

From House to House

Al-Risala, 8 January 1934

Said the master of rhetoric to his pupil:

“They claim that rhetoric helps its possessor to convey meaning through varied expressions — expressions of literal sense and figurative sense, of simile and metaphor, of allusion and representation, and of every hue of verbal beauty we know and do not know; some coming by design, others coming unbidden, as though inspired in the eloquent writer. But you know that this is not how we understand rhetoric, nor is this the direction we intend by it; rather, we take it in a sense more general and more comprehensive than this — the sense the ancients intended when they took rhetoric as a means of conveying whatever purpose or meaning presented itself to the writer, in the words best suited to his purposes and meanings. And you may recall that they had a curious way of teaching students the art of rhetoric, one that often distressed those affected moralists who know philosophy only by its surface.”

Said the pupil:

“Yes — it is this same method that used to lead the master to broach, before his pupils, and lead his pupils to broach, the most contradictory and divergent of subjects, so that they might argue them as though they believed in them with the strongest belief, and were convinced of them with the deepest conviction. This was an innovation devised by the Sophists, which the masters of rhetoric then inherited without altering it, only pressing it further. Aristotle's book on Rhetoric is full of this. Al-Jahiz, too, distinguished himself admirably in this manner of teaching rhetoric, and the masters of language and rhetoric composed, in this vein of letters, books not lacking in pleasure and delight — containing praise of a single thing alongside its blame, praise of two opposites alongside blame of both, and more besides...”

Said the master:

“Enough — for I see that the months of summer, with all their travel and wandering, the shifting climates you passed through, and the far reaches of the earth you traversed, have not made you forget what we spent, in the months of spring, in study and inquiry. We wish now to begin again where we left off, and proceed from where we stopped, and

return to our exercises. Choose for us, then, a single subject that stirs both laughter and lament, that stirs both mockery and mercy, that fills the soul with mirth and delight and fills the heart with sorrow and gloom — one and the same thing throughout, unchanging in itself, only the angle from which it is viewed, and the manner of thinking about it, that changes; for a single thing may contradict and differ from itself according to the vantage points from which it is seen, and the paths taken toward understanding and reaching it.”

Said the pupil:

“I have no need to strain or exert myself, to search or to choose; for the subject stands before me already — I witnessed it only yesterday, and it stirred in me these very contrary feelings, and roused in my heart these very different shades of emotion. Those who delve too deep into rhetoric do wrong by themselves, by their pupils, and by the art itself, when they shun what occurs before their own eyes, what befalls them and their like among life's turns of fortune, and instead cast about for subjects of their own invention, fabricating them outright — sometimes hitting the mark, sometimes missing it, and living, in any case, in a world of pure imagination. Whereas had they looked to what surrounds them of the living and the things of life, they would have had no need for all this toil and effort, nor would they have led themselves and their pupils so far from the seats of truth, honesty, and rectitude, nor would they have removed letters from this familiar world — where nothing stirs but illusion — nor would they have severed the bond between literature, which ought to be a mirror of life, and the people, who ought to take it as a glass in which to see themselves and their lives as they truly are, or as they wish them to be, or as they hate them to be.”

Said the master:

“Bring me your subject, then, and do not dwell too long in digression; for I have already learned, and I have already told you that I have learned, that the months of summer did not make you forget the lessons of spring.”

Said the pupil:

“The subject I witnessed yesterday is one that stirs whatever meanings it pleases, whether you wish it or not, and inspires whatever thoughts it pleases, whether you welcome them or not; it calls forth a smile, should you wish to smile, and calls forth a frown, should you wish

to frown. It may force a smile upon you even as you frown, and force a frown upon you even as you smile; it may not stop at a smile but plunge you headlong into laughter, nor stop at a frown but drive you headlong into tears. And it may leave you suspended between smiling and frowning, between laughter and weeping, in some state between the two — a state of quiet wonder, of contentment and indignation both stirring within the soul without ever showing their trace upon the face.”

Said the master:

“Rein in this flood of eloquence, and bring us to what we want; for I have learned that the months of summer did not make you forget the lessons of spring in their meanings, and I have learned too that they did not make you forget the lessons of spring in their expression, and I have learned that you are still capable of excelling at this art which allows the writer or the speaker to speak at great length without conveying any meaning or pointing to anything at all.”

Said the pupil:

“One would think you disdain this art, or mock it, or claim that the beauty of speech does not come from speech itself, and that words possess no share of an inherent beauty arising from their harmony, their cohesion, and their concord.”

Said the master:

“Spare us all this idle play, and bring us to what we want; we may return another day to a discussion of words and meanings, and of the bond that ought to exist between them, and of how beauty ought to be divided between the two. But tell me, if you have forgotten, that subject you witnessed yesterday, which stirs both laughter and lament — tell me of it: how did it stir laughter? And how did it stir lament?”

Said the pupil:

“And how could I forget a subject that forgetfulness itself could never overtake? What do you make of a man of letters created to write and to speak, only to be condemned, all at once, never to write or speak again? Created to think, and to soar with his thought to the heavens, only to be dragged violently back down to earth, forced to remain there against his will, seized and bound to a life among its people; created to read, only to be condemned, all at once, never to read again; created the most eloquent of men in speech, the boldest with the pen, the swiftest to

grasp meaning, the richest in fertile thought — only to have his tongue tied, his hand shackled, his spirit chained, and his mind rendered barren. Created with a clear brow, a smiling mouth, and an open countenance, in whose rich soul teeming meanings stirred and showed their agitation upon his face, so that he was ever restless in bearing — one could scarcely glance at his face without seeing upon it some new expression, picturing some new meaning stirring in that soul which never rested, never grew still — only to be condemned that his bearing should now fall still, and his face take on a single fixed, frozen, settled, unchanging expression, never moving, never shifting, never fading.”

Said the master:

“And what do you find so objectionable in the case of this man of letters? He is nothing but an image of Prometheus, who was himself a movement — unceasing, fruitful, productive, swift and deft — teaching mankind without pause, seeking out every path and every means to instruct them, until he did not scruple to steal the fire of the gods and deliver it as a gift to men, granting them thereby civilization, science, and art, and all but freeing them from need of Zeus and his fellow dwellers of Olympus. And so Zeus grew angry at him, and could not bear him, and resolved to punish him for his crime; he bound him to that rock of his in the Caucasus, and condemned him to remain chained there for all eternity. His very essence had been movement, and so he became powerless; his very reality had been the power to act, and so he came to possess nothing for himself or for others, unable to ward off harm from himself or from them. The eagle appointed to visit him from time to time would tear at his liver, and he would watch it done and suffer the utmost pain, unable to fend it off; he called upon Freedom, but she did not answer him, for Zeus had withheld her from him; he called upon Death, but he did not answer him either, for Fate had decreed him immortality. Aeschylus rendered this condition of Prometheus in a wondrous portrayal that inspired the writers, poets, sculptors, painters, and musicians who came after him. And in his portrayal, Aeschylus stirred the laughter of the hard-hearted and the pity of the tender-souled alike, even as he stirred other meanings still more upright, more fertile, and more enduring than either laughter or pity.”

Said the pupil:

“I never meant Prometheus, nor thought of him at all — do you imagine I saw him yesterday? I never went to the Caucasus; I was with

you, all the while, in Cairo. And were I to go to the Caucasus, I doubt I would find the rock or its companion, for none of those who have visited that land since Aeschylus's day have ever spoken to us of them."

Said the master:

"Then it is some image of Prometheus you had in mind, and took as your model for this manner of rhetoric, just as the ancients used to do."

Said the pupil:

"I did not think of Prometheus, nor did I mean to imitate Aeschylus; it is simply something I witnessed yesterday."

Said the master:

"And what did you witness?"

Said the pupil:

"I saw our friend So-and-so, whom the circumstances of life had decreed should move from one house to another."

Said the master, bursting into laughter:

"How far this image you describe to me is from that image I was reminding you of! And what a distance there is between our friend So-and-so, as circumstance moves him from one house to another, and Prometheus, as the chief of the gods binds him to the rock of the Caucasus!"

Said the pupil:

"Our friend So-and-so did indeed stir laughter in you, because his image called to mind that vast and mighty image raised up by the father of tragedy for all mankind; and when you descended from that image to this slight, frail figure, who had been living at one edge of Cairo and moved to another, you could not help yourself but burst into helpless laughter. And yet, had you seen him yesterday — gloomy of spirit, sorrowful of face, grieved of heart, tongue-tied, foot-bound, hand-shackled, hemmed in among a crowd of furniture and household goods of the most varied and disparate kinds, great and small together, elegant and unsightly together, all gathered around him in a heap, piled up around him in a mound, and he himself set down among them, placed upon a chair or something resembling a chair, and told: stay, do not stir,

until God permits, or the workmen permit you, to move — and there he stayed, unmoving, unable to say a word, indeed with nothing he ought to say, since he understood nothing of what surrounded him. He wished only to withdraw into himself and dwell among his own thoughts, and instead found himself utterly wrenched from his own conscience by this violent clamor of mismatched sounds coming from every direction, weaving around him a coarse, harsh, rough sort of music — the voices of the workmen in all their variety, the clash of furniture and its thud upon the floor, that grating sound that irritates and sets the nerves on edge, coming now from things dragged across wood, now across stone, the tramp of feet, the calling back and forth of servants, the shouting of the porters, and whatever else, countable or uncountable, belongs to this strange din that fills a house when life departs it, and fills a house too when life enters it.”

Said the master, sorrowful and full of pity:

“And how much time did the poor fellow spend in this state?”

Said the pupil:

“A full day — half of it in that house he was vacating, and half in this house he was coming to fill. I resolved to speak with him of this moving from house to house, and to take with him the poets' own approach to the subject, so I began reminding him of poets standing at the ruined encampments, and how they revived, through this standing, the memories that stirred within them, and the tears that streamed down their cheeks; and I recited to him: ‘Halt, let us weep, in memory of a beloved and an abode...’ and chanted to him: ‘For Khawla, ruins at Burqat Thahmad...’ and sang to him of the deserted camp of Umm Awfa... and recited to him what Dhu al-Rumma said of the traces of Mayya, and went on from there to what Abu Tammam said of Amorium after al-Mu'tasim laid it utterly to waste. But I found in him neither vigor nor delight; he only said, in the voice of a grieving man, in the tone of the weary and worn out: ‘And what is that to me? I have moved, in my life, among many houses — from Housh Atta, to Darb al-Gamamiz, to Shaqq al-Thu'ban, to Montpellier, to Paris, to al-Sakakini, to al-Huwayyati, to Heliopolis, to Zamalek; and I swear that I never once found, in the hour of moving, a single one of those sweet moments the poets sing so beautifully in beautiful verse — leaving behind a house I had loved, in which I had tasted both the sweetness and bitterness of life's many colors, and stepping into a house I did not know, not knowing what the days might

yet reveal to me within it, of events and turns of fortune to come. It is nothing but noise and tumult, the crush of goods and furniture, the shouting of workmen and porters, the tramp of feet, the dragging of heavy loads, a cramped gathering like the one you see before you now, and long, heavy hours like the ones you have just witnessed — and then, afterward, a resumption of what life had interrupted, a pursuit of what living had left neglected, an immersion in these violent motions in which there is no room for poetry and no place for song.’ There I turned him away from this manner of literature to another, and began speaking to him instead of Abu Tammam's verse:

*Move your heart wherever you please in love — there is no true love but
for the first beloved.*

*How many a dwelling on earth a young man comes to know, yet ever he
yearns for the first dwelling of all.*

“And I asked him which of his dwellings he loved and held dearest, and he needed no thought nor deliberation, but said, in a voice of sorrow shot through with a smile: ‘The dearest house to me, and the one I hold most cherished, is that in which I grew up as a child, in a village of the countryside; and this house in which I came of age as a young man, in Housh Atta; and then this house in which I dwelt as a student seeking knowledge, on a street of the Latin Quarter in Paris. But on the condition that I never again return to live and dwell in any one of them; they remain dear to me, precious, cherished, whenever I recall them, and whenever I pay them a brief, fleeting visit. But as for the house I love best and hold most dear now, it is this one you see before you, in disarray, in confusion, filled with every kind of noise and tumult and shouting, in which you see me a captive, a prisoner among these jumbled, piled-up belongings around me, unable to move or shift, because in a few days they will come to order for me, and will bring me, within these walls, hours of life and shades of living I have not yet tasted. And it is enough to recall all those houses, and how I moved from one to the one that followed, until I arrived at this house, to know that I, like anyone else, am fit to grant those houses nothing of myself but this measure that is bound up with memory. And who knows — perhaps I shall move, from this house you see, to another house I shall prefer above it, and single out for special favor; for in every house we dwell in, we leave behind a piece of our hearts, but you know that our hearts are not diminished by what we distribute of their pieces among these houses — rather, they are made whole, and grow richer in wealth, through these very memories we carry

with us, until that day comes when we move to another dwelling that we do not choose and that does not choose us, that we do not love and that does not love us, that we do not seek out and that does not seek us out, but to which we are driven by pure compulsion, and which is driven, in turn, to us by pure compulsion..."

At that point I felt the bitterness of the conversation, and resolved to turn my companion toward some other subject; but the business of the house and its arrangement spared me the trouble of making that shift, for the movers had already begun arriving, hoisting this and that, calling out to one another, exchanging orders and instructions.

Said the master:

"There is no harm in this subject — but you must treat it differently, and present it as a work of art that stirs both laughter and lament; and that will only come when you approach it with the purpose of the true artist, breathing into it something of your own soul, so as to lend it a measure of life."