Between Literature and Politics: An Art of Political Criticism

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), 24 October 1934.

It is not published in newspapers or magazines, nor do orators' tongues give voice to it in the Chamber of Deputies or the Senate, or in public assemblies, nor is it the stuff of conversation in private clubs and drawing rooms; it is, rather, a dialogue between two or three people, or more, upon the stage.

You have understood me, without doubt, to mean that I wish to speak of drama that takes up political affairs and subjects them to heavy, violent criticism, or to light, graceful criticism; yet I do not wish to speak of political drama as such, for political drama is abundant, varied, and highly diverse, and people's acquaintance with it is ancient — indeed, it was very likely earlier to influence public political life than Her Majesty the Press, and earlier to influence politics than parliamentary speeches, as we know them in the modern age.

Those who know the Greek poet-actor Aristophanes, and savor his political plays, and know from history what has come down to us of their secrets and their stories, know full well that the stage was influencing political life twenty-five centuries ago, long before it occurred to civilized people that Her Majesty the Press might produce any effect, strong or weak, upon public life.

A great many of those who will read this piece know, without doubt, that Aristophanes was aristocratic in sympathy, deeply impatient with democracy in Athens, and with extreme democracy in particular, and was given to excess in attacking the democratic leaders in many of his plays, which all of Athens then witnessed; he made the Athenian public laugh at itself, and toyed with the democratic order as far as toying could go, often ending by stirring up the democratic leaders' resentment, and the people's own orators among them, in particular.

He may well have paid a dear price for it, and did not enjoy his artistic freedom, nor make the Athenian public laugh at the democracy it loved so dearly, without himself bearing some harm for it, and without his opponents among the democratic leaders lying in wait for him along some road to give him his fill of blows and punches, and to make him hear what

he disliked, and to expose him to the harm he dreaded when left alone with himself, and which he forgot when receiving inspiration from his own demon, or when he wished to entertain the public.

They know, too, without doubt, that these Athenians would frequent the theater, and laugh at themselves along with the other laughers, and marvel along with the other admirers, and forgive, more often than not — but they would grow impatient from time to time, and so would toy with the great poet's own person just as he had toyed with their standing, their leadership, their eloquence, and the good effect of their influence upon the masses.

Nor is it excessive to claim, or to affirm, that drama preceded Her Majesty the Press not only in political criticism, but in literary criticism as well, and that Aristophanes was the hero of this precedence too; for just as those who read The Knights find in it biting political criticism, those who read The Frogs find in it the splendid literary criticism we may take up on some other day.

Nor are we exaggerating when we affirm, further, that drama preceded Her Majesty the Press in philosophical criticism as well, whether the serious kind of philosophical criticism, or the kind that relies on jest and mockery. Euripides, master of tragedy, who brought it to its perfection among the Greeks, was a serious philosophical critic — or say, rather, that he was the philosopher of the stage.

As for Aristophanes, it is enough to read his play The Clouds to see how he toyed with philosophy and philosophers, and how he made people laugh at the chief of philosophers, Socrates. Drama, then, has long been a friend of criticism, and comic drama in particular is what established that general criticism in which the public itself shares, or which is aimed at the public rather than at specialists. Comic drama has gone on in this very tradition, across differing ages, without ever departing from it or changing its method — only being shaped by the circumstances surrounding it. You find in Molière the same political, philosophical, and literary criticism you find in Aristophanes, allowing for the difference between these two great men, one of whom lived under the shade of free Greek democracy, and the other under the shade of Louis XIV.

I do not, then, wish to speak of this general sort of dramatic criticism that everyone already knows, and whose traces they see in every work deserving of the name drama; rather, I wish to speak of a particular art within the arts of dramatic criticism, touching the

narrowest and most sensitive corners of public political life — the sort you find in those splendid short dramatic pieces left to us by the great French writer Courteline, scarcely any one of which exceeds a single act, more often than not.

Courteline, as people know him, is a man of humor and jest, or is the modern French writer who excelled above all in humor and jest, and left behind in them immortal masterpieces, some in the form of stories, some in the form of drama; but in his drama he took particular care to criticize the legal and judicial sphere, so that we scarcely read one of these short pieces without finding it has taken for its subject something touching the judiciary, or the police, or the law, and sometimes the army, and sometimes certain matters connected with social and moral life.

But his attention to the police, the judiciary, and the law is truly exceptional, and he produced in this regard masterpieces beyond dispute; and I am not speaking of this kind of drama here to show its artistic beauty, which is something I may take up elsewhere — I wish rather to show the exceptional political freedom that literature enjoys in countries that know freedom's true worth, and regard it as a necessity of public life, just as air is a necessity of natural life.

And I should love for our judges, our public prosecutors, and our police chiefs to read some of these plays, and to consider that they are performed on the stage, on the greatest French stages, in the very house of Molière no less, and that the French people throng to see them, enchanted by them, and that the men of the judiciary, the public prosecution, and the police are themselves foremost among those who go to see them and enjoy their humor and jest, without the writer facing anything like what our own most dutifully respectful writers face, our writers most intent on sparing the men of these sacred institutions any hurt.

Were they to do the same, they would ease things for themselves and for others, and would smile upon life, and would permit people to smile upon it too, and would come to know that the majesty of high institutions comes not from severity, fine-grained touchiness, impatience with everything, anger at everything, and taking offense at the slightest thing, but rather from tolerance, ease, and gentleness, from meeting life as it is, and meeting people as they are, and from the conviction that life is corrupted most thoroughly when it becomes all seriousness, and grows ugliest when it insists most strenuously on the bitterness of seriousness,

and piles on more of it still.

And the strange thing is that Courteline never toyed with the men of the judiciary, the prosecution, and the police except in precisely those respects where these men are most rigid, and most insistent that they stand above criticism — let alone above mockery and jest.

We do not think anything could hurt, infuriate, or embarrass a policeman, and drive him to appeal to the courts and seek the law's protection, more than a mocking critic touching his office, his particular duty, and his manner of discharging that duty — and yet this is exactly the respect in which Courteline took up the French police, and no other.

You may read his play titled "Le Commissaire est bon enfant" ("The Police Commissioner Is a Good Fellow"), and you will see that he toyed with the station commissioner in a way that, had an Egyptian writer dared anything resembling it, he could not have counted on his own family not to disown him, nor on calamities not to engulf him, nor could he have counted on finding peace at home among kin and friends. The commissioner in Courteline's play is a man accustomed to precision in discharging his duty, and most insistent on applying the law to the letter, to such a degree that he has acquired from it the very flaws Courteline records. A complainant comes in to him, and no sooner does he begin to state his complaint than the commissioner races ahead to finish it for him, as though he had witnessed it himself, as though he had seen what he complains of — yet for all that, he pays him no heed and offers him no relief, because he does not wish to burden himself, nor to trouble himself writing reports, drawing up records, and taking proceedings; so he looks for some ruse to be rid of this complainant, referring him to the prosecution at one moment, urging him toward a direct civil suit at another, and turning him away violently without referring him anywhere at all a third time; and if the complainant presses, woe to him — for the commissioner can order the police to put him out, and if he presses harder still, the commissioner can order the police to lock him up, for having insulted an officer of authority in the discharge of his duty.

And consider this man, who found a watch along some road, and, being honest, brought it in to the commissioner, who asks him: where did you find it? And when he says: I found it in such-and-such a place, he asks him: at what time did you find it? And when he answers: at such-and-such an hour of the night, he asks him: and what were you doing in that place during the night? And when he answers: I was on my way home, he asks

him: who are you, and where is your home? And when he gives his name, he asks him: and who will prove to me that you are telling the truth? And who will guarantee me that you did not steal this watch? And the exchange goes on, this honest man growing more exasperated by the commissioner's high-handedness, and the commissioner growing more enraged by this man's defense of his own honesty — until the matter ends in his being thrown out, the commissioner summoning the police and ordering them to lead this honest man off to prison, because suspicion attaches to him from every side.

Then consider this woman, who came wishing to speak to the commissioner, and he asks her: perhaps you wish to complain about your husband? And when she answers: yes, he says: then you ought not to complain to me of that, for I am not charged with hearing wives' complaints except in particular matters — namely, the establishing of adultery. And if she claims her husband is mad, he refuses this most emphatically, claiming to her that she is thinking ill of him, impugning his conduct, and that it may well be she who is mad, and that her husband may be a perfectly sane and innocent man, but that she is making his life miserable in order to force him into something he dislikes — and he keeps at her until he has turned her away.

But now consider the vengeance that unfolds in the shortest possible time: these two policemen bring in a man they claim was shouting in the street something contrary to the law, inciting to revolt. No sooner does the commissioner speak to him and listen to him than this man sets about presenting him with philosophical theories on politics, and once he is alone with the commissioner, the two policemen having withdrawn, and the commissioner begins to listen and converse with him, the man edges, little by little, toward the door, and closes it, and hides the key in his pocket, and continues the conversation until the commissioner becomes certain his interlocutor is mad — but when he thinks to call the police, he cannot, for the man has leveled a pistol at him.

And the madman goes on giving the commissioner order after order: he charges him to put out the fire, though the cold is bitter, for God did not create cold in vain, but created it that people might find it — so people must find cold in winter and heat in summer, else they are in rebellion against nature, and the commissioner is compelled to submit, because the pistol is leveled at him if he does not. Then he orders him to take off most of his clothes, and to remove his shoes, then orders him to open the window, then shows him a small door; and when he asks what

lies behind it, and the commissioner says it is the coal storeroom, the madman opens this door and charges the commissioner to go inside it; and when he refuses, the pistol is leveled at him, and the commissioner is compelled to submit, and in he goes, and the door closes behind him, and is firmly locked; and the madman takes his cap, opens the door, and goes out as composedly as the sanest man could. Then the two policemen come in and do not find the commissioner; they search for him and do not find him, finding only traces of him; and as they are at this, the commissioner's voice reaches them from behind the door, and when it is opened for him, he emerges before them, blackened all over with coal dust.

What do you make of a play like this, taking its bearings from Egyptian life, then presented upon some stage, and performed by actors? We note, first, that it would never reach the stage at all, because the censorship at the Ministry of the Interior would stand between it and the stage; but suppose the censor had not read the play, or had read it and seen no harm in it, and so permitted its performance — what, then, do you suppose would happen were it performed, and the public came to see it, and among them a cultured police officer: would he laugh, as the police in France laugh, and then leave as though he had seen nothing, or would he rush to denounce it, protest it, and seek the protection of the courts?

And should you read another of Courteline's plays, titled "This Policeman Has No Pity," you would see the toying with the policeman carried to its furthest extreme; for the hero of this play is a most sensitive policeman, hurt by everything, infuriated by everything, who sees in everything an insult to himself in the course of his duty, and who submits to the prosecution, every single day, countless reports — because so-and-so insulted him with this word, or because so-and-so insulted him with that look, or because so-and-so did not answer his summons. And the deputy prosecutor, exasperated with him and with his reports, now scolds him, now counsels him — until he reads one of these reports, and finds that it accuses one of the city's finest men, among its wealthiest and most charitable, of having insulted him in the course of duty — and the insult is a flagrant one the deputy prosecutor cannot overlook, yet the man is too great to be taken up over such a thing.

And when the deputy prosecutor summons him and questions him, he confesses the offense, but tells his own story: he says that one day he went out for a walk, with his dog running loose behind him, and that

along the way he met this very policeman, and prepared to greet him, but the policeman stopped him and reprimanded him for letting his dog run loose, and wrote him up on the spot; and the man went to the mayor, apologized, and asked pardon, and the mayor accepted this, and promised to intercede with the policeman to have the report dropped, and advised him not to let his dog out again without a leash, until the policeman should forgive him. And the man obeyed, and from then on never went out except leading his dog on a leash behind him — until, a day or two later, he met the policeman along some road again, and the policeman came up to him to tell him that the mayor had interceded for him, and that he had accepted the intercession; and the man made ready to thank the policeman, but the policeman, looking at him, saw that the man had leashed his dog — in compliance with the policeman's own first order! — and, infuriated, said: why have you leashed this dog, when you know I gave you leave to let him run loose? I shall write you up! And the man, beside himself, cursed him.

And when the deputy prosecutor heard this story, he summoned the policeman and set about placating and conciliating him, but the policeman grew only more insistent and severe; and the man himself tried to placate and conciliate him too, going so far as to offer him a reward — whereupon the policeman seized the opportunity and brought the deputy prosecutor a fresh complaint, that this man had tried to buy his conscience with a bribe; and the man, infuriated, let slip some harsh word, whereupon the policeman brought yet another complaint, that this man had assaulted him in the course of his duty, in a place where no such assault should occur.

And the deputy prosecutor grew angry at the policeman's excessive rigidity, but was compelled to accept the complaint, and to bring its subject before the court; then it occurs to him to ask the policeman the time, and when told it is a quarter past midnight, he says to him: "And so, what are you doing standing here at an hour contrary to the law?" Then he writes out a few lines, hands them to him, and orders him to submit them to the chief of police. And the policeman, looking over these lines, has no doubt that they spell punishment, should this letter reach his chief, and so he pleads and begs, and recalls his record, in which he has never once been punished — but the deputy prosecutor pays him no heed and gives him no hearing, and the policeman, in turmoil, suffers a fearsome clash between his sense of entitlement and his fear — until, at last, he tears up the reports he had written against this man, declaring

that a policeman may well have no heart, yet may also have a generous soul, willing at times to overlook offenses. At this the deputy prosecutor pardons him, and orders the man to withdraw; but the man, happy and delighted at having escaped trial, wishes to thank the policeman for his forbearance, and to praise him for it — but no sooner does he set about it than his tongue outruns him into cursing the policeman instead.

Have you seen, then, this freedom Courteline exercises with those to whom the State has entrusted the protection of order? Have you seen how far this writer carries it, and how neither the men of the police nor the men of the judiciary find any harm — I will not even say in reading it or watching it, but in enjoying it and being pleased by it? And yet all this is nothing, set beside other plays in which the writer jests with the men of the public prosecution and the judiciary themselves; and I may perhaps tell you of some of these plays next week, once I have consulted men of law, and satisfied myself from them that speaking of these plays will not land me under investigation, nor before the courts. Until then.