Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi

Akhbar al-Yawm, 28 November 1964.

A book delightful in every respect — this one which the esteemed Dr. Ahmad al-Hufi, professor of Arabic literature at Dar al-Ulum, has so kindly presented to me as a gift.

In it is a study accomplished in the fullest accomplishment, profound in the fullest profundity, of a writer among the great names of the fourth century of the Hijra who received little attention in his own lifetime, yet about whom much came to be said after his death. But those who wrote about him in ages past did not give him his due attention; they merely touched upon him in passing — some praising him for the abundance of his learning and the brilliance of his style, others accusing him of heresy, doing him, in all likelihood, an injustice. It was only in this modern age that attention to him grew intense, so that many researchers wrote about him, yet none did him the justice of depth and thorough investigation as Dr. Ahmad al-Hufi has done, for he expended the utmost effort within his power, and bore the hardest and most demanding labor a researcher can bear in his research, until he had given the man his due, and attained in his study the furthest limit a researcher can reach of thoroughness and depth. He left none of the surviving books untouched; he paused at each one at length and analyzed it with the finest analysis, so that his book became a model of precision in research and soundness in verification.

And the most distinctive thing about this writer is that he was, in his own life, a man of despair, impatient with people to the utmost degree of impatience, holding himself in the highest esteem, yet finding none among his contemporaries who took any interest in him or paid him any heed; and his straitened circumstances were nearer to wretchedness and misery than to happiness and ease.

And this grieved him most deeply, and drove him to the utmost despair of people and of time. And yet he participated admirably in every branch of knowledge cultivated in his age, being a philosophically-minded man of letters who engaged with the various branches of philosophy, and skilled in writing, perfecting it and displaying every virtuosity he could bring to it. He attempted to combine the manner of the writers of his own time with the manner of the ancient epistolary stylists, so he practiced rhymed prose as his contemporaries practiced it, and composed free discursive prose as al-Jahiz used to compose it; he very nearly stood alone

in this combining of the manner of the moderns with the manner of the ancient epistolary writers.

And perhaps he overindulged in both at once, until he arrived at something resembling tedium in his writing, from his excess in combining these two manners. And besides this, he was utterly satisfied with himself, utterly resentful of his age, seeing other writers and poets living a life of ease and comfort, in contact with ministers, princes, and men of wealth, and thereby winning from them prizes and every kind of largesse; and he would try to do as they did, yet scarcely attained anything of what he wished.

And he lived by a craft that he soon found unbearably confining — the copying of books — and this craft of his afforded him a narrow and harsh existence, so he tried to make contact with ministers and lords, but found nothing from most of them, and sometimes met with the harshest rebuff and contempt from them. He tried to find favor with al-Sahib ibn Abbad, but found from him nothing but impatience with him, rebuff, and contempt. He tried the same with Abu al-Fath ibn al-Amid, and achieved nothing there either, and was at last driven to satirize these two ministers in a book he devoted to their faults; and he at last despaired of people altogether, yet could not content himself with his straitened life, so his resentment intensified, and he arrived at a measure of pessimism, and perhaps it was all this that drove him toward something of Sufism. He sought ease and could not attain it, so he tried to rise above both ease and hardship alike, to take himself to asceticism, and to devote himself to seeking contact with God. Yet even so he could not attain to Sufism in its precise sense, but was rather forced and artificial in his Sufism, for his soul could not truly renounce ample sustenance and the good things of life, nor could he attain to the ample sustenance and good things of life to which he aspired; so he remained in the utmost turmoil, oscillating between a contentment in which his soul found no rest, and a craving that brought him no fulfilled hope nor any realized wish.

Throughout all this he kept writing books and circulating them by whatever means he found, but these books, for all their number, brought him nothing of what he had hoped for; and when age advanced upon him and he despaired of everything and everyone, he arrived at last at despair of his own books as well, and burned them, since they had profited him nothing, realized no aim of his, won him the favor of none among the great and the wealthy, earned him no prize, and brought him no ease of circumstance.

He came to hate people, and so refused to leave them his books to profit from reading them, since he himself had not profited from writing them. And strangely, he was not content with merely hating his own contemporaries, but added to his impatience with them an impatience with all people, across every generation and every age. Yet his ill fortune denied him even the full satisfaction of burning his books as he had wished, for he burned only what copies he himself possessed, never imagining that he had already circulated these books, and that some of what had been circulated would survive to reach us; so that we now read him and study him with the same thoroughness as Professor Dr. al-Hufi has done, despite Abu Hayyan's own hatred of it — for he was never able to gather up all the copies of his books that had passed into people's hands; he burned only the originals, and what remained of the copies has been passed down through the generations to this day, and will continue to be passed down until the end of time.

And I scarcely know how to thank Dr. al-Hufi enough for his rich and fruitful labor, for I took boundless delight in reading his book; I meant to read only a portion of it, and found myself carried onward to its very last word, and then returned to it to read certain chapters a second time — and this because he probed the study of this writer with a depth rarely seen in these days, when people know neither patience in research nor thoroughness in study, but merely skim the subjects they write about, snatching at learning and knowledge, and are nonetheless content with their own work, and grow utterly impatient with its critics. Not so Dr. al-Hufi, who began his study of Abu Hayyan in a book he published, and then, wishing to reissue it, reconsidered it beforehand, sensing his book's need for completion, renewal, and finer precision; so he removed from it, added to it, renewed some of its chapters, and altered somewhat the ordering of these chapters, so that the book emerged in its second edition attaining the very best that could be hoped for it of sound research and perfect precision.

And Dr. al-Hufi, like others who have written about Abu Hayyan, admires him most intensely, and very nearly prefers him to al-Jahiz, as the late Professor Ahmad Amin did before him; but he chose moderation instead, weighing him against al-Jahiz and doing so with excellent balance. And perhaps I do not agree with him, nor with Abu Hayyan's admirers, for I find in reading his books a measure of tedium, because he tried to compose free discursive prose as al-Jahiz composed it, and so overindulged, both for his own sake and for his readers', in this discursive

manner, reaching a prolixity that wearies the reader at times.

This, together with his persistent fondness for rhymed prose in many passages, to the point of wearying his reader; though it is only fair to say that he does not indulge in digression as al-Jahiz used to do — yet al-Jahiz's digressions added further benefits to his books beyond their original purpose.

And al-Jahiz is innocent of Abu Hayyan's prolixity, and innocent likewise of the excessive partiality to rhymed prose that Abu Hayyan shows. And if Abu Hayyan lived in an age in which the sciences among the Arabs had attained the utmost that could be hoped for them, while al-Jahiz lived in an age distinguished more by translation than by innovation, as Professor al-Hufi says, and as the late Professor Ahmad Amin said before him, then Abu Hayyan did not, in point of style, profit from the abundance of learning and knowledge of his age, but rather wished to write as the ancients wrote, and did not attain in this what he wished.

And al-Jahiz, in his books, was far more attentive to pure literature than Abu Hayyan, for you will not find in Abu Hayyan's books what you find in al-Jahiz of attentiveness to ancient literature combined with the foreign culture then being translated in his time.

Read the book "Al-Hayawan" and the book "Al-Bayan wa'l-Tabyin" and other books and epistles of al-Jahiz, and you will find in them a truly splendid blending of Arabic letters and newly introduced culture. And there is no way for tedium to overtake you as you read al-Jahiz's books, whereas tedium hastens upon you as you read Abu Hayyan's books, owing to his excess in prolixity and his combining it so often with rhymed prose. Read, if you wish, this passage from Abu Hayyan's book known as "The Divine Allusions":

"O you! The true stranger is he whose beauty has set like the sun, who has grown estranged from his beloved and his dear ones, who has grown strange in his sayings and his doings, who has turned strange in his retreating and his advancing, who has become a stranger even in his garments and his cloak. O you! The true stranger is he whose very condition speaks of one trial after another trial, whose outward sign points to one tribulation following upon another tribulation, and whose true nature reveals itself only now and again. The true stranger is he who, if present, is as one absent, and if absent, is as one present. The true stranger is he whom, if you see him, you do not know him, and whom, if

you do not see him, you cannot come to know."

Have you not heard the poet say, when he said:

With what shall I console myself? No kin, no homeland,
no companion, no cup, no resting-place?

And were it not that I should plunge you into a weariness from which you would find no escape, I would have recited to you, besides this passage, other passages even more excessive than this one in prolixity and immoderate in rhyme; but you may, if you wish, read any book of Abu Hayyan's that is in people's hands, and you will find this very style running through it, pervasive and unbroken.

And how far is this from the style of al-Jahiz and the others among his contemporaries?!

And I commend Dr. al-Hufi for his moderation in judgment and his fairness in comparison, and I wish to congratulate him most sincerely on this splendid book, hoping he may present us with its like again from time to time, God willing.