

Criticism, the Tarboosh, and the Window Glass

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You may add to these titles other titles besides, for there are alleys narrow to the point of narrowness itself, winding to the point of winding itself, upon whose ground the mud has so accumulated that a man walking through them all but slips, or walks with the very gait Muslim ibn al-Walid describes in his famous line:

*When the crest of a moustache rises high upon us,
it makes him walk the walk of a shackled man in the mud.*

And its sky, or the windows of the houses standing within it, has rained down upon it every hue of rain—liquid and solid alike; God forgive us, rather its sky, or the windows of the houses standing within it, has poured down upon it every hue of calamity—the broth of sprouted fava beans among them, and pickle-brine, and other solid things besides, which used to come hurtling down upon heads, and sometimes struck eyes, and sometimes entered mouths and reached throats, where they were wrung out with a wringing, and kindled there a blaze and a fire. And in these alleys there dwelt a demon among the demons of the jinn, or the demons of men, broad of chest, upon which his long hair bristled, sharp as spearheads, so that when a short man collided with him, this long, sharp hair would play mischievously across his face, and enter his nose and his mouth and his eyes. And in these alleys there was a wicked lad, sweet of tongue and bitter of hand; and in these alleys there was a youth outwardly stupid and foolish, secretly cunning and treacherous, fierce in force and violence, who frightened those who had no business being frightened, and drove even the steadiest of heart and the most scornful of life to run the running of al-Shanfara and Ta'abbata Sharran and Ibn Barraq, until he was driven into one of the houses, then into one of the rooms of that house, entering it not by its door, as God commanded houses to be entered, but through one of its windows. And in these alleys there was a venerable old man, fearsome in outward appearance, but within him mercy and gentleness, courtesy and calm, refinement and good taste.

All these things, and all these persons, might be added to the titles I set before this discourse; but I did not add them, from reluctance to

prolong it, from a wish to spare it excessive elaboration, and from a preference for eloquent brevity.

Now, having set down this title and followed it with this discourse, I am free to carry you off to whatever subject you wish, or I wish, and speak to you of it at whatever length, long or short, and set before you in it images beautiful or hideous, and stir in your soul emotions calm or unruly, and trace upon your face a smile and a laugh, or a scowl and a frown—until, having achieved all of this, whatever you wanted, or whatever I wanted, or whatever we both wanted, I should mention criticism, the tarboosh, and the window glass. And I should believe, or you should be given to imagine that I believe, and you should believe, or be given to imagine that you believed, and my friend Ustadh al-Mazini should believe, or be given to imagine to himself and to us that he believes, that I had regaled Al-Risala and its readers with a valuable essay—or a worthless one—whose substance was a discourse on criticism, the tarboosh, and the window glass!

And you ask me why Ustadh al-Mazini is being dragged in here so forcibly, and what business he has with criticism, or the tarboosh and the window glass, and the broth of sprouted fava beans, and pickle-brine, and everything else that follows from these things and these lives? I answer you that this question ought not to be put to me, but ought rather to be put to Ustadh al-Mazini, for it is he who spoke of all this, and it is he who provoked me into speaking of all this; and there is no doubt that Ustadh al-Mazini will say, in his sweet and charming banter, what business is it of yours, and why do you come between me and criticism, and the tarboosh, and the window glass, and everything attached to them? But the Ustadh agrees with me, or does not agree—it makes no difference—that he is a man of art, and that men of art, if they write for themselves, are in fact publishing for the people, and that a man of art no longer owns his artistic work once he has cast it before the people. And that it is the people's right, once something has been cast before them, to take it up however they please—to be delighted by it or indignant at it, to be drawn to it or to turn away from it, to praise it or to heap blame upon it.

And so Ustadh al-Mazini has cast before us his delightful and admirable essay, which provoked me into speaking to you of criticism, the tarboosh, and the window glass—or rather, into speaking to you of Ustadh al-Mazini himself, from behind these countless things which I do not tire of repeating, and which I do not think you tire of hearing

repeated: criticism, the tarboosh, the window glass, the alleys and the mud that accumulates upon their ground, and what the sky pours down of liquid and solid, and those who walk amid all this, the wicked and the good.

And Ustadh al-Mazini has, in connection with all these things, and with all these people, and with you, and with me, a curious and charming story, worthy of being told, and worthy of arousing admiration. Do you know what drove Ustadh al-Mazini to speak of these things, and of these persons, so that he provoked me into speaking of him, and of them, and of these things? It is something simple, very simple: he is a man of letters who reads books, writes in the newspapers, and reviews books and their authors. Times may change, the circumstances of life may shift, generations may rise after decline; but there is one thing that does not change, does not shift, in the true nature of the matter: that letters are an affliction by which men of letters are tried, a visitation God brings down upon those to whom He has granted some measure of good taste and the capacity to understand literature and bring it near to people. And God has tried our friend al-Mazini, and allotted him a great portion of the affliction and calamity of letters, making him an accomplished poet, a skilled writer, and a critic whose word carries weight, whose presence commands awe, whose opinion has power—no book appears but people wish to know his view of it and his judgment upon it. And the author of the book himself is the person most eager for this, most insistent in seeking it and pressing for it. Books rain down upon Ustadh al-Mazini, and with them rains down the request for criticism and the request for eulogy, and criticism and eulogy both require reading and study. And so poor Mazini is diverted from himself, from his own art, from his own books, toward these people who write, and toward those who read. And for this reason, and for other reasons besides, Mazini has been made wretched by letters, even as letters have been made happy by Mazini; and what proof of Mazini's wretchedness through letters, and letters' happiness through Mazini, is stronger than this story I am about to tell you now?

For a writer among writers had brought out a book among books, and had dedicated it to the Ustadh, naturally. And people learned that this book had been dedicated to him, and so people began to wait, and the book's author in particular began to wait; and when the waiting grew long, the request came; and when the request came and yielded nothing, the pressing insistence came. And Mazini was compelled to submit, and

was forced to write, but he had already sent the book off to be bound. And when the pressing insistence upon him intensified, he went to fetch the book from the binder. And so he was driven into a strange journey, and into a stranger discovery still. He was driven out of these civilised quarters, where the streets are broad, where motorcars run, where police are stationed everywhere, and whose ground is not covered in mud, and whose sky does not rain down broth or pickle-brine, into narrow, winding alleys of foul air, where generations of demons and devils dwell; and in these alleys Mazini came to know fear and terror, came to know flight and its excess, came to know what it is for stones to strike bodies, and what it is for curses to strike souls. Then he came to know how people lose their tarbooshes, and how they watch them being disgraced and rolled about in the mud; then he came to know how those fleeing are driven to storm houses and hide within homes whose owners have gone. Then he came to know the story of the man who went to fetch a book and lost his tarboosh, returning empty-handed.

And the strange thing is that this tremendous journey, and all the perils that filled it, took place entirely within Cairo, and within a matter of a few short hours; and I do not know why those who love danger need seek it in the desert, or in the mountains, or upon the open ocean, so long as passing from one quarter of Cairo to another is capable of showing us such terror and peril as our friend the man of letters saw. From this we can understand Mazini's exasperation with letters and men of letters, with books and authors, and his ceaseless supplication to God to spare him this trade which brings him such misery—though it brings happiness to him, and to people, all the same. But Ustadh al-Mazini asks himself, in some perplexity, whether he ought to read what he himself wishes, or what people wish him to read. And if he will permit me to answer him, I hold that he is obliged to read what he wishes, and to read what people wish, so long as he has taken up this trade willingly or under compulsion; but the question I should like to put to him is this: does Ustadh al-Mazini believe he has discharged his obligation before his readers and before the author with this admirable essay he wrote a few days ago, in which he told us of criticism, the tarboosh, and the window glass, and of what the earth bears in mud, and what the sky rains down in broth? If he believes he has satisfied his readers and his friend with this essay, then he is both right and wrong at once: right, because the essay is admirable; wrong, because it does nothing whatsoever to satisfy the demand for criticism, and the author of the book will not spare him his insistence, and will not leave him be until he says that he has read this book and either approved

of it or condemned it.

And another question, which I hope my friend Mazini will not resent my putting to him. What has come over him, that he tyrannises over himself and goes to excess in this tyranny, and portrays himself in this manner which suits him not at all, and which we do not wish for him? Is it truly the case that he is so timid? By no means; rather he loves to toy with himself, and goes to excess in this toying; and I am fairly certain that were we to say this to him, he would grow impatient and irritated with us, and complain of these parasites who insert themselves between people and their own selves, and say: if I have no right to toy with myself, then who has the right to toy with me instead? As for me, I answer the Ustadh that this right belongs to no one; yet people take it for themselves regardless, whether the Ustadh likes it or not; and I challenge him, and demand of him, to show me how he can prevent people from treating him with whatever species of criticism and mockery they please, rather than what he himself pleases—how can he prevent people from this without stepping outside the bounds of the man of letters? Why, then, does he do himself this injustice, and press upon himself this pointless mockery? Or has the world grown too narrow for the Ustadh, as it is said to have grown too narrow, one day, for al-Hutay'a, who satirised himself because he could find no one else to satirise him? Or has the Ustadh come to loathe give-and-take, grown weary of dialogue and dispute, come to hate mentioning people lest he tempt them to mention him in turn, and so preferred to mention this wretched self of his, which finds no one to defend it and protect it from its own tyrant? If this is the case, then Mazini has erred, and here I am defending Mazini against Mazini himself. I fear, though, that none of this has any root or branch, as they say, and that Mazini simply meant to review the book he was asked to review, when his imagination carried him off, and his playfulness carried him off, into these narrow, winding alleys, searching there for the book and its author, and gained nothing but the loss of his own tarboosh and the loss, for the old man his host, of his window pane, and nothing at all, either for himself or for his friend the author. Woe to books and authors from Mazini's playfulness and mischief; woe to books and authors from Mazini's riddles and symbols; nay, woe to Mazini himself from the tyranny of his imagination and its unruliness—for within this slight, slender frame, the frame of this calm and gentle man, there lurks a demon like the demons, and a devil unlike any other devil.

Now then, let us mention criticism, the tarboosh, and the window glass, and the things and persons connected with them, that we may close this essay as we opened it; and let Mazini know that we have not spoken of him, have not alluded to him, have not thought of him at all, but have spoken only of a book awaiting review, a tarboosh that was lost, and a pane of glass shattered utterly by some lad or other.