

The Soul and the Dance

Al-Risala, issues 25-26

My friend Dr Muhammad Awad Muhammad discovered, in his valuable and charming critique of my book *On the Margin of the Sira*, that behind the thin coat of Western culture I had displayed there lay a thoroughbred Azharite. It is therefore fitting that I congratulate him on this discovery and thank him for it; he has guided me to myself and revealed to me the truth of my own condition. And perhaps he will permit me to dedicate this translation to him in acknowledgement of his merit and as a reward for his abundant and great endeavour.

And I should like, before this translation, to set down some indispensable observations.

The first: I have taken the very greatest care that the translation should be precise and nearly literal, so as to convey to the readers an image that, if not identical, is at least close to what the author wished to say.

The author himself is obscure; and this manner of translation makes him still more obscure—though I shall do my best to clarify this by means of brief notes that illuminate what he intends.

The second: the author is one of the foremost leaders of the Symbolists; he seeks metaphor and figure, similitude and representation, and takes them to great lengths; and through these lengths he draws the reader into sharing with him the pleasure of thinking and inferring. The reader should therefore not be irritated by the strangeness he will encounter, but must be patient with this strangeness and train himself to confront it until he grows accustomed to it and feels at ease with it, and becomes a friend to the author and a lover of his works.

The third: this book is a dialogue between Socrates and two of his disciples at the last of a series of supper parties; and the reader should bear this in mind, and should also bear in mind that Socrates and his companions were pagans, and so they speak the language of pagans—mentioning many gods, not one God.

The fourth: the title and subject of this book may offend the sensibilities of the more scrupulous among Easterners, though they give no offence to French ears. It is certain that Paul Valéry did not write his

book for us; and had he thought of us and reckoned that we might translate his book, it would have been possible for him to choose a different subject and title for it other than the dance. And who knows—perhaps he sensed that all connection between him and us was severed and unrestored, and that he might prove unable to write for us, and we might prove unable to read him.

There is nothing in this book that is ill, and nothing in it to anger the more scrupulous; it is rather one of the works of art whose author wished to depict, with clarity and power, the relationship between the soul and outward beauty. It comes closer to being a treatise on aesthetics than to anything else.

And now we may begin the translation.