

al-Ma'arri: Poet or Philosopher?

al-Hilal, June 1938

"...Abu al-'Ala' is a poet in his own philosophy, and a philosopher in his own poetry — he has beautified philosophy with whatever art he has lavished upon it, and granted poetry dignity and gravity with whatever philosophy he has spread through it. In this respect, he stands utterly unique in our own Arabic literature..."

This is a question one of my own friends once put to me, on a day we happened to be discussing the special issue *al-Hilal* was devoting to Abu al-'Ala', and some of the essays it was about to publish in it.

My own friend wanted me to make this same question the very subject of the piece I would send to *al-Hilal*, so that I might join this same tribute men of letters were offering to Arabic literature's own genius. I had already put this question to myself more than twenty years ago, and answered it then by saying Abu al-'Ala' was both poet and philosopher at once — indeed, more than merely poet and philosopher: a writer too, a man of letters, and a scholar of language, in the most precise sense the Arabs of his own era understood these terms.

The years have passed since then, circumstances have changed, I have come to know things I once did not know, and have most likely forgotten things I once knew — but my own view of Abu al-'Ala' has not changed at all. I still see him as poet and philosopher, as writer, man of letters, and scholar of language too — and my own view of him has, if anything, only grown stronger; my own conviction in attributing these qualities to him has, I believe, never once been stronger than it is now, exactly as our own political debaters here are fond of saying, every now and then.

In fairness, no one has ever disputed with me over Abu al-'Ala' being a poet, a writer, a man of letters, or a scholar of language — but some have disputed with me over Abu al-'Ala' being a philosopher, and perhaps none has disputed with me over this more vigorously than Professor Nicholson, the well-known English Orientalist. He sees nothing, in the wisdom filling *al-Luzumiyyat*, nor spread through Abu al-'Ala's other books besides, that amounts to any real form of philosophy, as people of this modern age understand that term — he sees it, rather, as ordinary wisdom, resting merely on contemplation and reflection.

What, above all, stands between Abu al-'Ala' and the title of philosopher, in his view, is that Abu al-'Ala' never established for himself a philosophical system with clearly announced doctrines, distinct aspects, and coherent parts — one we might delineate and define, exactly as we delineate and define philosophical systems when we speak of Plato, or Aristotle, or any philosopher of the modern age.

Professor Nicholson thus regards it as excessive to describe Abu al-'Ala' as a philosopher, or to describe al-Luzumiyyat as a work of philosophy. And yet, Abu al-'Ala' is a philosopher, and al-Luzumiyyat is a work of philosophy — I do not doubt this in the slightest, nor hesitate to declare it, and to defend it. The whole matter comes down simply to our needing to agree on the meaning of "philosopher," and the meaning of "philosophy," when we attribute it to a book like al-Luzumiyyat.

I recall having defined these two terms myself, more than twenty years ago, when I first attributed them to the Sage of al-Ma'arra — understanding them exactly as the ancient Greeks and Arabs once understood them. For me, a philosopher is a man who searches for truth as far as he is able, and, once he has discovered it, or discovered what he believes to be it, brings his own knowledge and his own conduct into harmony, ordering his own daily life according to whatever truths of things, and whatever moral principles, his own intellect leads him toward.

By philosophy, I understood exactly what the ancient Greeks and Arabs themselves understood by it, ordering it exactly as they ordered it — dividing it into natural philosophy, mathematical philosophy, theological philosophy, and practical philosophy. I then saw that Abu al-'Ala' had indeed been a philosopher, in exactly this same sense in which the philosophers of Greece and the Arabs were philosophers, and that al-Luzumiyyat had indeed been a work of philosophy, in exactly the same sense in which the various books philosophers composed were works of philosophy — but that it possessed, beyond this, something raising its own rank still higher, elevating its own standing, and setting it apart among works of philosophy, by exactly the same quality that set apart Lucretius's own poem *On the Nature of Things*: the highest artistic distinction of all — the distinction of poetry.

As for Abu al-'Ala' being a philosopher in this same ancient sense, I do not believe anyone can genuinely deny this, or dispute it. Abu al-'Ala' spent his entire life in search of truth, and expended, in that pursuit, a

genuinely exceptional personal effort, one many philosophers no one ever disputes attributing philosophy to never actually expended. Abu al-'Ala' was never a mere imitative philosopher — or, to put it more precisely, he never belonged to any single one of the various philosophical schools, believing in its established doctrines and simply adding to them whatever he discovered through his own research and effort. He was, rather, a thinker in the fullest sense of that word, thinking deeply through every question that presented itself to him.

He surveyed every philosophical school known to Muslims in his own era, engaging with them all, taking from them, and leaving them, then leaving what he had once taken, and taking up what he had once left — so that his entire life, especially after his own seclusion, became one continuous act of thought, a constant critique, a perpetual movement between philosophical opinions and schools, and a genuine exploration of matters the ancients themselves may never have reached before him. You cannot say he was a Platonist, or one of Aristotle's own followers, or one of the Stoics, or one of Epicurus's own followers.

But you can say he was, in a sense, all of these at once — taking from each of these schools whatever satisfied him, whatever suited him, in the particular moment he was thinking through a given question. Nor, indeed, can you say he was a philosopher of the Greek style, or of the Islamic-Greek style, nor that he was a philosopher of the Indian style, or of the Persian style — he was, rather, a philosopher of every one of these traditions combined.

He drew from the philosophers of Greece, from the philosophers of Islam, from the sages of Persia and India — and, not content even with this, engaged also in the jurisprudence of the jurists, the hadith scholarship of the traditionists, the theology of the theologians, the mysticism of the Sufis, and the doctrine of the Shi'a. Not content even with all of this, he engaged too in the linguistic sciences, drawing these disciplines close to philosophy, subjecting them to philosophy, and extracting from them a genuinely original philosophical system, one still awaiting someone to devote himself to it fully, and give it the study and research it truly deserves.

Abu al-'Ala', then, was never a mere follower, or imitator, of philosophy, nor confined to any single school or sect — he was, rather, a genuine chooser, much like a bee moving among flowers, never confined to this garden or that, but ranging across every garden it might possibly

reach, drawing from every flower it pauses at, and every garden it visits, digesting all of it, and distilling from it this strange, varied, self-contradictory philosophy filling al-Luzumiyyat, scattered and ordered alike throughout the various other books he composed.

The man genuinely strove after truth, and searched for it in earnest; his own effort in this search was sincere, his own intention pure, and he brought whatever truth he discovered into genuine harmony with the laws he imposed on his own daily life. And the strangest thing we find in Abu al-'Ala' is that, despite his own constant movement among the philosophical schools known to every civilized nation, and despite the sheer contradiction and turbulence we find throughout his own opinions, he laid out for himself a practical plan that never changed, imposing on himself a conduct that turbulence never touched — one he held to steadily from the moment he returned from Baghdad right up until he departed this world, never deviating from it, not for a single day, nor even part of a day. His own intellectual life was turbulent in the extreme; his own practical life remained calm in the extreme.

This contradiction, between a calm, settled practical life and a turbulent, unbridled intellectual one, stands as the very mark of Abu al-'Ala's own aberration — and, at the same time, the very mark of his own genius, his own superiority, and his own distinction over every philosopher and poet Islamic intellectual life ever produced. For he was never merely a philosopher — had he been only a poet, his own practical life would have been just as turbulent as his own intellectual life — but he combined both qualities at once: an intellectual superiority that led him toward disillusionment with life, and convinced him of the value of calm, seclusion, and freedom from worldly burdens; alongside an artistic superiority that drove him to think through everything, critique everything, depict everything he absorbed, and express everything he imagined in a genuinely magnificent artistic form, exactly as people of that era conceived of magnificence. I happened to be reading, not long ago, a splendid essay by Paul Valéry on the great artist Leonardo da Vinci, in which Valéry attempts to draw Leonardo close to philosophy — indeed, to make him a philosopher outright, the whole difference being that he expressed his own philosophy through his own visual, artistic works, rather than through the words philosophers habitually use to express their own philosophy.

Paul Valéry arrived, in the end, at demonstrating that philosophers, when all is said and done, are nothing but a group of artists — like poets,

sculptors, and painters — who see nature, life, and the universe in a particular way, and then display what they have seen in that same beautiful philosophical structure that grants us pleasure and delight.

Among the decisive proofs he offers for this view is that we still read, and will continue to read, Plato, Leibniz, and Spinoza, finding in that same reading a pleasure and delight beyond any doubt — and yet how much of these philosophers' own philosophy has already been invalidated, and how little of it actually remains.

What, then, is the source of this pleasure we find in things we know modern philosophy and modern science have already definitively refuted? Is there not some resemblance between this pleasure and the pleasure you find reading Homer, or Virgil, or Dante — is there not, in other words, a genuine resemblance between the pleasure we find reading philosophers and the pleasure we find reading poets? There is, indeed, no doubt whatsoever these two pleasures are exceedingly close to one another — close, precisely, because philosophers possess a certain share of poetry, or because poets possess a certain share of philosophy, or because both share, in common, a certain measure of art itself, which is exactly what grants us this pleasure.

I thought of Abu al-'Ala' while reading this essay, exactly as I thought of Lucretius, and exactly as I thought of Plato — all three of them poets, even though the third of them never took up verse as his own means of declaring that poetry. All three are poets, all three are philosophers, and all three are capable of delighting us, and giving us real pleasure, through this same magnificent blend that pleases both our hearts and our minds.

Whoever says Abu al-'Ala' was a poet has not strayed from the truth — his own poetic gift admits of no doubt, though it may well have fallen somewhat short, in certain respects, of Abu Tammam's own poetic gift, and that of other sighted poets like him. Yet it surpassed that same gift, in certain other respects, since it plumbed truths those poets never plumbed, and rose to a height of wisdom they never reached. And whoever says Abu al-'Ala' was a philosopher has not strayed from the truth either — I have already shown the man genuinely shared in philosophers' own philosophy, though he may well have fallen short, in certain respects, of what Ibn Sina, or al-Farabi, achieved in probing certain theories deeply, and in establishing coherent, orderly, consistent systems undisturbed by turbulence or contradiction. Yet he surpassed

these same philosophers, too, in a real sense — for he brought philosophy down from its own fortress, and brought it to life within the very milieu ordinary people actually inhabit, making it genuinely human, reaching not the intellect alone, but the heart as well, spreading through it love, mercy, and tenderness, exactly as it spread through it indignation, rebellion, and anger — an indignation, though, that never ends in hatred, a rebellion that never ends in rancour, an anger that never ends in ruining the bonds between people.

Abu al-'Ala' is a poet in his own philosophy, and a philosopher in his own poetry — he has beautified philosophy with whatever art he has lavished upon it, and granted poetry dignity and gravity with whatever philosophy he has spread through it. In this respect, he stands utterly unique in our own Arabic literature, exactly as I have said a thousand times before, and shall go on saying a thousand times again.

There remains, though, an aspect I mentioned not long ago, one never properly studied, of Abu al-'Ala''s philosophy and art together — an aspect genuinely deserving of study, genuinely deserving of admiration, and genuinely significant in depicting this poet-philosopher's own psyche. No one ever mastered the Arabic language the way Abu al-'Ala' mastered it, no one ever devoted himself to the Arabic language the way Abu al-'Ala' devoted himself to it, no one ever commanded the vocabulary of the Arabic language the way Abu al-'Ala' commanded it.

He spent his own boyhood and youth in study, in learning, in taking part in the literary life of his own era, exactly as the most distinguished cultivated men of his own age did — until his own great trial came, and he found himself compelled into seclusion, confined to his own house, becoming, as he himself put it, the prisoner of two confinements, or perhaps three: a prisoner of his own house, a prisoner of his own body, and a prisoner of this same affliction that stood between him and any sight of nature, and the living creatures teeming within it.

He turned inward, then, upon his own self, examining it closely — and what did he find? He found meanings beyond counting, gathered together during his own studies, and still gathering, even after his own seclusion; he found a vocabulary amassed through his own linguistic study, a genuinely vast share of this same verbal wealth his own. He looked, then, and found himself obliged to spend his own life amid these same meanings, these same words — unable to escape them, unable to free himself from their own relentless pressing upon him.

Whenever he considered meanings, his own opinions grew turbulent, and contradictory emotions, clashing passions, stirred within his own soul; whenever he considered words, a real wonder seized him at the sheer abundance he had committed to memory. He was compelled, then, to resist these same meanings, to resist these same words, to prevent them from ever gaining mastery over him — and his own path toward that was to master them himself instead, spending his own life pairing these meanings with those words. And this is exactly what he did.

You will never see him except playing with meanings, playing with words — matching one meaning to another, then setting meaning against meaning, exactly as he matches and sets word against word, and matches and sets word against meaning. Reading whatever remains to us of his own works, you can scarcely shake the feeling that this man simply left himself free with meanings and words alike, playing with them, amusing himself with this very play, since he found nothing else to spend his own time and effort on.

It is in this same light that you can understand that severe, self-imposed discipline he laid upon himself in al-Luzumiyyat — binding himself to what was not strictly required of him in rhyme, exactly as he bound himself to compose verse on every single letter of the alphabet, whether it was strictly required of him or not. It is in this same light, too, that you can understand al-Fusul wa-l-Ghayat, for he imposed upon himself, in prose, something genuinely close to what he had imposed on himself in poetry: composing this great many chapters, holding himself to rhymed prose in a great many of them, yet giving each chapter its own particular end-word, holding himself to that same rhymed prose within that end-word, and insisting on basing these same end-words on every letter of the alphabet, exactly as he had based al-Luzumiyyat on every letter of the alphabet.

It is in this same light, too, that you can understand this simple, charming anecdote he offers in Risalat al-Ghufran, recounting the story of Khalaf al-Ahmar and his own companions, when he questioned them about al-Namir ibn Tawlab's own two lines:

*A nocturnal phantom of Umm Hisn visited my own companions, while
they lay asleep,
hers to have whatever she desired — pure honey, should she wish it, and
fine bread with butter.*

He asked them what the rhyme of the second line might have been, had the poet said, in the first line, "Umm Hafs" instead — and, when they fell silent, Khalaf al-Ahmar answered: "Fine bread with cheese." Abu al-'Ala' seizes on this very opportunity, building upon it, as he himself puts it, supposing the first line's rhyme on the letter hamza, then on ba, then on ta, and continuing on in this fashion right through to the very last letter of the alphabet — bringing forth, in the process, every trick and wonder imaginable, leaving you with the distinct impression this was a man who had devoted himself entirely to this very kind of play.

His own play with words admits of no doubt, and his own play with meanings admits of no doubt either. Is *Risalat al-Ghufran* itself anything but a form of this very play? And could he possibly have played with words without also playing with meanings? Every word, after all, carries its own meaning, and no man can genuinely conceive of pure, abstract meanings with no words attached to them at all — meanings are words, if you like, and words are meanings, if you prefer, and whoever plays with the one plays, necessarily, with the other.

Abu al-'Ala' played with both, words and meanings alike, for nearly half a century — and the result of this play is exactly what he has left us in his own immortal works, uniting the gravity of philosophy with the beauty of art.

There is one further trait I must touch on before I finally spare my readers this same chatter: that Abu al-'Ala', by virtue of this same artistic-philosophical play, ranks among the Arab poets most consciously willed in his own artistic works. He never depicts things simply according to his own natural disposition, never lets himself run free according to his own instinct, whether composing poetry or writing prose. He never surrenders to emotion, never gives in to passion, never hands over his own reins to mere nature — he is, rather, always thinking, always choosing deliberately, willing exactly what he says, and fully intending whatever he composes and writes.

He is, exactly as Paul Valéry would put it, a man who does not merely "say" poetry and prose, but genuinely "makes" them — driven to this by this same artistic play I have already mentioned, by his own genuine care to master words and meanings, by his own deliberate craftsmanship, and his own genuine adornment through it, by his own constant self-scrutiny and criticism of his own language, driven, too, by his own genuine need for caution and reserve, guarding himself against

whatever might expose him to accusation, or bring down upon him indignation and censure.

What is genuinely strange is that this man believed himself compelled, with no real share of choice at all in whatever he did or left undone, even in al-Luzumiyyat itself. And yet he stands among our own poets with the very greatest share of genuine choice, the very greatest share of genuine will, the very greatest degree of deliberate intention behind whatever meaning and expression proceeded from him. Nor is this the only mark of contradiction in Abu al-'Ala's own life — his own intellectual life, as you have seen, was contradiction through and through — but there is another mark of contradiction in Abu al-'Ala's own case I would genuinely love to know his own view of: this same man lived in seclusion, in the deepest possible asceticism regarding whether people paid him any mind, or spoke of him at all.

How, then, might Abu al-'Ala' regard all that people now say of him? How might he receive their own care for him, their own reverence toward him, and all these efforts now devoted to studying him, understanding him, interpreting him, and immortalizing his own memory? How I would genuinely love to know Abu al-'Ala's own view of how the generations have come to regard him, after his own death — but how might one ever reach that? Does Abu al-'Ala' perhaps have some knowledge of what is now written about him, or said of him?