



TAWFIQ AL-HAKIM

A READER'S GUIDE

WILLIAM MAYNARD HUTCHINS

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*In memory of
Zakiya Umm Nasir
(Ibrahim Mahmud Amir)*



Preface

This book is an invitation to a dialogue with the works of Tawfiq al-Hakim rather than a definitive analysis of them. It is therefore positioned midway between a critical perspective and a guide to mushrooms. Although every attempt has been made to ensure accuracy, the book's success should be judged not by the quantity of carefully sifted information it contains, but by its rootedness in al-Hakim's texts and by the encouragement it offers readers to discover or rediscover Tawfiq al-Hakim. There is much to ponder and admire in al-Hakim's self-consciously diverse set of writings. Fans of Arabic literature know that he is important, that several generations of Arab schoolchildren have grown up reading him, and that it is next to impossible to write about the development of Egyptian letters in the twentieth century or about Arabic drama without reference to him. All the same, he is not well known to readers of English, and even some of those familiar with his reputation tend to consider him an easy read and therefore a writer not meriting much considered reflection. That al-Hakim was able to make many of his works accessible to the general Arab public should be considered a triumph of his creativity over the awe-inspiring Arabic language, not a shortcoming. Accessible works are not inevitably shallow.

In "The Radium of Happiness," al-Hakim's narrator takes several volumes by the medieval author Ibn Abd Rabbih on holiday, even though that limits him to one change of clothing. In the wooded cafe he frequents, these mysterious volumes of Arabic win the narrator the attention of a popular waitress. Eventually he abandons her friendship, preferring the company of Ibn Abd Rabbih, whose ghostly presence emerges through the words of his books. With this allegory, al-Hakim

shows that Arabic literature can be carried to the world. By selecting a larger valise, one can pack several changes of clothing and still enjoy the company of Tawfiq al-Hakim through his books, in Arabic or in translation, on a refreshing journey up a cold mountain.

—*William Maynard Hutchins*



Chronology

[*Editor's Note:* I have respected what I understand to have been Tawfiq al-Hakim's wishes by omitting personal details such as his wife's name.]

- 1898, October 9, born in Alexandria, Egypt (A strong case has been made for 1902, but 1897, 1899, and 1903 have also been suggested as his year of birth.)
- 1914, elementary school certificate
- 1915, moved from Damanhur to Cairo, where he lived with relatives while continuing his studies
- 1918, competency certificate
- 1918–1919, “Spanish” influenza epidemic, worldwide, including Egypt
- 1919, arrested during national uprising against British occupation of Egypt
- 1919–1920, completed play *al-Dayf al-Thaqil* (*The Unwelcome Guest*)
- 1921, finished secondary education; entered law school in Cairo
- 1923, wrote *al-Mara' al-Jadida* (*The New Woman*)
- 1925, passed law exams in Egypt; began his studies in Paris
- 1927, wrote *Awdat al-Ruh* (*Return of the Spirit*) in Paris
- 1928, returned to Egypt from his years of artistic exploration in France
- 1928–1929, apprentice public prosecutor in the Mixed Courts of Alexandria
- 1929–1934, public prosecutor in various rural communities of Egypt
- 1930, purchased in Tanta the walking stick he used for years and celebrated in his writings
- 1933, published *Ahl al-Kahf* (*The People of the Cave*) and *Return of the Spirit*

- 1934, published *Shahrazad*; appointed director of the investigative bureau of the Ministry of Education; resident of Cairo again
- 1936, published *Muhammad*, a “passion” play; summer collaboration with Taha Husayn in Europe and visits to Paris and the Salzburg festival; published *al-Qasr al-Mashur (The Enchanted Castle)*
- 1937, published *Masrahiyat Tawfiq al-Hakim (Plays of Tawfiq al-Hakim)* and *Yawmiyat Na’ib fi al-Aryaf (Maze of Justice)*, a novel criticizing the administration of justice in rural Egypt
- 1938, published *Usfur min al-Sharq (Bird of the East)*; his books *Shajara al-Hukm (Rulership Tree)* and *Tahta Shams al-Fikr (By the Light of the Sun of Thought)* provoked political controversy; summer holiday in the Alps
- 1939, transferred from Ministry of Education to the newly established Ministry of Social Affairs as director of social guidance
- 1940, published *Himar al-Hakim (Al-Hakim’s Ass)*
- 1943, left public service for writing; associated with the newspaper *Akhbar al-Yawm*; published *Zahrat al-Umr (Youth: Life’s Bloom)*, a collection of letters to a French friend
- 1944, published the novel *al-Ribat al-Muqaddas (The Sacred Bond)*; film version of *Rusasa fi-l-Qalb (A Bullet Through the Heart)*
- 1945–1951, writer for newspaper *Akhbar al-Yawm*
- 1946, married sister of Dr. Muhammad Lutfi Bayyumi
- 1947, birth of his first child, his son Isma’il; met Naguib Mahfouz
- 1948, May 14, Ben-Gurion read Israeli Declaration of Independence; Egypt at war with Israel
- 1949, published *al-Malik Udib (King Oedipus)* and *Qisas Tawfiq al-Hakim (Stories of Tawfiq al-Hakim)*
- 1950, published *Masrah al-Mujtama’ (The Theater of Society)*, a collection of plays for and about contemporary society
- 1951, named director general of the Egyptian National Library; served to 1956
- 1952, overthrow of the Egyptian monarchy; published *Fann al-Adab (The Art of Literature)*, a work of literary theory
- 1953, published *Arini Allah (Show Me God)*, a collection of short stories
- 1954, named member of the Academy of the Arabic Language, Cairo; published *al-Aydi al-Na’ima (Tender Hands)*, a comedy praising Egypt’s socialist revolution
- 1955, published *Iziz (Isis)*, a play, and *al-Ta’aduliya (The Art of Balance)*, a work of literary theory

- 1956, published *al-Masrah al-Munawwa'* (*The Diverse Theater*), a collection of plays, and *al-Safqa* (*The Deal*); October 29–November 5, Sinai campaign
- 1956–1959, member of the Egyptian Higher Council of Arts, Literature, and Social Sciences
- 1958, awarded the Cordon of the Republic; declaration of a United Arab Republic uniting Egypt with Syria
- 1959–1960, Egypt's representative to UNESCO in Paris
- 1960, returned to Cairo and to the Higher Council of Arts, Literature, and Social Sciences; published *al-Sultan al-Ha'ir* (*The Sultan's Dilemma*); film version of *The Sacred Bond*
- 1961, awarded State Literature Prize; began with the newspaper *al-Ahram*; Syria seceded from the United Arab Republic
- 1962, published *Ya Tali' al-Shajara* (*The Tree Climber*), a tribute to the "theater of the absurd"; military involvement of Egypt in Yemen
- 1963, opening of the Tawfiq al-Hakim Theater in Cairo
- 1964, published *Sijn al-Umr* (*The Prison of Life*), an autobiography
- 1965, film version of *Tarid al-Firdaws* (*Expelled from Paradise*)
- 1966, published *Bank al-Qalaq* (*Anxiety Bank*), a play-novel; *Masir Sarsar* (*Fate of a Cockroach*); and *al-Warta* (*Incrimination*), all modern tragedies
- 1967, named officer of *al-Ahram* newspaper; June, war with Israel; film version of *al-Khuruj min al-Janna* (*Departing Paradise*)
- 1968, film version of *Yawmiyat Na'ib fi-l-Aryaf* (*Maze of Justice*)
- 1969, Tawfiq al-Hakim festival at the University of Cairo; convenor of a Cairo Congress of Arab Dramatists
- 1970, September 28, death of President Gamal Abdel Nasser; September 29, published eulogy for President Nasser
- 1971, published *Thawrat al-Shabab* (*Revolt of the Youth*)
- 1973, January 8, drafted "Declaration from the Writers and Men of Letters" to protest policies of Anwar al-Sadat; October, war with Israel
- 1974, January, agreement to separate forces; published *Awdat al-Wa'y* (*The Return of Consciousness*), political reminiscences, 1952–1972; made president of Nadi al-Qissa, the short-story writers' club; President Sadat initiates an "open door" policy for the Egyptian economy
- 1976, elected president of the Writers' Union
- 1977, wife died; film version of *Hikayat Wara'a Kull Bab* (*Stories Behind Every Door*)

- 1978, son, Isma'il, died; September 17, Camp David Accord
- 1981, member of Supreme Council for Culture; assassination of President Sadat
- 1982, published *Malamih Dakhiliya (Inner Features)*
- 1985, published *Le Troisieme Faust (Faust III)* (limited edition of twenty-five numbered copies, in French under the pseudonym of "Goethe fils"); death of Mohamed Aly Hassan, son-in-law and publisher (Al-Adab Press); film version of *Bird of the East*
- 1987, July 26, death
- 1998, November 28–December 3, Cairo conference, sponsored by the Egyptian Supreme Council for Culture: "Tawfiq al-Hakim: An Innovative Presence"



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Tawfiq al-Hakim's "Lives"

Tawfiq al-Hakim, who was in his mid to late eighties¹ when he died on July 26, 1987, was one of the most influential writers of twentieth-century Egypt. Famed as the playwright who more than anyone else established Arabic drama's literary respectability and who explored a wide range of theater styles—drawing inspiration from classical Greek drama, from Arabic and Islamic folklore, and from French drama of many eras from Voltaire to “theater of the absurd”—al-Hakim also wrote several novels, several volumes of short stories, many essays and newspaper articles, an autobiography (*Sijn al-Umr* [*The Prison of Life*]), and a collection of letters to a French friend (*Zahrat al-Umr* [*Youth: Life's Bloom*]) that serves as an autobiographical supplement. Several of his works merge genres, bridging gaps between autobiography, short stories, novels, and essays. Throughout his career, he showed an interest in spiritual issues, but toward the end of his life a theological bent was clearly evident. When awarded an Egyptian state prize for literature in 1962, al-Hakim was praised not only for “enkindling the spirit of national consciousness” but also for “his criticism of corruption and injustice.”²

Al-Hakim's life progressed in relatively steady, even triumphal stages, although he encountered many public controversies and toward the end of his life faced two family tragedies. From a primarily provincial Egyptian childhood, he moved to studying in Cairo, where he successfully completed law school, on to an ill-fated attempt to earn an advanced degree in France, to a career as a provincial Egyptian legal officer, and up through several levels of Egyptian government service, from which he finally emerged to become one of Egypt's few professional literary figures without a day job. His personal life diverged from

the Muslim ideal pattern according to which a man studies, marries young, has a career, raises children, and then evolves into a sage, senior citizen, and grandparent who is visited frequently by grandchildren. Instead, his life followed, with some reversals of order, the pattern of an ideal Hindu life, in which one progresses from student to householder to partial recluse to a *sannyasi* completely withdrawn from society. Al-Hakim studied and started a career, but he married only late in life and even then did not concentrate much on his marriage until after his wife and son had died.³ He remained aloof from society for decades, taking pride in not joining political parties or meeting with prominent politicians. Meanwhile he kept a keen eye on the imperfections of Egyptian society and of Egyptian women and maintained a dialogue with his fellow countrymen through his publications, especially through opinion pieces in various newspapers, to which, like many other twentieth-century Arab authors, he was a frequent contributor.

Critic James Wood praised Virginia Woolf for creating characters who are not prisoners of the author.⁴ Of the scene in *To the Lighthouse* when Mrs. Ramsay thinks of one thing and another while looking out the window, Wood said: "It is as if the novel forgets itself, forgets that Mrs. Ramsay is a character."⁵ Although al-Hakim chained many of his characters to his pen, his heroine Shahrazad escaped. The hero who, paradoxically, exercised the greatest independence from the author was Tawfiq al-Hakim as a fictional character who, in a series of four novels, progressed from precocious child to sensitive student to bureaucrat to professional author, and then to public figure. In fact, al-Hakim made himself one of his own most ubiquitous characters. He fabricated stereotypes of himself as a miser, an enemy of women, and an ivory-tower recluse. Although these were tongue-in-cheek exercises in self-denigration, he went to great lengths for decades to perpetuate them. Even when his portrayal of his life is imaginative, the flight path taken by his fantasy reveals much about his approach to life. In his autobiography, *The Prison of Life*, al-Hakim said he sought to portray the convulsions of "this nature of mine, behind the prison bars" of genes and upbringing.⁶ Bayly Winder explained: "He maintains that everyone is a prisoner of heredity but that in the realm of thought there can be an escape."⁷ By drawing from his autobiographical works, this chapter sketches in his own words, as much as possible, some characteristic moments of al-Hakim's life.

The Prison of Life (1964)

Al-Hakim said in his autobiography that he was setting out to dissect his life and especially his inherited predispositions, even though speaking candidly about his parents meant bucking Egyptian custom.⁸ He lamented, for example, that his father Isma'il al-Hakim, a lawyer, public prosecutor, and judge, lost his "inventiveness . . . artfulness . . . [and] 'philosophizing'" as he shouldered family responsibilities.⁹ One of his more touching stories about his father describes the continuous remodeling of their dwelling in Alexandria: "Building and demolition in our house became something natural and continuous, like eating and drinking."¹⁰ At that time his father was head of the court in Alexandria, and "when he came back from a session tired and exhausted, his first action was not to go in for a meal, but to head straight to the masons and carpenters"¹¹ who occupied "a room near the garden gate, where they settled, stayed overnight, held parties, and received . . . members of the family . . . as guests. . . . And in a corner of the garden they planted radishes and leeks."¹² In short, al-Hakim explains, "my parents were of a practical turn of mind, but they were also imaginative. They would think about a practical project in a practical way, but then imagination intervened and swept them off to a ridiculous conclusion."¹³

His mother was from the multiethnic harbor-master caste of Alexandria¹⁴ and learned to read through force of personality rather than as the result of any adult's plan.¹⁵ Seduced by his legal career and hoping to better her circumstances, she insisted on accepting the marriage proposal from Isma'il al-Hakim despite her mother's objections.¹⁶ When an adult, to pass the time during a lengthy illness, she read "stories from *The Arabian Nights* . . . and the like" and delighted in rehearsing them. "She was good at telling the stories, leaving no detail without trying to picture it. My grandmother and I used to sit at her feet all ears." Even his father "caught the infection from us."¹⁷ A story that illustrates his mother's love-hate relationship with the arts and her hopes for her son features a wedding entertainer whom she and al-Hakim's grandmother befriended. A welcome visitor in the home, Maestra Hamida overstepped the limits of his mother's goodwill, however, by teaching the youngster how to play the lute: "When she saw that I was clutching the instrument and bringing harmonious notes out of it, she gave a thunderous shout of anger and bore down on me to snatch away the lute. . . .

She kept repeating that if I touched the lute one more time, I would never succeed in schoolwork and . . . would have no . . . other future than as a 'songmonger.'"¹⁸

Al-Hakim's younger brother was named Zuhayr, after a famed pre-Islamic Arab poet, but "the directions he took in life were strictly materialistic and practical. His hobbies were shooting, hunting, swimming, dancing, card-playing, and . . . things I am incapable of . . . thinking about."¹⁹

As a child al-Hakim hated both poetry and swimming, the latter because his father attempted to teach him to swim by letting him flounder in deep water.²⁰ When he began secondary school, the cinema, not poetry, captivated him: "Serials and adventure sequences" of "the American Cosmograph . . . overwhelmed me and robbed me of all sense of proportion."²¹

The Prison of Life ends with al-Hakim's return from his studies in France and his reception as "a flop and a failure" because he had returned with everything except his doctorate. Without glossing over his shortcomings as a graduate student, al-Hakim explains that the "cultural struggle, into . . . which I had thrown myself, and the intellectual voracity" with which he had attacked the banquet of international civilization readily available for consumption in France "left . . . me without the power or ability to shoulder another burden."²²

Youth: Life's Bloom (1943)

At the end of *The Prison of Life* al-Hakim describes *Youth: Life's Bloom* as "an approximately accurate description" of his years in Paris.²³ It covers as well the beginning of his career with the Egyptian government legal services and thus provides background for his novels *Bird of the East* and *Maze of Justice*. Al-Hakim considered at least one episode in *Youth: Life's Bloom* to be a short story: When al-Hakim expresses to a friend his admiration for the beauty of a young woman seen in a cafe, the other man relays this information to the young woman, who is, opportunely, desperate, since a previous affair has just ended. The ever helpful friend arranges for her to move in with al-Hakim, who experiences a night to rival all other nights but feels remorse not at sexual liberties taken but at the potential threat to his museum time. Eventually—to spare al-Hakim the burdens of a romantic relationship—they work out an arrangement that limits their fellowship to sex and housekeeping.²⁴ This episode or story is a refreshing example of al-Hakim the author affectionately mocking al-Hakim the character.

*Justice and Art:
Memories of Art and the Judiciary (1953)*

In his foreword to this work, al-Hakim describes it as the nonfictional counterpart to his novel *Maze of Justice*.²⁵ It is therefore a sequel of sorts to *Youth: Life's Bloom*. In one episode, al-Hakim, while stationed in Tanta, is handed the file of two swells under arrest. They have been picked up, while en route from Cairo to Alexandria to attend horse races there, on charges of defrauding a local tobacconist of two packs of cigarettes and the change for a ten-pound note, which they had proffered but then neglected to hand over. When the two men are brought in for interrogation, they turn out to be old school friends, who even as young people had been on the fun-loving, prankster side of life. They assume that all their problems are over, since the investigating officer is a school chum. Al-Hakim describes himself as troubled and embarrassed by the whole affair and uncertain how to proceed. At last, although he decides to address them politely, he writes on their file that they are to be detained. They leave his office in smiles only to find themselves immediately thereafter in handcuffs.²⁶

In another episode, when posted to a new location, al-Hakim is warned that the local *ma'mur* or police chief is so devious that he might steal one of your fingers while shaking your hand. Sure enough, this official hosts one welcoming banquet after another for al-Hakim, each featuring a turkey. When al-Hakim presses the police officer to explain the provenance of this string of turkeys, the officer finally admits that the British army has ordered him to round up, from local farmers, a host of turkeys for British soldiers to eat at Christmas, and that it is "reasonable" that one of this multitude should die each day, especially since one had died and its corpse had been retained to play the part of the newly deceased turkey each morning.²⁷

Al-Hakim's Ass (1940)

In the first two chapters of this autobiographical account of his adventures with a donkey, al-Hakim offers a portrait of himself as an established literary figure. Ensclosed in a fashionable Cairo hotel that is frequented by tourists and graced with Nubian doormen, a revolving front door, and waiters who staff each floor, al-Hakim, inspired subconsciously by a blonde lady and her pet dog who share the lift down with