

The Reply

Al-Risala, 15 September 1933

To Professor Tawfiq al-Hakim from Dr. Taha Hussein

My dear Professor,

I do not know whether it truly matters to me or my companions that we know the opinion of the new generation about our literary efforts and the influence we have had on our new literary life. For a true knowledge of the opinion of one's contemporaries has no path to it — or the path to it scarcely exists. Or say rather that this new generation itself may find it very difficult to form about us an opinion that is correct, upright, free from those sharp and ungoverned emotions that hold sway over the souls of young people and exert the most powerful influence on the opinions they form about contemporary writers and poets. They are divided between the admirer whom admiration drives to excess in praise, and the detractor whom resentment drives to excess in blame. I am almost convinced that it is no easy matter for a writer or poet to know what people truly think of him, because that opinion does not appear clear and plain, free from the influence of emotions, passions, and circumstances, except when the writer or poet becomes a trust in the keeping of history. Nevertheless I thank you most warmly for your opinion of my companions and of me, for your praise of my companions and of me, and they as much as I are pleased that your opinion of us should be sound and your praise of us free from excess in the love that leads to excess in esteem.

I have read your delightful book and it left various impressions on me, the most prominent of which was admiration for this upright and penetrating thought, this wide and rich learning, and this fruitful orientation toward identifying the literary spirit of Egypt in its past, present, and future life. My admiration for your valuable book moved me not to keep it for myself alone, and I preferred to share it with the readers of *Al-Risala* and to circulate it among them. I am confident that they have seen in it what I saw and praised in it what I praised and admired you as I admired you, and they were disposed to debate some of the opinions contained in it, just as I now want to debate them. I do not know whether the matter of your book will stop at its circulation in *Al-Risala* and my reply to it, or will go beyond these to a long and wide discussion in which various writers and many critics participate. Your book merits this discussion because the manner of thought in it is new and valuable. And whatever I do, I shall not be able to address all that I

feel the need to address by way of critique and examination from your many diverse opinions with which you have filled your book to the full. But I shall pause at a small number of these opinions which I cannot allow to pass without critique or comment.

The first of these opinions at which I pause is your view of what you call the affairs of thought in Egypt before the generation in which we grew up. You seem to think that these affairs were all imitation, emulation, and following of the Arabs, and a wholesale adoption of their literary models, until Professor Lutfi al-Sayyid came and opened for us the path of literary independence. There is some truth in this view of yours, but there is also in it no small measure of excess. For I do not believe that Egyptian personality was effaced from Egyptian literature completely at any point; I do not believe that the word "I" had no referent in the language of Egyptians; and I do not believe that the Egyptians were in a kind of swoon until the generation you speak of arrived and restored life and vitality to them. All that can properly be conceded to you is that Egyptian personality in literature had withered and faded to a considerable degree at some period that perhaps begins with the end of the Mamluk era. But that personality, for all its withering and enfeeblement, did not die and was not effaced; it remained alive, its faint rays reverberating through the works of writers, poets, and scholars until the modern era arrived. It suffices to read Egyptian literature in the days of the Mamluks and before the Mamluks to know that our literary personality was powerful and productive, attractive and captivating in every branch of our intellectual life. It was in poetry in particular stronger than it is today. Read the collected poems of Baha' al-Din Zuhayr and you will find your own image in them clearly, find yourself apparent in them, find your own emotions represented in them — and you will find all this more brilliantly and powerfully in this ancient poet than in any of our contemporary poets. Nor is the matter confined to this poet; it is common to all our poets before the Turkish conquest of Egypt. And it is equally common in our writers and scholars. Had our personality been weak, withered, languid, and feeble, we would not have been granted the opportunity to preserve Islamic civilisation and to keep it from being lost when the Tatars and the Europeans seized the horizons of the East and West. Nor was this personality hidden or obscure in the ages of weakness and decline; you find it plainly in the poetry of those later poets who lived in the early part of the last century and in its midst — poets whose poetry we do not love and at which we do not linger, whom we imagine to have been imitating and excessive in their imitation, yet who despite this heavy

imitation could not efface their Egyptianness nor conceal it. I cannot give you examples here for that is an endless task, but I assure you that your judgement on this Egyptian personality in literature stands in need of correction — and you are capable of this correction if you read our Egyptian literature as you read Western literature and as you read ancient Arabic literature. You will find imitation in it, and you will find much ornament in it, but you will also find in it a clearly Egyptian tendency that you will feel wherever you go, wherever you turn across the land of Egypt, and that you will find in Egyptians of the present day whom European culture has not drawn out of their familiar ways in feeling, thinking, viewing life, being affected by it, and judging it. This tendency is somewhat mystical: it has a temperate disposition toward acquiescence in fate and a smile at events; it has a temperate measure of a grief not intensely dark nor excessively deep, and of an irony not fierce nor sharply biting yet for all that persuasive and penetrating — an irony that passes in many cases. And perhaps you will find this very tendency quite close to yourself. Perhaps you will find it in *The People of the Cave*. Our generation, then, did not create a new Egyptian personality where none existed; it polished that personality and removed the veils and coverings from it. Our generation did not grant it life; it granted it vitality, increased its measure of independence, and changed its direction — turning it forward after it had persisted in looking backward. And that is no small thing. I am struck by your views on Egyptian art and on Greek art, but I dislike this haste of yours in drawing general conclusions and erecting rules that will not survive examination and scrutiny. The proof of this is that you yourself sensed some of this haste and corrected it when you condemned the Greeks at the beginning of the book and then vindicated them at the end. You will see that you were hasty in the former and hasty in the latter, and you ought to have cultivated patience in both. For it is not true that the Greeks were men of matter and nothing else, and it is not true that the Greeks' spirituality — which you denied at the beginning of the book and acknowledged at the end — came to them solely from their god Dionysus. The Greeks' share of spirituality is ancient; you find it plainly in their narrative poetry in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* before the violent effects of the religion of Dionysus appeared among them. You know that this god's appearance among the Greeks was late in date, that he is in all likelihood a foreign god who came to them from Thrace, and that he did not give them this high spiritual life that we find in Socrates and his disciples and in Plato in particular — but rather gave them another spiritual life, all mysticism and all aspiration toward an unknown, confused world surrounded by mysteries and riddles and

expressed in symbols and allusions. This type of spirituality had two different manifestations: one common and shared, in which the whole people participated — the rural folk especially — and another confined to a specific group that learns the mysteries and participates in their performance and revival. The religion of Dionysus was thus most akin to the Sufi orders among us: its true knowledge confined to the Sufi elect, and its gross practical activity common to all members of the people. And the influence of Dionysus on Greek literature was powerful and deep — it suffices that he is the god of drama. But the truly fertile, truly distinguished spirituality of Greece, which I claim, with apology to you, that you cannot find its like or its near equal in spiritual Egypt — this Greek spirituality you find clearly and plainly, sweetly and enchantingly, in the philosophers of Greece among the disciples of Socrates, and in Plato in particular. You will say, as many have said before, that Plato visited Egypt and drew from it. I do not deny Egypt's spirituality; but I know little of it, and I may perhaps be indebted to the Greeks for what I know of Egyptian spirituality. However things stand, you agree with me that the Greeks were not mere men of matter, and that their spirituality did not come to them from Dionysus alone, but that the Greeks are a temperate blend of matter and spirit — the very people who realised your ideal of a union between matter and spirit, a harmony between movement and stillness, between anxiety and calm — and that is why the Greeks were those who produced for humanity in the ancient world the finest heritage in literature, art, and philosophy.

I said I do not deny the spirituality of the Egyptians. And I also say I believe in the spirituality of the Indians and acknowledge the influence of Egyptian and Indian spirituality on the life of the Greeks. But I know little of the spirituality of the Egyptians because we know of no articulate art among the Egyptians — we know no literature among them in the true sense of the word. You agree with me that literature is the clearest portrayal of the life of minds and hearts, for it achieves a common measure that can be agreed upon and that it is difficult to dispute. If we read poetry or prose together, we understand it with one understanding or two closely related understandings. But silent art — the art of painting and sculpture and the like — arouses in the souls of people meanings that however close and similar they may be differ according to persons, environments, and ages. Here you are understanding from Egyptian art what you understand, and many of the European-educated share this understanding with you. But are you truly certain that the ancient Egyptians saw their statues and their architecture as you see them,

understood them as you understand them, found inspiration in them as you find it? Consider: if you asked a contemporary of Ramesses for his opinion on a statue or a building, would he say of them what you say? The same applies to Greek art and to all silent arts. It is not good to rely on them alone to diagnose the mentality and the spirituality of nations. The true diagnostician of minds, hearts, and spirits is speech — and the beautiful speech we call literature, divided into poetry and prose. Until the archaeologists of Egyptian antiquities reveal to us an ancient Egyptian literature worthy of the name, I ask your permission to doubt greatly many of these judgements that writers, poets, and artists deliver on the mentality of the ancient Egyptians, their spirituality, their distance from matter, and their closeness to the spirit.

All these are, in my view, hasty judgements, delivered without investigation. And so it may be excessive to take this obscure Egyptian spirituality — which doubt rushes toward, which cannot withstand examination, and which threatens to be nothing but a fantasy that you and your companions among writers and artists have imagined — as the foundation for our modern Egyptian literature. For who knows: perhaps the search into Egyptian antiquities will one day reveal to us, after a long or short time, an ancient Egyptian life that wholly contradicts this fantasy you love, take comfort in, and which you imagine the ancient Egyptian art inspires and dictates and speaks.

We are then facing two things, one of which is highly susceptible to doubt — we scarcely know anything of it — and the other of which admits of no doubt. One is the ancient life of Egypt and its intellectual civilisation — if the expression is appropriate; the other is the life of the Arabs and their civilisation. To which of the two shall we have recourse in building the structure of our new literature? To doubt or to certainty? And here the disagreement between you and me appears indeed severe. You have corrected your view of the Greeks, and I cannot debate your judgements on the Egyptians because they are the fruit of artistic inspiration. But your view of the Arabs and their legacy stands in very great need of rectification. We used to think that Ibn Khaldun was unjust to the Arabs — yet here you are more unjust than he and with less excuse. For God has facilitated for you the means of knowledge of ancient history, the history of the Middle Ages, and the history of the literary, artistic, and intellectual life of various nations and peoples to a degree not facilitated for Ibn Khaldun. If it can be accepted from that philosopher-historian that he fell into error because his vast mind did not comprehend what we can

now comprehend or penetrate of Greek, Roman, Indian, Persian, and ancient Egyptian affairs — this error cannot be accepted from you, and cannot be accepted from contemporaries in general. A group of Orientalists — among them Dozy and Renan — have gone where you have gone, and I consider you all to be doing the Arabs grave injustice and pronouncing on their affairs without truth. For had you gone to compare the Arabs with the Indians, the Persians, and the ancient Egyptians, you could not on any account have placed these nations ahead of the Arab nation in literature — because we scarcely know anything of the literature of these nations in their ancient history that can be measured against the Arabic literature we have in hand. Until the literature of these nations is uncovered — if they have a literature beyond what we know — we must acknowledge Arab superiority over them in poetry and prose alike. The Egyptians have their art, the Indians their narratives and their philosophy, but the Arabs have their poetry, their prose, their religion, and their narratives as well. If you want to compare the Arabs with the Romans, I think you agree with me that pure Arabic literature is vastly superior to pure Roman literature — that Roman literature only truly rose when it was influenced by Greek literature, so that the Romans are the disciples of the Greeks in literature, art, and philosophy, and the Arabs resemble them in this. But the Arabs had a distinguished literature before they were influenced by Greek civilisation, while the Romans had no share of this distinguished pure Roman literature worth mentioning. The Romans excelled in jurisprudence, but they did not surpass the Arabs in this dimension of literary production — and perhaps the only nation comparable to the Romans in jurisprudence is the Arab nation.

All that remains, then, is Greek literature — that which may be said to truly surpass Arabic literature. But who measures the height of literature in one nation by the height of literature in another? If the conditions of Arab life differ most profoundly from the conditions of Greek life, it is natural that the literatures of the two nations should differ. There is no doubt that Arabic literature portrayed Arab life faithfully and thus discharged its duty in the best way. All that can be held against ancient Arabic literature is that it does not portray our life today. But are you truly certain that ancient Greek literature is capable of portraying modern life in a way that satisfies its people? As for myself, I do not hesitate to answer such a question: ancient Greek literature is rich, plentiful, and enjoyable beyond doubt, but like Arabic literature it portrayed the life of the ancients, and it is capable of inspiring the moderns — no more and no less.

I see you mention Arab art and criticise and deprecate it, and you may be right in this. But is it not unjust to lay this art at the Arabs' door when it is an Islamic art in which the various Islamic nations participated and from which they drew most from the Byzantines? If you are to blame or praise this art, I prefer you to be moderate in attributing it to the Arabs, and the better course is to attribute it to the Islamic nations. The situation of the Arabs with regard to art, literature, science, and philosophy after the first Abbasid era is like the situation of the Greeks with regard to all these things after Alexander's campaign in the East: they were inspirers, stimulators of activity, drivers of production, furnishing their language as a vessel for what minds and faculties of all kinds produced. And it may be true that each Maqama of al-Hariri resembles a gate of the Mu'ayyad Mosque — but it is equally true that literary works resembling the Maqamat of al-Hariri and artistic works resembling the gates of the Mu'ayyad Mosque are very numerous in the Greek world in the later period and in Byzantium, and these Greek Byzantine works may be what generated among the Muslims the Maqamat of al-Hariri and the gates of the Mu'ayyad Mosque. You distinguish the Greeks by movement and the Arabs by speed, and from this speed you derive great injustice toward the Arabs, as Ibn Khaldun did before you. There is no doubt that the Arabs share in movement with the Greeks — but there is also no doubt that you greatly exaggerate in characterising them by speed. The Arabs were swift only in leaving their desert; but when they reached the cities they settled in them, remained there long, influenced their inhabitants and were influenced by them, and were in the Middle Ages the most similar of nations to the Greeks in the ancient world. And your view of Arab and Greek music stands in need of correction as well: we know little of Greek music and it is imprecise, and we know nothing of Arab music. I do not know to which nation or to which generation we can trace the music and singing we speak of. But the thing I do not doubt is that it is very difficult to trace them to the ancient Arabs. Everything indicates that Arab music and song as the Arabs knew them in the Umayyad and Abbasid eras and in Andalusia were most powerfully influenced by Byzantine music and Byzantine song. If you want to censure them, do not forget to censure their ancient Greek original.

I want now to leave these debates touching particular matters and to arrive at the heart of the subject about which you want to know my opinion: what is the Egyptian spirit on which modern literature ought to be built, and what are the elements that compose it? I ask your

permission to be simple and easy — neither deep nor laboured, nor seeking shade at the fourteenth hour (as the French say) — for the matter is far simpler than all this. Three elements compose the Egyptian literary spirit since Egypt became Arabised. The first is the pure Egyptian element that we have inherited from the ancient Egyptians through the continuity of the ages with them and through their exposure to the various influences to which their life was subject, and that we draw continuously from the soil and the sky of Egypt, from the Nile of Egypt and its desert. This element is always present in pure Egyptian literature. I tried to characterise it somewhat at the beginning of this essay: it has something of mysticism, something of sadness, something of magnanimity, something of irony. The other element is the Arab element that comes to us from language, from religion, and from civilisation — an element from which we shall never be able to free ourselves, nor weaken it, nor diminish its influence on our life, because it has blended with this life in a way that constitutes and sustains its personality. Every corruption of it is a corruption of this life and an effacement of this personality. Do not say it is a foreign element — it is not foreign, this element that has been Egyptianised for centuries upon centuries and has been influenced by all the influences affecting things in Egypt from the characteristics of the Egyptian region. Arabic is not a foreign language in us; it is our language, a thousand times and more closer to us than the language of the ancient Egyptians. Say the same of religion, and say the same of literature.

As for the third element, it is this foreign element that has always influenced Egyptian life and will always influence it, from which Egypt has no path to free herself and no good in freeing herself, because her geographical nature demands it. It is what comes to her from her connection with the civilised nations of East and West: it came from the Greeks, Romans, Jews, and Phoenicians in the ancient era; from the Arabs, Turks, and Franks in the Middle Ages; and it comes from Europe and America in the modern age. Take now any Egyptian literary work and analyse it into its constituent elements — you will always find these three elements. But you will find some stronger than others by the measure of the author's or composer's share in these three different cultures. In some of these works the Arab element predominates; in others the European element predominates; and very few display the ancient Egyptian element. If I must then portray the ideal of our Egyptian spirit in our modern literature, I prefer that Egyptian education should be built on a clear balance among these three elements: intensifying its concern with

Egyptian history, Egyptian art, and Egyptian literature across the ages; intensifying its concern with Arabic literature, Arab history, and the Islamic religion; then intensifying its concern with modern culture. What I fear most for this Egyptian spirit are two things. The first is that European culture may distract us from Egyptian and Arab culture — and everything attracts us toward it and attracts it toward us, for it is a necessity of life; it is our duty not to squander our share of it, but it is equally our duty not to dissolve ourselves in it. The second is that we should prefer one European culture over another — preferring English culture (as some desire and as the policy of the state desires) or preferring Latin culture (as others desire and as the policy of the state formerly desired). This is dangerous because it places the nascent Egyptian spirit face to face with a European spirit stronger and mightier than it, which threatens to overpower and absorb it. Had we opened our doors to all foreign cultures in their variety, we would have benefited from all and each would have weakened the others and prevented any one of them from absorbing us or dominating us. That is why I have wished and continue to wish that no single European language had been imposed on Egypt, but that all the living and elevated languages were open to students to take from them what they will.

This Egyptian spirit, composed of these three elements, is what we now see in you and in many of your educated peers. It is what we seek to spread and circulate among Egyptians generally, and it is what will stamp our modern Egyptian literature with its powerful mark whether we wish it or not. Our Egyptian-Arab personality is stronger, thanks be to God, than to be erased or to vanish, and European civilisation is too powerful and too necessary for us to turn away from it or fall short in taking our due share of it. You will ask me: but the writer — where does he draw his thoughts and find the inspiration of his creative vision? And I answer: from all these elements, or from whichever of them he wishes. We shall have writers who draw inspiration from the ancient Egyptian element — are there not among the French those who draw inspiration from the Greeks? We shall have writers who draw from the Arab element — are there not among the French those who draw inspiration from the Romans? And we shall have writers who draw from the European element — are there not among the French those who draw inspiration from the Saxons, indeed from the Far East, the Middle East, or the Near East? Yes — and the same is true among the English, the Germans, and the other living nations. You will see then that the matter of this Egyptian spirit is simpler than to call for fear or to compel confusion. The most likely

source of this confusion and fear is the disorder of educational policy in Egypt — its absence of foundation and its straying from the right path. Had this policy been clear and straight since long ago, we would not be asking today about the Egyptian spirit or about where Egyptian literature draws its life.

As for the rest: I wanted to be brief and sparing, but the conversation with you has seduced me into length and made me love it. I hope I have not been a burden to you or to any other reader, and I hope you will accept my sincerest greetings.

Al-Risala, 15 September 1933