

Transgression

Al-Farazdaq did not err in describing the Arabs when he wrote in his celebrated poem: “Our reason weighs mountains in dignity, Yet we become demons whenever ignorance overtakes us.” My dear friend Abdel Rahman Azzam became something of a demon a few days ago when he read a short sentence buried within a long essay. At once he sprang into action, calling for challenge and combat, imagining himself upon a battlefield. He wrote that lengthy article which Al-Balagh published in defense of the Arabs—though no one had attacked them—guarding their honor though no one had insulted it, proving their glory though no one had denied it, and summoning others to duel and combat as though he stood in one of those ancient arenas where Arab horsemen once displayed their courage, strength, and valor, and where he himself displayed his own courage and vigor not so very long ago. But no one stepped forward to challenge him, because no one had offended either him or the Arabs. No one had committed this supposed crime which so angered him, stirred his pride, and filled him with the lofty arrogance of Amir ibn al-Tufayl and the ancient Arab warriors. My friend Abdel Rahman Azzam knows perfectly well—if he withdraws into himself and consults his conscience, and I do not doubt for a single moment that his conscience is pure and sincere—that I am not an enemy of the Arabs, nor one who denies their ancient glory and enduring greatness. He knows equally well that I am not hostile to the modern Arab renaissance or to the call for Arab unity in any of its forms. I have spoken to him about these matters more than once, both privately and before others. If he doubts anything, he cannot possibly doubt that I am among the furthest of men from insulting the Arabs or turning against them. Yet despite all this, he extracted that single short sentence from the long essay and built around it the article published in Al-Balagh. Most remarkable of all was that this article appeared on the very same day that Al-Sha‘b published another in the same spirit. I could understand Al-Sha‘b adopting such a course, for between that newspaper and myself there exist many causes of hostility, enough to drive it toward lies, slander, intrigue, and malice. But that my friend Abdel Rahman Azzam should take such a path is something for which I can find no explanation. Above every man of knowledge there is one more knowing still. My friend Abdel Rahman Azzam’s article provoked a disturbance—or something resembling a disturbance—in Damascus. Had I been in his place, I would have been ashamed to have caused it. To incite people against one another, intentionally or unintentionally, and to encourage attacks upon freedom of opinion, intentionally or unintentionally, are not things in which a writer should take pleasure or find reassurance, much less a man who claims to struggle for freedom and independence. I had imagined that my friend Abdel Rahman Azzam would have been the quickest to condemn this evil in defense of the Arabs themselves, in support of their dignity, and in preservation of their ancient glory. Yet Al-Balagh found a peculiar delight in prolonging discussion of this mischief. It published what one of the Damascus newspapers had written, then waited a day before returning to

summarize it again so that it might settle more firmly in the minds of readers and spread more widely among them, after which it proceeded to debate the newspaper itself. And after firmly deciding that Dr. Taha Hussein had committed a grave error beyond doubt, it declared that this was why he had refrained from replying to Professor Abdel Rahman Azzam. So let me congratulate Al-Balagh—though not my friend Abdel Rahman Azzam—upon its skill in spreading mischief among the public without verification or restraint. And let me say to both Al-Balagh and my friend Abdel Rahman Azzam that I did not refrain from replying because I admitted error or lacked the ability to respond. Rather, I understood the intentions of these people and therefore turned away from arguing with them. I did not wish to burden Egyptians with useless speech or debate over a matter pursued neither for God's sake nor for any noble purpose, but rather for a dark and hidden motive unwilling to reveal itself openly before men. Perhaps Al-Balagh understood this from me, and perhaps my friend Abdel Rahman Azzam understood it even more quickly. Otherwise, neither he nor the writers of Al-Balagh are so ignorant of history or so oblivious to its truths as to imagine that Arab rule in Egypt was entirely good, just, and free from oppression and tyranny. Such claims belong to the common crowd and those resembling them. Educated men—foremost among them my friend Abdel Rahman Azzam and the writers of Al-Balagh—know perfectly well that Arab rule in Egypt was beneficial at first because it brought Islam to the country. But afterward it resembled Arab rule throughout the Islamic world: a mixture of good and evil, justice and injustice. Egypt eventually grew weary of that rule and revolted against it, struggling until it secured its independence from Arab authority and imposed considerable hardship upon both the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs. It is deeply unfortunate that we should need to state such obvious truths which ought never to require proof, because they belong to the elementary facts of history about which no serious disagreement is possible. May God forgive those who seek their ends by pretending to defend the Arabs and safeguard noble lineage because they cannot pursue their goals openly and directly. Had they followed the straight and honest path, they would have found it filled with thorns and hardship. In conclusion, I want my friend Abdel Rahman Azzam and the editors of Al-Balagh to know that I do not fear such intrigues, nor do I attach importance to them. I pity only those who practice them, for God has warned those who engage in evil scheming of severe punishment. And I return to conclude this article as I began it, with another verse by Al-Farazdaq which seems to describe our friends with remarkable precision: "The spider has woven its web over you, And the revealed Book itself has pronounced your doom." As for our brothers in Syria, I have another conversation reserved for them.