

**The Translation of an Exchange Between Taha Husayn and Mahmud al-Mas`adi
Regarding the Latter's Play *al-Sudd (The Dam)***

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A. Introduction

1. The Writers

Taha Husayn (1889-1973) was at the peak of a prolific career in writing and public service in Egypt when he reviewed *al-Sudd (The Dam)* by the Tunisian writer Mahmud al-Mas`adi (1911-) in 1957.¹ At the time, Husayn was perhaps the most influential Arab intellectual with world fame that brought him a nomination for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1949.² His voluminous work includes novels and short stories, critical studies and translations from ancient Greek and modern French literatures, and numerous contributions to journals and newspapers. His three-volume autobiography, *al-Ayyam*, has enjoyed both wide popular appeal and intensive critical attention. Husayn played a critical role in the secularization of Egypt and the establishment of a new type of scholarship. His daring views on Egyptian culture voiced in his book *Mustaqbal al-Thaqafa fi Masr (The Future of Culture in Egypt)* had raised considerable debate. His study *Fi al-shi`r al-Jahili (On Pre-Islamic Poetry)* in which he casts doubt on the authenticity of pre-Islamic poetry and claims that some Koranic stories are myths is a landmark in scholarship on the subject. During this century, the author had moved from being a "bitterly controversial figure" to "virtual secular sainthood" to the position of "an Egyptian classic" (Malti-Douglas, 9-10). On the personal level, Husayn was a success story that "provided a role model for many an aspiring Egyptian" (Malti-Douglas, 8).

Al-Mas`adi wrote fewer books than his Egyptian counterpart and has been more reluctant to publish his work. He composed the bulk of his work back in the late 30s and early 1940s. But his pervasive influence on Tunisian literature remains unchallenged. In a 1994 survey organized by the Tunisian weekly magazine *al-Mulahiz*, he was chosen as the most important cultural figure in Tunisia. He is known as a writer of unusual and challenging

narratives, an insightful essayist, an influential educator, and the founder of two important cultural journals, *al-Mabahith* and *al-Hayat al-Thaqafiyya*. Most of his writings were appeared in book form years after their composition. *Al-Sudd* (The Dam), under review here, was "composed between September 1939 and June 1940," as the writer himself states but had to wait until 1955 to be brought out to the public (*Al-Sudd*, 149). His narrative, *Haddatha Abu Hurayrah Qal* (Thus spoke Abu Hurayra) was first serialized in part in 1944 and published in book form 30 years later. His play, *Mawlid al-Nisyan* (The Birth of Forgetfulness), appeared originally in various journals in the forties before it was expanded and issued as a book in 1974. His fictional work as well as his critical essays and occasional talks, both in Arabic and in French, have been appearing sporadically between 1939 and today but they never ceased to be significant cultural events in the country.³

Yet, despite the remarkable differences in the volume and genre of literature they produce, Husayn and al-Mas`adi had similar careers and exercised comparable influence in their respective cultures. As public figures and intellectuals engaged in the struggles of their respective countries, Husayn and al-Mas`adi are strikingly similar despite the former's 22 years of seniority (he was born in 1889) and better fame. They both come from small villages and may have studied the same subjects in the local *Kuttabs* they both attended till the age of ten. They had access to two of the most prestigious Islamic universities, al-Azhar in Cairo and al-Zaytuna in Tunis. They learned French, studied at the Sorbonne in Paris, and shared a passion for classical French and Greek literatures. As public figures, they played critical roles in the establishment and promotion of education in their respective countries at the highest level: Husayn was Minister of Education in Egypt between 1950 and 52 while al-Mas`adi held the position of Secretary of State for Education for a whole decade (1958-68). They pioneered higher learning. Husayn obtained the first doctorate from an Egyptian University in 1914 and became the first Egyptian to hold the position of Dean of the Faculty of Letters in 1932 while al-Mas`adi taught at the college of Higher Studies between 1948 and 55 and founded the Tunisian university system in the late fifties.

Likewise, both men endured similar hardship and suffered a great deal for their ideas and activities. Husayn was denied *al-`alamiyya* (a high diploma) from al-Azhar for questioning the institution's educational orientations. He was declared an apostate for his stance on the Koran. Later in 1932 he was removed from his position as Dean for his political opposition to the government in power. Al-Mas`adi was exiled to the desert in 1952 for his involvement in the nationalist movement and organized labor in Tunisia.

2. The texts

Without knowing the exact the circumstances under which *al-Sudd* came to Husayn's attention, the Egyptian prominent scholar demonstrates that he is tuned to new voices and does not hesitate to link his name to an unknown writer from the remote small country of Tunisia. His article, published in the newspaper *al-Jumhuriyya* on February 27, 1957, and the praise it contained for the book would seem to be a dream come true for the little-known writer. Wider circulation and prestige seem to be only expected as a result of such high caliber acceptance. Yet, all indications point to the contrary.

Husayn's article seems to have caused no more than a ripple in the buzzing cultural scene of Egypt in the fifties. For although al-Mas`adi had personally enjoyed a warm reception in Cairo in May 1957 and was enthusiastically reviewed by the prominent Abd al-Hamid Yunis and others, we hardly hear anything about him from readers and writers of the time in the Arab East.⁴ As paradoxical as it may seem, I suggest that Husayn's favorable review may be part of the reason why *al-Sudd* was not widely distributed in Egypt. Readers were deeply immersed in Husayn's own realist fiction, Yusuf Idris' socially committed stories (the first volume of which was published in 1954), and Naguib Mahfuz' engaging tales of contemporary Cairo (the trilogy

was published in 1956-7). They could hardly welcome a book that Husayn calls "a symbolic play" whose language "seems to be carved from the very stone that makes the dam it depicts." It should not be surprising that they would shun a work that Husayn himself needed to "read and reread."

Unlike its fate in Egypt, in Tunisia Husayn's article has never ceased to be reprinted and cited. It has become a necessary companion to a book that remains on the curriculum of high school seniors in the country to this day. Furthermore, Husayn's essay has been frequently referred to by scholars and laymen alike as an irrefutable evidence that al-Mas`adi is a writer of great stature. It is even used among more patriotic readers to boost the pride to belong to a country that has produced a writer even the great Husayn has found difficult to reckon with. In fact, Husayn's article has fed a great deal of ill-informed rumors, speculations, and misquotation. For instance, it is often related in public conversations that Husayn had written in his commentary on al-Mas`adi's book: "I have read and reread *al-Sudd*, but couldn't understand *al-Sudd*. For this reason I have decided to erect a *sudd* (dam) between you and the Doctorate in Arabic literature." The erroneous assumption in this quote, which is wrongly attributed to Husayn and made to sound authoritative through rhyming prose, is that al-Mas`adi had submitted his book in lieu of a doctoral thesis to the Egyptian University where Husayn was Professor and Dean. Al-Mas`adi had no connections to the Egyptian University and his play could not of course be presented as doctoral thesis.

The texts, translated here in English for the first time, reveal striking differences between the two writers. Their essays represent microcosms of two divergent kinds of concerns within Arabic intellectual and literary circles. There is, on the one side, Husayn's extrinsic view of literature which leads him to pay special attention to issues of authenticity and assimilation of foreign elements as is evident in his focus on the "Arabness" of characters and the "Islamization" of Western thought. On the other side, there is al-Mas`adi's intrinsic view of authenticity that concerns itself less with questions like "Who influenced whom?" and devotes more energy to an original theory of literary creation, redefining terms and concepts, and collapsing apparent differences between East and West into broader Human concerns. The first view emanates from binary oppositions: Us Vs. Them, Islam Vs. "Atheist Existentialism," while the other poses the problem from the standpoint of common threads that meet across cultures, languages, and individual writers.

This is perhaps why Husayn's nod of recognition towards al-Mas`adi is not without hesitation, generalization, and even a hint of arrogance. It seems, indeed, as if *al-Sudd* has taken Husayn by surprise. It appeared to him, maybe unexpectedly, so unusual and so "well written" that he lacked the terms to account for it. There was nothing to compare it to in his repertoire, hence his general descriptions like "wonderful" and "pure poetry," and his approximation of the kind "it is closest to", "bears kinship with." Surprise turns to amazement when he considers the book's origin. Indeed, Husayn seems to be puzzled by the fact that the book is written by an author from what he describes as "the hospitable Arab country of Tunisia, about whose literature we barely know anything of significance." And so he proceeds to a diagnosis of the state of the relationship between the Eastern and Western parts of the Arab-speaking world and offers an apology. The diagnosis throws the responsibility of such separation between "The Arab literature in the East and its sister literature in the Maghrib" on "brutal French occupation." His apology, which verges on self-congratulation, has to do with the "concerted effort" his ministry had done to acquaint Egyptians with "literature from Tunisia."

3.The translation

Without stopping at each of the numerous problems that the translator from Arabic into English encounters in these texts, some of which are noted at the end of this translation, in

what follows I will discuss the basic problems that authors' styles pose, raise some theoretical issues related to choices I make, and point out a number of critical problems brought forth by the translation of this dialogue.

The reader of contemporary literature in Arabic easily recognizes Husayn's style and realizes that it could not be more different from al-Mas`adi's. The reader of this translation may have noticed that Husayn's tone seems ironic or even sarcastic. But, Husayn's readers know that this tone marks his fictional narratives as well as his scholarly essays. It may have to do with the fact that he dictates his work. Some of the characteristics of his style are long winded sentences; extensive use of absolute objects; series of three verbs or nouns; passive form; phrases like almost, not only but, etc. Al-Badawi Zahran notes in his book *Taha Husayn's Style* that the author relies on a number of effective oral strategies that reveal "a strong memory and a taste that stem from a well-trained ear and a high sensitivity to linguistic harmony" (28). At the sentence level Husayn resorts to what Zahran calls "the assembling of memorized structures" as the author draws from his recollection of the Koran and classical poetry and prose. The result is compound and parallel structures that form long sentence whose language is deeply embedded into these sources. It is noticeable, however, that when he uses complex concepts loaded with philosophical or theological connotations, Husayn tends to choose the "literal" or the more readily accessible references of the term. Hence his usage of the word "*hayy*" which may mean a human being or a living being to describe Sisyphus. But, in the Greek myth, Sisyphus is punished after he dies whereas Ghaylan, al-Mas`adi's hero, is alive. Therefore, Husayn either uses the word "*hayy*" to mean human being or does not fully appreciate the relevance of this fact about Sisyphus to Camus. This is of course a major difference between Sisyphus and Ghaylan that al-Mas`adi has tried to explain in his article. I chose "human being" and put "wants" and "punished" in italics to emphasize the crucial difference between the two heroes: Ghaylan chooses while Sisyphus has no choice.

Al-Mas`adi's style, on the other hand, is marked by short, metaphorical phrases, often organized in rhyming prose or blank verse. In this essay he draws heavily on Islamic philosophical terminology and mystic concepts. Instances of the author's use of this register include *`aql* and *fikr*, intellect and discursive reasoning, *kawn* in reference to world, being, and universe. In other cases, he expands the concepts or alters their meaning. The usage of "being in potentiality" and "in actuality," normally applied to the human soul, as is the case in al-Ghazali's theory of knowledge, is extended here to the area of creative writing and circulation. Literary production has, to my knowledge, remained outside Islamic philosophical investigation. And here we have the elements of a theory of literary production clarified in the article.

Other instances of the difficulties that al-Mas`adi poses for the translator pertain, among others, to what he himself calls "*san`a*," a word variously translated as craft, artisanship, artificiality. This style has been a criterion for both condoning and condemning styles of writing in Arabic. Al-Mas`adi's language has been considered craft like and artificial by several contemporary critics. However, in the only published essay in English on the author, R.C. Ostle notes the parodic usage of language in *al-Sudd*. He writes: "Its [the book's] outstanding feature is the author's usage of the Arabic language in almost constant exploitation of linguistic parody, and in ways which invest the language with genuine physical qualities" (158).

In order to convey al-Mas`adi's nature metaphor imbued with mystical meanings, I sought parallels in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The translation of "*qa` safsaf*," normally rendered as "empty abyss" or "bottomless pit," by "waste land" is an acknowledgement of the presence of T.S. Eliot's poem in al-Mas`adi's text. Other references to the poem include the idea of echo, barrenness, etc. In *al-Sudd* itself, one finds even more kinship between both writers. The word "*`Asifa*" means storm, tempest. I use "tempest" to draw attention to possible echoes of Shakespeare's play in *al-Sudd*. In addition to the storm

itself and to the fantastic atmosphere in both places, Mayara -- who is defined as "spirit, shadow, love, beauty" -- is a close kin to Ariel, the spirit of thin air, in Shakespeare's play. Ghaylan and Prospero resemble each other in complex ways as well.

In both cases (wasteland and tempest), I have in mind a translation that may be termed "connotative." The choice of terms draws attention to the relationship between target and source texts and points to possible intertextual ties. It transfers "intertextuality" into the realm of the essay based on findings in the creative texts themselves. Thus, it interprets, rather blatantly and critically, the source text and presents it within the horizon of the reader in the target language and culture. English readers are certainly more attuned to Shakespeare than to the Koranic imagery that an Arabic reader is familiar with.

4. Issues

This translation makes available to the reader with limited or no access to Arabic two views on critical issues pertinent to the study of Arabic literature and literary scholarship in general. It points to at least four major issues on which the authors take different stances.

1) The usage of the word *abda`a* to mean to create (It also refers to invent, to excel) has been the source of much discussion in Islamic literature and theology as well as among foreign scholarship on Islam. This translation presents two views of the problem. Commenting on the Arabic novel as a genre Said called "almost entirely of this century," Edward he writes in *Beginnings*:

obviously it is not that simple; nevertheless, it is significant that the desire to create an alternative world, to modify or augment the real world through the act of writing (which is one motive underlying the novelistic tradition in the West) is inimical to the Islamic world-view. The Prophet is he who has completed a world-view; thus the word *heresy* in Arabic is synonymous with the verb "to innovate" or "to begin." Islam views the world as a plenum, capable of neither diminishment nor amplification. Consequently, stories like those in *The Arabian Nights* are ornamental, variations on the world, not completions of it ..." (81)

The example he takes from modern literature is Taha Husayn autobiography *al-Ayyam* (first part published in 1929 and translated in English as *Stream of Days*). He says:

The book's narrative style bears no resemblance to Koranic Arabic, so there is no question of imitation and hence of addition as in the Christian tradition. Rather, one's impression is that life is mediated by the Koran, informed by it; a gesture or an episode or a feeling in the boy's life is inevitably reduced (always in an interesting way) back to a relationship to the Koran. In other words, no action can depart from the Koran; rather each action confirms the already completed presence of the Koran and, consequently, human existence.(82)

In this regard al-Mas`adi seems unique, both as a writer and a theorist. His book, *al-Sudd*, is in part an imitation of Koranic style and a creation of a world that challenges the completed in the world. The author's view of human existence as a process and matter of individual will stands out as a case where the theory of free will is pushed to the limit and made to meet Nietzsche's notion of the self-created man in control of his destiny. He writes:

For when God breathed of His spirit into Man, He granted him the essential and unique attribute of His divine nature: He made him into a miniature image of His Divine Absolute Essence. He thus willed him to be an individual cause, capable of work, creation, and purposeful action due to the free will He had put in him. This is Man's role in existence: a free creator of his own destiny. And this is his position in the cosmos that allows him to be God's vice regent on earth, a position made possible by man's acceptance of "the Trust" that God offered to a universe that declined it from fear and pity.

Ghaylan is the prototype of the creator who assumes the role assigned him. The author adds:
 If Ghaylan, therefore, believes in this and in the fact that his essence is limited in time and space but that it is "delivered" due to the Divine part that is in it, why does he not seek what secures his deliverance from incapacity, limitation and transience? And why does he not ascend to the position that allows him to communicate with God and share with Him the most exalted attributes of His Absolute Essence: power and creation?

Husayn reacted to this theory of *khalq* (creation) in his second article with alarm and caution. He says: "I hate to attribute creation to other than God alone." He reminds the author of the fact that Sartre's Existentialism promotes Man's "unlimited belief in himself," and is, therefore, "atheist, deviating from religion and denying God."

2) Al-Mas`adi suggest a theory of reception based on the "echo" or "resonance" of a work in the reader. It takes the effect as criterion of judgement. This idea is not unfamiliar to Arab critics. For, unlike Aristotle, they focus on the receiver, listener, or reader.⁵ Their theory is, however, based on poetry and oratory not on prose. With al-Mas`adi we may see elements of the extension of this theory of poetics to account for prose. This may also explain why his style is a hybrid of both modes (it is made up of mainly short, memorable phrases with occasional rhyme) that tie him to the Arabic tradition of what has been called "artistic prose." His stance reflects how he differs from the dominant Arabic critical perspective of the 1950s that Taha Husayn represents. While al-Mas`adi thinks that literature is the "message of Man to Man," Husayn believes that it is a "reflection" of reality. The first talks of the "echo" a story may find in the reader whereas the second stresses the need for interpretation based on socio-historical contexts.

3) Al-Mas`adi writes: "*Ma'sat hiya `azamatuhu wa fadluhu `ala al-`alamin*" or tragic are His greatness and His beneficence to humans. Although reference to God is not explicit here, grammatically "*fadluhu*" or his greatness refers to either of the two preceding masculine nouns *wijdan* (consciousness) or *hadas ilahi* (divine intuition). But it may be interpreted as an implied reference to God, based on the occurrence of the expression and usage of *huwwa* (He) in the Arabic language. I chose the implied meaning for this translation. On the level of literary theory, tragedy is here redefined in Islamic terms. Muslim commentators on Aristotle's poetics have either arabized the term or kept it as it is, without further comment. Ibn Rushd (Averroes) uses the word *madih* or praise to bring the concept closer to the Arabic reader. Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and al-Farabi, however, transcribe "Tragedy" as *traghudia* but note its specifically Greek origin. Al-Mas`adi offers this unique interpretation (both in theory and in practice) of the Greeks' "highest" form of literature as Aristotle had called tragedy (*Poetics*, p.11). This area in the writer's contribution is yet to be studied especially in comparison with the best-known writer of the genre, the Egyptian Tawfiq al-Hakim. I note here that while al-Hakim has mainly adapted Greek tragedies into Arabic, al-Mas`adi may have been the first to write a tragedy in the Aristotelian tradition with a conception of tragedy the author calls "Islamic and Eastern."

It is perhaps in this vein that the insightful Ibn Rushd makes a very brief but extremely important reference to the existence of tragedy in the Koranic text (p.232). Ibn Rushd notes: "Know that there are no examples of these four types of eulogy (*madih*) that praise willful noble action in the poetry of the Arabs; but that they occur frequently in the Noble Book" (232). He considers, for example, the story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son "part of the discourses that necessitate sorrow and fear" or catharsis (220). Without knowing whether al-Mas`adi was inspired by this original statement by Ibn Rushd (and its implications, among which the ramifications of the fact that tragedy in Arabic culture may have been the realm of prose and the sacred text, not that of poetry), we can see how *al-Sudd* may be studied in the light of Ibn Rushd's remark.

Al-Mas`adi's use of Aristotle in his tragedy *al-Sudd* may seem, however, in contradiction with his theory of literature based on echo, resonance, or effect. In other words, his is either an attempt to reconcile Greek poetics based on the author and Arabic poetics based on the audience, or an instance where the idea of "catharsis" in Aristotle is pushed to new limits (*Poetics*, 11). Either way, it is possible to see the implications in the realm of poetics of al-Mas`adi's theory that the stuff of "authentic literature" is the Human, rather than the culture-specific unity of the existential experience

4) Husayn emphasizes the Arabness of Ghaylan (Ghaylan is indeed an ancient Arab name, both as a word and as an "archive," as Michel Foucault says of proper names) is an indication of his definition of influence. It explains his idea of "Islamizing Existentialism" he credits al-Mas`adi of achieving. According to this notion, al-Mas`adi could be said to have "Arabized" the Greek myth or Camus' version of it. The nationalist connotations of this theory are obvious: assimilation of foreign culture is essential to modernize Arabic culture.⁶

Influence, according to al-Mas`adi is likened to birth. The fetus is made up of genetic components derived from both parents; yet, differs from both. It might be closer to one or the other, but it remains, nonetheless different. An author draws on all kinds of sources, but his/her literary creation differs from all its sources without being totally alien to them. In the writer's own words:

It is very difficult to substantiate scientifically the influences a writer may have underwent/subjected to. Here, we are in the field of incommensurability. we apply this to what takes place inside a person? ⁷

Influenc

The translated texts raise a number of issues that have remained outside the interest of students of Arabic literature and those interested in the cultures that have come in contact with Western cultures, more broadly. The translation introduces the English reader to a discussion that does not fall under the overarching division between traditional and modernist discourses within Arabic culture. By going beyond the debate of what to take and what to reject from the West, it adds a new element to the equation often thought to dominate the intellectuals' definitions of themselves and the relationship they must entertain with the Other. It reveals new venues for the question of authenticity by indicating the intricacies of a way out of the East/West polarity (and polarization). It shows how Taha Husayn, an intellectual thoroughly educated within the traditional system and who had then rebelled against it and lead the fight for secularization and "modernization," has reacted to an intellectual that seems unyielding to classification with either camp. On his part, al-Mas`adi seems less concerned with defending his work than with carving a space in Arabic literature that is perhaps best defined as the "exception." Thus, his case raises the question of the exception in the face of the dominant: what goes into the making of an exceptional work? how does it relate to the dominant? what does it tell us about the dominant? How does it define and defend its position? Does Al-Mas`adi signal a shift in Arabic literature that will go unnoticed amidst increasingly nationalist cultural production revitalized by binary oppositions of this nature in literary as well as in critical discourse? Or is he a case that foregrounds the development of the modern experience in Arabic culture?

B. The Translation

1. "Al-Sudd: a Symbolic Dramatic Story by the Tunisian Writer Professor Mahmud al-Mas`adi"

Today I would like to take the readers of this column away from Egypt and its writers and men of literature to another Arab country about whose literary life we know barely anything of significance, because political circumstances have long prevented organized communication with it. This country is Tunisia. The French occupation had descended on this hospitable Arab country and aimed at severing its ties with its Eastern Arab sister nations, and had succeeded a great deal in its wish. This made books by Tunisians rarely reach us directly and made our books and literary works reach Tunisia only smuggled through France itself. Occasionally, a Tunisian might have come to Egypt bringing some works and returning to his country with Egyptian writings. Despite all this, the Egyptian Ministry of Education had tried at times to establish a link between Eastern literature and the Arab literature in Tunisia. It published a valuable small book about contemporary Tunisian literature written by the honorable Professor Hasan Husni `Abd al-Wahhab, member of the Arabic Language Academy in Egypt, and distributed it among secondary school students more than twenty years ago.⁸ This effort was then interrupted and never renewed. Some Tunisian contemporary poetry reached Egypt and was received with not only satisfaction but acclaim.⁹ But the matter stopped or almost stopped at this stage. Now that the despised French occupation is over or almost over, the relationship between us and our Tunisian brothers has been renewed again in a certain orderly manner that we hope to see continuing and increasing.¹⁰

A Story

The work I would like to talk about today is a wonderful but extremely strange dramatic story [*qissa tamthiliyya*] which its author, Professor Mahmud al-Mas`adi, wrote to be read rather than to be performed, and to be read with a great deal of thinking, and the need for re-reading and reiteration. Suffice it to say that I read it twice and then needed to look at it again before dictating this article. It is closer to serious difficult literature than to anything else. The writer put in it all of his heart and mind, his artistic skill and excellent command of the Arabic language with a fresh magic style and carefully chosen idiom.

He intended it to provoke philosophical thinking not entertainment, easy distraction, or simple excitement; rather he sought an in-depth inquiry into life and a penetration to what lies beyond it. You could say that it is a philosophical story as deep and as precise as philosophy can be. And you could say, as well, that it is a poetic story as skilled and as admirable as poetry can be. This is not unusual since poetry and philosophy often meet. Learned people are aware that Plato's works were not devoted to either philosophy or poetry alone. They find in them the thinking and investigation applied by reason and the alertness and sublimity [*tasami*] pertinent to imagination. These works thus rise by this to a height rarely achieved by a poet's poetry or a philosopher's philosophy.

The reader of this story needs to take notice of two elements he has to conjure in order

to understand the story and delve deep into its secrets. One of these is the fact that the writer is a Tunisian who lived in a country which foreign occupation oppressed and whose people it deprived of freedom, so that productive action was barred from them. Occupation availed itself of all the riches, and left Tunisians with no more than the bare necessities of life. It also deprived them of fruitful intellectual activity. If it were not for an genuine [*asil*] strength that guarded them against resignation and obedience, they would have given in to both. With time and reoccurring hardship, occupation had imposed on people a feeling of something that if it was despair itself, then it was not very far from despair.

The second element is that this Tunisian writer had cultivated an exemplary knowledge of Arabic literature and then completed his education in France where he mastered his knowledge of French literature and where he came under the influence of the famous philosophical writer, Albert Camus.¹¹ Albert Camus grew up in North Africa, in Algeria, but like most Algerian youth, French dominated his language and he became an excellent French writer. He has a well-known philosophical doctrine based on Existentialism and founded on the idea that it is absurd to try understanding human life since it has no recognizable goal to be reached or a rationale [*hikma*] to be discovered. Life is totally absurd, and man should limit his search to his own self.¹² He should not seek the wisdom of his existence or what is beyond his life since he will gain nothing. Camus compares man's life, and indeed existence as a whole, to the ancient Greek myth that tells of a Greek hero who was condemned after death to spend eternity pushing a stone from the abyss to the top of a mountain. He would push it before him until he reached the summit but he would barely reach the summit with it before the rock would fall again. So he was forced to keep repeating the same task until the end of eternity, if eternity can be said to have an end. The sentence pronounced against him has no sense or wisdom. For his eternity is absurd and his effort is absurd; in fact, existence as a whole resembles this absurdity imposed on the ancient Greek hero.

Our writer was influenced by this French author, by Arabic literature, by Tunisia, and by the life he had lead before independence. His story turned out to be a magnificent image of all these types of influences. The writer is desperate, or like a desperate person, pushed by hope, imagination, and his human nature to build, create and invent. He, therefore, expends effort, bears hardship, and endures all types of pain until when he becomes convinced that he had successfully reached his goal, everything he had built and invented, and all the results of his building and invention vanished, as if they had never existed, as if he had never invested an effort, endured hardship, overcome difficulties, or subdued hurdles. To be more precise, he imagines man to be thus in all he aspires to and plans, in all he builds and invents. Man, despite all this, is proud by nature. Neither his lost effort and his irredeemable struggle, nor the difficulties that yield to him and the hurdles he brings under his power only to see them rebel and regain their initial state as if he did not conquer them in the long years of suffering due to work and pain would weaken his determination or cause despair to take hold of his heart and mind.

Hope and imagination

Hope and imagination have taken hold of his full attention. They push him to work hard in vain, to endure pain and suffering without reward. They deceive him constantly. They lead him to believe that even if he fails today, he will prevail the following day and that it does not matter whether he fails again and again since success is his destiny. It does not matter if success is destined to him or denied. He is propelled to hope and work and nothing will make him stray from both, except death. Death can prevent one generation from hope but the following generation does not learn from the one that preceded it. Instead it follows on the footsteps of its predecessors hoping, working, striving for what there is no hope for or no path to it. This is like what Abu Tammam has accurately described in the following famous couplet:

Riders shining like spear-tips stopped for a rest, in a similar place while night's darkness descended.

For the sake of a matter which they must begin even if its conclusion they could not finish.¹³

It can only be symbolic

It is very clear that our writer's story can only be symbolic since he himself did not fail after hard work and did not wonder about the successes or failures destined him. It is most likely that he now believes in hard work and hope, forging his path toward the successful implementation of secondary education in Tunisia.¹⁴ He, however, informs us that he had written this story during a time of solitude and seclusion, and then put it to the test after living and working with people. It did not seem alien to him and he did not deny it [*lam tunkirhu wa lam yunkirha*].¹⁵ We thank God that the story did not seem alien to him and that he did not deny it, since this allowed him to publish it and made it possible for us to enjoy reading it.

As long as the writer chose symbolic expression as his method and as long as he did not wish to write pure philosophy but wanted to produce a literary philosophy or philosophical literature, it seemed natural that poetic style should be his means to portray his idea, using symbol and allusion. In this he has succeeded to a degree unmatched by any other Arab symbolist writer I know. Our symbolist Arab writers from the variety of Arab countries have not succeeded in submitting the Arabic language to their art in order to achieve mastery and creativity. They are still at the stage of trial and experimentation.

His language has yielded to him

As for our writer, his language has yielded to him and responded to his will without resistance or stubbornness. In fact, I fear that it may have yielded to him more than appropriate. It allured him and tempted him to be hard on it and to exhaust it (*aghrathu bi'an yashuqqa `alayha min 'mriha `usran*). The author begins by constructing a pure poetic environment. No sooner do you approach it than you find yourself in a strange imaginary world whose like is unfamiliar in Arabic literature, except in few instances when philosophers symbolize some of the wisdom they want to portray. They would then conceive a single individual who finds himself in a desert island and sets out to discover knowledge and wisdom on his own, as did Ibn Sina in the East and Ibn Tufayl in the West.¹⁶ Or when they symbolized the relationships of familiarity and subservience or disobedience and rebellion that exist between humans and animals, as did the Ikhwan al-Safa' in one of their epistles.¹⁷

But our writer is, in nevertheless, endowed with fertile imagination, keen intellect, and rich language. He breathes life, reason and logic in the mountain, in its rocks and in its wild and domestic animals, and he spreads it in the atmosphere through voices that from time to time address man, animals, and mountains with what the writer wants them to say. The characters of the story are most unusual (*`ajab min al-`ajab*). There is Ghaylan, a man possessed by hope, love of work, rejection of despair, and rebellion against life's reality. Then there is Maymuna, who strongly believes in what is handed down in life and wants to be satisfied with it, rejecting hope and imagination completely. She tries to convince her husband not to respond to (hope and imagination) and to discourage him from pursuing their aims.¹⁸ Then there is her intelligent talking mule -- if mules can be endowed with speech and intelligence. There are the rocks that are brought to life for a while during the day or the night or between day and night in order to talk, pray to and invoke Sahabba`, the Goddess invented by our writer, I believe, to stand for the land that cherishes aridity, drought, and bareness.

Our friend Ghaylan wants this land to drink water, to be irrigated and to open up with its riches in order to change the life of those who live on it and to take them from want to abundance and, from poverty to wealth. But the Goddess is stubborn, rejectful and proud. She neither hears nor responds. Instead, she persecutes those who attempt to force her against her will. The Goddess, who prefers stillness, stagnation and lifelessness, has a prophet of many

different voices. He cannot be seen but he talks to the people, things, and animals, and things in his different voices, simultaneously, tempting them to obey the Goddess and to pray to her. He condemns man's vanity that tempts him to imagine in himself the power to disobey the Goddess and to force her to submit to him against her will, to accept the reform and construction he wants to achieve.

Ghaylan has discovered an abundant spring, and he wanted to build a dam to prevent the water from spreading and in order to cultivate the land and fill it with wealth and bounty. Maymuna discourages him from the project in an attempt to prevent him from implementing it. But he does not pay attention or listen to her and turns his attention instead to a strange, gentle, most beautiful and most attractive person. She is Mayara, the symbol for the imagination that tempts one to go forward and to shun despair. Ghaylan succeeds in building the dam and is content with it and admires it, but it is barely completed when the workers rebel against him, destroy what they have built, and attempt to kill Ghaylan himself. He is, however, saved by the Goddess Sahabba'. One would think that Ghaylan would regain his senses and refrain from attempting the impossible. But he neither refrains nor repents. Instead, aided by his tireless imagination, he resumes work as if he was not met with failure. When the dam is almost finished for the second time, Sahabba' rises in wrath and destroys the structure beyond repair. It is the rebellion of Nature: winds blow, thunder roars, lightning strikes, rain pours, the mountain shakes and then erupts in a raging fire.¹⁹ Ghaylan and his beloved shadow, Mayara, do not give in but the storm snatches them to nowhere. Maymouna, now alone, descends to the valley. But, what valley? She imagines it close but it moves farther away from her whenever she thinks it almost within reach.

I do not know if I understood the story or not. I do know, however, that this brief summary is close if not accurate. It should not be surprising that I doubt my full understanding of the story after reading it twice or three times. This is the nature of symbols, which, like poetry, is killed by hasty and easy understanding. Symbolic literature is enlivened by this fertile obscurity that compels you to read it again and again, gaining from each reading something you did not benefit from in the first reading. I wished the author's language were a little easier than it is. He has sculptured it from rock as if he had extracted it from the mountain where the story takes place, thus adding difficult expression to difficult meaning and style.

Poetry

The story, as I said, is all poetry; but it is a poetry that is measured only occasionally. This measure does not rely on any of the traditional poetry known to the ancients and the moderns, but invented by the author in order to express himself. It is closer to the French Free Verse than to anything else. The story is introduced by two honorable Tunisian professors, Mahjub Ibn Milad, Professor of Philosophy, and Shadli Qilibi, Professor of Language and Literature. They both understood the story and commented on it. I join them in admiring the story and in congratulating and praising its writer, although I am not completely sure I understood the book with ease as they did.

Taha Husayn

2. Al-Mas`adi's Commentary on Husayn's Article

1. My comments about the critique that Dr. Taha Husayn has honored me with by writing about *al-Sudd* (The Dam) will not be a discussion or a response to him, or even a justification of my work and my literary "doctrine" [*madhhab*] in it. For I have previously said, if I have not written, that each literary creation gives birth to a being (*ka'in*) that the writer produces from the depths of the self, carves from his flesh, and endows with life from his inner being (*kiyan*). This is the extent of the relationship and kinship between the writer and what he has written. Once production is completed and the work is circulated among people, one life of the book ends and another begins. The first life of the work resides in the author's heart, feelings and mind. Its boundaries are the writer's will and intentions. The second (life) occurs in actuality (*bi al-fi'l*) at the state of conveyance and exterior existence, when it becomes a common object among people to accept or refuse, to reject or admire. They understand it as they wish and question it freely; indeed, they treat it as they want. Whatever it provokes and inspires in them is not necessarily related (sometimes it is even unrelated) to the first life of the work, when it is in the author's heart (*wijdan*) during conception and at the time of labor. What a work evokes in minds, inspires in hearts, elicits in imaginations, or stirs in feelings is the effect of the work in actuality (*al-ta'lif bi al-fi'l*), in the state of its essential existence. It is not required at this stage that the work corresponds with the mental image it had initially in the confines of the mind and the creative desire, or, to the contrary, it does not fit what the author had intended it to be.

2. I am continuously puzzled anew whenever I hear someone say that he did not understand this story or that play (*riwaya*). For if the reader of a story, a play or a poem wonders after finishing reading whether he understood it or not, he would be making a meaningless inquiry, unless by "understanding" he means perceiving the author's intentions and goals and comparing what happens in his own self, as a result of reading, to those intentions and aims, desiring that both turn out to be completely proportionate, balanced, identical and corresponding. However, do you see that there is any significant benefit to be gained from such processes of comparison and contrast? Is it not the case that one may gain more than, or something different from, what the author had intended? Paul Valéry is reported to have said after listening to a professor of literature at the Sorbonne in Paris explaining his poem "Le cimetière marin": "The explanation showed me things in the poem I did not think I put in it and I understood from him what I had not thought was in the poem."

The truth is that the process of "understanding" any authentic (*samim*) literary work is often no more than an affair between the work itself and the reader himself that does not involve the author nor his intentions or aims. The richest, most fruitful and most authentic works are perhaps those that cause the reader's springs to well up and his horizons to open wide. However, if this happens to coincide with what the author wanted, it may be said that the composition had fulfilled its assigned mission and delivered the trust (*amana*) with which it was entrusted without exceeding limits or surpassing set boundaries. If the reader does not agree or identify with the composition, it may be because the reader has found in himself something different from or beyond what the author had intended. This is still a valuable and

worthy way in the life of a work. Another situation, one in which the reader would find neither what the author meant nor anything else, is also possible. In such case the fault is often the author's and the shortcomings are those of the work. But, it is also possible that the matter is due to a shortcoming and an inadequate receptivity on the part of the reader. I have written long ago in *Haddatha Abu Hurayrata qal* (Thus Spoke Abu Hurayrah): "These are but the sufferings of Man, whose echoes extend from century to century and from generation to generations, just as the echoes of thunder resonate across mountains. Thunder lives only through shattering rocks. But not every thunder finds mountains that echo it. It may strike in a waste land (*qa`in safsaf*) and thus lasts only the blinking of an eye.²⁰ Each literary work -- in that it is a message -- has equal chances of success and failure. It oscillates between two possibilities. If the author succeeds in perfecting his art, the work allows him to extend his voice and to communicate his message. But if he fails to do so, the work shines no light and makes no sound. Likewise, if the work is received by a self as alive as a valley between mountains then its echoes roar, but if its voice spreads across a deaf waste land, it dissipates and dies.

In this regard, *al-Sudd* is like any literary work. When I listen to those who discuss about it or read critics of it, what I look for first is not whether the commentator or the critic has understood it (this is meaningless and profitless for me, as I have said); rather what I look for, above all, is the extent of the echo, any echo of any kind or extent, that my work had sounded in the reader.

3. Now that I explained this -- hoping to have responded to all those who have read *al-Sudd* and wondered whether they understood it or not -- I can allow myself to say that what I have really admired in Dr. Taha Husayn's critique is how his analysis is founded on penetrating insight, profound vision, and deep examination, all embellished with a kindness and a humility of which only great souls are capable. In most of what he said, I found him able to aim for and hit the mark of the heart of the matter, to penetrate into its essence, and to deduce the existential questions that the story expresses. He does without difficulty or toil, despite the fact that he did not know the author nor communicate with him. For I do not remember having had the opportunity to speak with Dr. Taha Husayn more than twice or three times. One of these goes back to a time before the last world war when I met with him for a few moments at a summer resort in France where he was spending some time resting and recreating and dictating to his faithful secretary. Despite the fact that Dr. Taha Husayn has hit on the essence of *al-Sudd*, he does not feel embarrassed to write: "I do not know if I understood the story or not!" He thus gives pompous and vain critics -- and there are many of them among the literati -- a valuable lesson in the kind of humility that emanates only from unparalleled graciousness that contains no envy.

4. Now, does all this mean that I am completely satisfied with all that Dr. Taha Husayn has written about *al-Sudd*? The truth is that I am not. In reality, and while I accept the writer's interpretation of the story as he understood it -- since it is his absolute right to encounter the story according to his own feelings and thoughts, and since it is her absolute right to appear to him according to what it actually is in its "objective" existence -- I still find it necessary to stop with him at some points in his discussion to comment on them with the thoughts and observations that they have provoked in me.

The first point that attracted my attention is the one related to the influence of French literature, and particularly the work of Albert Camus, on me. It is true that in my literary formation I was influenced by French culture to a no less degree than my influence by Arab-Islamic culture, and it is equally true that I know Camus' writings. Nevertheless, I do not think that I read a French writer less than I read Camus; not because I do not respect this writer's work, but rather for a reason unknown to me. Perhaps it is "the veil of

contemporaneity," since Camus' first writings go back to the period when I wrote *al-Sudd*, or shortly before that. In any case, I did not read his *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *Misunderstanding* till years after their publication and long after *al-Sudd* was composed.²¹

It is possible that the sources of French literature that I drew from before writing my story -- especially between 1933 and 1939 -- are the same ones that Camus drew from (*istaqa minha*) and that he was influenced by the same existential tendency that appeared in French literature and began to color it with its special tint at that time. Among those I remember focusing on during my formative years are Baudelaire, Paul Valéry, André Gide, Saint Exupéry, Jean-Paul Sartre, André Gide and other French writer's of the same stature. This is in addition to other European writers like the English Shakespeare, the Russian Dostoevsky, the Norwegian Ibsen, the Spaniard Unamuno, besides the prominent Arab-Islamic authors who nourished my knowledge, such as Abu al-'Ala al-Ma'arri, Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, and Umar al-Khayyam. There is no doubt then that the literary influences that affected me belong indeed to this existentialism that Dr. Taha Husayn mentioned; but not in its narrow philosophical sense, rather in its largest human meaning. And I would like to dwell for a moment on the meaning of this term and the issues raised by its definition.

5. Those who follow the development of world literature know that the literary and philosophical thought of our time are especially marked by two phenomena: "commitment" on the one hand, and "existentialism" on the other. I know of no idea in need of more examination and analysis, nor of an expression more deserving of precision and definition, nor of a concept more requiring specification and clarification than the two terms "commitment" and "existentialism" and the range of meanings connoted by both. The highest form of vanity that people entertain is perhaps their belief in every age that the terms they find and use always indicate the discovery of a new idea. The truth is that modern people have discovered only the *expressions*: "commitment" and "existentialism." The ideas of commitment and existential thought are in fact ancient in literature and philosophy, as old and as authentic as literature itself. For me, the real meaning of commitment in literature is no more than the fact that the writer must be committed to essential matters, rejecting flowery expression and artifice (*al-san`a*). Commitment means that literature should be the sum of Man's story and the summary of what he extracts from the most profound of his depths and what he experiences in the inner parts of his heart. Commitment means that literature should be Man's message to Man, a message inspired by the divine side of his mind and soul; from this consciousness (*wijdan*) and divine intuition, which is reason and beyond reason, intellect and beyond the intellect, imagination with knowledge, knowledge with freedom, and existence experienced in its totality and its wholeness. Tragic are His greatness and His gift to human beings.

If this is committed literature, then we can say that Ancients had known it before Moderns. They have composed in it what is more magnificent in its art, wider in its extent, and more deserving of permanence (*khulud*) than much of what Moderns have authored. Suffice it to mention as examples *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus, the tragedies of Euripides, Shakespeare's immortal plays and al-Khayyam's *Quatrains* with their dark tunes about wine and death. French literature may boast with, among others, the plays of Racine, although these do little more than reflect a flame (*qabas*) from ever-shining light of the Greeks. As for modern writers, one may find evidence of this "everlasting tradition" in authors like Valéry in "Le cimetière marin" or "Le philosophe et la jeune barque", Malreaux in *The Human Condition*, Louis Ferdinand Céline in *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, the American Ernest Hemingway in *The Old Man and the Sea*, and Jean-Paul Sartre in *La Nausée*.²²

What is the meaning of all this if it is not the effort stretching across time that writers from different cultures and distant eras expend when they contemplate their conception of Man, of his reality and his position in the universe, of his becoming and of his destiny in life and

after death?²³

It is clear that ancient and modern writers such as these have met in the same fields, shared the same concerns, and were brought together by the same tendency in feeling and thought. They strive to examine the reality of man's position, seek to understand human destiny and relate, describe or philosophize the existential adventure. Can we still, therefore, speak of a difference between commitment and existentialism? Is there anything that separates Prometheus in his chains and bloody tragedy from Sisyphus in the farcical comedy of his absurd toil, or Kierkegaard's philosophy from Hamlet's burning question: "To be or not to be is the question."

The close and strong relationship that makes commitment and existentialism become one and the same does not seem strange by any means. Its secret is not difficult to grasp. It is evident that the aware human being needs to build his vital activities and all his actions and moments of rest on the bases of a clear knowledge and unambiguous certainty about himself, his universe, and the nature of the relationship he entertains with life and the cosmos. He has a "vital" need to know his essence, the purpose of his activities and paths, his ends and goals, his status and destiny, the relationship between his activities and his position, and to what extent he is suitable to it, serving it, changing it, redirecting it or in opposition and in contradiction with it.

Existential thought from this perspective becomes necessary to an aware life and one of the conditions without which it cannot take place, like breathing and nourishment. Commitment in literature becomes the expression of this meditation about the human existence and life and about the direction towards which existential thought would orient the living's activity in its totality. Literature becomes a tale of the conduct in life required by existentialist thought in order for Man's vital activity to be consistent with the meaning of existence, of man's essence and the fulfillment of his role and destiny that result from this thought. While existential philosophical thought clarifies the idea and the literature of commitment expresses this conduct and stance, both take place within the frame of the question of existence, of human destiny, Man's position in the universe, his conduct in life and his fate after death. Neither of the two can leave the boundaries of this frame without moving away from the realm of authentic thought and original literature, and so becoming the artifice of philosophy or the artifice of literature. Indeed, how remote from life is artifice!

6. It should be clear by now that *al-Sudd* is an existentialist story and that Dr. Taha Husayn was completely correct when he related it to existentialist literature. Nevertheless, I would like to uncover a side of Ghaylan's personality that does not seem to me to be clear enough to readers. For it may occur to them -- as it occurred to Dr. Taha Husayn -- that there is a similarity between the failure of Ghaylan's renewed effort and the defeat of his continuous attempts, on the one hand, and the failure of Sisyphus' plight when he pushes the rock from the bottom of the mountain to its top only to see it fall down again and finds himself pushing it up the mountain once more, and thousands of other times endlessly till infinity, on the other. The obvious distinction between Sisyphus' situation and Ghaylan's is that the first symbolizes the uselessness and absurdity of existence, empty of any known goal to be reached or any wisdom to be discovered, as Dr. Taha Husayn had said.

As for Ghaylan, I do not see myself symbolizing with him and the story of his efforts and struggle anything of the sort. To my understanding, Sisyphus's strife is pure absurdity and the unadulterate suffering of Fates. Ghaylan's effort, however, is fertile, pregnant with ideas and goals, despite the fact that he was destined to fail at the end. What I know is that I did not see in Ghaylan's experience a failed life ending in bitter absurdity. Nor did I see in Ghaylan's efforts the struggle of a being devoid of wisdom and not aspiring to a purpose. What I wanted Ghaylan and Maymouna to do is to personify with their blood, flesh, and tragedy a particular

understanding -- which I consider Eastern and Islamic -- of the essence of Man, his position, his power, and his honor as a human being.

The tragedy that Ghaylan represents in his life and action is not the tragedy of Sisyphus, but rather that of the living being compelled by life to live, act, work, build, and struggle tirelessly, without laziness, weakness, despair, cowardice, or restraint, as if he will live forever.²⁴ [He does so] despite the fact that he carries in his heart the certainty of a "believer" that life is transient and that permanence belongs to God alone, that human capability is only incapacity compared to God's power, that immortality and endurance are not destined to what man creates but only to God's creation.

7. For this reason, the story is set within the scope of the problem of action and in opposition to two views on this issue, Ghaylan's position and Maymouna's. Human certainty that one is destined to perish and his anticipation of the agony of sunset at the break of dawn can either feed a despair capable of drying up the spring of life, of paralyzing hope, breaking wings, killing the forces of vitality and forcing the return to "Nirvana's repose" and to the stillness of inanimate objects, or, on the contrary, this conviction can become the idea that accompanies the living being each moment of his life, awakening in him the forces of will and human heroism, urging him towards the honor of higher struggle and more noble fight.²⁵

It is evident that Ghaylan and Maymuna had taken two different paths in the forest of this question. Ghaylan knows -- just as Maymuna knows -- that the human essence is "individual," cut off from the "whole," and that it appears with limited means and confined power in the face of the cosmos and the Divine. At the same time, however, he believes that this limited individual self is privileged over all the other beings by the power to use the will and that, in addition, it is extracted from a superior self, "The Absolute Essence."

Consequently, if the human essence is limited on one side, from another side -- because it is extracted from Divine Power -- it is capable of freedom (*intilaq*). For when God breathed of His spirit into Man, He granted him the essential and unique attribute of His divine nature: He made him into a miniature image of His Divine Absolute Essence. He thus willed him to be an individual cause, capable of work, creation, and purposeful action due to the free will He had put in him. This is Man's role in existence: a free creator of his own destiny. And this is his position in the cosmos that allows him to be God's vice regent on earth, a position made possible by man's acceptance of "the Trust" that God offered to a universe that declined it from fear and pity.²⁶

If Ghaylan, therefore, believes in this and in the fact that his essence is limited in time and space but that it is "delivered" due to the Divine part that is in it, why does he not seek what secures his deliverance from incapacity, limitation and transience? And why does he not ascend to the position that allows him to communicate with God and share with Him the most exalted attributes of His Absolute Essence: power and creation. How often does the word creation recur in Ghaylan's speech! How often also does Maymuna, the voices, Sahabba` and her people, the stones, and the prophet's voice beseech him embrace "surrender" ("*Islam*") and "resignation," constantly warning him "of the fate in life destined him and the limits drawn for him!" But he does not give in to them and insists on becoming the model of the daring humanity that surpasses its limitations to reach "union and unicity" (*al-wisal wa al-ittihad*), adopting the type of "Sufism" in which there is no cutting the roots of life nor passing away in contemplation, a Sufism in which unity with the Gods and unification with Them are attained through the strength of existence, the greatness of creative power, and the permanence of productive life.

Maymuna believes, in no less certainty than Ghaylan, that the individual human essence is perishable and transient and that its power is limited and handicapped. However, she does not understand her human position as Ghaylan does. She watches him as he elevates his position, altering it and breaking its confines in order to reach the glory of power and creation

to attain the heights where he nears Godliness (*uluhiyya*) and the honor of proximity to God. This seems to her sheer arrogance, since she considers God to be too great and too sublime to draw near to. For her, faith is the living being's satisfaction with and acceptance of his position with contentment and sincerity.

Whereas Ghaylan's clear understanding of "the given" human role leads him to try replacing it with an "acquired" one -- to be gained through struggle and heroism -- Maymuna's equally clear consciousness leads her to a different kind of courage: the courage to face her "given" position in its "naked truth". She is not, therefore, weak or fragile; rather, she is content with her condition, with the limitations of her power and with the confines of her position without sorrow or despair. She thus endures what only strong beings, among "those who have witnessed and those who lead," can bear. Is she not the one who says to Ghaylan: "Courage is to accept yourself, your faults, your limitations, and your powerlessness. Courage is to see all that, without feeling crushed or overcome by grief."²⁷

Maymouna does not believe that human beings should choose the paths of stubbornness and opposition among the paths of being in the universe, but that they must follow the course of "nature, agreement, compatibility, unity, communion and universal satisfaction."²⁸ This is, for her, "the limit of the quest to be that existence compels (*awjaba`ala*) human beings to do: the effort extended by contented and satisfied beings, not the strife for fighting and struggle... It is to open the self to the cosmos, to be alert and awake to it, to accept and trust it, and to surrender to it the way living beings surrender to life. The gift of the Absolute Being to the living is acceptance, ease, and contentment."²⁹

8. I cannot end these comments that stretched in length beyond what I wanted without extending my many thanks again to Dr. Taha Husayn not only for what he kindly offered by way of critique of *al-Sudd*, but also for the opportunity to rise with him to some of the essential human issues worthy of his standing. I thank him for the chance to talk to him about them across boundaries and distance in a manner that I hope did not belittle his standing and did not fall below in its seriousness what is appropriate to his position.

Mahmud al-Mas`adi

3. "Echoes from Tunisia" by Taha Husayn

Three months ago I published in *al-Jumhuriyya* an article about the wonderful dramatic story, *al-Sudd*, written by the skillful Tunisian writer, Mahmud al-Mas`adi. Among what I said about this unique story was that it portrays the influence of its writer by Arab-Islamic culture, on the one hand, and by French culture and modern Existentialism, on the other. I also said that the author was influenced by the doctrine of the French writer Camus, who regards human life and struggle, the suffering Man endures, the hardship he encounters, the hurdles he overcomes, and the difficulties he conquers -- and indeed existence itself -- as an absurdity without reason to reassure us or a purpose to strive for. Life and existence are similar to the myth of the Greek hero that mythology portrays as a man sentenced after his death to push a big stone from the abyss until he reaches the summit of a towering mountain, and who when he arrives at the top, thinking he had reached his aim, sees the stone roll back down to the abyss. He then pushes it up the mountain again only to see it descend to its starting position. He continues lifting the stone and it continues to fall down, taking him with it, till the end of eternity, if eternity can be said to have an end.

My article in *al-Jumhuriyya* reached Tunisia and was read by the writer of the story. He was satisfied with most of it but felt uneasy about what I wrote regarding his influence by the philosophy of the well-known French writer. He wrote an enjoyable article that I won't say was

a response to the article I had dictated. Rather, I would say that it was a commentary on it and a clarification of some of the things he thought had escaped me regarding his admirable story.

Needless to say, he graciously accepted the praise I awarded to him and to his story, which they both deserve, if not even more so. He then graciously expressed his gratitude, a gesture that emanates from his high upbringing and good nature.

It is not important that two writers exchange greetings and compliments across the physical distance between Egypt and Tunisia. What matters is something of greater importance and deeper influence because he is adding to Arabic literature a new trend that Eastern writers, be they ancient or modern, have not before him achieved.³⁰

Before explaining this new doctrine and expressing my opinion about it, I want to concede to Professor al-Mas`adi what he wishes. He denies that he is influenced by the French writer in his book *al-Sudd* and affirms that he did not read Camus' work about the Greek hero until after he had written his play and a considerable time had passed. He also adds that it is likely that he and the French writer may have drunk from the same spring and that their minds might have arrived at ideas that are, if not identical, at least similar. The minds of great and exceptional people meet, as the French say. It is normal that he meets Camus or that Camus meets him along the way. I acknowledge that he is an innovator (*mubtakir*) that was not influenced by that writer or any other.

None of this will, however, change the truth of the matter. Al-Mas`adi's hero, Ghaylan, bears strong resemblance to the French writer's hero -- the hero of the Greek myth, if he so wishes. The Greek hero expends a continuous purposeless effort to which no one can find any explanation or rationale. Likewise, Professor al-Mas`adi's hero expends his effort without purpose or rationale, because neither he nor others see the outcome or the goal for this endeavor. He wants to irrigate land and to gather the water that gushes from the springs in order to build a dam and organize the exploitation of water in irrigating the land. But the land does not want to be irrigated or to be fruitful because it prefers aridity, likes drought more than irrigation and favors sterility over fertility. For this reason, the land destroys the dam or incites others to destroy it as soon as it is completed, or when it nears completion. Irrigating the land for al-Mas`adi's hero is similar to the mountain top, and the dam, whose structure rises only to be destroyed, resembles the rock that reaches the summit only to roll down to the abyss. The only difference between the Arab hero that our writer invented and the Greek hero the myth has invented, that the French writer has borrowed, is the following. The Arab hero is a human being who *wants* to bring something into existence and so accomplish a goal, but does not bring anything into existence and does not accomplish any goal, while the Greek hero is a human being whom the Gods have *punished* with this aimless perpetual suffering. It is for this reason that the French writer was eager to borrow him for his doctrine, to show that human life is an aimless and fruitless absurdity. The Arab hero is taken by imagination. The tempest carries him, together with his imagination, away to nowhere. He is therefore destined to nothingness, as are his imagination and his dam. Only his poor obedient wife, the land, and the aridity she loves remain.

Having said all this, I now leave Professor al-Mas`adi to his hero and the French writer to the Greek myth and move to the new doctrine I mentioned before and that ancient and modern Arab writers alike have not yet achieved. Existentialism has become Muslim under Prof. al-Mas`adi just as it became Christian under the well-known French writer Gabriel Marcel. This is not unusual since philosophy itself used to be pagan when it was invented by the Greeks, particularly by Socrates and his disciples. It then became Christian when Christianity defeated the paganism of the ancient world, especially the Greco-Roman world. It turned Muslim afterwards, when God completed his light and Islam spread in the East and in the West.

It is not surprising then that Existentialism starts atheist then becomes Christian and

finally turns muslim. Islam is the last of the revealed religions and its prophet (God bless him and grant him salvation) is the Seal of prophets. God alone is capable of guiding and leading astray whom he wishes. He said to his prophet: "You cannot guide whomever you please: it is God who guides whom He will."³¹ God has guided Existentialism to Islam today at the hand of the writer [al-Mas`adi].

Nevertheless, I wish to discuss with him some elements of this doctrine. The author wants to make his hero a Muslim who believes in God and who is convinced that his strength is extracted from God's power and that his self, as the writer says, is only a flame from the Absolute Essence, which is God, may He be exalted and elevated. So when he acts and strives to bring something into existence, to be inventive and creative -- although I hate to see creation attributed to other than God alone -- he only ascends to the position appropriate to him by right of what has been built in to his nature by this Absolute Divine Light.

The Absolute Divine Light, however, never requires that man be recalcitrant to the extreme and arrogant to the limit. On the contrary, He requires that he be wise and mature and to manage his affairs with patience, care, wisdom and caution in the face of the adversities he might encounter. He must not be rash, gamble, or throw himself in harms way, or let himself follow the imagination freely and wait for the storm to carry him and his imagination to nowhere, leaving behind those he is required to provide for, like this poor content spouse who likes work but hates recalcitrance.

Since it is necessary to explain this Muslim Existentialism in Professor al-Mas`adi's doctrine, I will do so regardless of what he thinks. For he himself had informed us in his enjoyable article that the French poet Valéry had listened to one of his poems being explained at the Sorbonne and said later that the Sorbonne professor made him aware of things he himself did not think his poem contained. Let Professor al-Mas`adi be in the position of the great poet, and I in the position of the humble teacher who indicates to poets and writers what they had unwillingly and unknowingly put in their words. My interpretation of Professor al-Mas`adi's story is very simple. He wrote his story during the French occupation that oppressed Tunisia and Tunisian hearts and minds. It usurped the means of work and production in their country as well as its courses of action and participation in the development of human civilization, in which all free and independent nations take part. He wrote his story when he was in despair or close to despair in an attempt to feel that he exists and that he is a rational and strong being who must influence life just as he is influenced by it. He wrote it in order to free himself of this submission imposed on him and to struggle for this goal as best as he could ... to struggle and struggle without yielding to the suffering and hardship he encounters and the difficulties and obstacles that face him. He continues struggling without giving in to the recurring failure imposed on him. He fights despair no matter how great it is and no matter how numerous its causes. He rejects submission despite the comfort and ease it provides, and shuns obedience whatever its temptations may be. It is of no importance to him whether the storm carries him and his imagination away to nowhere. The harm, pain and death he may encounter are more acceptable to him than submission even if he were to be offered the world's worth in gold.

Al-Mas`adi has written his story at this stage of his life and the lives of his fellow countrymen and of his country as a whole. Consequently, his story was a mirror of Tunisian heroism in the resistance against French colonization and in the fight to win an honorable free life for himself, for his country, and for all his compatriots. God so willed that the story should be written before the burden of occupation was removed off the Tunisian nation. When this happened, the writer returned to the story. He did not reject it, and it did not reject him because it portrays a stage in his life and an instance of his struggle. It captures the dark sadness that was looming in that life, a sadness that neared despair without, however, turning

into one because determination and hope were more powerful and more courageous than despair.

This is the explanation of our writer's story that he himself may not find. That is why he forces the interpretation of his story in an attempt to make it compatible with the new Tunisian life. And I would like the author to realize that I was not deceived by this forced interpretation.

I challenge him and request that he treats us to a new dramatic story that portrays hope and work. I assure him that from the new story will shine the light of a confidence that knows no despair and succumbs to no failure. His hero in this story will be more determined and more sincere in his belief in himself. He will attain a goal that, although may not satisfy him, will be better than being blown away to nowhere by the storm. The reason is that he will write the new story in a situation where his life and the life of the Tunisian nation around him have changed; both have become masters of their destiny. Obedience and resignation will no longer be imposed on him and no one will ask him to surrender and obey, as Maymouna asks Ghaylan.

It remains to say that the author's article is enjoyable although it failed to convince me of his interpretation of the story. The enjoyment results from the fact that he made Existentialism become Muslim, willingly or unwillingly, and thus made it possible for those who wish to be Existentialists to reconcile between Existentialism and religious truths without trouble or effort.

The author certainly knows that the Existentialism of the French Jean-Paul Sartre is atheist, deviating from religion and denying God. He must have read the play *The Flies* by this author and saw how Orestes disobeys the High God, refuses His orders and declares, in a sort of insolence, that the High God has no rule over him. It is enough that he had created Man. He has no power over him after that. This flagrant apostasy and open disobedience Man displays in the face of the Highest God represents the Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and of the German philosopher Hiedegger. It is an Existentialism based on Man's unlimited belief in himself to the point of making of himself the scale of good and evil. Man alone assumes responsibility for his deeds and is accountable only to himself before he is judged by the community and its laws.

It is not surprising, then, that Existentialism can lead man astray and take him further than its proponents would want. On the other hand, the Existentialism that turned Christian at the hands of Gabriel Marcel or Moslem, in Tunisia, at the hands of Professor al-Mas`adi, sets limits to Man's confidence in himself. The strongest and most powerful of these boundaries is the religious limit that protects man from arrogance and defiance. It puts in his heart the belief that he is responsible before a force that is greater and stronger than him, and more powerful than the community and its laws. This is the power of God who examines one's conscious and who "knows the furtive look and the secret thought."³²

I do not know whether this Moslem Existentialism will prevail or if it is destined to failure. What I know is that Christian Existentialism did not go much beyond its founder Gabriel Marcel, and I fear that Muslim Existentialism will end with Professor al-Mas`adi and will not expand beyond him, even among Tunisian youths. The reason is that after Christianization and Islamization, Existentialism becomes no more and no less than a philosophical doctrine. Philosophical doctrines are numerous and are discussed alike by those who know and those who don't, but most people do not take them seriously.

I would have liked to debate Professor al-Mas`adi about the Existentialism of the ancients that he has mentioned in his delightful article. But such discussion requires another article since this one has become too long. So I will postpone the debate to another time soon. It will of course be only a discussion between two friends close by hearts and minds, despite distance.

To the generous friend, I extend my sincere greetings and truthful thanks, urging him to accept my challenge and write for us a story about hope and action. We shall then see who

was right and who was wrong.

Taha Husayn

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Notes

1.Husayn's article was first appeared in the Egyptian newspaper *al-Jumhuriyyah* on February 27, 1957 and al-Mas`adi responded to it in the Tunisian journal *al-Fikr* in May 1957. His article prompted a commentary by Husayn which appeared in *al-Jumhuriyya* on May 29, 1957. All three texts were reprinted in the Tunisian journal *al-Fikr* (Vol. 18, number 10, July 1973) and in *Mahmud al-Mas`adi wa Kitabuhu "al-Sudd"* by Nur al-Din Sammud (1973). They are also reprinted in the 1976 edition of *al-Sudd* (211-228). Neither of the original publications are available to me at this point. I use the reprint in *al-Sudd*, with occasional cross-references to Sammud, as my source for this translation. There are differences between these three reprints that comparison and further research may explain.

2.I derive most of the biographical data on Husayn from Cachia (1956) and Malti-Douglas (1988).

3.Research on al-Mas`adi amounts to a small industry. The study of his work is renewed with new interests and approaches. It owes much also to the fact that author's work is regularly used as textbooks. For a recent bibliography, see Tarshuna (1989).

4.There was a reception for the author on May 13, 1957 at Ma`had Ibrahim Naji al-Thaqafi during which Dr. Abd al-Hamid Yunis presented a paper on *al-Sudd* (Sammud, 79-87). Among other views on al-Mas`adi in the East, see also Isa al-Na`uri's 1966 article, for example, and how it differs from Husayn's especially in his reference to world literature (Sammud, 131-147). Of related interest is *Muhawala fi fahm riwayat al-Sudd li al-Mas`adi* (*An Attempt to Understand al-Mas`adi's novel al-Sudd*).

5. See al-Yusufi (1992) for a study of how Greek poetics is assimilated and transformed in the medieval Arabic theory of discourse that he calls, rhetorical (*bayani*).

6. These views are stated more explicitly in a his 1955 article "The Modern Renaissance of Arabic Literature (1955)."

7.Personal Interview with the writer on January 8, 1994 at his home in Tunis, Tunisia.

8.*Mujmal tarikh al-Adab al-Tunisi* (A History of Tunisian Literature). first published in 1918 and then reprinted in 1944 in Egypt when Taha Husayn was minister of Education.

9.The Tunisian poet Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi was well known in Egypt especially through the journal *Apollo*. See "What We Might not Know about al-Shabbi" by Jaber `Usfur.

10.Tunisia received its formal independence from France in 1956, but it was not until 1962 that the military occupation was over.

11.Camus (1913-1961), Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957 and author of many novels, plays and essays.

12.The comparison of the original with the reprint of the same text in Sammud reveals that a phrase is dropped and an other is repeated. The translation reflects the correction of what I think is a printing error.

13. My translation of the original couplet by Abu Tammam or Hasan Ibn Aws al-Ta'i (d.843/232).

*wa rakbin ka 'amthali al-asinnati `arrasu
`ala mithliha wa al-Laylu tastu ghayahibuh
li amrin `alayhim an tatimmaa suduruhu
wa laysa `alyhim an tatimma 'awakhiruh. (Sharh 9)*

The couplet is from a poem in praise of Abu al-`Abbas `Abd Allah Ibn Tahir.

14. Reference to al-Mas`adi's position as Chair of the Division of Secondary Education in Tunisia between 1955 and 1958 (See Sammud, 12).

15. Reference to the preface of *al-Sudd* by Mahmud al-Mas`adi (p.9).

16. Reference to *Hay Ibn Yaqzan* by Ibn Sina (980 - 1037), Ibn Tufayl (d.1185), and al-Suhrawardi (d.1191). Notice al-Mas`adi's silence about this point in his response to Husayn.

17. Reference to Ikhwan al-Safa' (10th c.)'s epistle "*Risalat tada`i al-Hayawanat `Ala al-Insan* (An Epistle on the Claims of Animals on Humans).

18. Al-Mas`adi's text is unclear about the relationship between the two and it does not mention marriage. But notice that al-Mas`adi neither confirms nor denies Husayn's claim in his response.

19. See al-Mas`adi's description of the storm in *al-Sudd*, Scene VIII, p.144-45.

20. "A story still in manuscript that I hope to publish soon." (Note in original text) The book was written in the late thirties and published in series in 1944, then in a book form by the same title in 1973.

21. References to Albert Camus' *The myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and *Misunderstanding*. Al-Mas`adi has written *al-Sudd* "between September 1939 and January 1940."

22. In the Sammud's version of the text, we read "Goethe in *Faustus*, and Dostoevsky and Nietzsche in their complete works." All titles in the original are the author's own translations into Arabic.

23. Additional lists of five titles and four names appear in Sammud's book but not in the edition of *al-Sudd* on which this translation is based.

24. Reference to the Prophet's *hadith*: "Work for this world as if you will live forever and work for the hereafter as if you will die tomorrow"

25. The expression, "Nirvana's repose," is taken from *A Dictionary of Philosophy*.

26. Reference to (Ahzab) 33:72: "We offered our trust to the heavens, to the earth, and to the mountains, but they refused the burden and were afraid to receive it. Man undertook it, he has proved a sinner and a fool" (*The Koran*, p.300).

27. Reference to *Al-Sudd*, 123.

28. "Al-Musafir" in *Mawlid al-Nisyan wa ta'ammulat ukhra* (The genesis of Forgetfulness and Other Meditations) (p. 132). "Al-Musafir was first published in French in Oct 1942 and then in Arabic in 1954.

29. Reference to "Al-Musafir" (p. 133).

30. This is a reiteration of what Husayn had already mentioned in the first article. The uniqueness of al-Mas`adi is reaffirmed.

31. I use the Penguin translation of the Koran. Here the reference is to "The Story" or surat 56 (*Koran*, 56:28).

32. *Koran*, "Ghafir" or Surat 40, verse 19.