I work in every day.

Yes, I gave this some thought, having finished reading some of these books, and found that we quarrel over the new and the old, that we are excessive in our contention, and extravagant in our interpretation and exegesis, even as time drives us down the road of renewal with a force there is no resisting, or drags us along this path with a pull there is no escaping. But I paused over one phenomenon that perhaps deserves the attention of critics and thinkers alike: the intellectual and artistic form the relationship between East and West is now taking. For a time, we were simply influenced by the West, sought it out, borrowed from it, and wished — if the expression is fair — to transplant it into ourselves. And this pursuit consumed our own identity, or very nearly consumed it, so that we became Westerners in our thinking, our expression, and the very life of our minds and hearts. Our fortunes in this Westernness differed in strength and weakness: some of us imitated well, others badly. And this weakness of our own identity made the conservatives among Eastern

people despise us and lose interest in us. And it stirred, in the hearts of the innovators among Western people, an affection for us tinged with sympathy and pity — and we chafed under both that contempt and this affection, and wished we could take, toward both parties, a natural stance, free of embarrassment, of affectation, and of constraint.

Such, too, was the condition of our writers and poets in this modern age when they sought renewal or moved toward it. But things have changed in these days: the identity of our writers and poets has grown strong, until it has come to believe in itself, and the people around it, East and West alike, have come to believe in it too. Our writers and poets now compose prose and craft verse without truly cultured people in the East turning away from them in any great numbers, and without the people of the West treating them gently out of mere condescension; rather, the former love them, read them, and give them honest advice, criticism, and encouragement, while the latter esteem them, study them, and measure the distances they have covered on the road of renewal, of contact with Western civilization, and of establishing that civilization in Eastern lands — all without their own identities being consumed, or afflicted by weakness and languor.

And stranger still than what you observe when reading what (Gibb) and (Kampffmeyer) and others write of our writers and poets, is something you notice in these very days: that among the people of the East are those who so embody the West that they seem to belong to it, speaking to it in its own tongue, thinking as it thinks, feeling as it feels, and sharing, in this, in its purest literary output — publishing their books wherever the West itself publishes its own, in London or in Paris. And these books reach us from the capitals of the West, and we receive them just as we used to receive Western books, and our papers treat them with the same criticism and praise they give Western books; and you see some Easterners embodying the West, assimilating it, digesting it — if the expression is fair — dissolving it within themselves, making their own identity prevail over it, and feeding their own nationhood upon it. Then they speak to us in our own language, refined; and they think alongside us in the very ways we think, distilled — enriched now by another wealth added to their own, made fertile, bearing fruit we love, find sweet, and long for more of, so that we press for still more.

And thus East is joined to West by an intellectual and artistic bond, after the bond between them had been merely material and conventional; and thus we advance in renewal by broad, worthy, truly enriching strides,

adding to the wealth of the West even as the West adds to our own.

I should like now to speak to you of two books that represent this state I have described, of the noble, reciprocal contact between East and West. The first of these two books is a novel written in French. The other is a story written in Arabic; the first of the two is pure narrative, the other is dramatic narrative. The first is by a Lebanese lady, Madame Amy Kher; the second is by an Egyptian writer, Ustadh Tawfiq al-Hakim.

As for Madame Kher's book, it is (*Salma and Her Village*); we heard of it more than a year ago, and its author spoke to us of its substance, and read us some of its chapters at a lecture she gave a year ago, in one of the halls of the Continental, where the friends of French culture gather every Friday during the winter. We had grown fond of what we heard of this book and of the talk about it, and had promised ourselves delightful hours to spend with it once it was printed and returned to us from Paris in its new French dress. But I am extremely cautious, distrustful of my own judgement and opinion, and I do not trust such hasty verdicts; nor do I hide the fact that I distrusted the pleasure I felt with this book last year, fearing that the source of that pleasure might be Madame Kher's skill as a lecturer and her gift for fine delivery; and I judged it best to wait until the book itself reached me, so that I might read it apart from its author, apart from her sweet voice and her lovely speech.

This book reached me some weeks ago; I gave it my time, hours at a stretch, and I do not hide that I was greatly pleased with it, and admired several of its chapters immensely, while pausing at others with the more measured satisfaction of one who feels a pleasure with nothing excessive in it.

The book's subject is evident from its title: it is the story of a Lebanese girl, and a portrait of the village where she lived and died. The author tells us that her book is a photograph of *Salma* and her village. This may well be true — indeed, it is true. And it is, at the same time, the very source both of the book's merit and of what may be observed against it. How I wish this book had not been a photograph, but simply a portrait — a portrait made by a human hand, not by the mechanism of a camera; a portrait in which the author's own personality appeared plainly, something we could take comfort in and rely on to help us absorb the truths the book contains. But the story remained, as Madame Kher wished it, a photograph: distinguished by its honesty, distinguished by its precision, and losing, in exchange, a great deal of life and impact.

The story itself is neither strange nor original; it is something familiar we can almost find in every book — God forgive me — we can almost find in many books written in the last century, and we can almost find in every work of Arabic literature that speaks of lovers wasted away by love until it delivers them to death. Salma fell in love with Fathi, from a village neighbouring her own in the north of Lebanon. Her father fell ill; her mother took up his nursing, and she went alone to the farm, where she met this young man — wealthy, comfortable, and somewhat cultured. The young man was drawn to her, and she to him; they spoke; each learned the other's secret. Then love filled the girl's heart and took full possession of her; then the father recovered from his illness, and the lovers' meetings were cut off, so that they had to steal what hours together they could. Then the father discovered something of the affair; he struck the girl, and went to reproach the young man and offer him her hand in marriage. The young man made his excuses, and his uncle sent him off to Egypt to seek his fortune and scatter his love upon the banks of the Nile; and a deep sorrow struck the girl, which hope eased at times and doubled at others. Then came despair. The girl was married to a young man who was infatuated with her. She tried to be faithful to him, and strove hard at it, but she could not free herself from her old love, so that her heart and body grew too weak to remain true to her first love and faithful to her husband's, and illness took hold of her, remaining with her until it released her from this life.

So you see there is nothing strange or original in the story; and yet the story's beauty is beyond doubt, and its source, it would seem, is this very photographic rendering that carries you to a village of Lebanon, and to the life within it that we love for its simplicity, its gentleness, its natural beauty unspoiled by affectation, undisfigured by any excess of civilization — a life in which pure, free faith mingles with pure, free living. Yes, and we love, too, this life filled with productive activity in the season of labour, and filled with quiet rest in the season of stillness; and perhaps we love, as well, this kind of passion that springs from the human heart without artifice, without indulgence, untouched by the philosophy of the intellect and its relentless drive to investigate, analyse, and probe. And then, after all this and above all this, we love these photographic images of Lebanon's landscape in its various forms: these towering mountains draped in snow when winter comes, adorned by spring with green-leaved trees; these valleys where man struggles fiercely to wrest from them the sustenance that sustains his life; and the Lebanese people's strong, sincere, unaffected love for their own nature,

their mountains, and their valleys — a love so enchanting that it makes poets of them all.

What is strange about this story is that it is faithful not only in its portrayal of its subject, but also in its portrayal of a certain side of the author herself — I mean her artistic skill. At the beginning there is something of weakness, of slowness, of laboured language, as though the author were struggling somewhat with herself; but once the story has advanced a stage or two, her pen becomes a phantom, light and swift — the French language throws her its reins, and the French style yields to her, and she is set loose, free and generous, as though she had completed her training. For this reason, the end of the book is better than its beginning. And for this reason we have every right to trust that the book *Madame Kher* will bring out next will be better than the one she has brought out now. And if I must note some fault, I regret to say that the book has not entirely escaped a certain carelessness with language: it uses vulgar colloquial expressions that have no place in a literary work unless some wit calls for them. Among the clearest examples of this, perhaps, are those found on pages 72 and 140. In sum, we are indebted to Madame Kher for delightful, worthwhile hours spent with this engaging book — though our hopes remain rather greater than our satisfaction. Let us thank her for this first effort and congratulate her on it, and look forward to still greater things from her future work.

As for the story (*The People of the Cave*), it is an event of consequence — and I do not say this only for Egyptian Arabic literature, but for the whole of Arabic literature. And I say this without reservation or caution. I say it rejoicing and delighted by it. What lover of Arabic literature would not rejoice and delight in being able to say, with full confidence in what he says, that a new art has arisen within it and been added to it; that a new door has been opened for its writers, who are now able to pass through it and, from it, reach distances so far and so lofty that we could not have imagined, until now, that they were capable of even conceiving them?

Yes, this story is an event of consequence that marks a new era in Arabic literature. I do not claim it has achieved everything I would wish for dramatic narrative in our Arabic literature; I do not claim it is free of every fault — indeed, I shall have some accounting to settle with Ustadh Tawfiq al-Hakim, and perhaps not an entirely easy one. But for all that, I do not hesitate to say that it is the first work of its kind composed in Arabic literature, that it can rightly be called a true dramatic narrative,

and that it can be said to have enriched Arabic literature and added to it a wealth it did not possess before. It can be said to have raised the standing of Arabic literature and enabled it to hold its own against foreign literatures, ancient and modern alike. It can be said that foreigners devoted to Arabic literature will read it with pure admiration, containing no sympathy, no pity, no indulgence for our budding literary childhood. Indeed, it can be said that lovers of pure literature among foreign critics, should it be translated for them, would be able to read it and find in it a powerful pleasure, a rich delight, and would praise it as sweetly as they praise the finest dramatic works produced by the great writers of Europe.

Is this story Egyptian? Is this story European? It is neither purely Egyptian nor purely European, but a balanced blend of the gentle Egyptian spirit and the powerful European spirit. And it may be difficult for anyone without a trained eye to distinguish between these two spirits from which the story is composed.

But those with a genuine grounding in both Arabic and foreign literature can distinguish between these two spirits: when they find in the story an ease and sweetness of temperament; when they sense that light playfulness which makes them pause, from time to time, as they read; when they find words and sentences that capture the Egyptian character now just as it was captured in different ages, ever since the Egyptians first had an Arabic literature; and then, when they find this deep, rich, exacting thought that presses toward depth and strains toward precision, refusing to leave any single truth open to doubt or as a target for obscurity — unless the writer has deliberately intended it so, refusing to let his mind run free out of regard for certain circumstances.

All this enables critics to discern, in this story, a graceful Egyptian spirit and a powerful European spirit. Let us pause a moment over the story's subject and its form.

As for the story's subject, the writer did not invent it, but discovered it — and there is a clear difference between invention in literature and discovery. Discovery, indeed, may often be harder than invention, and in this story of ours it is difficult and demanding. The story's subject is found in the noble Qur'an, and before it existed in the Qur'an it was already known in Christian narratives held in some degree of reverence. It suffices to know that it is the account of the People of the Cave, who feared the persecution of a Roman king against the Christians, and fled

with their faith from this tyrannical king, taking refuge in the cave, where they slept for three hundred years, and nine more. Then God, exalted and glorified, raised them up; and the people did not recognize them, nor did they recognize the people; and so they returned to their cave, where God took them unto Himself.

And you know that this story was told by God in the Qur'an, in noble verses that are the sweetest and loftiest examples we know of Arabic eloquence; and you know how difficult it is to draw upon such a story in our Arabic literature, which has not, in the modern age, grown accustomed to putting religious scripture to artistic use, as Europeans have grown accustomed to seeking, in their sacred books, subjects for narrative, poetry, drama, sculpture, engraving, painting, and music. So if Ustadh Tawfiq al-Hakim has succeeded in drawing the subject of his story from the Qur'an, or from a story the Qur'an relates in detail, and in raising upon this subject a work of splendid artistry, he deserves to be congratulated on his courage and his skill alike.

The story's subject, then, is an Eastern one, known through Christian tradition and related in detail by the noble Qur'an. Europeans knew it only by this route, and so our author is, in this, like other European authors who sometimes draw the subjects of their dramatic works from the Torah and the Gospel. But our author, like these other European authors, has not simply retold what Christian tradition and the Qur'an have handed down; rather, he has breathed into the People of the Cave another life altogether — one with strength in it, with richness in it, with a philosophy that connects it to the whole of human life across every age and circumstance, in directions quite other than those the Qur'an addressed and the Christian tradition addressed. He introduces into this life new elements the old story lacked, the most important being two: the element of philosophy, and the element of love. For there is an enormous difference between these figures as the Qur'an portrays them, and as Eastern Christian tradition portrays them — in a simplicity beyond measure, a gentleness beyond measure, a faith beyond measure and beyond question — and these same figures as Ustadh Tawfiq al-Hakim portrays them, their lives grown complicated, and with them their minds. Two of them lose this absolute simplicity, this absolute gentleness, this absolute faith; only one retains these qualities — Yamlikha the shepherd. And by this new manner of portraying these figures, the writer has been able to make them the heroes of a modern dramatic narrative. Had the writer preserved their original qualities intact, he could never have

raised them above the heroes of the mystery plays once performed in the Middle Ages before churches. So the writer is, on the surface, a discoverer of his story, but is, in truth, its inventor: he has created its characters anew, and set between them a philosophical dialogue such as none of us could ever have imagined. It may be difficult to pin down the exact philosophy the writer intended to arrive at, but this very difficulty is itself one of the writer's merits, one of his virtues. He is neither dogmatic nor swayed by personal inclination; he does not wish to impose upon you any single opinion from among the schools of philosophy, but wishes only to stir in you reflection upon a range of views and doctrines. He is precise and modest, unwilling to declare his own opinion outright for fear that the weaker-minded might follow him without inquiry or thought. He is content, then, merely to draw your attention to a set of questions worth pondering, and to invite you to seek their solution, in the hope that you might arrive at it, or come close. What is time? What is resurrection? What is the bond between man and time? What is the bond between the living and life itself? By which of the two faculties can people truly live and be productive in life — by this faculty we call the heart, by which we love and hate, or by this faculty called the intellect, by which we think, analyse, and reconcile things with one another?

All these questions deserve reflection, deserve a long pause; and the writer stirs them within you, employing for that purpose a splendid, rare art, full of moving power and gentle restraint. He is neither a schoolmaster nor a professor, but a friend conversing with you, keeping pace with you, drawing your attention to what you might otherwise pass by without pausing or looking closely. I know of no Arab writer who has treated his readers as well as Ustadh Tawfiq al-Hakim. He has truly honoured them, truly guided them, and done them good without humiliation, without bewildering them, and without condescension.

And love — this love the writer has introduced into the story without artifice, without strain, and without any collision with religious sentiment — the writer has managed to portray in two powerful forms. One of them reaches a pitch of intensity we can scarcely find except in the most ardent of European writers and poets devoted to passionate love, its hopes and its pleasures in all their variety. The other attains, through love, a pure mystical intensity, innocent of any taint, such as we can scarcely find except among the great mystics and saints.

I confess I am unreservedly, boundlessly impressed by the writer's skill. As for the real, lived life of these ordinary people, who think of

nothing beyond their daily tasks, who neither taste philosophy nor know how to conceive it or discuss it — how the writer has portrayed it! He has captured it perfectly in the figure of the king and those around him at court and in the city. And this mixed, half-formed faith that marks people who cultivate learning but are, in truth, only half-educated — in them a certain simplicity, though they wish to seem clever; in them a love of life and an eagerness to hold onto it, though they wish to appear as though they prize faith above life itself. How brilliantly Ustadh Tawfiq al-Hakim captured this in the figure of the tutor Ghalyas!

I do not suppose you would want me to summarize the story for you; it is in print, and you can read it — indeed, you ought to read it, for no one versed in Arabic literature should remain ignorant of this splendid literary achievement.

But — and how sorry I am for this "but." How I wish I had no need to set it down. But the story has two faults. One of them genuinely distresses me, and however much the writer may soften it, I will not give it its full due of blame: it is this outrageous fault in the language. It is a fault no writer ought to fall into, let alone a writer like Ustadh Tawfiq al-Hakim, who has opened, beyond any doubt, a new door in Arabic literature. I think too highly of the author, of his story, and of (Al-Risala) itself to dwell upon these ugly errors — some touching the very substance of the language, some touching grammar and morphology, some touching style and sentence construction. I will not soften my words to spare myself the charge of harshness and severity, nor will I hesitate to demand, firmly, that the author withdraw this beautiful edition and reprint the story once its errors have been corrected. And I would be glad to undertake this correction myself, on his behalf, should he wish it. Perhaps what a second edition will cost him will be enough to sting him, and compel him to make sure of his linguistic accuracy in whatever he writes before he releases it to the public.

As for the second fault, it carries its own weight, though a lighter one, since this is the first story of its kind, as they say. This fault concerns the dramatic form itself: philosophy and poetry so overpowered the writer that he forgot the audience has rights that must be respected. He grew lengthy in some places where he ought to have been brief; he elaborated in some places where he ought to have been concise; he went too deep in some subjects where a mere allusion would have sufficed. Perhaps he will agree with me that it asks too much of an audience to sit through, in the theatre, this very beautiful, very long speech that Priscilla

delivers to Ghalyas as she bids him farewell, having resolved to die in the cave alongside her sainted beloved.

This fault is a grave one, for it makes the story fit to be read rather than performed. And I am most anxious that this story be performed, fully confident that its performance will show the author, with his own eyes, the artistic flaw it contains, and enable him to avoid this flaw in his other works, and to correct it in this one.

In closing, I earnestly hope that Madame Kher's story will be translated into Arabic, and that Ustadh Tawfiq al-Hakim's story will be translated into French, so that both stories may accomplish what they ought to accomplish toward the true and fruitful bond between East and West.