

The Guide to the Philosophy of Locusts

Al-Risala, 17 May 1937

My dear unknown friend, Ismail ibn Zayd — may God preserve him, and multiply his like.

Warm greetings reach you wherever you may be, for I do not know where you are, any more than I know who you are.

To proceed: I read your book in (Al-Risala) some days ago, and I do not know how our friend Dr. Awad got hold of it, for it never reached me before its publication; had it reached me, I would not have delayed in replying to you, despite the press of work and my mind's preoccupation with matters people consider weighty, far-reaching in their effect on the lives of individuals and communities — matters I regard, as you yourself regard them, as slighter and less momentous than frog-hunting, than the education of locusts, or the extraction of sunbeams from cucumber peel. I am fairly certain you are a man tender toward his friends, gentle with his intimates, and that it occurred to you to consult me on the matter that had arisen for you, so you set down your letter and were on the point of sending it to me; then, learning that I was worn out and overburdened, you took pity on me, showed me consideration, and put off sending your letter until the year should end and I should be free for such grand and worthy subjects. But your letter fell into the hands of our friend Awad by whatever means books fall into people's hands, or people fall upon books; and Awad is a man with the cunning of imps and the polish of devils, acquired, I am fairly sure, from his translation of the story of Faust and his long companionship with that great German poet's devil. No sooner had the book fallen to him, or he fallen upon the book, than he rushed it off to Al-Risala, scheming to publish it — to your detriment and mine alike.

He schemes against you, because he reckons people will laugh once they discover these strange subjects you ponder, spending your time and effort in studying them; and he schemes against me, by demanding of me, in your name, before the assembled readers of Al-Risala, that I organize into chapters the books you wish to circulate on these subjects.

Now Awad is no devil, no imp, no translator of Faust, no long-time companion of Mephistopheles, who lets not a single day or night pass without striving and labouring to vex some person or torment some

friend; and I reckon that when he fails to find anyone else to vex or torment, he does not hesitate to vex or torment himself — in this he has a poor model and an ugly example in al-Hutay'a. There must, after all, be some in this world who call people to evil and drive them to injustice, just as there are some who call people to good and guide them to righteousness and right conduct.

I had half a mind, my dear unknown friend, to ignore this letter I never received, or to put off replying to it just as you put off sending it; but I confess — I will not lie to you — I had scarcely finished reading it than I found rest in it and took delight in it, for it struck a chord in me and matched something of the thoughts and opinions that had been stirring in my own head. So I found I had no choice but to answer you in (Al-Risala), since I do not know your address, and since I read your book in Al-Risala and received it by that route, and since I do not trust this imp we call Awad, to whom we have entrusted the teaching of geography in two of the University's faculties, not to tamper with it, in ways great or small. And you know how very difficult it would be for me to answer you, in a single chapter, on how to organize these four books you have written without any organization at all; that would require time and leisure I do not possess these days either; and it would require, besides, more space in Al-Risala than it could grant us without doing an injustice to one or two of its literary contributors. Nor will I speak of consideration for the reader, or of entertaining him, for the reader is the very last person I think of; it is no concern of mine whether he is angered or pleased, no matter to me whether he reads or turns away from reading, for I am not writing for him — I am writing for you. And I am not writing for him because this subject is too deep and too subtle to be written for readers; readers are written for on the philosophy of Plato, Aristotle, Nietzsche, and their like among the mighty-minded; but the philosophy of locusts is too delicate, too hidden, too fine a thing for the minds of the merely cultured to reach, or for the insight of the merely enlightened to penetrate. For this reason I think of you, and not of readers; had I thought of them, I would have written nothing, for I do not like to confront them with what they would dislike. There is no way, then, for me to address you on these four subjects on which you have written unorganized books; I shall address you instead on a single one of them, chosen to serve as a model for the others you have written on, and might yet write on. And if you insist that I organize all four of these books for you, we might manage that in private sessions, meeting from time to time for this weighty task — meeting to talk at leisure and in freedom, without

these readers joining our conversation, readers we cannot trust not to draw all manner of conclusions about us, loosen their tongues against us, and think all manner of things of us.

I have chosen the education of locusts in the principles of philosophy as the subject of this discussion. And the first thing I notice, my dear unknown friend, is that you have neglected the title of the book you wrote to a shocking degree; and I am fairly certain that your neglect of the arts is what stood between you and organizing the book as you would wish.

I do not know whether the ancients were right in saying that a book is known by its title, but I believe that a book's title organizes it, gives it order, harmonizes its parts, and spreads through it that music which endears it to the soul and lures the minds of readers toward it. And the first thing that must, I think, be attended to in a title is to follow the way of the righteous ancients: not to release it loose and unbound, but to bind it with rhymed prose — for releasing things unbound allows them to wander aimlessly, straying in every direction, becoming like these very locusts, which never settle on an ear of grain or a stalk except for the briefest moment before moving to another ear or stalk. So, my friend, if you wish to compose a book, do not think about its subject, nor its parts, nor its chapters and sections, nor its ends and purposes — all of this comes of itself, without your having to summon it or trouble yourself over it with care or thought. The one thing on which you must exert your effort, spend your time, and exhaust your strength, is the title — the title bound and rhymed. Our great literary heritage bears witness to this: count it up, and you will find most of it bound by these very rhymed titles. Our friend al-Zayyat bears witness to this too — we had rich and valuable exchanges with him in this very art in our youth, an art few can truly master. Our friend Mahmoud Hassan al-Zinati bears witness to this as well, who was our teacher in this remarkable art. And so, no sooner had I chosen this subject for discussion than I thought, before anything else, of the title of the book you wrote — and you told me only the barest, briefest fragment of it. You called this book *The Guide to the Philosophy of Locusts*, and the particular mark of a brilliant title is that the ordinary reader sees it and thinks it plain and clear, while the specialist, upon examining it, discovers in it shades of obscurity and varieties of strangeness requiring explanation and interpretation, commentary and elucidation. There is no doubt that the cultured among Al-Risala's readers will find this title easy, palatable, close at hand. But masters of rhetoric, those firmly grounded in the science of interpretation, will notice that the

word "philosophy" here has been used in other than its true, familiar sense; for locusts have no philosophy — the proof being that you wish to teach them philosophy. One might therefore say that the word carries a kind of loose figurative usage, the author intending "the philosophy of locusts" in the sense of what is yet to be, since the locust, once it has read your book, God willing, will become refined and well-mannered and come to possess a philosophy. But this may not be what the author intended; he may have intended something else — that locusts already possess, now, a locust philosophy, from which one wishes to redirect them toward human philosophy. Or the author may have intended "philosophy" as a verbal noun, meaning to render the locust a philosopher — as one says: "I philosophized the thing," meaning I made it philosophical; "I philosophized the man," meaning I made him one of the people of philosophy; "I philosophized the locust," meaning I made it philosophized. Do not search for this word in the old Arabic dictionaries — you will likely find nothing there; but look for it among the philosophers of the Faculty of Arts, for they are the ones who reconcile the old with the new, and to whom one turns for such problems.

Do you see how a single word from this title has stirred up all these inquiries I have only briefly gestured toward — so what of its other words, examined singly or examined together? What is beyond doubt is that this title will secure two things for you. The first: it is an advertisement that will delight and charm readers — indeed, will dazzle and astonish them — and will invite them to buy the book and promote it among their companions and friends. It may even please the Ministry of Education, and you know better than I the countless benefits that lie behind that. The second: this title will lay out for you the book's programme, and enable you to organize it without difficulty or hardship. Trouble yourself with no deliberation, no thinking at all — simply take the words of this title and turn them into headings for your inquiries, and you will find your book organized, God willing. Let the subject of the first chapter, then, be an inquiry into the word "book" itself — from what it is derived, whence it was taken, and the various meanings it has borne across different ages and different milieus. Do not be afraid of being told this is digression, prolixity, and padding of speech; for were it not for digression, prolixity, and padding, most of scholarship — or at the very least, most literature — would vanish. You have, in al-Jahiz, an excellent model, for he wrote at length about the word "book" itself when he set out to compose his work on animals.

Aristotle, before him, wrote on this same subject, choosing brevity and avoiding digression — and the result was that everyone reads al-Jahiz's book, while none look into Aristotle's, because Aristotle's book is science, and the science of zoology has since changed, while al-Jahiz's book is literature, and literature rarely changes — especially when it is marked by prolixity and continuity. And we, in the Faculty of Arts, never begin our courses in literature until we have taught our young men a great deal about the word "literature" itself and its meanings — so follow our example, and no harm will come to you. Once you have finished with these worthy inquiries, which have no connection, and need have none, with the subject itself, proceed to an inquiry that forms a bridge between them and the subject — namely, the addition of the word "book" to "guide," and the connection between it and "locusts." Consider how books differ according to the different kinds of people, and how books differ according to the different kinds of animals — not merely in their subject and style, but in their size and format too, in the material on which they are printed and circulated, and in the script and letters used in this printing; for types of printing vary according to readers' capacities and tastes, and so do sizes, and so does the material of paper and binding. And this must be extended by analogy to animals, and to locusts in particular. It is quite clear that this will carry you into varieties of original inquiry no one has attempted before you; and if you illustrate your views with a few images, be assured you will make a great event in the world of authorship, and be assured you will open, for the Translation, Authorship, and Publishing Committee, doors they will not hesitate to enter, though they will never know how to find their way out again.

Then leave this chapter for the second, and give it the title "Guide," following in this chapter the same course you followed in the first: subject the word "guide" and its meanings to all the same tests to which you subjected the word "book" and its meanings. Then inquire into how the guidance of locusts might come about, and devote a section to setting out the view of those who hold that the locust understands through the intellect, explaining how its guidance would proceed on this account; and devote another section to setting out the view of the moderns, who hold that the locust understands through the mouth and the belly, explaining how the locust's guidance might proceed by way of mouths and bellies. People, as you know, differ on this subject; some hold that the principles of philosophy should be written on the leaves of trees, on stars, and on crops that locusts love and are inclined to eat, saying that if the locust eats these philosophized leaves, it will grasp knowledge, absorb wisdom,

and become a philosopher, God willing.

Then make the third word the title of the third chapter, and it is "to." You must inquire into why "guide" takes the preposition "to" and no other; why one does not say "The Guide for the philosophy," or "by the philosophy," or "in the philosophy," or "from the philosophy," or "concerning the philosophy," or "upon the philosophy of locusts." It is clear that each of these prepositions will require a very lengthy chapter of its own, and you will find in Ibn Hisham's al-Mughni what will help you compose these chapters. Do not fear this prolixity, for it is exactly what will benefit you and win your book favour among our friends at al-Azhar. Then, if you wish your book to find favour among university men, and in the Faculty of Letters especially, take particular care over the fourth chapter — the chapter of "philosophy" itself, the true kernel of the book, for the chapters that came before were mere husk, though a necessary husk, since every kernel needs a husk, or else it would not be a kernel. Now inquire into philosophy itself, and into the origin of the word, and beware of saying it is Greek — this may well accord with the truth, but truth these days is of no use against novelty. And novelty these days consists in taking things out of their origins, placing them where they do not belong, and tracing them to sources not their own. It appears that the word "philosophy" goes back to an ancient Semitic Arabic root, and I have no doubt you will find, in the poetry of the tribe of Quda'a, a line proving to you and to everyone that the Arabs knew philosophy and used the word for it before Socrates was ever born. You must also present the meanings of philosophy and the doctrines of the philosophers across the different ages, and inquire which of them comes closest to the locust — to its intellect, if you are a partisan of the intellect, or to its belly, if you are a partisan of bellies. Once you have finished this tremendous, formidable inquiry, you will arrive at the final chapter — which is the result of results, the essence of essences, the origin of origins, the chapter of chapters, the summation of the book, the very kernel of kernels — namely, the chapter on locusts themselves, to which the Guide is directed.

This chapter is, by its very nature, complicated. You must inquire into the word "locust" — whence it came and to what it has led; you must inquire into the locust's standing among the kinds of animals; you must inquire into its virtues and its faults; then you must inquire into its intellect and the faculties it possesses, and into its belly and the qualities that distinguish it in absorption and digestion, and in distributing

knowledge and philosophy to the parts and extremities of the body — arriving, in the end, at the locust conducting itself according to a sound philosophical way of life. And if, having reached this point in your book, it seems to you that you have brought it to its conclusion and imparted knowledge of a solid, verifiable kind that would qualify you for a doctorate from the Faculty of Arts — then return to the Cartesian method, and strike out, utterly, everything you have written; assume you have written nothing and learned nothing, and begin speaking anew. You will find that you have wasted your time to no benefit, spent your effort to no purpose, and consumed your rest, your paper, your ink, and your pens for nothing at all — for the locust has no need to learn human philosophy now, since it has already learned it, long ago. If it is a plunderer, a raider, and a marauding warrior, it took this from man. And what, after all, is man, but an animal whose whole life consists of plunder, pillage, and war? And if the locust is light, swift, restless, never settling, never at peace, it took this too from man — and I do not suppose you could find a single locust ignorant of the ancient poet's verse:

Variety in passion's delights lies in variety.

And if the locust is versatile, adept in lightness and movement, it took this versatility, too, from man — for it watches civilization and its transformations, watches principles change their colours, watches the turmoil of people in their opinions, their passions, their doctrines, and their principles; watches consciences bought and sold, minds held cheap, freedoms treated with contempt, and foundational truths turned into merchandise, a means to profit and base advantage. The locust once resolved to imitate man in all this, but some remnant of its intellect — or of its belly, where philosophy resides — held it back, and kept it from sinking to that base, plague-ridden depth to which modern man has sunk; and so it remains where it is, raiding nobly to eat what it can reach of the earth's fruits, returning nobly if it can return, or dying nobly beneath whatever violence and destruction man inflicts upon it. And when you arrive at this conclusion, you find yourself between two positions: if you are among the partisans of corruption, the lovers of decline, who believe that man has reached, in this age, the highest stage of civilization, then resume your work, and search for some way to guide the locust toward imitating man in this same descent to such depths. But if you are among the conservatives who despise modern development and detest its results, then call upon man instead to learn the philosophy of the locust, and write, on this theme, a book entitled: (An Exposition on the

Divestment of Man) — "divestment" [tajarrud] here being derived, of course, from "locust" [jarād]. And accept, my dear unknown friend, my sincerest greetings.

Taha Hussein