

On Translation: That Worn-Out Type of Dusty Grey

He dashed off hurriedly into the alley without a moment's pause to greet his neighbours, the owners of the shops and stores adjoining the building where he lives down the side road off al-Abed Street, even though it was the most appropriate time of day for one to hear a good morning. He has neither a good evening nor a good morning nor a single hello to spare for anyone he meets on his way. In their turn, his neighbours pay no attention to his hurried comings and distracted goings, as if there was some kind of tacit agreement between them that on his side, he won't take the initiative to address them, and on theirs, they won't be surprised. When, however, one of them stops him and asks him a question, he pauses and listens with conspicuous patience, and gives obligingly of his precious time. And then he appears in his true nature, a gentle young man as good-natured and genial as could be.

This is how he sets off with great gusto every day; for he's the type of person who goes on his way turning neither to the right nor to the left, whether for practical contingencies or for theoretical ones to do with matters of abstract thought; and this is something that has gotten him into tangles which he could do very well without. Anyone seeing him speeding off would think he was on his way to an important meeting, or out to take care of some truly pressing exigency that admits no delay. And so were we to meet him sallying forth, for example, in al-Salihiya Street, where he would often pass in late morning, we would presume him to be in hot pursuit of the shortest possible route to his destination, especially as we watch him swiftly wending his way right and left, circumnavigating cars and passers-by, and turning his steps towards al-Zahra cinema, and then on to the corner of Cham Palace Hotel, where he crosses the road and reaches the corner of the side-street al-Firdaws. He makes his way along the pavement of Port Said Street, he slows down, he comes to a stop before the newspaper and magazine stand. He quickly scans the headlines; he's worried about missing a headline or allowing a piece of news escape him; he rereads them slowly and carefully, then with pleasure, as if he has found what he was looking for. What will he do after all this rush? He will simply buy a newspaper and make his way to the nearby café, the *Havana*, where he will sit down at a table alone, open his briefcase, bring out his papers and pens, stare out idly at the passers-by, and smoke a couple of cigarettes alongside a cup of black coffee. One moment he might follow with his gaze the people going up and down the pedestrian bridge, another moment he might study the

customers of the shop across the road that sells fresh juice and refreshments, or the people who have business at the electricity company, or his attention might be arrested by all the whistling and disruptive commotion caused by the traffic wardens, and the dust and din produced by the cars. He's thinking of things that might have nothing to do with him, just abstract thoughts pursued for their own sake, until he finally picks up the newspaper and begins to leaf through it.

This outing represents the groove in which Hamid Saleem has moved ever since he acquired his daily habits, like most other intellectuals. His outing did not persist for long, for he gave up the habit of frequenting cafés for reasons which will emerge in due time.

Hamid is not the kind of person who attracts attention, though his appearance might seem disconcerting and in need of definition; for in terms of figure, he's neither fat nor thin, and in terms of height, he's neither tall nor short. In general he seems neither attractive nor repulsive, perhaps because he's neither handsome nor ugly. An entirely ordinary young man, medium built and passably dressed, wearing a pair of corduroy trousers and a denim jacket. He has thick hair, an innocent-looking face with no traces of anything dubious, and a clear gaze which has a touch of dullness in it. Incontestably, he is a pleasant and warm-hearted young man who doesn't hesitate to give others a helping hand, even when there's only a passing acquaintance between them. He seems easy-going, but he can be very obstinate when he thinks he's right. The problem is that he thinks he's right most of the time, and that's something that can get him into trouble, especially since he works in translation. For that's a job that requires diligence but also flexibility. It requires decisions about what should come first and what should follow, and the ability to retreat from mistakes and sometimes even from what's strictly correct. It involves consulting dictionaries and delving deep inside them, finding devious ways of translating dirty slang or manoeuvring it out of the text, and looking into the various meanings and alternatives for words and expressions which have no meanings or possible alternatives, and all one can do is to sift the multiple synonyms with painstaking care and select the one that fits best. A job that demands serious mental effort, and to put it more plainly, a capacity for caution.

Were anyone to have the opportunity to view the way he goes about his translating work from up close, he'd realise what kind of small but nevertheless exhausting hurdles he has to face. That opportunity shouldn't be too hard to obtain, for at this late time of night he is engrossed in his work, translating a romance. And since his wife is cross with him and has gone to her mother's house with the two kids, coming upon him on his own will allow us to get acquainted with some of the thoughts and ideas milling about in his head and preoccupying him. The circumstances are auspicious, but one must be patient, for translators have their special states and moods.

He is stuck on the translation of a sentence which means nothing more than the sum of its four words:

“The sky was tenebrous...”

The description of the sky as tenebrous suggested to him a deep black and a sense of density at the same time, but it wasn't entirely right; the description overshot the mark. For a start, he felt (and Hamid usually shares the feelings of the protagonists of the novel) that a sky which is very wide is very close, so close it's almost falling on one's head and wringing one's breath from one's chest, and so it's in a sense a suffocating sky.

But can there be such a thing as a *suffocating* sky? One may have a cloudy sky, a dark sky, a stormy sky, a blazing sky, and many other skies which one can hardly begin to enumerate. As for a *suffocating* sky, to his knowledge nobody had ever mentioned such a thing, except insofar as it might be said to conflict with the idea of width; unless the black that dominated it was very dark and the four corners of the sky disappeared from view. Were he to stick to the text, the sky would be overcast with clouds with a slightly black hue. What was suggestive was the fact that they were the opening words of chapter four, and by dint of their supreme clarity they took on an obvious interpretation: it was a warning about dangers to come.

He finished reading the chapter, and his expectations were disappointed. The opening meant nothing more than a sky covered by a few clouds that suggested a grey type of weather, that worn-out type of dusty grey which stories about fog and ghosts and rainy days were filled with.

Even the simplest words taunt him, and somewhere between this meaning or that allusion, he might lose his way before he hits upon the right expression for what he felt. Where does he get this jumble of feelings from – from his eagerness to find what's correct, or from his obstinacy? Light stories make for dull scenes and even duller thoughts, and they don't deserve close attention or deep perplexity, whereas firm stories admit nothing liquid or fluid. In his opinion this story belonged to the former variety, and the meaning he was looking for was most likely to be lying in a region close by, hiding in some part of his mind. He waited nonchalantly while he drew near to that region, or while that region drew near to him. A moment later they caught sight of each other, he found the word, and he cried out:

“The sky was overshadowed...”

That was a better word, it suggested gloominess and a kind of darkness that wasn't entirely pitch-dark; a darkness which, even if it was thick in some sense, did not

entirely conceal the world from view.

He was pleased with his good choice; the word was just right. He read the sentence again several times, and every time the enthusiasm he felt for it grew a bit damper. Even though it seemed suitable, a wintry sky obscured by smoke, as well as some fog in the famous London style, nevertheless it was heavy on the tongue and rough on the ear. Whereas "tenebrous" felt lighter to pronounce and had a more pleasant sound, even if it didn't convey the exact meaning. He hesitated...let it be overshadowed, even if it was a little disappointing, for it seemed rather ordinary and conveyed nothing of the conflict that had preceded it, or even a small part of the thought processes he had undergone. But it expressed the point!

One wonders, do readers realise what pains a translator takes just in order to obtain a sentence as humdrum as this one: "The sky was overshadowed..."? This mental process offers a simple example of a not inconsiderable effort that regularly passes unnoticed.

Rather more vexing was the fact that the translation process did not thereby come to an end, for Hamid didn't settle with the solution he'd reached, and he once again abandoned his resolve and yielded to his translator's sensitivity and to the temperament of his literary taste, and decided to put the sentence back as it had stood before this laborious effort: The sky was tenebrous! To hell with precision.

The preceding intellectual labour, humble and fitful as it is, is only a drop in the ocean which fails to give a precise and comprehensive picture of the wider linguistic efforts and psychological struggles the translator Hamid Saleem has to undertake, especially those involved in the translation of long complicated sentences and profound subtle meanings with all their deep-seated recondite associations, above all those unconscious syndromes that rear out of the abysmal depths of worlds touched with the strangest kinds of perverse sexual fantasies. No, the readers won't realise the amount of effort that has gone into struggling with words and meanings, and even were they to learn of it, they'd be amazed at those morose men of learning with their thick glasses and their affected airs supposedly preoccupied with issues of universal significance when in fact they're spending sleepless nights thinking about tiresome little ambiguities and inconsequential words demanding time and thought.

The process might seem trivial, for what does it matter whether the meaning is a little closer or a little more distant to a foreign writer whom we might or might not know? The readers may be excused for their doubts, for stories of the imagination, even realistic ones, are worlds away from the real problems with which their lives brim. But what's the excuse of those critics or journalists who ignore not only the exertion of the pen, but indeed the exertion of one's mind and soul, and what's more, of one's creative powers?

But let us not run ahead of ourselves. That's a story from which Hamid Saleem suffered greatly, and for which he paid a dear price.

The Translator: Isn't Art Essentially a Process of Translation?

A few years ago, on the last month of an embattled year, the world was preoccupied with the threats America was making against Iraq, and the international inspectors were looking for weapons of mass destruction all over Iraqi caches and factories and schools and presidential palaces. There were also spells of rain, flooding and snow throughout most of the country. And even though the state of the world has relatively little to do with our story, there's no harm in bringing it into view, so that people won't think that the events we are narrating take place in isolation from the crimes of international politics and its victims, and from the upheavals and disastrous turnabouts in world climate.

In his weekly column, under the heading "Literary Counsels", the well-known journalist Shareef Husni criticised the unknown novice translator Hamid Saleem and accused him of disfiguring literary works which he had translated from English into Arabic, this amounting to a couple of novels and a few literary articles. The accusation had a mean tone, even though it seemed like a sober judgment, denouncing it as a bad and substandard translation that responded to the dictates of mere whim and the cheap cleverness of sensationalist rhetorical improvisations running to questionable excess. As for the counsels, they consisted of a single counsel directed to the officials in charge of censorship at the Ministry of Information and the Arab Writers' Union, proposing that the translator be forced to go back to school and take a course that would teach him the ABC of translation. And he ended his article on a sarcastic note, appealing to the aforementioned officials to prevent him from continuing his work, reminding them that censorship encompasses literary incompetence as well, and is not confined to the famous forbidden trinity of religion, sex and politics.

The journalist issued his harsh judgment without flinching, and the weak point in his accusations was his ignorance of the English language, and thus his inability to make a definitive pronouncement concerning the adequacy of the translation into Arabic. In spite of that, he took up the song again a week later, as if he had received new information in the meantime, or as if his appetite had not yet been sated, and he devoted his next column to him under the title "The Unfaithful Translator". Not content with conferring on him the honour of this famous and widely recognised accusation, he also appended criticisms that deprived literary infidelity of its not totally

reprehensible and indeed rather amiable ambiguities, and he described its perpetrator as an obtuse opportunist, renewing his previous accusations and adding to them that of toying with the meaning of novels, and foisting on their characters thoughts which were not to be found in the original text. And he did not spare him from a threat of punishment which he brandished before him, ending his article with a remark of caustic provocation: Had we a literary police, he would have had his fingers broken in punishment.

It was a fact that the translator Hamid Saleem followed an approach that differed from that of most others, one which did not abide by the principles of literal translation. As he put it, he wasn't too anxious about fidelity; what concerned him more was the spirit of the text. For his part, he didn't defend his approach with a widely circulated and accepted argument which took the edge off an austere literalism in preference of an approach that lax-minded reviewers referred to as "the course of the greatest accuracy".

Following journalistic protocol, Hamid requested the right to respond on the pages of the same newspaper. They agreed to his request, but his article did not appear; he asked about it several days later, and they said it had gotten lost. He didn't ask again; he realised his response would get lost a hundred times and fail to find its way to print, and he turned to a second newspaper. They accepted it on condition that no names be mentioned, for the journalist was well known and belonged to an official newspaper which had relations to theirs even though they were rivals, and so long as mere provocation would do, there was no reason to stir up a battle.

His article appeared, fully compliant with the conditions, alluding to an unknown journalist whom he designated as "a certain someone" and to whom he referred in several places in the following manner: a certain someone went on a rant...and wrote...and alleged...and claimed...and showed no shame...and so on; giving himself free reign in expressing his contempt, heaping scorn upon his prominent standing, and revealing his rival's illiteracy with respect to the English language, for he had obtained information that assured him of the journalist's complete ignorance of foreign tongues. He called him a meddling poseur who had understood his translations in the measure of his limited intelligence and meagre culture, and who had expended no effort to comprehend his innovations outside the grid of the narrowest and shallowest possible notions, as if the greatest contribution a translator could make did not go beyond a literal translation *word for word*. Whereas it is the task of true translation to comprehend the original work and confer upon it embellishing touches enjoined by "the particularities of our beautiful language."

The preceding remark was put that way concisely in the article, and it expresses

some of Hamid's views about translation which he alludes to with some equivocation among his colleagues at the café, and usually he keeps hidden and finds hard to articulate openly, for no doubt they are so strange that they will raise a thousand questions. For what he means by embellishing touches, to put it tersely, is this: a poeticising of sentimental occasions, heightened suspense at decisive moments, a charge of sorrow which he confers to characters with sensitive anxious natures, and a reasonable consignment of joy which it is the special privilege of mirthful carefree personalities to receive. And to use his expression: measurements like these are required in order for the reader to feel their happiness and grief!

In defending his approach, the article gave him the opportunity to attack the notion of translation as the self-aggrandising journalist would have it. And he pronounced his judgment upon it: ugly, dry and graceless, not daring to touch the author's text whether for better or for worse for fear of going wrong, standing before it with hands bound and head reverentially bent, as if it was a divine revelation; these are the boundaries of the translator's work, which he must never cross! And what will we thereby gain? A cold text lacking warmth and savour. As for that reasonable amount of interference which helps bring the translated work closer to the readers, a permissible amount which imparts a fresh look to the translation, that is out of the question, even though it is the touchstone, not only for the translator's in-depth knowledge of both languages, English and Arabic, but of his immersion in the depths of the work itself. But what's the point of talking when the journalist's ability for thinking about theoretical issues is so rudimentary and inferior? To go beyond what is actually far from being unanimously accepted, since it differs from one translator to next, is an undeniable act of creativity and not an unpardonable crime. Those are the rights of translation which must not be relinquished even if the common majority of readers finds them to their distaste. And what's wrong with their being confined to the elite and the intellectuals, those with a passion for literature? Though let it be known that, for the journalist, the matter certainly goes no further than distinguishing between a translator who receives approval and one who does not.

The skirmish came to a quick end, proof that just like other sterile literary skirmishes, it was a load of bluster leading nowhere, and it came and went without leaving a trace in the literary circles, for the person referred to as "a certain someone" did not appear in the article and the readers could find no link between the ignorant "someone" and the savvy Shareef Husni. But it left behind an incurable wound in a prominent journalist whose standing had taken a blow, and who felt humiliated even though he dared not reply, so as not to give, as he claimed, an undeserved importance to an insignificant journalist who lacked importance. And he began to bide his time for an opportunity to pounce.

Even though the battle was closed, the criticisms took Hamid aback, and aroused in him certain personal questions: Why does my natural propensity in translation compel me to interfere in the style of the novel? What's my motive? Is it truly possible that no-one has asked himself any questions about the exertions I put myself through in order to carry out improvements and modifications which mobilise the whole of my abilities and my cultural sensibility? Questions besieged him, and they brought no satisfactory answers in their train, or they brought answers which amounted to only one fourth or one half of an answer, and perhaps even fell outside the question or the topic. And his answers, which took the form of perplexed questionings, spoke for the following:

Wasn't art as a whole, from poetry to film, a reflection of our lives and dreams and desires, given through words and images, colours and lines and musical themes? Throughout the ages, hadn't creativity been an effort to translate the tangible, living images of real life into another type of image, legible, audible, and visible – a translation in which every kind of art had its special tools? In a broader sense, wasn't art essentially a process of translation, in which it was enough to grasp the vocabulary of correspondences and equivalences in order to get to know the mechanisms with which it revealed the self, the nature of life, and the world?

His work as a translator, transferring things from one language to another, was nothing but a constant relay between a foreign linguistic medium to a local medium that differed from it. And whether intentionally or unintentionally, it thereby added a further burden to his task, which was to transpose ways of thinking and living from one environment to one that was dissimilar to it, and from one society to another, crossing endlessly vast distances of which the distance between continents and oceans constituted only the superficial dimension, the one that mattered least. As for the hidden dimension, the one that mattered most, this was the possibility that an even greater distance might come between the peoples of the world. For instead of language acting as a means of communication, it would become an instrument for misunderstanding. In the original text, the author writes in his language to a reader with whom he shares the same world, and it is only natural that he shouldn't take into account an unknown reader with whom he is only minimally acquainted, and it is not at all improbable that this process of communication should result in its opposite, given the discrepancies and disparities it is burdened with, and in light of the perplexity, guesswork and probabilistic speculation it generates.

On the other hand, however, the same reader who is unknown to the author is known to the translator, and consequently one of the translator's principal duties is to exert himself in order to cover the distance that divides them, by forging a mutual comprehension between two different settings and two different languages, and by exercising his influence on the original work through a translation which should not be faulted for its openness to being re-moulded in a different yet appropriate cast, such that it isn't spared from certain simple intentional errors and from other elements that might seem like the result of mere absent-mindedness, whereas in reality they constitute a specific bias of the understanding that is not free from force, which aims to

bring the text closer to the reader, and will no doubt produce results that amply repay one's efforts in the long term.

This valiant defence stirred up suspicions in his mind (and in reality they were more than suspicions). Surely it was all an attempt to convey his own thoughts through the intermediary of an accomplished work, to find an outlet for existential thoughts and creative desires, perhaps to release a deeply buried urge to identify with others, and to disappear inside their shadow. Or perhaps these were the harbingers of something, which came to him in the form of effusions, whether conscious or unconscious, aiming to rouse and alert him. But who would take purely subjective motives into consideration?

In this way, Hamid defended his approach and asked his own questions and answered them. In general, whatever they might be, they neither truly satisfied him, nor on the other hand did they cause him any loss of sleep or anxiety. It was a widespread view that what mattered was to ask questions, not to answer them. In addition, and as a whole, it was an adventure which remained confined to paper, and which he would get dragged into as a result of the considerable impact the work he was translating was having on him. When the incitement grew unendurable, something would take form inside him, as he'd put it, and make him interact with the events, the thoughts and the characters, and he would deviate from the intended meaning in favour of an additional meaning which might not reinforce the original meaning and might even conflict with it.

This situation did not come to an end here but took a turn for the worse, and some time after this his audacity reached its zenith – and here is where the story we referred to earlier begins – when he translated a recently published novel by an African novelist writing in English. Hamid wasn't pleased with the negative ending of the story, in which the black academic, having completed his studies at a British university, decides to settle in the English capital and live with his white lover in the heartland of Western civilisation. It made no dent upon his conscience that his skills demanded of him that he return to his home country, which he had left behind groaning under the weight of its wretchedness. Such was the extent of the admiration Hamid felt for the novel, and such his resentment at the way it ended, that he modified the ending, to ensure that a marvellous novel would not go to waste, and it now became positive: the black academic, the protagonist, returns to his black country leaving his white lover behind in London.

And had it not been for the happy stroke of chance that took the side of the African novelist who had authored the novel and made him win the English Booker Prize, nobody would have noticed the amended ending.

Which was how disaster struck.

The Journalist: If Literature Has a Stake to Play, Grudges Have Several Stakes in Addition

That was when the editor of the cultural section in a weekly miscellany, to whom it occurred every so often to keep up to date with new literary publications across the world, wrote a feature about the award-winning novel along with a faithful summary of the plot, and he presented in great detail the deliberations that preceded, and then the decision of the panel of judges that followed, and in particular the eulogies they reserved for its bold and aptly chosen ending.

The editor continued with a sarcastic question: Since when had publishers begun to market novels in every language with a different ending that satisfies the feelings of its speakers? And he pointed to the obvious discrepancy between the English and the Arabic endings. Then he commented invidiously: Is the new world order striving to establish new literary customs in translation which would produce a literary apartheid between two worlds, on the model of racial apartheid, on the grounds of the crisis in readership and the publishing world – customs which were first applied in the Arab world with the agreement of Western publishers, taking into stock the extent of cultural backwardness in the countries belonging to what is called the developing south, thereby to galvanise the energies of their peoples and to goad them toward progress, choosing the events and plots that suit them best, and the endings which please them insofar as they're worthy of irrepressibly forward-thrusting heroes?

The journalist Shareef Husni paid no attention to the writer's invidious commentary, for he couldn't care less about the new world order and the backwardness of Arabic-speaking countries, or the venerable literary customs and the goading toward progress and the crisis in readership and the publishing world. The documented piece of information that had effortlessly dropped into his lap was an opportunity he had long awaited, from which he gleaned the existence of a blatant discrepancy between the defeatist meaning of the English original and the militant import of the Arabic copy, and it was all that was needed in order to plunge the unfaithful translator into disgrace and apprehend him *in flagrante delicto* committing a crime which went beyond disfiguring novels and involved replacing them with new ones, and it was even more

than he had hoped for in order to be able to wage a just and virulent war against those who vandalised and falsified literary texts.

Had Hamid predicted the troubles he might bring upon himself, he would not have heaped scorn on the prominent journalist several months ago, but would have done things as the popular saying eloquently puts it: he would have bitten the bullet and he would not have tried to rehabilitate his translations by an article whose intended target readers failed to grasp. He understood that when it was too late, or as the famous Arabic adage has it, when the sword had already preceded the censure.

As his bad luck would have it, the literary milieu was going through a monotonous period of relative quiet that lacked its usual share of back-biting and general machinations, and suddenly, there it was, a blazing scandal breaking out just at the right time and an experienced journalist fanning its flames, on the basis of strict principles informed by the highest type of academic zeal, whose first and final aim was to subject the translator to the most vicious castigation. This time, he did not content himself with breaking his five fingers, but asked for his head, and demanded his consignment to a literary sanatorium that would purify him from the miasma of his corruptive practices. His voice was joined by a radical journalist belonging to his circle of supporters, who demanded the promulgation of a strict law concerning translation which would reserve the severest punishment for anyone who made light of it. And the participation of the famous writer Muhsin 'Ali Hasan, about whom there will be more to say in chapters to come, brought a qualitative gravity and assured credibility which weakened Hamid Saleem's position and strengthened the resolve of his critics.

In addition, the campaign aroused the zeal of a number of minor journalists training to become the poets and novelists of the future, who found it a propitious opportunity for an exercise that would qualify them to penetrate the domain of criticism, and they waxed eloquent at the expense of a brilliant case which was as clear as day and proof to error, displaying all their impudence and talent for foul language in defending a set of values which nobody should be allowed to impugn. And they wouldn't let this local immolation go without escalating it to a full-scale bloodbath in which they participated with a ritually correct act of slaughter by registering a resounding and noble cultural stance, and so they vilified him without mercy in defence of the sanctity of literature, and demanded that everyone who let himself be seduced into performing an act of such vandalism ought to be called to account.

Everyone who took part in the campaign, including the translator on whose head its consequences descended, believed that Shareef Husni had launched it out of lofty and impartial motives, in order to preserve world literature from falsification. They didn't know that if literature has a stake to play, grudges have several stakes in addition, and

the journalist had only used literature as an expedient for dragging the unwary translator through the mud.

The reason might seem trivial, but it is not trivial for a journalist of Husni Shareef's stature. And if we try getting to know him a bit better, we will clearly perceive the extent of his standing and importance. For as can be gathered from the innumerable human fragments scattered throughout his articles and discussions, he is a man who is faithful to his principles and views, who knows what is due to him and what his dues are to others, and who, when circumstances require it and even when they do not, criticises lies and hypocrisy and dissimulation, and all other types of human baseness which this includes and excludes. And on account of his sheer rectitude, he encounters great hardship in making himself understood by people; no wonder, for the righteous have sensitive souls, and they recoil from all things specious or ugly. He's just like that, only more, and he tolerates no crookedness, refuses to keep quiet or show clemency toward faults of any kind, however marginal, and he wages battle against errors and strives to correct them. And that should come as no surprise; for his fighter's nature enables him to throw himself into the most rugged terrain, which is why he chose a profession that's in the business of always looking for trouble.

One cannot fail to be struck by the stream of strongly-worded satire he directs against writers. There's no big secret here, for he has literary endowments that are in no way inferior to theirs; and as he says, they stand on the same footing, there's no distinction they have over him, and he is not taken in by the magical nimbus they contrive around themselves, nor is he deceived by the imaginary walls they try to hem themselves in with from all sides. They are birds of a feather; he too is a poet, a storyteller and a critic. Which is to say that literary games which are all right for others are not all right for him. For he'd been writing poetry from a very young age; impressing his primary school teacher who encouraged him to publish it, he'd sent his poems from the village where he lived to the three daily newspapers in the capital, and to judge by the readers' letters, it was warmly received. During his time in university, the allure of poetry lost its hold on him, even though he met with success, for he observed that the number of poets outstripped the number of readers, and he pulled the brake on his poetic inspiration and gave up writing poetry, and devoted himself to writing short stories instead. The stories' short breath matched the feverish speed of the age and their preoccupation was with the struggles of the nation, and thus the future and the struggles of the hard-working became his primary personal concerns. He distinguished himself in short stories, and he cast a few of them in the direction of the region's cultural centres and won several encouraging prizes at province-wide competitions, until he got a job at a daily newspaper and actively fell to work, devoting his time to journalism once and for all. But he would seize the opportunity and collect his poems and stories which lay scattered in different newspapers and periodicals and publish them all together as a book, thus becoming a member of the Writers' Union, and thereafter he'd turn his back on story-writing forever.

This transition, or this final substitution of story-writing for journalism, took place

at the time when stories went bankrupt, and could no longer be trusted to put a crust of bread on the table or serve for anything. As the theory that calls for practical action would have it: what we need is action, not to cram our free time with stories about imaginary heroes – though let it be said that his stories were in fact socially engaged, and strove to reveal the secret ins and outs of relationships in the putrescent urban bourgeois society, contrasting them with the warm, intimate and simple relationships in the countryside: the village, the mud houses, the harvest nights, the bewitching natural landscape, the domestic animals. By contrast he would lampoon the city as a den of corruption, which corrupted the innocence and virgin purity of those arriving to it from the green plains and the proud hills, using a harshly realistic style that didn't leave out a single act of sexual prowess which the honest youths performed with the lascivious wives of rich sexually frigid traders who were too busy with their business projects and shops and with buying and selling and counting the day's profits to attend to their fleshy white-skinned wives. He lampooned these relationships and revealed the sordid depths of dissolution and decadence that lay behind them by means of skilful story-telling strokes. So for example, after a particular woman has satisfied her lust with the virile young man from the country, she doesn't let go of him but keeps coming back to him and tries to please him by cleaning his room, cooking him delicious meals, and washing his dirty clothes. Then she tries bribing him with money, and she buys him gifts and pays his rent. But he leaves her, because his pride and self-esteem won't allow him to remain a prisoner of his carnal desires and urban ambitions. She pleads with him to stay with her, but her abject submission only increases the revulsion he feels for her, and in the end he pushes her away with pride and hauteur, refusing to yield to her despite her charms and her husband's wealth. This ending, and others of the same kind, would entail a further ending. The young man contents himself with living austerely, on a crust of bread and an onion, working in a factory or going back to his village to look after his land with his dignity intact and his head held high.

His stories drew their themes from this central ethical motif, and in this noble manner they swiftly made their way through the folds of revolutionary realistic literature. Nor did he stop at this shocking exposé, but he added new topics which called upon the young generations arriving from the poor rural areas to make their mark in building the great future, this being a topic others had already written about repeatedly and at length. Its principal aim was to raise the morale of the newcomers rushing in to find a place for themselves in the civil service, in government institutions and in the army, so that they would not feel mortified faced with a city that shut its doors in their faces for a single reason which they would later come to discover. And what was that? There had been many who had arrived from the outside during the revolutionary upsurge and who had wrought havoc in the city; and it had shuttered its soul in their faces. That was what had happened to the journalist, who hadn't yet come into prominence at the time. These were things he had drawn from his own experience; and the aspirations which had beguiled him and which he had brought to the city

among his belongings turned into rancour, for he wrested nothing but looks of indifference, and sometimes disdain, from the pretty girls who made his imagination salivate and who unleashed his sorrows during his idle wanders through al-Salihiya Street and al-Hamra'.

He made his way through journalism taking the programme of direct social criticism in charge, with no circumlocutions or shadow-play or the exciting long-windedness of story-telling, and he swept into the field of nationalist political articles. There was no national occasion or other important event in which he didn't take part, from the celebration of the French evacuation to the festival of Eid al-Adha, and from the 8th of March Revolution to the elections of the popular assembly, and he would praise the wise historical leadership, the astute far-sighted strategy, the piercing vision on the Arab-Israeli conflict. And from time to time, he would criticise a film or a theatrical performance or a painting exhibition, or perhaps a novel or a play, that is to say anything that happened to come his way, and he would be unstinting in offering his advice to poets, his proverbs to children, and all manner of guidance to housewives, with a serious and sagacious pedagogical style full of learning, so that in due time nobody knew any longer whether he was a political writer or a moral teacher or a literary critic or a critic of theatre or the arts.

Because of his many talents, or his numerous activities, he became the object of universal admiration, and earned the respect of TV programme directors and conference organisers, and of the editors of the literary, social, youth, sports, arts and entertainment pages, most of whom had only recently received their appointments. On his part, he was an altruist; he didn't retain for his private consumption the yield of his wide-ranging knowledge which was rich in information and statistical facts, but freely bestowed it upon the multitudes, and demonstrated its effectiveness by using it in a variety of different fields among the many issues, and controversial issues, which appeared in the media. So he had a ready opinion about the war and the conditions of just peace and normalisation, the organisation of labour in consumer organisations, the bread-selling kiosks, the maintenance of buses serving domestic routes, the prevention of smuggling and football matches, an opinion that was comprehensive and exclusive of any other and would tolerate no halfway solutions and involved decisive theses which could not be haggled away or make temporary truces.

Thus, what was it about this minor case, the translation of a novel, and about the questionable translations of Hamid Saleem in particular, that roused his passions? A man like him, a man who has achieved his kind of position in the world, gives a wide berth to such peripheral concerns. But circumstances have compelled him, and these circumstances have to do with his personality and with his reputation, which determines his actions and exercises a regulating effect over his movements, impelling him to protect his intellectual standing. He was the man of the hour, sometimes the man of the minute, and always had a becoming appearance which made him the object of attention. By comparison, Hamid's appearance was not becoming and did not draw attention. So why did our journalist display such a great degree of interest for a

translator unworthy of interest?

To begin with, Shareef Husni finds that his person possesses a distinction which demands to be appreciated, and he takes great care with his movements and gestures, tracing them out with the utmost care, and he doesn't neglect even the ordinary movements, which he transforms into mannerisms that bear his own special character, like a trademark that carries his signature, and is sometimes one of a kind. A spitting image of men of extraordinary genius, it is expressed in the way he reclines far back in his chair, in his limp way of shaking your hand, his way of standing by the window and contemplating a cloud on the horizon, even though there may be no cloud in the horizon or in the entire sky, the way he lights his cigarette and blows out his smoke, the way he assumes the posture of thinking and absent-mindedness, or stares deeply in the face of his interlocutor, as if he was plumbing his depths, and forgets himself in this state, or the way he closes his eyes and shakes his head irritably, supporting himself with his arms on the table, his shoulders sunken, his hair tousled, weighed down by intractable local concerns, or even more intractable global concerns, if not indeed universal ones that reach galactic level. These aspects and many others sow fear and confusion into the hearts of his visitors. As for his readers, his writings alone leave them confident of his magnanimous paternal or fraternal nature, his intellectual generosity and his humane guidance, which in their eyes constitutes a defence of their rights as citizens, and sometimes as consumers of fruit and vegetables irrigated with dirty sewage water or sprayed with poisonous pesticides, of rotten imported meat, bad plays, holes in the roads, air pockets and prank callers, and finally hotspots of immoral behaviour and the exorbitant costs for portable phones widely known as "mobiles" or "cellulars". Such is the admiration of his assiduous readers that they'd cut his articles out of the newspaper along with the accompanying photograph and keep them in the pockets of their clothes closest to the heart. And we would not be exaggerating were we to say that he intends every turn or word or gesture to constitute a testimony to his difference and distinction. For he is an extraordinary human being. Without a doubt, if a TV cameraman were to walk in on him without warning, he would find him ready to roll on the spot, and to discuss live on the air any topic whatsoever.

The novice translator met the experienced journalist years ago when he paid him a visit in his office carrying his first article underarm, which was a study about the American novelist William Faulkner, and this is an incident which, notwithstanding its insignificance, left its small mortifying details indelibly fixed in the journalist's mind. The translator hasn't forgotten about it, but he doesn't remember it in its entirety. At the time he was still shy and would often blush and lots of details would be lost on him. But he hasn't forgotten the young woman who entered the office a little after him, who was a trainee journalist and was neither shy nor yet entirely composed, and was

bringing a report about the archaeological sights in Homs.

It was the perfect situation, to be approached by a couple of young beginners, who in a few moments' time would be asking him to publish their articles. As a matter of actual fact, they wouldn't realise their objective, and they'd get nothing but advice from him. They would plead with him and he would promise them, then he'd forget and would never fulfil his promise; they've got a long way ahead. Before the advice of course, he would inevitably be treating them to the aesthetic spectacle of his meditative ways of lounging back and pregnantly pondering in all their diversity. The situation was propitious, for the young translator was petrified with fear and the young journalist was a little nervous. And it also looked like a promising opportunity; he'd be adding this young lady to his list of admirers and regaling her with his amusing anecdotes and his smooth flirtatious attentions. Later he would invite her for a cup of coffee outside the office, then to a café. She would stay on late and he would drive her home in his car through narrow, winding and dimly lit streets which he had learnt through long practice, for he knew the back roads in every area, from Mezze, Dummar and Qudsiya, to Sahnaya, Jaramana and al-Zahira. He would deliberately take the wrong road; then as he drove around blindly in the darkness, he would let his gaze roam through the endless night, and he would bestow upon her ears the sound of words with the grace of poetry, about music, about the liberated body, about love that has broken free from traditions and customs and the rigid say-so of mothers and fathers. Suddenly he would steal a kiss on her cheek, and he would continue speaking while observing her reaction from the corner of his eye. If her boldness was a match for her ambition, she would take an initiative; it might be a modest one, no matter – perhaps a kiss; or a great one, like throwing herself into his arms. If her reaction was feeble, for example a shy look full of confusion, the onus would be on him to develop it into a long spell-binding embrace. After this outing, the teacher would open up new horizons for his pupil in the world of journalism. Beyond that, it would be up to her and the extent of her abilities whether she'd make her way in the world of public relations and popular media or whether she'd fall by the wayside and get married to a fledgling journalist, or perhaps an editor or proof-reader, raising her children to the sound of the problems of the readers and listeners, discovering women's rights somewhere between the kitchen and the bedroom, and passing her idle time in the evenings criticising the extensive news coverage of the peaceful demonstrations of environmentalists and the biased superficial coverage of more violent armed clashes, acquiring her set of daily habits to pursue with dogged envy and resentment, like the stream of abuse she would unleash against women in the media who perform political interviews when they don't have the dimmest clue about politics.

But in order not to get carried away by his romantic adventures, let us return to his show before the translator and the journalist. Something that should have been simple and easy given the existence of precedents and long practice broke down before he had even made it through the introduction. One of the first moves in his show was to express some scoffing criticism concerning a current event; for from the free

economy to mercy killing, there's nothing that fell outside his knowledge. Most of the time he would pounce on the sessions of the popular assembly and would tear them limb from limb, but this time not a single incident deserving of his contempt came to his mind, whether trivial or serious, even though the recent ministerial appointments had not pleased him. As bad luck would have it, the translator's article was lying in front of him on the table, and as good luck would have it, it was on the topic of world literature, which was his favourite subject and one he greatly enjoyed launching forth on, for it afforded him the opportunity to escape the stagnant, narrow confines of the local and soar into broad global horizons, notwithstanding his stout defence of the authenticity of the local with his familiar statement: we are not inferior than the West, in fact we're better than them. In William Faulkner, he found just what he was looking for, and without further ado he proceeded to criticise him with disdain: he didn't deserve the Nobel Prize in literature, his writings about love are romantic sentimentalizations, his wars are superficial and his seas, forests and hills as if they'd been written by a tourist, fit for articles and reports rather than stories and novels; he didn't succeed as a journalist, had he been a good journalist he'd have turned into an excellent writer.

It is clear that he'd gotten William Faulkner mixed up with Ernest Hemingway. The shy translator tried to correct his information, but did not meet with success. The journalist rebuked him and reduced him to silence, and he reaffirmed his previous remarks adding further information which demonstrated their soundness, and on the basis of his information, William Faulkner became a participant in the Spanish civil war as a war correspondent, a famous wanderer in Paris in the 20's, an addict of bullfighting matches, and a hunter of wild animals in the African wilderness, who bought a house in Cuba and then committed suicide by putting a bullet through his throat. Yesterday, incidentally, he had finished reading his novel *Farewell to Arms*, and he hadn't changed his view of him one bit.

With the production of this last piece of information, the journalist thought he had brought the absent-minded translator to order. He turned upon him to give him a tongue-lashing and saw him looking tongue-tied from astonishment, and he flashed the young journalist a conspiratorial smile, but she didn't return his smile. Contrary to all expectations the girl had cheek; she stepped in impudently and took the side of the translator, and asserted that the novel was written by Hemingway, not Faulkner, who had no relation whatsoever with the Spanish civil war and Paris in the 1920's or with bulls and wild animals, and had not committed suicide.

The name Hemingway struck him hard on the head. He recollected himself at once and realised his error; it had been a simple case of absent-mindedness. He fixed the journalist with a hard stare to see whether she would retreat or soften her tones, for she seemed prepared to continue the discussion, but her arrogance did not permit him to acknowledge his slip, and he said peevishly, And what's the difference, what I said also applies to Faulkner, I don't like his style either. And before either of them could have the chance to speak, he added a stream of information which tumbled out

disjointedly to reveal his knowledge of Faulkner, about the stream of unconscious and the sound and the fury and the American south. He continued talking vaguely, a sentence here, a sentence there; his movements were not masterful, they were disgraced. Then he motioned coarsely toward the door: my time does not permit; and he extricated himself by saying roughly: I have a live interview to attend. Nevertheless he'd take their articles with a promise to publish them soon.

He didn't neglect the articles. He lost no time in depositing them in the waste basket, and his meeting with them came close to leaving nothing but feeble vestiges in his memory, which would have been soon erased just like any other, had it not been for the fact that a few weeks later he came across them talking on the third floor of the newspaper and passed before them pretending he hadn't recognised them, and he noticed, or perhaps he imagined, that they suppressed a smile and then exchanged whispers among themselves, and their subdued laughter accompanied him down the hallway.

The Defence: Translation Is a Means of Construction, not Destruction

Not too long after the aforementioned incident, the name of Hamid Saleem appeared several times in the newspapers, where he was hailed as an accomplished journalist on cultural affairs, and also as a translator of articles introducing a series of novels from world literature. Then followed his translated novels in strikingly quick succession. Shareef Husni inquired of the head of the international politics section at the newspaper about the quality of his translations, and his opinion was that it was suspect, for it was inconceivable that the original novels could have brimmed with such sheer amounts of eloquence and rhetorical expansiveness. The journalist brought up the questionable translations in his weekly column as has already been mentioned, the translator lost no time in making a response that reduced him to silence, and then a while later he was caught red-handed in a crime far worse than the first, and the storm over the African novel broke loose.

Hamid determined himself to reply in a way that would exploit the patriotic dimension of the positive ending, thereby affirming an additional task which translation was called upon to fulfil: it was not merely about passing on thoughts or new styles of expression or different programmes of thinking, but about engaging them in dialogue, refuting them and making their foolishness plain, if they were in discord with our social world. As luck would have it, his notion was in perfect harmony with the political line endorsed by the state, which encouraged criticism as long as it was constructive, and translation was in one respect a form of criticism, and it was best that it should be a means of construction, not destruction.

In translating the novel, Hamid had done nothing more than give practical expression to his aims by making action the touchstone for translation, and he had given literary form to his views about the country's loss of its brightest sons, taking the West's inveiglement of African academics as his example, with a deft move which made plain the intellectual atrophy which the country suffered as a result of the migration of creative Arab minds. He wrote his article defending the intervention he had made in the novel, and he produced statistics bolstered by hard facts that showed the extent of the damage suffered by developing countries, and he concluded with a question

calculated to reduce one to silence: should we hand over our gifted scholars to the West, and moreover ask them to provide huge salaries, extra ease and comfort, and sentimental, not to say sexual, incentives, for them to remain there, when we stand in dire need of them?

Hamid was confident that many writers and readers would consider fidelity to the original text a matter of secondary importance, and would lend him their support on patriotic grounds which possessed a far greater appeal and which deserved to be defended, and they would take his side and fend off the journalist's attack, and it was not unlikely that even some of his adversaries would be won over to his side.

The official rival newspaper promised him to publish the article but stalled, and in the meantime the article was leaked to the prominent journalist who was appalled by the translator's adept defence of a phenomenon which he had poached from him, for it was he himself who had championed its cause for years under the heading "the draining of intellectual wealth from the third world" and who had raised it repeatedly in his writings and talks. Could he make a show of denying it? Had this simply been between the two of them, he would have been able to retreat without too much trouble. The problem was that the party would go for the translator's claim, even if it was plagiarised and demagogic in nature, and they wouldn't care a jot about literature, however high and lofty; they wouldn't care about literature as much as they would about the rumpus they might get out of it, especially if they sniffed out an impulse of zeal calling for the preservation of our intellectual wealth, even if it was the party that was primarily responsible for squandering it. And in this case, they would lose no time in meting out to him a severe admonition, if indeed they contented themselves with mere admonition. For how could you, member of the party that you are, give your blessing to the West's robbing us of our outstanding young people? What would he be able to say in reply?

On his morning round, Hamid stopped at the newspaper seller as usual. He had hardly finished reading the headlines when he felt a hand on his shoulder, and he turned around. The owner of the hand was a journalist who worked in the newspaper's financial section and was among Shareef Husni's close associates. Before he had even shaken his hand, he said to him admiringly:

"A felicitous article."

Hamid frowned and asked him to explain. The finance journalist went on:

"I read your article and I really liked it."

"How did you read it when it hasn't been published yet?"

"Don't ask, I came across it and I wished to congratulate you, you will finish him

off and it'll be the end of him."

He wasn't joking. His article might actually strike Shareef Husni dead! Hamid invited him to a cup of coffee at the *Havana*, but the finance journalist put his arm around his and drew him toward the narrow street nearby, so that none of the passers-by could overhear them.

"By the way, Shareef Husni also read it, and he went ballistic. It was a masterful blow; it completely floored him."

Given that the journalist was part of his coterie, no doubt he was aware of what was happening on the other side. But why had he come to him? Surely some kind of disagreement must have come up between them. And the proof of this was the malice he next began to give vent to:

"Our friend lost his head. He was was running around in a frenzy like a man possessed, almost eating himself up in his fury. You'll soon be rid of him and you'll be able to give your head and your nerves a rest. The party will stop him from writing and he'll lose his position. If he's lucky they'll put a freeze on him and put him on the shelf."

"In reality I don't wish him evil."

"Show him no mercy. He wanted to do away with you – *but!*"

The journalist scowled and drew his head closer to whisper something in his ear, and it seems this must have been the reason why he'd wanted to talk to him privately.

"Be careful, he might harm you."

"What could he possibly do to me?"

"To be honest, I saw him yesterday night and he was all over the place, racking his brains to find a way to deliver you a fatal blow which would blast you out of existence."

"He wished me dead!"

"It's even worse than that. I'll tell you on condition this conversation stays between us. He was thinking which division of the intelligence services to send you to. You know him, he's got it in him..."

"What will he tell them? That I got the translation wrong and changed the ending. I don't deny that."

"Don't take it so lightly, have you forgotten about the time he sent the writer Sameer Sami to jail?"

"So it was he who sent him?"

"Who else? He wrote a report for the intelligence services in which he accused him of writing stories full of symbols against the state and the party. Tell me, who had the guts to ask about him – the Writers' Union, his friends, his family?"

"The party won't accept that."

"And how do you know what the party will or will not accept?"

"You can't tell me party members don't read."

"The party is enamoured with poetry, at particular moments; namely national and patriotic occasions. As for literature, it's got no time for it, and it only reads it in order to forbid it."

"Shareef Husni would never do anything so base."

"He's made up his mind, it's all settled. When I left him yesterday he was only a little uncertain."

"So he hasn't completely decided himself."

"Oh but he has, and he's resolved to send you to the division for an inquest. His uncertainty concerned the question how heavy he should make out the accusation against you."

"And what did he decide in the end?"

"His inclination was to make it as heavy as possible."

The contradiction in the finance journalist's talk did not escape him, despite his laconic style and his hyperbolic conclusions. It was clear that Shareef Husni had commissioned him to deliver him a warning, and sure enough he was discharging his task. On his part, Hamid wanted to send back a distinctly defensive message.

"I will tell the investigators at the division, here's the novel, go ahead and read it. You won't find any symbols or opposition to the state inside."

"I don't think you're as ignorant of their ways as that. They're more interested in the content of reports than they are in the import of novels, and Shareef Husni will make a big deal of the objectives of the novel and the ending."

"It's precisely the ending that will save me and support my viewpoint."

"Don't forget about all the different ways of interpreting translations – they'll be your undoing. It won't be hard for them to make you out to be an enemy of the whole of humankind."

"They're not that stupid."

"They're as stupid as that and more. My dear friend, my dear friend, I advise you to go and withdraw your article straight away as a sign of good will, and to content yourself with just ruining your future. I warn you, don't try to defend yourself. Just keep quiet till the storm blows over."

"On the contrary, I will defend myself."

What fortified his stance was his awareness of the new directives that had been issued by the presidential palace, which imposed checks on the powers of the various services, and above all the security service. The directives were clear; they forbade them from meddling indiscriminately in anything whatsoever without justifying legal

grounds. So who would pay attention to a mere conniving report?

5

Division 312: Don't Make Light of Talk, the Destinies of Nations and Human Beings Revolve Around it the World Over

It was only two days later, as he was shaving himself in the morning, that the telephone rang. He lifted the receiver and a voice came over asking politely: Mr Hamid Saleem? He replied: Speaking. The voice said: Your presence is requested at division 312. He froze with fear. Merely the mention of a division, whatever the number attached to it, meant the intelligence services. His voice came out hoarse: What for? The voice replied gently: Be there tomorrow at 11 am and you'll find out. He asked: What do they want from me? The gentle voice said: The head of the division would like to invite you over for a cup of coffee.

His heart sank to his boots. His being summoned to the division of the intelligence services was a terrifying notion, even if it was to have a cup of coffee. His legs could hardly carry him, and he had to lean against the wall for support. This was not an innocent invitation. There had been others before him who they'd seduced with the offer of a cup of coffee and who had then been thrown into prison for several years without ever getting to taste it. That dastardly Shareef Husni had carried out his threat, and he had raised a trivial question of translation to the level of a direct threat to state security, perhaps some serious case of espionage like leaking information to the enemy. If they believed the journalist, how could he let himself be reassured by the new directives of the presidential palace?

Hamid gave free reign to his gloomy apprehensions, a not uncommon state among those who get summoned by the security services. It is true that many of those who went there never came back; but if truth be told, some of them did come back, though it might have taken them a few years. There's no reason to be pessimistic, Hamid told himself to take heart; I too will make it back. What I committed is nothing but a silly misdemeanour compared with crimes against public security, if indeed my diminished literary honesty is a misdemeanour punishable by law.

After his nervous agitation had eased and the turmoil of his anxiety had subsided, he addressed himself again; perhaps it wasn't Shareef Husni that was behind the summons I received, perhaps I'm doing him injustice by making these assumptions; it

might be a different matter altogether. And just to be on the safe side, he asked himself: have I recently voiced any criticism of the government? No. Have I expressed a view that was opposed to the political orientation of the state? No. Have I detracted from the conduct of any of the persons in positions of command? No. On the other hand, and to be perfectly honest, from time to time I did not refrain from certain criticisms and disparaging remarks and other captious comments concerning government policy, which I shared with some friends who joined me in vituperating against the government and the state with equal or indeed even greater intensity. Had matters been more serious they would have had me dragged off by force instead of issuing me with a gentle summons.

At the café, he asked among his acquaintances for the address of division 312 and none of them could tell him. In general, one of them said, the address is not a problem; the division you know shows you the way to the division you don't. As for what the specialisation of this division might be, here he moved to a neighbouring table, where sat a former detainee who had wide experience of the divisions and everything that subdivided from them, whom they had put through the worst and who began co-operating with them in order to preserve himself from their evil ways, and did not hesitate to openly warn his friends and acquaintances against bad-mouthing the government and its supporters in his presence, because if they hauled him away and subjected him to Q&A he would not be able to endure any physical or psychological pressure and he would tell them everything he knew and even things he didn't. So as a precaution, he kept his distance from everyone, to preserve them from his evil ways.

The former detainee was happy to share his information with him. He had heard rumours of this sort, murmurs of the grapevine which he believed to be reliable, which seemed to have been put into effect or were on their way to being effected. As a result of recent events and developments, they had set up new security divisions which had been specially designated for dealing with writers and intellectuals in a refined manner, to distinguish them from rogue activists with political agendas, and to take their irenic culture and creative sensitivities into account. So for example, the old divisions begin by beating you up first and then asking questions; the newer divisions first ask and then do the beating. The newest divisions don't do any beating at all, it's all questions, and you're at perfect liberty to reply or to refrain from replying and merely listen. These number no more than two or three centres, all of them clean and respectable, and there's no force or coercion there, an atmosphere of safety prevails which lends itself to the free exchange of opinions and which is worlds apart from the former divisions and the methods of interrogation employed in them, in which writers were not begrudged their liberal share of insults, verbal abuse, slaps on the face, and jostles and shoves, short of severe physical chastisement; for the purpose of torture is

usually to extract confessions, whereas intellectuals on the other hand confess spontaneously of their own accord, and in any case what is there for them to confess so long as they're just writing down what's in their heads, sometimes with additions and embellishments, sometimes with exaggerations and ornate displays, and always to no purpose?

These centres were asked to conduct research and studies, one of them gathering economic and political data about different countries and especially about neighbouring states, another undertaking strategic studies and tracking the developments in global alliances, and the third, if there was indeed a third, something along the same lines. The officials in charge were given extraordinary powers and they revolutionised prevailing notions about security, resulting in rapid changes that heralded the advent of a civilised and mellow-mannered intelligence service whose task was to keep people under surveillance and to eavesdrop on new schisms and alliances and on any planned programmes and conspiracies, appearing under the heading "agendas".

As will be clear, work of this order creates a pressing demand for intellectuals and a need to consult their views, so that all matters high and low without distinction are referred to their judgment; for what we take to be highly important may turn out to be trivial and vice versa. That's what's referred to as the role of the intellectuals in the new world order. And if the collaboration between the parties turns out well, one is not begrudged his dues and is remunerated with an open hand, and he might even be given a car complete with maintenance support and a guarantee of regular supply of fuel.

The treatment is different in kind, and the proof of this is the fact that officials in these centres do not practice the methods formerly in use, as the courteous manner in which they summon people makes abundantly clear. No dragging or kicking; everything happens with perfect civility and over the phone, exactly the way it was in your case. And not only that, but you'll actually get to drink your cup of coffee, and not because you're forced to; and it will be possible for you to ask for red or green tea, and perhaps even *zuhurat*, all types of hot or cold drinks are available on demand. And it is only natural that the refined interaction between security officers and intellectuals should put them on a footing of perfect equality, and sometimes the scales may even tip to the advantage of the intellectual. It is an unusual situation compared with the kind of interaction that had prevailed in the past, in which the security officer towered far above the defenceless intellectual – a thing that would now seem embarrassing, reprehensible and unseemly; but they must both flex themselves to adapt to these new realities.

These are measures which, rumours have it, will be extended in future to all security apparatuses, and in the long term they will yield a new way of doing things that will rectify the relationship between citizens and government, generating salutary relations that rely on transparency and open dialogue, and if they've started with the

intellectuals, that's simply because their expertise is indispensable at this stage of history. And it is a splendid sign that they have begun to open channels of communication with translators like yourself, it is an excellent step, which is expressed in the fact that they consider you as intellectuals whose opinions about how best to deal with Western mentality, given the way this connects to matters of foreign policy, are well worth listening to, and they may be interested to hear your suggestions about the internal reforms to be pursued.

He recovered his spirits. If the intelligence services, having suffered such fundamental alterations, were in need of him, then why not accommodate them and adjust himself to the modernisation of the security services?

Had it not been for the security guards and the guards' booth, the building housing division 312 might have looked like a clinic for the treatment of contagious diseases. It was hemmed in on each side by pine trees and white poplars, and in the courtyard there were beds of herbs, camomile and oleander with water-fountains in the middle, and a pleasant breeze was wafting forth the smell of cleanliness redolent with the fragrance of disinfectants. The entry was paved with marble, and the corridors were elegant and free from all types of dust, even the finest type which is concealed in the air and cannot be seen with the naked eye, and resembles germs and viruses in its infinitesimal fineness. That's what Hamid remarked as he walked between the soldiers dressed in civilian clothes, traversing well-heated hallways in which the rooms at both sides had their doors wide open and one could see the researchers crowded inside engrossed in their work, so that the only thing needed to complete the picture was the white coats. A picture tantalising in its paradox, and if there was anything it should be taken to signify, it was the state's conviction that the critical, unravelling political conditions and the patient and wounded populace were in need of being healed instead of being engaged in combat.

Equally tantalising was the fact that the officer who was head of the division was wearing a light-coloured civilian suit, one of those joyous spring colours which anticipated the spring that was due to arrive in a week's time. The official was a smartly dressed man of average height, with well-poised movements, a reassuring face, calm features, and grey hair, who might have been the manager of an investment company, the type that cared about public relations and liked to keep all its customers happy, even the difficult and importunate ones. His prescription glasses betrayed an avid and proficient reader, and his lips parted to reveal a smile redolent of fresh fluoride and two rows of brilliant white teeth.

He immediately asked him, did anyone give you any hassle during your walk from the main entry to my office? Hamid replied, I just hope I didn't give them any

hassle myself; he was a match for him in courtesy and refined manners. Then he gave him the choice between different varieties of coffee; there was the option of Turkish, French, Arabic, Brazilian or Colombian. Hamid chose the Arabic coffee to affirm his patriotic sentiments, even though he was capable of translating into our beautiful language any type of coffee from any part of the world whatsoever; that's what he said laughingly to the head of the division.

His gaze happened to fall on the door that opened to the neighbouring room, and he could see the wooden shelves running all along the walls packed thick with books, while on the ground volumes were lying around in heaps waiting for their turn to mount the shelves on the opposite side that was concealed from view. Hamid wondered to himself in amazement, where *am I*, inside a division of the intelligence services or inside a cultural centre? And when he turned back to look at the head of the division, his grave face made him appear like the director of a rural cultural centre, whose mission was to encourage young people to use their free time to broaden their reading horizons.

Contrary to the practice of every kind of intelligence service division in the entire world, the head of the division did not pose any questions; instead he began to speak and continued his discourse at length. It was as if Hamid had posed him a series of questions, and he had set out to respond to them one by one in order of priority, thoughtfully and uncomplainingly, in the manner of a recorded lecture which gets repeated without pause. He began his lecture with an overview of the complex global conditions; with the Soviet giant out of the picture, Chinese power isolated, and the third world now orphaned, the Americans are sweeping across the world on the pretext of extirpating terrorism. The Europeans are trying to contain the rising tensions in the region, but have proved unsuccessful because they haven't expended the necessary effort. The Americans are still bombing the Taliban strongholds scattered throughout the Pashtu tribal areas and American special forces are pursuing members of al-Qaeda in Tora Bora. The Arab world is in deep crisis, beleaguered by fragmentation and disunity.

An official entered the room carrying copies of telegrams and faxes; the head of the division read some of them over and cast a quick glance over others, and then resumed his talk. The Palestinian intifada is escalating and Israeli repression has spun out of control; over the last few years, Arabs have failed to take an active stance on the crises that confront them, and if there was ever any sense of common purpose among Arabs, it is in tatters and about to breathe its last. Then he moved to the situation in Syria, and to the new initiatives necessitated by current events. The circumstances are difficult and the stakes enormous; we're following the situation very closely; the coalition forces are pouring into the region in droves and establishing themselves on land and sea and in the Gulf region, laying siege to Iraq in order to prepare the ground for invading it; Syria must be prepared to face off American pressures and provocations.

Another employee walked in bringing emails and articles printed off the internet. He read the emails and the titles of the articles and then resumed his speech. Our position is clear and unchanging; we refuse to accept colonial interventions whatever their putative grounds, whether it's with the pretext of eliminating weapons of mass destruction from Iraq or of fighting fundamentalist terrorism. The neo-conservatives are driving foreign policy in imperialist America and we know their aims full well; they want to seize control of the oil-producing areas and establish their hegemony over the region. There's a new strategy in the offing, the Americans have drawn up a new map of the Middle East which conforms to their interests. Sadly we cannot hope for a decisive stand from our fellow Arabs; some of them have dealings with the invading forces and have allowed them into their land. We won't have a united front in fighting against the invasion, in a few months' time we'll be facing the Americans on our own, and we'll be sharing borders.

The head of the division had taken on the personality of a successful lecturer, whose only flaw was that he gave him no opportunity to voice an opinion or pose a question, no doubt assuming that they were in agreement. Hamid did not allow these formalities to preoccupy him too much. Why the hurry? His opinion would be solicited in due time. After all, does it matter who's doing the talking and who the listening? In general, we Syrians are in agreement when it comes to the broad outlines of foreign policy; the position of intellectuals – even those that belong to the opposition – has remained unswerving in its rejection of all types of American intervention, just as America has remained unswerving in its anti-Arab policies over the last five decades. Our disagreement arises over particulars that concern the methods employed in domestic politics. That's what Hamid thought.

And it seems that the lecturer had arrived at the disputed particulars. The deteriorating prospects on the eastern borders made it imperative to preserve our internal front intact and subject it to reform, and necessitated carrying out radical reforms, both administrative and political, which would extend to the ministries, the state institutions, and the various departments of the government.

“Besides, the party needs to be blown up and remoulded from scratch.”

Hamid's jaw dropped. He hadn't imagined the lecturer could go so far in assuming his new personality as to drop a bomb on the party! The lecturer noticed his gaping mouth and admonished him:

“You shouldn't be surprised!”

Hamid was evidently extremely surprised at this strong and hostile foray against the party, which clearly aimed at its destruction – even if it was with the intention to remould it anew! His ears straining, he listened in disbelief.

“I'll be honest, and I'll stand by every word I say: the party contains a frightful number of opportunists scattered throughout the state sector – a state that's become the target of dishonourable mercenaries and a bureaucracy that generates thieves and

embezzlers, with philandering ministers at the helm who chase after women and alongside them officials who want to get rich at any cost and in the quickest time possible. Who's responsible for upholding people's rights? The judiciary. And what do we see before us? A corrupt judiciary, venal judges, and fraudster lawyers."

He was so flummoxed that he could not even express his implicit agreement. More so as the lecturer's critical tenor started to rise and began to put his actual capacity as a security officer under threat, when he began demanding practical action to establish democracy, submission to the rule of the ballots, the elimination of emergency law, the defence of human rights, the sanctioning of political pluralism to include even the Islamists, and the release of dangerous political prisoners. Then he said, to quote his exact words:

"Just think: for over forty years the party has failed to produce thinkers. Where are its intellectuals? Go dive into that teeming sea of our cheerful party members and you won't find a single true thinker. Why do we keep the party going? Let it dissolve itself."

All this, at a single stroke! Hamid was stupefied by what he heard. How could an officer responsible for national security – the last person one would have expected to hear expressing open opposition – oppose the very authorities that had placed him at his post? In fact, to listen to him talking, he could easily have been an eloquent spokesman among the leading members of the opposition. How had he managed to infiltrate a sensitive and secretive apparatus like this division, which despite all developments and reforms and reconstitutions, nevertheless still was and remained a division of the intelligence services? This, of course, was an impossible thing. Whether or not he was an infiltrator or subversive who had slipped through the net, what was astounding was that he had surpassed even the regular critics of the government in boldness and left them behind in a cloud of smoke, especially when he turned to mocking the ruling party and threatening to remove it from power. In fact, however funny this might be, even the miserable scattered remains of the opposition parties wouldn't have been able to express radical views that rivalled these in their trenchancy, even though this was the opposition's sole preoccupation.

Having voiced his strong opposition in a calm and dispassionate voice, the head of the division invited him to respond and express his views at his leisure, however much these might oppose his own. Hamid said with some hesitation:

"You were persuasive."

He left off and fell silent, but the head of the division did not fail to remark that there were still things left unsaid, and he encouraged him:

"Speak your mind."

"But I think you went a little too quickly – I mean very quickly."

"Go on, don't be afraid. Imagine you were taking part in a TV debate."

"If I'd seen you on a TV debate I'd have taken your side."

This was the best way out that Hamid could find for commenting on a lecture which was – the suspicion assailed him suddenly with compelling force – a kind of theatrical performance, like those interviews on TV shows.

"Don't you agree that those who call themselves the opposition will find themselves looking weak when compared with me?"

"That's exactly what I was telling myself."

"In reality, we're more opposed than the opposition; we can't be bested."

"Believe me, that is exactly what I was telling myself."

"Politics is not about idle pedantry, it's about information and facts and documentation. I have a system at my disposal which supplies me with everything I want, and I don't just bandy about my words at random. The audience will be the judges of what we both say."

"What audience?!"

"I will be invited to take part in live TV debates, and if you, the intellectual, take my side, then the people will also be able to recognise the truth."

"Will you declare your views on the party, on the parties, on the Islamists, on democracy and on emergency law, this openly?"

"Yes, but when the time is right. We're not like them; we proceed with pragmatism, taking national circumstances into account."

How could he be a representative of the government and at the same time the representative of a virulent opposition? Even if his opposition was just a charade, how far would he push his performance? He felt like asking to have this conundrum explained to him, so he could understand how it was that the government and its enemies disagreed in nothing more than their choice of timing. Was it possible to act in both roles at one and the same time? He failed to muster the nerve, despite the auspicious opportunity for launching a quick exchange on the air with the official belonging to the opposition who was hidden behind a spring suit, a contemplative manner of reclining, and aspirational looks to the future.

What prevented Hamid from expressing any additional objections in an atmosphere already thick with opposition was the sense of intimacy he had come to feel between his interlocutor and himself. In fact he felt that, having managed to talk so candidly about the most highly sensitive issues, this closeness allowed him to raise a personal matter and make a special request, namely that he put an end to this vexing business of his with the cantankerous journalist. Hadn't the official placed his trust in him and appointed him as an arbiter between him and the spurious opposition, and hadn't he been the small-scale witness of his success who gave him hope that he might score a large-scale success before a wider multitude?

The idea was tempting, but Hamid rejected it, giving proof of his opportunity-wasting probity. He told himself: I shall not take advantage of my friendship with him; this official didn't cast off his garb of security officer for any personal gain, but rather in order to be able to apply himself to conflicting, sensitive and lofty political and intellectual tasks, and to spend all his time sharpening his faculties for them and looking for ways to bring them into harmony, not to investigate gratuitous intricacies between a translator and a journalist.

He didn't relinquish his honourable stance even when the head of the division gave him a firm and friendly handshake which expressed his deep gratitude. He took his arm in his and graciously walked him to the door, and then, instead of waving to him goodbye, he let go and frowned – he had suddenly remembered something. Hamid guessed what he had remembered, it was inconceivable that he should have been summoned to give his view of his radical transformation from his persona as a security officer to a political persona, there is something else, yes...he will ask him for his advice, or elicit his opinion on a certain topic, one of these two must be the reason why he was summoned!

"I forgot to tell you to withdraw your article from the newspaper. We don't want any hullabaloo at the present time. Your friend the journalist, Shareef Husni, is an honourable man who's got a lot of responsibilities on his head and we don't want to burden his time by toing and froing with arguments back and forth."

Hamid thought he was losing it.

"It's *him* you should rather be asking to leave me in peace."

"Have no fears: as far as you're concerned, we don't take you for a traitor, whatever he might say. This is just literary palaver. The only treason that exists is treason against the country, and you're innocent of that; apart from that, nothing can touch you."

"I know I made a mistake, but isn't it unfair for me to have to pay for my mistake by ruining myself professionally and wrecking my future?"

"I won't hear a word of it. Withdraw your article means: withdraw it."

"It won't do anyone any harm for me to defend myself."

"Don't contradict me – do as I say, and don't force me to transfer you to a different division. If you think the charge against you is not enough to have you hanged, they'll spin you another one which is good enough to hang you ten times over."

It wasn't the thought of being hanged once or ten times that bothered him. What pained him was the loss of the most fleeting mirage of friendship, which lasted no longer than a handshake and a few steps between the chair and the door. What was even worse was that everything would stay the same; no changes would happen except when the time was right, and his trivial case would not be one of them.

What should I do? Hamid asked the former detainee whom he found sitting on his own, just as he'd left him the day before. He let him in on what had happened, and he made no comment. He asked:

“Does that make any sense? Can you believe it?”

Despite his good-naturedness, the former detainee was a smart guy, for had he not been smart he would have been a current and not a former detainee. Both his nature and his experiences have made him into a person with piercing insights which he would part with ungrudgingly, even though Hamid had addressed him two broad questions at a single stroke. The former detainee gave himself some time to ponder them before responding.

“If he told you they're more opposed than the opposition, this means they will steal the opposition away from the opposition; that's why you see them racing toward books and culture and politics to see who'll get there first. The aim is to tear them apart and occupy their seats, especially given that most of their seats are empty, and there won't be much of a problem seeing as the opposition is mere words to the wind. As for what is capable of implementation, it depends, as he told you, on national circumstances, and all these immediate demands will be subjected to delays or cancellations. And why *won't* you believe it? Yes, the government is working to create a troop of politicians. In the past they needed military officers, nowadays what's needed is people who can talk politics. Your imagination wasn't hoaxing you when you thought you were seeing a dress rehearsal being played out before you, a rehearsal which involves practising how to think and discuss and debate and make dialogue. We're living in the age of talk, and there's no escaping the need to learn its methods, manoeuvres, playing tactics and tricks. Wars will soon be coming to an end and the necessity of surrender, *a.k.a.* peace, will appear plainly, and it's under its banner that the pickings get decided and everything gets arranged, and this demands talking, lots of talking. Don't make light of it, the destinies of nations and human beings revolve around it the world over.”

Hamid ventured on an eloquent repartee, seizing upon the historical moment.

“In these days, we are witnessing the wane of the military and the waxing of politicians.”

“Don't be so optimistic; they're only changing costumes. The ruling power isn't changing, nor are its instruments – it's just sprucing itself up.”

Hamid reverted to his story and reasserted his obstinate intention not to withdraw his article from the newspaper, and he bolstered his decision with the idea that, now that the security apparatus had begun to tend toward irenic solutions, it no longer fell to it to settle his dispute with the journalist, and the head of the division with his political tinkering had not been serious, he had just been trying to scare him off with

words unbacked by deeds.

“What would you advise me to do?”

“My advice to you is to obey the orders you were given: withdraw your article.”

An expression of chagrin appeared on Hamid's face, and the former detainee laughed. He made use of his literary past in trying to mitigate the blow.

“You can't fool around with these kinds of people. Their jokes have nothing in common with the amusements of our friend de Musset in his play *Don't Fool with Love*. If the Romantics did not approve of jokes in matters of love, don't expect the pragmatists running the security divisions to give you a comic hanging.”

So Hamid took the bus to the newspaper, and withdrew his article with a meek and cheerful heart.

The Hit-Man: Hamid Lets a Golden Opportunity Go to Waste

After this disappointing incident, Hamid lapsed into silence and tried to avoid all contact with the journalist and his cohorts, so as not to be forced into confrontations with them. Whenever he went to the *Havana* he would sit far away from them on his own, and he'd notice them winking and gesturing in his direction, ready to provoke him. This forced him to relocate to the café *al-Rawda*, but there, too, things proved no better, so he gave up on cafés and public places altogether. This gratified the journalist Shareef Husni and added new wind to his sails, though they were already billowing as it was, and he was puffed up by the sight of the translator fleeing in disgrace, even though with his disappearance his cohorts lost a most enjoyable sport.

As for the translator, he would fall asleep and wake up to the sound of his grievance: my reputation has been dragged through the mud, I'll never stand back on my feet again, I've no future in translation, the newspapers won't give me work. It was a sound whose tenor gradually began to rise: where will I find a job which has nothing to do with literature, where people have no interest in novels, where in fact they're best off hating translated novels and optimally can neither read or write?

The world grew bleak around him. It was on one of those days when the gloom was weighing heaviest upon him that the light cold tempted him outdoors for a walk, and he walked out late in the afternoon, hurriedly turning his steps toward the shopping district of al-Salihiya, with an oppressed spirit and a dark frown on his face. And instead of trying to recover his cheer by letting his eyes rove over the glittering shop-fronts and the faces of the elegantly dressed women and pretty young girls, he began to run through the possible scenarios which would allow him to effect a dignified return to the world of literature, preserving his honour in the face of his cruel adversary. But he failed to come up with a strategy which would put an end to their dispute. His thoughts came back empty-handed; the brilliant journalist had closed off every passage in his face, and had he happened to leave him a single passageway open, it wouldn't have been one that shone with brilliant light. After a while – whether a short or a long one, he could no longer tell – the only thing he could see around him was a frightful ring of darkness.

The darkness! That's what he'd failed to remark. The night had descended some time ago and he hadn't noticed it falling. He had lost track of time as he ground away at depleted possibilities and blocked passages. A sense of exhaustion came over him; all these thoughts had tired out his head and his feet. Where had he been heading and where had he wound up? Where, as a matter of fact, was he standing right then? A most remarkable thing: he was standing at the end of the Autostrad-Mezze bus line. Had he walked down the end of al-Salihiya street, taken the road uphill to al-Muhajirin, crossed the al-Rabwa bridge, made it past the crossing of al-Muwasat Hospital and the packed crowds in the square, and had walked along the entire motorway to the very end without noticing?

What he also did not notice, on account of the darkness and the turbulent thoughts preoccupying his mind, was a man with a woollen cloth draped around his head who was walking now behind him, now beside him, following him from place to place. And even though the man grew tired, he did not abandon his pursuit when he saw him crossing over to the other side of the motorway, and he followed him to the minibus stop as he made his way toward it.

Hamid got on the Mezze-Jawber minibus, and decided he'd get off at the main stop under the President's Bridge. From there he'd take the Rukn al-Din bus to the 29th of March Street, he'd buy some cake to take home, and then walk the rest of the way home to al-Abed Street. He took his seat by the window and surveyed the road; the traffic was at its peak. As he was doing so, the man with the headgear sat down next to him and spread his bulk comfortably on the seat, splaying his legs wide open. The cloth wrapped around his face and concealing his features struck Hamid as odd; it was like some kind of headscarf which let nothing but the eyes and mouth show through. It hardly crossed his mind to imagine that he'd been pursuing him for more than two hours.

"Does he think the whole seat belongs to him?" Hamid thought to himself, and huffed out noisily in annoyance, to alert the headscarfed man who'd squashed him against the wall of the minibus to the fact that he'd violated the code of polite behaviour for taxis and buses, which applied with equal force to minibuses as well.

"Have I annoyed you in any particular way?" the man's rough voice came through with a nasal twang.

His dull tone didn't indicate genuine questioning as much as a displeasure which he spat out through his teeth, as if it was *he* who'd annoyed him. Hamid's blood began to boil.

"Of course you annoyed me. The seat is supposed to be for two people, not just for one. Show some tact, my friend, the car doesn't belong to you. Give me some room here

– a bit of courtesy wouldn't do you harm.”

The man rasped over to him in a creaking voice, nudging him with his shoulder.

“I sat next to you on purpose, so you could hear me clearly.”

“To talk to me about what? I've never met you before in my life!”

Some of the other passengers who were sitting in the front seats turned around to look at them curiously.

“Don't raise your voice,” the man growled.

“What do you want from me?” Hamid whispered, and cast a quick glance at him. Under the small dim lights of the minibus, the stranger's head was drooping low against his chest and his mouth was twisted toward him, his thick lips having suddenly protruded through the folds of the cloth that covered his face haphazardly. He turned to give him a second look, and the only parts of his face he could glimpse were his bulging eyes and his crooked mouth. The cloth was wound tightly around his face squeezing it this way and that underneath, so that his features seemed to be running together in one place and running over each other in another, every single one of them looking like it was somewhere it shouldn't be.

“Sit up straight so I can hear you better.”

The man didn't change the way he was sitting. He'd already started talking.

“I've been panting behind you for more than an hour. Didn't you see me? I've been following your tracks from the end of the Muhajirin bus-line to the end of Autostrad-Mezze.”

“Following me...why?”

“I was worried you might do something stupid, like throw yourself in front of a passing car, or trip while you're crossing the road. You were distracted, you looked like you weren't all there. You weren't looking in front of you or around you. I felt sorry for you. I heard you talking in a loud voice – there were only a few footsteps between us. Monstrous things came out of your mouth. You were threatening people and promising to bring down all sorts of evils on their heads. Imagine, even though I hardly know you, I found out everything you've got on your mind.”

“Don't poke your nose into things that don't concern you.”

“And you declared your desire to do away with certain people.”

Had he reached such a pitch of distraction while he was out walking that he'd fallen to talking to himself in public like a madman? That had never ever happened to him before – how could he have fallen this low, so that even this random passer-by had come to know about his problems and private grudges?

“It seems like I lost my self-command out there.”

“Don't take it too hard, I appreciate the situation you're in. Your life is in tatters

and your future is hanging in the balance. If this kind of thing had happened to me, I would've lost my wits and maybe even committed a crime and put an end to Shareef Husni."

"Good God, did I mention him by name?"

"You sure did, by name and by profession. He's a journalist."

"I beg you to forget about what you heard me say, I was angry and I didn't really mean it."

"And you also mentioned some other people, and you pleaded with them to help you."

"I was clearly raving."

"I'll rid you of him..."

His words weren't clear, probably because he'd uttered them in a low whisper. So he inquired:

"What do you want to rid me of?"

"I'll rid you of him. Of the journalist."

He said this lightly and confidently, as if getting rid of the journalist was a paltry affair which required nothing more than a flick of his foot. Hamid could no longer hold his temper, he turned around to fix him with a sharp stare. The man was still concealing his features from view and twisting his mouth, opening and shutting it, his lower jaw dropping and rising, chewing his words between his molars in a repugnant manner. He hastened to say:

"It's my problem I want to get rid of, not him."

"If I rid you of him you'll be rid of your problem."

His definite tone made a shudder pass through him. He replied sharply:

"Are you out of your mind, my man?"

His own sharpness took him aback. The man had riled him with his shoddy imitation of the style of professional killers, chewing his gum in that coarse way of his as if he was copying the criminal types one sees in American films who kill people in cold blood. He didn't feel at ease; for all he knew he might really be a criminal. He just wouldn't let himself be dragged into a conversation with a person he didn't know. He said emphatically:

"I don't want anything bad to happen to him."

"He's not worth a single clipped fingernail."

His heart began to beat faster. The man was inciting him to make light of the life of his adversary. He stole a quick glance at the other passengers, worried that they might have heard some part of their exchange. He suddenly looked outside; the minibus had

driven past the stop at the President's Bridge and was now heading toward al-Thawra Street. He got up with the excuse that they'd driven past the spot where he wanted to get off, and he nudged the man with his knee so he'd move his feet a little out of the way, to let him pass. The man didn't budge. Instead he pulled him down to the seat by his sleeve, drew his head closer to him and thrust it into his chest, without noticing that the cloth on his head had come loose and its lower end had fallen away from his neck. The sight of his unusual traits immediately bowled him over.

The man quickly seized the end of the head-cloth and covered himself up again. Hamid had managed to catch a glimpse of his features; they weren't just loathsome – they were revolting beyond description. He froze to the spot, transfixed with horror, having found out his ugly secret. At the same moment the man let go of the sleeve of Hamid's jacket and raising his hand, pointed his finger into his right eye as if he'd gouge it out.

“We'll continue together until Jawber; it won't cost us extra. You pay my fare. I'll come back with you and pay your fare if we don't reach some kind of understanding.”

“I'll pay for both us. Now let me get off.”

“Don't imagine I want to take advantage of you. I've no need for you. I'm an honest man.”

“Let me go. I'm not imagining anything.”

“So sit down then.”

He felt a little more reassured. There was pleading in his voice.

“I'm afraid there might be a misunderstanding. I'm certainly very annoyed, but I don't want to get rid of anyone, even if he's not worth a single clipped fingernail of mine.”

“I won't let him annoy you.”

“You say that as if you're planning to do away with him.”

“That's my business.”

His coarse reply startled him. So he didn't deny his designs! He wanted to convince him he was a professional killer, but of the third-rate variety, a boorish hired hit-man who hunts down customers on the hoof and negotiates his terms with them on minibuses...Where am I? Somewhere in Chicago, or what? Crime hasn't yet reached such levels of advanced sophistication in Damascus, to have criminals offering their services to people without prior acquaintance. And yet he'd piqued his curiosity; the guy might have something wrong in the head.

“What price would I be looking at?”

“Nothing whatsoever.”

“You'll kill him without asking for anything in return?”

“Who said anything about killing him? Do you take me for a criminal or something?”

Having led me on to believe he was a killer, here he is, beating a retreat! Hamid told himself, his innuendos can only mean one thing, there's no two ways about it. And for him to deny it in this stupidly exaggerated way demonstrates he's a man not worth one's bother; probably just some scumbag of the lowest class, to judge by the way he's wrapped that thing around his head and the way he's chewing on his gum. It's not entirely improbable that Shareef Husni should have put him up to land me in some new imbroglio; next time you translate it'll be in prison. He burst out angrily:

“Don't try to trap me and then start trying to squirm your way out and playing the wretched soul in my face, I can read your ways like an open book. All one needs is to look at the way you wear that head-piece and the revolting way you're chewing your gum, and your shameless criminal innuendos. Why do you keep your face hidden? You want to act the part of the mysterious gangster or what?”

“Take it easy now. I'm just a guy like you who's looking for work.”

“What work, when you're claiming to be a good-hearted criminal who won't take money for his criminal deeds?”

“I do want something for it, but it's only something small. How much depends on the type of service required. I could deal him a blow below the belt or above it, I could break his leg or his hand, or give him a few slaps on the face, or just threaten him so that he gets off your back – does it matter which? Say something, don't just sit there without a word as if the matter doesn't concern you.”

The man had worked himself up to a state, and his words were coming in stutters as he laid out his wares in a rough and trembling voice; perhaps he was somehow disturbed in the head after all. His chest was heaving, his powerful hands were shaking, and his palms had turned rigid and his fingers had curled. He was trying to stir up his emotions so as to get him to hire him.

Suddenly the head-piece came loose, and Hamid hastened to take another glance at his features before he could cover them. The frightful, disfigured features of his face were tightly contracted in a way that moved one to pity; he had the look of someone who'd been struck by acute painful cramps. Noticing that Hamid was not responding, he said:

“I won't hit him if you prefer. I'll just pretend to strangle him, and I'll let go of him at the last moment.”

“And what if he dies?”

“That'll be the end of him.”

The conversation with him was beginning to seem ridiculous. Hamid asked:

“How can I hire you when I don't know anything about you?”

"Why do you need to know me? I'll just do as you order me. And if there's anything else you want, I'm ready to do it – just let me know now."

The tone of pleading in his voice came over with unmistakable clarity, a pleading that bespoke sincerity. His speech was halting and tumbling out in fragments. Only a few moments ago the man had tried to get him to take him for someone different, with his rough and shifty manner, and both times he'd skilfully managed to quickly conceal his features. What was he – a miserable wretch, a cunning trickster, a swindler, an imbecile? If he could go on talking with him a bit longer, the matter might become clearer. He said lightly:

"He deserves to die."

The man gave a start and his head-piece came free, revealing an enormous nose.

"You must be really desperate if you're thinking about killing him."

"He's brought me to the brink of despair."

"Relax – if he tries smashing your head in, I'm going to smash his ribs."

He said this angrily, trying to slip past him the substitution of breaking his ribs for killing him, and as he brought his face closer to him, his sense of caution abandoned him and he let show his harelip, his swollen right cheek and his left cheek which was eaten away. The disfigurement was clearly visible; what a far cry it was between his terrifying appearance and his confusion. There was a striking contrast between his frightful look and his bad-guy stammers. It wouldn't do any harm to fool around with him a little.

"After that, if I want to thank you for example, what will I say to you – will I say thanks, mysterious stranger?"

"I don't want you either to thank me or to know anything about me. I'm not stupid, I have to be on my guard. Deal with me on the basis of what you see. I'm an entirely different person in my ordinary life – please don't stare at my face too much."

"How do I know you're not trying to hoodwink me in order to rip me off?"

"Don't take advantage of me in my moment of need. I've been a whole month now without a job. I've got a wife and three kids whom I packed off at my wife's family house and made off in a hurry with the promise I'd bring something home. My difficult circumstances are forcing me to look for any job whatsoever, however lowly, otherwise I wouldn't have asked you to pay my fare. Do you think I'm in the habit of asking passers-by for help? What would they say about me, a well-built strong guy like me who's taller than a date tree and stouter than an ox, stretching out his hand to ask people for assistance? That's what's forcing me ask you so urgently for work, any work whatsoever."

Had he happened to hear this story on TV on an episode of "Justice and the People" he would have turned up his nose at its subject. A lurid melodrama – a jobless man with a wife and kids making a plea for help, in such dire straits that he ends up

begging and contemplating crime.

“Go find some other work.”

“Don't give me advice. Give me a job – any job – for any amount whatsoever, no matter how little. I'm up against the wall today and I'll give you a special price, a price that beats all your expectations – just two hundred pounds.”

The frightful man was talking in broken tones. He'd raised his palms and buried his face in them. Hamid felt at a loss. The man was offering him a plastic crime, which began from a pair of crossed palms and might end in death, for a footling sum. His thoughts immediately flew ahead to imagine how mean and mortifying his revenge would be if Shareef Husni were to find out that his death had cost him no more than a couple of hundred pounds, the price of four packs of cigarettes. Or...a lethal substance with a connection to cockroaches came to mind. He laughed out loud. The idea appealed to him. It was so sordid it would make for a sensational headline in the crime section of the newspapers: “murder of famous journalist fetches price of cockroach repellent.”

Tantalising though it was, Hamid let a golden opportunity go to waste and haughtily turned his back on a perfect crime despite the paltry price at which it was offered, and notwithstanding, most importantly, the impossibility of discovering the identity of the real criminal. For what police investigator would have the genius it would take to trace the connection between this repulsive man and himself? He turned his face away from him, signalling concretely his refusal of the offer and his loss of interest in the murder. He lowered his eyes to the ground to avoid having the horrible features imprint themselves in his memory, and scorning to snatch any further looks, or to venture anything that might suggest a despicable furtive interest. Then he lifted his head and fixed his eyes on the road, vowing to himself to forget the unforgettable traits of the man's face which had revealed themselves to his gaze. He heard his voice coming over shakily:

“Don't you trust me?”

“I have confidence in you, and I believe you.”

“You look like I've offended you.”

“On the contrary, you're wholly excused in my eyes.”

“So why have you turned away scowling like that?”

“Out of respect for your desire for secrecy.”

“Don't worry about it, you're now as good as a friend to me, and you'll see what manner of friend you've made for yourself. My name is Mahmoud.”

"And mine Hamid. But listen, I'm not thinking about harming anyone."

The man cried out in dismay:

"You don't say!"

"I'm pretty hard up as far as finances go."

"I'm even worse."

"I don't want to take advantage of your difficult circumstances."

"I'll be happy with very little, just a few pounds would tide me over – the cost of five falafel sandwiches. Don't turn your back on me just as I was thanking my stars our paths crossed."

Hamid stretched his hand into his pocket and pulled out a five hundred pound note, he asked the driver for change, and then gave him half of it.

The man took the notes in his hand disbelievingly and made an attempt to press the sum back.

"That's far too much."

But Hamid didn't let him take no for an answer. A feeling of pleasure washed over him at having given him the money for nothing, and he felt so happy about having managed to extricate himself from a heinous crime that a gallant impulse suddenly seized him and he told the man he could consider him his friend.

"I'll give you my address, and you don't need to tell me yours because I want nothing from you. If there's anything you need, you just come by my place, and if I've got any money I won't think twice of helping you out."

The man lowered his head in shame as Hamid gave him directions to his house, and when he tried to speak his voice was trembling. He tried to thank him but instead broke out into a loud sob. He asked him through his tears:

"You're a translator."

"Is there anything you need translated?"

"I won't forget you."

Hamid got off the minibus and ran toward the bus-stop on the opposite side of the road.

The Critic: In Literature We're All Equals, There's No Room for Exceptions

But his plight was far from over, even two months after he'd withdrawn his article and distanced himself from the coterie of journalists and writers, for all one might have supposed they would have forgotten all about him. Their inclemency toward him was not without justification; for culture is inherently antagonistic to forgetfulness. And if they failed to show him any mercy, it's because, just as culture knows how to mellow human hearts, it also knows how to make them harsher. Besides, why should intellectuals behave any differently than most other people? Thus, there should be nothing surprising in the fact that they didn't leave him in peace or spare him from their sarcastic jibes. The latest in this series had been particularly sordid. Appearing in an article written by someone who belonged to the journalist's clientèle, it had likened him to a disfigured midget trying to scale the high stature of great writers. And at noon on the same day, one of his acquaintances had told him, Watch your back, Shareef Husni hasn't had his fill of revenge yet.

"But he's done me harm enough – he's done me more than enough."

"The problem is that he doesn't get to see you and so take his malicious pleasure. Watch out, he'll be launching a second round of assault, a final round that brings the game to a close. I'm warning you – find some way to offer him your apology."

Hamid exploded.

"That's all that's left – for me to go to him crawling on hands and knees to ask for his forgiveness, and have him trample upon my head and my dignity, hoping he might show me some mercy afterwards...Never! Let him go hang himself."

The cup had overflowed, and he took an irrevocable decision not to allow them to put him on the rack a second time; he would resist. The question that brought him up short was in what way he ought to pursue his resistance without having to appear at the front line of the battle. That night he thought and thought for a long time without reaching a result, and his sleep was fitful and disquieted.

Just before waking up, he had a dream in which he saw himself standing at the door of a large hall that had been engulfed by a fine film of fog, through which one

could glimpse enormous plush volumes of books, paintings from around the world and pictures of famous Western writers. Little by little, the fog lifts. Far inside he makes out the figure of the critic Jameel Halloum busy reading or writing; then, he lifts his head and gazes far into the distance, piercing the walls to look out toward the sprawling expanses of literature. But what a shock...he wasn't looking out toward the expanses; he was looking at *him*, and he was on the look-out for his arrival! As soon as he'd caught sight of him he sprang to his feet and rushed toward him, welcoming him warmly, arms wide open. At that point he woke up, and recollecting his dream, he asked himself: what could it possibly mean?

Hamid doesn't believe in dreams or in any of the predictions they make about events still residing in the depths of the mysterious unknown. His attention was nevertheless drawn to the sight of the volumes of books, the paintings and the pictures of writers...and the fog which receded to reveal a man unsheathing a pen. The dream needed no interpretation, for it interpreted itself by itself. It was exhorting him to take up the cudgels for his cause, exactly as he had thought he should, covertly and without openly being seen to do so, thereby exposing himself to the vindictive machinations of his cantankerous adversary. And what's more, it had been so kind as to present him with a man who would take his defence in charge; the critic who had appeared in the dream, and who also existed in reality, and was perhaps waiting for him this very moment.

Jameel Halloum was a man of letters by profession and one of the most important literary critics of the present time, and he was the only one who bestowed on literary writers long-term and guaranteed attestations of competence, elevations of status, and categorisations, not because of any shortage of capable literary critics, but because of his widely acknowledged broad learning. He was an authority in his field, and he had acquired his harsh reputation on account of his stern judgments and polemical views. He'd been able to survive as a critic throughout the last quarter of the previous century, a century of unprecedented unrest and upheaval, and he had demonstrated his abilities by writing long, recondite articles in which one strove to fathom whether they aimed to praise or lambast and which baffled those praised and lambasted alike. And writers eagerly paid court to him in order to preserve themselves from the torrent of his wrath and from the solid arguments he brought forth drawing on his profound knowledge.

With his dream to support him, Hamid saw the critic as his last chance. At the very least, he had not taken an interest in the petty vociferations that had surrounded his translations, and to the extent that he had not sought to draw any advantage from this situation, it was possible to trust him. And one should not give any credence to what people said about his untrustworthiness as a critic. For some people had claimed that he exploited his intellectual connections for personal ends; because as rumour

would have it, he had lifted women and young girls from the worldly trough to the lofty summits of high literature and helped them shoot to fame. So for example, he'd shown no qualms praising a novice poetess with a disreputable past but with a pretty face and flowing hair in a brilliant article that brimmed with quicksilver-slippery, helical-spiralling interpretations which read a unique profundity into her poetic work, in which the meaning of every single word, full-stop and comma soared upward to become a discerning diagnosis of human misery and an experiential discovery of the edges of the universe. By contrast, he could pour scorn on a talented and good-hearted young man who needed to hear a word of encouragement, and whom he punished as if he had committed the gravest sin by dismissing his poetry as so much flimsy inanity.

It would take a bold man to presume the task of analysing the personality of the critic Jameel Halloum. Critics do not have personalities that are easy to disclose, perhaps because they are compound in nature, comprising two or sometimes more conflicting literary personalities, especially when critics hold themselves to be creative minds just like other writers and not merely humble interpreters of literary works. And indeed some of them hold their critical writings to be creative works that far surpass the novels and poems of great writers in greatness. So how could they eat humble pie before a novel when they know themselves to be greater than it is and capable of taking it apart at the joints, making a harsh example of it and reducing it to a pile of debris? That's an indispensable reminder for us, so we may realise that novelists and poets are no more important than critics, even if the latter make a living out of what is written by the former.

Jameel Halloum became famous for wielding a powerful pen and for an unyielding temperament, and for defending political causes whose time had passed and national causes deemed unassailable verities, which he would embellish with a brute show of knowledge and mockery that verged on impudence, displaying the sincerity of a dreamy revolutionary. When it came to literature, he would often join abstruse literary questions with clever theorisations filled to the hilt with intellectual conceit and enhanced by his windingly voluble commentaries. This stemmed from his conviction that it was not the task of intellectuals to simplify and popularise ideas, but rather to render them more complex, even if this should restrict them to the select few. He was the first to have broached sensitive critical questions and to have restored the standing of real critics, distinguishing between two separate types. One type he designated "the menial servant" of literature, who amounted to nothing more than a book tout and whose criticism was all about promoting capitalist literature, marketing it through misrepresentations and misleading commentaries. The revolutionary critic, on the other hand, was the "faithful servant" of literature. The word "servant" raised the hackles of revolutionary writers and did not leave them pleased. For if there was a servant, then there had to be a master, and hadn't that word been struck out of the radicals' vocabulary, whether or not literature was the master, or a mister, or its Excellency, its Majesty, or its Highness? So he replaced it with "the faithful guardian", meaning one entrusted with the protection of literature. And literature thereby became

a burden of trust placed on the shoulders of critics.

In general the numerous stances he took in controversies gave witness of his sound nationalist feelings, which were far in advance of his opponents' and which went beyond the old, well-trodden nationalism and displayed acutely leftist leanings that surpassed the claims of nationalist and revolutionary writers alike. Similarly, he had written against the authorities, against repressiveness, censorship and terrorism, he had criticised the American intervention in different parts of the world, and he had been at the head of campaigns to sign petitions of protest in defence of freedom of thought and freedom of thinkers, and he had shown no leniency toward recusants and self-excusants and those who'd lamely slink away from the task. There was hardly a petition that did not carry his name at the very top.

He ingested the succession of critical theories which asserted themselves in the region for over half a century, in addition to all theories foundational and essential, flitting between them with remarkable agility. And while keeping up with the latest literary fashions, he remained steadfastly devoted to engaged art despite openly expressing his disdain for it, and it was with this as his basis that he pronounced his stern judgment on different types of literature, and refused to let it veer from its progressive task. The slightest suspicion of reactionism was enough to pit him against it, and he became proverbial among writers for his adamant asperity. He took the view that novels were turning into crime stories, and in his opinion this demeaned novels and it banished them to the realm of cheap thrills if a policeman should so much as make an appearance, even if only as a passer-by crossing the road or standing at a junction recording a breach of traffic regulations.

(This makes us fear for our novel and the charges that may be raised against it, little though it deserves them, especially given that one of the characters in the novel will assume a number of different personalities and disguise himself under several different names, not to mention the fact that one of the characters of the novel is a naïve and amateur criminal pretending he's into real crime and offering his services publicly for all to hear, as we have just seen. We only bring up these and other examples because this kind of categorisation will draw them into its sweep, for it contains all the things we mentioned and even more thrown into the bargain; to which one might add a premeditated and resolutely predetermined crime with a fair measure of incitement and criminal intent – though this is not something that can be asserted with any certainty at this stage, for the story is still at the beginning. But the most important element yet is a mysterious band of people whose roots go back even before the beginning – a band which might even be a Mafia. Good God, not a Mafia as well! That's just the peevish thing he'll say.)

What that means is that according to his critical approach, the fast-paced crime novel is not worthy of being placed in the class of profound literature, whose natural pace is slow and whose events unfold unhurriedly and with due reflectiveness. The thrill of suspense, on the other hand, is a superficial thing, and makes a novel forfeit its

sobriety and its place among serious writings which afford the reader the opportunity for extended meditation, and thus for something akin to the piercing insights of philosophy, and the leisurely enjoyment of big ideas. All of this is in danger of being lost, should a novel be infected by the merest trace of criminal activity, or even a mere disturbance in the air that results from a few shots being fired, though this be in a wedding celebration.

(For this and other reasons, Halloum the critic will cast this novel aside to a faraway place where no eye need ever alight on it, and he will not place it next to those novels which he has shown such splendid skill in extolling and dissecting and wringing the life out of through an excess of anatomical zeal, these novels numbering no more than a few dozen works in Arabic whose number might wax or wane depending on the strength of his personal relationships.)

And in spite of his repeated assertions that his critical standards were purely literary in nature, he would often dismiss older romantic writers and be full of praise for novelists producing nationalistic and ideological novels who happened to occupy positions in governmental departments that commanded great respect. He was proud of his analytical powers and had once claimed that, should he so wish, he was capable of discovering cholesterol levels and their relationship to cardiovascular diseases inside a novel, or if he was so disposed, to banish the greatest novel from the world of art, even if it was written by Dostoyevsky and Proust put together. In the view of most literary writers and literary wannabes, the facts testified to his influence and his destructive powers, so it was no wonder that many of them should have purchased his silence by fawning.

Hamid Saleem had met the critic Jameel Halloum on only a handful of occasions. On those few occasions, the translator had displayed an attitude of spontaneous and unaffected respect toward the critic, and had listened to his views and expressed his agreement with them even though they weren't all to his liking. Their political disagreement was not a problem, for he wasn't really interested in politics. Nor was their literary disagreement a serious hurdle, for he didn't understand his positions, which were at the time structuralist and deconstructive.

Hamid felt sanguine that he would meet with understanding from a critic who had been undaunted and undefeated by a famous literary theory which based its arguments on rhetorical lines and circles and squares and rectangles, and who had risen above petty literary squabbles, and had not joined the fray in the campaign against him, not with a single direct or indirect word. And Hamid took the critic's silence in the dream to signify his objection to the scandalous way in which they'd all taken sides against him.

The meeting took place in the critic's home, after Hamid called him up to ask for an appointment so he might consult him on some literary matter. And from the very moment one of his people let him in and led him to the library room before turning to leave, it seemed to him as if his dream was about to come true. For from the threshold of the room where he stood, he could see a fine film of grey fog descending and enveloping everything in sight, in the midst of which the critic could be distinguished writing or reading. As expected, he rose to greet him, but he didn't open his arms for him and only shook his hand. Later on, when putting the dream straight in his mind, the fog of reality would only appear like a passing deception that blinded his vision.

The library that met his gaze was a teeming welter of books and paintings and small statues, and seeing the whole of it spread out before him in its splendour, elegance, and dusty hoariness gave him a wonderful surprise, and made him feel as if he was stepping into a shrine reflecting an intellectual life filled with knowledge and the quest for truth which refused to be bound by prohibitions and stop at the limits of what's permitted. For there were the yellowing books on history, culture and religion, the red communist books, the blue books about sex and in flaming scarlet the erotica, and next to them the books about different philosophical schools and all types of venerable classical world-wide trends in literary criticism, as well as scintillating ponderous modern ones, next to which stood a bookcase all in French, loudly testifying to his francophone culture and his having gained a doctoral degree – in what, no-one knows – from the Sorbonne, which no-one knows whether it ran to single or double digits. At the same time, the paintings hanging on the wall gave evidence of his refined taste for visual art, as he had secured perfect prints of Renaissance nudes, of the sunny paintings of Van Gogh, the elongated paintings of Modigliani, the rose paintings of Picasso, the surrealist paintings of Dali, the nightmarish paintings of Bosch, the grotesque ones by Bacon, alongside throwaway pieces of pop art as well as statues of Venus, Voltaire, Marx, Gorky and Lenin, fixed landmarks pointing to the wellsprings of the critic's diverse and ramified culture.

His expectations were disappointed from the first moment of their encounter. The short, broad-shouldered critic was looking out at him with the frown of a pessimist philosopher and the fierce look of a professional boxer, and it wasn't long before he meted out to him a sudden, painful blow below the belt, without the slightest warning and with a smile of derision which was far broader than was absolutely necessary. He had composed an article against him, and was about to send it to the newspaper in order to make his contribution to the furore to come, and he issued a prediction:

“This article will make mince-meat of you.”

He wagged his finger confidently as if he had just scored a victory against his eternal sworn enemies, impudent imperialists and self-styled Muslim terrorists, declaring that what he was about to write would be sufficient to finish him off.

Hamid did not lose faith in his dream, despite the disappointing overture, for what the situation was telling him was this: the dream was vying with linear time and

was leagues ahead of it, and if it had assured him of the way matters would end, the way they began could do him no harm. After all, hadn't he gotten to the critic before he'd sent his article to the newspaper? The critic's broad smile had narrowed and was now tightly pursed, and it looked more like a smile of malicious satisfaction than a smile of regret, and seen from another angle it seemed like the scheming smile of someone about to wage a war of extermination that would see to it that he was chopped to pieces, or as he had phrased it moments ago, would mince him like mincemeat.

His optimism did not last long, for the smile of malice proved stronger than the dream and threw him off balance, and he was struck with a sense of vertigo faced with the critic's uncharacteristic intransigence. For he was gnashing his teeth and looking at him like a butcher sharpening his cleaver in preparation for pulverising him into fine shreds of meat, so that the banner of literature might continue to stream in lofty winds. His predatory appearance was such as to fill Hamid with self-reproach and incline him to give credence to the tendentious rumours circulating about him. How had it slipped his mind that this was the critic who turned right and wrong on their heads, not because he nursed any particular like or dislike for either, but simply by way of making a display of his critical virtuosity; that his ambitions went beyond his tasks as a critic and took criticism as an expedient for creating an entirely new text that retained only a flimsy relation with the text under criticism, and that was nothing but a springboard for him to make a show of skill in wielding devious stylistic features laid thick with subtle rhetorical moves and complex structures, twisting and winding his way around a small idea until it grew into something exceptionally big and vacuous, so that his praise for others was only an opportunity for him to praise his abilities and advertise his cultural modishness?

The translator stood at a loss, and he could bring himself to utter but a single, flaccid word:

"But I..."

It gave the best expression to the disconsolate end he now sensed lying ahead of him. At that, the critic hesitated. This "but I" which the translator had succeeded in uttering had found its mark, making a plea that was effective despite the fact that it had numbered no more than a few letters, for it had pointed toward an entire sentence: "But I haven't even uttered a single word!" He took pity on him, and threw out to him contemptuously:

"Convince me of your point of view."

A sense of foreboding came over Hamid, but he hadn't entirely lost hope – there had to be some truth to the dream. He began stammering. The critic quickly said in reassurance:

"Convince me and I'm prepared to tear it up."

But it was not a matter of convincing as it was of understanding and showing

lenience. Would he show lenience if he understood? He made his confession tersely:

“What I did was shameful.”

“Agreed.”

The critic would not save him from having to falter through his words, though he had received his confession with pleasure and had assumed a leisurely aspect of anticipation, allowing the translator to take his time spluttering and stuttering. Hamid said:

“I mean, I'm a special case when it comes to translation, and I'm the first person to complain about it.”

“In literature we're all equals, there's no room for exceptions.”

Nevertheless he expressed a desire to be apprised of his case, though not before giving him a caveat:

“I will not count your particularity as a ground for turning a blind eye on the offences it resulted in.”

The critic's willingness to hear him out made a strong flash of hope appear on the horizon, though the situation remained difficult: more than once in the past, he had been forced to defend his special vision of translation, and he had tried to justify it using expressions that he strove to present as reasonable, but which were never free from a certain weakness. With the critic now ready to listen to him, he would take special care with every single word that came out of his mouth, so that he would not misinterpret him. Especially since critics have a habit of interpreting things whichever way they please. Was he capable of that? No. The truth was therefore the best defence. In fact what he felt bubbling within him was reaching boiling point, and he had to release it by removing every obstacle from its path. At that critical moment, the truth confronted him forcefully and he grasped it with perfect clarity, and he could now speak it out loud for the very first time:

“I have an inveterate weakness when faced with literary characters.”

He fell silent, fixing the critic with a stare in the hope that he might exempt him from the need to say more. The thought of uttering something whose extreme strangeness he realised – a strangeness that surpassed his own expectations – struck him with a sudden terror. His own thoughts were devouring him and breathing fear into his mind. The critic said encouragingly:

“I also feel a certain kind of weakness when faced with the characters of great novels. I feel they're stronger than the characters I meet in real life.”

The translator felt a surge of enthusiasm. Let him then go ahead and reveal what he'd been prepared to say without reservations. The critic Halloum was the only person capable of understanding the thoughts fermenting inside his head. His condition might be similar to his own; so let him speak his mind.

"They're immeasurably stronger; I can neither escape them nor resist them. They rise out of the paper and I take leave of reality. We go together to a region lying somewhere at the boundaries between them, there between the paper and reality. They tear off their masks and they bare their souls, and they goad me to delve far into their uncharted depths. I follow on behind them and I discover some of the secret recesses and shadowy nooks of my self – oh what whirlwinds and wild gales seize me and carry me off to a place of no return! I go no further; I stop. I find it arduous to confront them. I'm overwhelmed by fear. If I'll be honest, courage fails me."

"A unique literary state," the critic commented with envy.

"They're not all like that; these are rare cases. The characters vary, and some of them I attach no importance to."

"I can understand that – I don't blame you."

"While for others, I feel a sense of love and gratitude and compassion, and I might even identify myself completely with them. I want to give them something, and something within me incites me to try and enrich them with a thought, to contribute a small detail to them, or to remedy a flaw in their construction. And permit me to say, however well the writer may be acquainted with the human soul, he can never express his characters in a way that gives them their dues, there's always something that falls short, and some of this I try to redress. Sometimes I'm so closely connected and intimately involved with them that I feel their pain, I feel the misfortune that has befallen them and the gross injustice they've suffered and I want to give them a second chance, and this impels me to reconsider the novel, its plot and its style, and to rectify matters that eluded its author, and remove imperfections he was oblivious to. To be sure, these things don't happen to me of my own accord, nor because I'm trying to be clever or trying to worm my own literary contributions into the text. What I do is a result of my complete immersion in the characters, and of my effort to anticipate the effect that events will have upon them. All this gets played out in my mind because I'm living and breathing them and interacting with them in imagination, and a not insignificant amount of this seeps out into my translations."

"There are characters that are weak-willed or unfortunate or hopelessly flawed. Is there anything that could fix these up?"

"Oh, these I simply wish I could re-write from scratch."

"I, too, have encountered literary characters that struck a cord in me and dominated my thoughts and actions for days and weeks on end, which it demanded supreme effort to free myself from."

The critic did not finish what he was saying about himself. He caught himself in time before he'd had a chance to mention two characters that had exercised a great influence on him during the stifling period of his adolescence, Kafka's transmogrified cockroach and Dostoevsky's outcast who spoke from the underground. The translator would not take these in a spirit of literary innocence, as a reference to alienation and

despairing solitude, but he'd take them as a reference to misery, resentment and misanthropy. The critic realised he'd already gone too far with the translator in this enticing adventure. And he worried that any display of sympathy might make him think he assented to his views. He put his guard up before he could let himself be drawn into talking about his own case – there was something a little too beguiling about describing its charms – and went on sharply:

“You're capable of committing more than one idiocy, in fact several different idiocies at the same time. In all this, where does translation come into the story – you know, accuracy in rendering the text, integrity in the way uses language?”

“I don't disregard these issues; I care about them. But the associations of the narrative take me with them and the characters overpower me. Things begin fermenting inside me, they produce effects, they germinate thoughts and feelings within me, and I express them by translating what I've started thinking and imagining or even dreaming about them. I know these are associations which my own nature brings forth, but what I do is something I participate in without deliberate intention, I'm not *compelled* to do it, I'm *called* to it. Should I turn my back on them? No, I must answer the call, otherwise – let me say this openly – the process of translation would lose all the beauty, allure and pleasure it holds for me. This is my chief reward.”

“These are not concerns that can be taken into consideration. The translator translates only what's there on the page, without intervening and without adding or subtracting. What you're doing – if we're to call it by its rightful name – is an aggression on both the author and his work.”

“But the readers stand to reap the rewards, for they get a work in a higher degree, one that's been written twice over.”

“On the contrary, you're deceiving them, for what they're reading is not the original book.”

“But I am giving them a book which they have a stronger connection to.”

“What you're rather giving them is a disfigured book. Can you pretend to deny its relation to the first book when it's based on it? What you're doing not only inflicts injury on the idea of translation; it puts paid to it.”

“Don't forget that a good translation tries to encompass both the book and the character of the author.”

“Nobody can encompass anybody, how much less an author!”

“I don't comprehend him entirely, but I try. During the time that I'm working on my translation of the novel, my mind is not immersed in it exclusively. There are things stored up inside me which provide me with a great deal and interact with what I'm reading. A state of lucidity descends upon me in which I contemplate everything around me and my eyes and mind and heart open widely to what's happening in real life, and even though it's only a scattered, desultory narrative, it interleaves itself with

the narrative of the novel. Characters from my past and from my own imagination drift in and out of stage, they enter into relationships with the people in the novel and they exchange woes, feelings, and experiences, and each of them takes things from the other."

"You're failing to convince me. That kind of confusion won't go far with me."

"How can I translate any novel whatsoever, whatever its language or time or the country it comes from, without being affected by the time and place in which I'm living?"

The critic made no reply; he was busy thinking. At that, the translator cried out in a burst of fervour:

"If it's fidelity that concerns us, then it's to life, not to books, that we owe our fidelity."

There the critic called him to a halt and asked him for a brief description of his way of translating, delivered without embellishments. The synopsis Hamid came out with was an outright defence of his approach:

"I don't just translate a book coming from another time and place, but along with it I also translate what connects it to the present place and time; all of it together, intermingling. The thoughts that course through me, my God – what vistas lie open – !"

The critic Jameel Halloum gave a start of surprise. The idea appealed to him despite the rebuttals he could administer to each and every one of the translator's assertions. Indeed, when he scrutinised it more closely, he found it to exude dynamic elements imbued with a future universality, which would encompass the present at the same time as it would encapsulate history, cleaving its way on the printed page with visionary audacity. He reformulated it to himself in his own dazzling style: the germinating seed of an unprecedented prophetic vision, which came shimmering out in the idealistic form of an ultimate and genuine fidelity, one not devoid of a distinct seditiousness; a matter admitting no jejune simplifications and not devoid of a certain warmth, of a provocative sense of faith that defies conceptual understanding, and can only be experienced through feeling. He was standing face to face with a special case, a case of special genius, that drew life and the world into a relationship with what what was past, what was present, and what lay yet in store, inside the forge of writing and translation. He had to think it all carefully through from the beginning, so he said to him gravely:

"Give me time to think."

Without a doubt it was a brilliant novelty and it could be released into the world and be assured to plunge into convulsions the whole dulled cultural atmosphere, with its avid thirst for all things new, however inane – imagine, then, when something so acutely surprising and so brazenly strange should come along! It could be dispatched to Europe and America as a Middle Eastern fad promising an interaction between two times and places, the West and the East, between the covers of a book, giving birth to a

mutual understanding between others, and to a dialogue that takes place between the lines on a white sheet of paper in a calm and conciliatory manner free from entrenched animosities. He expressed the rapture he felt at this dazzling find by saying to the lowly genius standing beside him in all his mundaneness:

“I promise you a counter-attack.”

He only asked Hamid for a two-day respite, so that he could think matters through for himself and see how the battle might be turned in his favour, after he had first ascertained how far it extended. It would not be a merely local skirmish – he planned to take it to the wider Arab world. Their meeting was fixed for three days later.

Truly, dreams are full of wonders.