

Irritability

Kawkab al-Sharq, 30 May 1933

I wish to return to that discussion I addressed to readers the day before yesterday, concerning what appears in our public life of narrowness of spirit and constriction of the breast, and irritation at the slightest things, the most trivial of matters. This discussion made its mark on the minds of a number of friends and adversaries alike, moving them to comment upon it and take part in it. And what they wrote was, in truth, clear proof that I had not erred in remarking upon this novel phenomenon in our public life, nor in setting out to seek its causes and explanations, and to call for its resistance and mitigation. For the very irritation of these friends and adversaries at what displeased them appeared, to a degree I had scarcely expected them to reach; some of them complained, and complained insistently, of the satirical papers, affirming that setting the law upon them was indispensable to the reform of morals — indeed, going further still, holding that those whom these papers attack must necessarily seek other means of defending themselves, should the means of the law prove insufficient to secure this defense. Which is to say that they approve of the very narrowness of spirit and constriction of breast they themselves display, and seek excuses for themselves and others in their being driven to it — indeed, in their being driven to sheer wrongdoing and personal vengeance, should the law fail to protect them from the mockery of the mockers. And I know of no clearer proof, no more brilliant evidence, of narrowness of spirit and constriction of breast than the stance of this very man whom you urge to patience and forbearance, whom you remind to govern his emotions and master the tumult of his soul — and who only grows more heated, more excessive in his heat, driven not merely to protest, but to outright threat. And some of them made this discussion a means of indulging a certain set of emotions and appetites better left unindulged! And so one of them set about laying the errors of some people upon others, adding the wrongdoing of wrongdoers to those they wrong, building arguments upon this, and seeking every means toward it — as though he wished to make these satirical papers a means of attacking the serious press, and to make these satirical writers a path toward attacking the political parties these writers claim to belong to and advocate for.

Nor, likewise, did my friend Haykal hesitate to mention those papers that publish zincograph photographs of the leader of the Wafd and his

secretary, and campaign in some of their pages for the Wafd, only to take quite different paths on other subjects unrelated to politics; nor did Haykal hesitate to suggest that the Wafd encourages these papers — encouragement that is itself a sin — and that the Wafd shelters behind these papers, a shelter that is unbecoming!!

I would have liked Haykal to be broader of spirit, more generous of heart, more measured in judgment, than to entangle himself in all this, or to mention it, whether outright, or by insinuation, or by allusion; for there is no good in any of it, no truth in any of it, and no correct understanding, in any of it, of the realities of things in democratic life.

Haykal knows full well that those who love democratic life and cherish it with sincerity ought not to enjoy its benefits while chafing at its evils to this degree; rather, they ought to accept it as it is, and do what they can to remedy its faults and flaws — not through violence, nor through harshness, nor through narrowness of spirit and constriction of breast, but through patience and forbearance, through self-mastery and the conquest of passion, through calling to the good with argument and gentle admonition, not through recourse to the law nor through threats.

The Wafd, like other democratic parties, has its official press, which sets forth its views and depicts its positions, and speaks in its name — and for this press it is responsible. But the Wafd has, besides, many followers, connected to it, championing it, calling for it, sometimes in speech, sometimes in writing in the papers. These do not consult the Wafd, do not draw upon any inspiration from the Wafd in what they write, nor does the Wafd direct them in the paths they follow. It is the Wafd's own right to encourage them when they call for its doctrine and champion its principle. It is no one's right to deny the Wafd this, or to blame it for it. Nor is it anyone's right to ask the Wafd about whatever errors these people may fall into, or whatever excess and extremism these people may go to. The Wafd is, in this, no innovation among political parties, and Egypt is, in this, no innovation among democratic countries. Every strong political party has its supporters, followers, and devotees, who champion it and go to excess in championing it, who do not always scruple to exploit their connection to it, their affiliation with it. And in every country that lives a democratic life, there are satirical papers that go to excess in mockery, indulge to excess in tracking down faults, and yet affiliate themselves with political parties — parties which are not held to account for them, nor made to answer for their offenses.

Perhaps Haykal recalls that there were once, in Egypt, satirical papers connected to the Liberal Constitutionalist Party, championing it, calling for it, and receiving from it satisfaction and encouragement. Perhaps Haykal recalls that these papers, at that time, attacked the adversaries of the Liberal Constitutionalists with attacks rich in malice, harsh in denial, containing assaults upon honor, violations of sanctities, and the commission of sins. Perhaps Haykal recalls that the Liberal Constitutionalist Party never cleared itself of these papers at the time, never turned them from their wrongdoing, never rebuked them for their sins! And perhaps Haykal recalls that these very papers later turned, with changing circumstances, away from the Liberal Constitutionalist Party, and subjected it to the very fire they had once directed at its adversaries.

What would Haykal have said, had the adversaries of the Liberal Constitutionalists, in those days, held them accountable for the sins of these papers, and laid upon them the responsibility for what they published, for what they broadcast? What would Haykal have said, had these papers never turned away from the Liberal Constitutionalists at all, but remained loyal to them, advocating for them, while continuing all the while to commit the very sins they had committed, to indulge in the very transgressions they had indulged in? What would Haykal have said, had those whom these papers cursed and insulted claimed that the Liberal Constitutionalists were responsible for this cursing and insulting, on the grounds that these papers advocated for them on a page or two, published their photographs, and then went on, beyond that, to conduct unacceptable to letters and morals alike? What would Haykal have said? Would he not have said that he was responsible only for what he himself wrote, and that his party was responsible only for what its serious, official newspaper published? And so, indeed, ought all parties to say: they are answerable only for what they truly say and truly inspire. As for whatever the papers that affiliate themselves with a party and advocate for it may say, these papers alone are responsible for it, and alone answerable for it.

And what path is there to holding these papers accountable for what they write, and answerable for what they broadcast? There are two paths: recourse to authority, and appeal to the courts — a path not, in itself, objectionable from the standpoint of pure ethics, but one that betrays exactly the narrowness of spirit and constriction of breast we have already noted, a departure from due measure. These are traits that, if tolerated in the general public, seem strange indeed in those who live the political life, and bear the burdens of political struggle. It is in no way

true that political struggle is merely innocent discussion, pure devotion to truth and to the rules of decency and morality alone; political struggle is this, and other things besides — exposure to harm, the endurance of flagrant injustice, blatant oppression, assaults upon one's dignity, violations of one's sanctities — and patience with all of this, forbearance toward all of this, and a turning away from all of this toward what befits a noble man. Had those who occupy themselves with politics, and bear the burdens of struggle within it, devoted themselves instead to calling people to account, whether personally or through the courts, for what is written and said about them, they would have spent upon it the very best of their effort, the choicest part of their lives, and would have been distracted by it from the true, productive struggle.

It is truly strange that my friend Haykal should imagine my own breast would be troubled, were the satirical papers to say of me some part of what they say, these days, of others. God forgive you, my friend! I would never have thought forgetfulness could touch your memory to such a degree! I know of no contemporary, my friend, whom the satirical and serious papers alike have toyed with, and taken from, to the extent that they have toyed with me and taken from me; and you will recall — if you have not forgotten — that the serious and satirical papers alike spent months and years with no subject but myself, saying whatever they pleased, without regard for themselves, without any check upon the pen, without any shame before conscience — and they did not mention me alone, but mentioned alongside me those who ought never to have been mentioned. And perhaps you recall — if you have not forgotten — that I turned away from what they said, and have remained turned away from it ever since; I never gave them a single page in reply, never tore away a veil to expose them, never set the law upon them, never brought my complaint to the authorities — even though a very small part of what they said would have more than sufficed to justify recourse to the courts and appeal to authority.

This is one of the two paths; there is also another way of holding the satirical papers to account for their excess in mockery — namely, meeting mockery with mockery, mischief with mischief, aggression with aggression — a way that pure ethics may well condemn, but which is deeply woven into human nature; people resort to it always, follow it always, and men of politics resort to it in particular. Let not my friend Haykal say that the Liberal Constitutionalists do not love this way, and feel no inclination toward it; this may indeed be true, when the Liberal

Constitutionalists retreat into their own consciences and their highest moral ideals — but when they plunge into the tumult of political life, they conduct themselves there exactly as other parties do. They, too, had their satirical papers once, and these papers won, from them, victory and support; and if circumstances do not now permit them a share of such papers, that is no fault of their adversaries, nor any ground for blaming those adversaries.

And after all this, I did not, in fact, mean to speak of moral corruption when I wrote what I wrote the day before yesterday; for I do not believe our political morals, as members of the opposition in these days, are any worse than our political morals of times past. Long ago, our politics contained both earnestness and jest; long ago, our politics contained both excess and moderation; our political morals have not grown any more corrupt. Indeed, what the satirical papers publish today may well be better than what they used to publish yesterday; it may well be closer to a measure of caution and purity of language than what used to be published before the war, and what used to be sent to Muhammad Abduh and Qasim Amin — for our morals have undoubtedly risen, and our manners have undoubtedly progressed toward the good, if only a little. What I truly wished to observe and record was simply our own impatience with one another, and the way our breasts fill with constriction over the slightest things, the most trivial of matters.

My friend Haykal recalls that it is the political and economic crisis that has filled the breasts of ministers, deputies, and senators with distress at criticism, even when it comes from one another; since the ministers and their supporters among the deputies and senators do not suffer from this crisis, and since journalists — even those in the opposition — do not suffer from it as the peasant suffers from it. I would have liked my friend Haykal to show a better appreciation of these matters than appeared in his article yesterday; for it is not only the man consumed by the crisis's evil alone who suffers pain and distress from the political and economic crisis, but also the man who defends it, who tries to protect it, who tries to impose it upon the people, who tries to depict it in the guise of good — and I can assure Haykal that the ministers, deputies, and senators suffer more, in defending our political and economic position, than we ourselves suffer in enduring this position and all the pain it entails! These ministers, deputies, and senators are deserving of pity and compassion, for they stand in a position that is wholly distressing, defending a position with no possible defense,

praising a position they themselves know, deep within, cannot be praised. They are bound to spend upon this position of theirs whatever effort they possess, and they are bound to find their capacity to resist the criticism directed at them weakened.

Let Haykal believe me: the difficult political and economic position into which the present Cabinet has forced us, a position that has dragged on so long, whose burden weighs heavily upon its supporters and adversaries alike, is the very source of what fills people's breasts with distress over everything, and irritation at everything. The fullness of true manhood demands that we resist this distress, free ourselves of this irritability, hold ourselves to patience and steadfastness, train ourselves to endure harm and hardship, and turn ourselves away from anything that betrays a weakness of resistance, a failure of nature, a dissolution of resolve, or a departure from due measure.