

## Earnest and Jest

By Ṭāhā Ḥusayn – *al-Ahrām*, 6 September 1952

For ten days I lived without receiving a single Egyptian newspaper, and I knew nothing of Egypt and her blessed Revolution except what the French or Italian press chose to carry. As chance would have it, the hotel where I was staying had no radio to which I might turn morning or evening to hear the news and follow what was unfolding in Egypt. So I had to learn about my country indirectly, through foreign papers and their short, clipped reports—reports that neither satisfy nor persuade, but rather whet one's appetite for more certain knowledge.

And so I began to imagine things, to form in my mind all manner of conjectures about the life being lived in Egypt. I was eager for news, and I imagined that all Egyptians were as eager as I. I thought of nothing else; my mind was wholly absorbed by thoughts of our Revolution—its first fruits, its future consequences, and the mark all this would leave on the life we live today and on the life we shall live tomorrow, or the day after.

I had no doubt that the educated class in Egypt was as preoccupied as I, that they too thought of nothing but this. I imagined them reflecting on the past only to compare it with the present, or with the future that lies ahead. I believed that the Revolution and its aftermath had so taken hold of them that they could think of nothing else—that they had forgotten the resentments and rancor that once divided them, that they had become brothers, their hearts cleansed of hatred, their souls purified of malice, their consciences freed from all grievance.

I remembered what I had learned from the traditions—that *Islam annuls what came before it*—and I thought that Revolution must annul what came before it too. I was certain that Egyptians would think of the past only to redress its wrongs, remove its injustices, and restore rights to their owners, compelling the oppressors and the corrupt to live lives untainted by oppression or sin.

I imagined all this and said to myself: time has turned full circle in Egypt, as it was when God first created her and her people. No more tyranny or arrogance or aggression; Egypt had become a land of pure skies and sweet climate, inhabited by a people whose hearts and consciences were clear, whose conduct and inner life were both sound and good.

So I felt, so I thought, and in all this I believed with serene confidence.

Then one day the Egyptian newspapers arrived. I rushed to them eagerly, pored over them with delight—and what an awakening it was! A painful, disquieting awakening after a peaceful rest and sweet dreams.

For I found our press exactly as I had known it before leaving the country and crossing the sea—exactly as it was before the Revolution swept away the arrogance of the arrogant and the tyranny of the tyrants. Nothing had changed—neither in outward form nor in its hidden essence. The same obsession with sensational news, the same relish for shocking or terrifying stories, the same chasing after trivialities, drowning in them, the same endless, fruitless arguments that profit neither writer nor reader.

The political parties were still absorbed in their squabbles as though nothing in the world had changed. The weekly magazines were still gathering amusing tidbits for people to laugh over at one

another's expense—this party or that person—as if Egypt had not begun a new and glorious chapter in her history.

And as I was leafing through the papers, I came upon an article—no sooner had I read it than I burst into loud, hearty laughter. Yet it was laughter tinged with pain. The article was about me—about my supposed misuse of the Arabic language. The writer accused me of being unable to handle prepositions correctly, of confusing their meanings, of misplacing the hamza, of deviating from the usage found in Zuhayr's poetry or in Ibn Hishām's *Mughni al-Labīb*!

I laughed long and deeply, but my laughter was not because I denied what the writer said. Everyone knows I am not skilled in Arabic. Everyone knows I am not a master of fine style or noble literature—that I am merely a pretentious babbler who knows neither how to begin nor how to end, who does not even know how to say what he means. Everyone knows this, and so do I. It was not I who asked people to call me by grand titles or flattering names; it is merely people's love of jest and play, their passion for mockery, that has led them into such indulgence.

No, I did not laugh because I disputed his words, but because I suddenly recalled that image of Egypt that had filled my imagination an hour earlier—an Egypt purified and reborn—and then I saw this petty article before me. Nothing provokes laughter more than the meeting of opposites when they are worlds apart.

A king renounces his throne in submission to the people's will; a nation's life is overturned, its system transformed; political and social institutions are being remade to purge corruption and give birth to a new order; history is resuming its course with a chapter that promises to be magnificent, luminous, captivating to heart and mind and ear and eye—and opposite all this, a linguist, old or young, sits counting the grammatical slips of a writer and reproaching *al-Ahrām* for publishing his articles without correction!

How vast the contrast—immensity on one side, a mere nothing on the other. What is worse, this nothingness is not unique. There are many such nothings in many newspapers. They do not all concern me; they concern others. And what is truly lamentable is not that they criticise this man or that, sometimes justly, often unjustly, but that they are *small*—pitifully small—beside what ought to preoccupy every Egyptian mind and heart, what ought to shape our ways of thinking, feeling, writing, and speaking.

I once had a dispute with certain Egyptians about education. We argued, each with our views. I thought I might one day reply to one of them. But then the news from Egypt reached me, and all that argument fell away—not by choice, but by necessity. For what are the issues of “free education,” or of “Buthayna and Jamīl,” in a country where one system has collapsed so that another might rise in its place?

I have often asked myself about the line of al-Mutanabbī:

“When a soul is great, the body is wearied in its quest.”  
And I have wondered—what if we replaced “great” with “small”?

That question came back to me as I read those Egyptian papers. I pictured our great Leader who transformed Egypt's life in mere days—indeed, in hours—restoring her dignity and honour at home and abroad, awakening in every Egyptian the power to say “No” to tyranny and to stand, proud and unbowed, before all who would degrade him or wish him harm.

I pitied our great Leader when I saw that around him were some—few or many—still absorbed in their pettiness, still obsessed with themselves, turning about in their small vanities as though nothing had changed.

How great Egypt is—and how small some of her sons have become!  
What shall one say of lions that roar while beside them flies buzz and frogs croak?

How urgently Egyptians—especially the educated among them—need to measure their country's greatness rightly, to know that she is greater, nobler, and more resounding than this trifling nonsense in which they persist! Let so-and-so be learned or ignorant, eloquent or tongue-tied, wise or foolish—what do such trifles matter now, when Egypt stands before such vast and momentous tasks?

I say all this as one who is far from despair or pessimism, and nearer than most to hope and faith. Egypt may yet be remade; her systems may change fruitfully and deeply. Yet there will remain among her children some who have been so long shaped by the old life that they have grown old in it, though still young in years:

“And when the old man's crookedness you seek to straighten,  
No schooling can ever make him stand upright.”

Is it any wonder, then, that they should be more attentive to the buzzing of flies and the croaking of frogs than to the roaring of lions? Is it strange that they should need more time—more than these few weeks since the Revolution—to feel that the world around them has changed, and that the great tasks of political, social, and intellectual reform deserve more of their care than the pursuit of trifles?

They hear that Egypt seeks to transform her social order—to make the distribution of wealth fair and just, to set limits to property, to raise taxes equitably, to enable the idle to work and the helpless to live, to give the ignorant access to learning, and the weak the means to justice against the strong. They hear all this—and their hearts and minds take no notice. Instead, they criticise a writer for misplacing a preposition, or a politician for smiling at the wrong time.

But the day will come—soon or late—when these people will awaken from their deep sleep, and realise that the age of trivialities is over, at least for a time; that our country and our own selves have claims upon us far greater than these petty amusements; that we must concern ourselves first with what matters most, until we have built a free and noble life. Then, and only then, when we have achieved such a life, may we return to our small jests and light diversions—play with them and rest with them, so that after a brief pause we may resume the hard, earnest work of life.

But these people will read what I write here with derision, hunting for errors of language, consulting *Mukhtār al-Ṣiḥāḥ*, and saying, “The man has not changed—still that same chatterer who cannot write nor knows what he says.”

Let them then talk and play—until their promised day arrives.

**Ṭāhā Ḥusayn**

*al-Ahrām*, 6 September 1952