

Taste (II)

Al-Siyasa (Hadith al-Yawm), 3 August 1932.

That there reigns in Egypt a stable order is a matter beyond any possible doubt; were it not so, the Prime Minister would never have absented himself from Egypt, nor would his heart have been free enough to meet and receive Italy's great man, to visit museums and antiquities, and then to move on to wherever he might rest or await what fate holds. And that this order is constitutional in the best sense constitutional orders can be, and democratic in the most complete sense democratic orders can be—one under which people may trust in the safety of their persons and property, and in every kind of freedom, freedom of thought, speech, writing, and reading in particular—this too is a matter beyond any possible doubt. The proof of it is that whoever doubts any part of this finds his affair referred to the prosecution and the courts, and to the administration even before the prosecution and the courts. And I know of no proof more brilliant, no demonstration more dazzling, than the force that compels people, by sheer compulsion, to believe what they could never bring themselves to believe if they were left free.

We are, then, calm and content; we have submitted to the order, and our bodies, hearts, and minds have found peace in it. And I imagine I have satisfied the Prime Minister after this frank admission of what he likes us to admit and to believe. And I imagine that I may now speak as I please of our public affairs, with the Prime Minister having no hold over me.

There is a question that has occupied my mind for days now—indeed for weeks, indeed ever since this present Ministry rose to take charge of affairs—namely, that our government's share of good taste falls far short of fulfilling expectation, satisfying need, or earning the good opinion of the people. And it is obvious that taste is a matter of refinement, one the government may take up a little or a great deal, or may reject outright, leaving it to the affected sophisticates among Egyptians and Europeans, without any of this bearing on the stability of the order or the fitness of the Constitution to the country's needs and capacities. We may, therefore, criticize the government's share of good taste without angering it, without vexing it, without provoking the wrath of the prosecution, or being hauled before the courts.

Taste, then, is a matter of refinement; it is one of civilization's manners, and one of the fine arts of refinement that arises from advancement in learning, upbringing, and morals, and from the cultivation of feeling, the purification of temperament, and the tempering of disposition. Those who prize all these qualities strive to secure their own share of them; and if they fail, they first deceive themselves, and afterward deceive others about themselves, and present themselves in the guise of the well-bred and the polished, who have perfected their portion of taste until they have become, in it, a model unlike any other model, an example unlike any other example. And among the most particular marks of taste, as the refined sophisticates put it, is not to show joy when the people around you are in dire straits, and to strive as hard as you can not to injure people, especially when their affairs are in your hands, and when you stand toward them in the place of a Prime Minister.

So say the lovers of refinement and the sophisticates. And they all know that our Prime Minister has distinguished himself from others not by intelligence alone, nor by shrewdness alone, nor by tact alone, nor by resolve alone, but by other qualities as well, which, joined to those I have just mentioned, make of the Prime Minister a complete man in the sense that Plato and Aristotle understood the complete man. The Prime Minister has distinguished himself by grace in every movement he makes, by lightness of spirit in every word he utters, and, above all this, by taste in all his sayings and all his doings.

The proof of it is that, for all the weight of affairs of state that burdens him, he has never once fallen short, on any single day, in his regard for friends, kinsmen, and colleagues; he shares with them whatever befalls them in life's turns, sweet and bitter alike, sees them off when they travel, and visits them when they return. And in this he follows a path that none of the heads of government before him, in directing the affairs of this country so fortunate to have him and so honored by his rule, ever followed. Those earlier heads of government were sometimes excessive in their courtesies, consoling friends in person, seeing them off in person, congratulating them in person. And this excess was no proof of correct taste or balanced temperament; for heads of government are men like other men, yet they are distinguished men, who ought to recognize the worth of their own station, and not cheapen themselves by excessive congratulating, condoling, seeing-off, and greeting. Rather, correct taste and balanced temperament require that the Prime Minister devote

himself to affairs of state, and send some clerk from his office to see off a minister, whoever that minister may be, should he travel, and to console a friend or supporter, should misfortune befall that friend or supporter. So does the Prime Minister act. And we shall see, once he resigns—whether from Vichy or from Cairo—whether this practice persists among his successors, or whether these successors revert to the old custom that the heads of government before him followed!

Our Prime Minister, then, is a model of correct taste in Egypt; but no sooner had he departed from us than certain things about him displeased us, things we fear may expose his otherwise perfect taste to some criticism, light or heavy.

The first of these things is his journey. The people are too preoccupied with their own poverty and hardship to think about departures. You will say: but ministers have traveled before him! And I answer you: many officials, too, have traveled before him, and other ministers and officials will travel after him. But do not forget the saying of the ancient poet:

*If the master of the house is enamored of the tambourine,
then the way of the whole household is to dance.*

And it was only right, for the sake of his own taste and the taste of his colleagues and officials, that the Prime Minister make an example of himself to all of them, enduring the summer heat this year as the people endure hunger. And I am confident the Prime Minister wished to do just this; for his sound taste commanded it of him and compelled him to it. But the burdens of governance sometimes drive a man beyond his usual bounds, and entangle him in what taste does not sanction. The Prime Minister did not travel out of a desire to travel, nor out of love of rest, but because affairs of state forced upon him, at the very last moment—after the English refused to negotiate with him in these days—the necessity of visiting the city of the Caesars, to meet Mussolini, and to be honored with an audience with His Majesty the King and His Holiness the Pope. And when affairs of state conflict with taste, policy unquestionably stands above taste. And whoever has been in Rome and finds he needs rest in Vichy commits no wrong in resting there! Yes—but people with endless tongues neither rest themselves nor let others rest, and they are like the fox who, unable to reach the grapes, described them in the ugliest terms. These people could not themselves reserve private suites aboard ships, nor arrange for themselves splendid receptions at Naples, nor set up the

city of the Caesars for themselves and make it sit up and take notice, nor win for themselves a banquet with Mussolini, the favor of His Majesty the King of Italy, and the blessing of His Holiness the Pope. They could manage none of this, while the Prime Minister managed all of it; and so they envy him, resent him, and cannot stop talking about him, saying: the Prime Minister has been excessive with his own money, if he spent his own private money on this journey, and it was only right that he make an example of himself to the people in economy and moderation; and the Prime Minister has been excessive with the state's money, if he spent the state's money on his journey, for the state is poor in these days, and it is neither kind nor considerate toward it that the Prime Minister should burden it with such expenses, at a time when it is forced to economize on the wages of its lowliest workers. And what vexes them most about this journey is what was announced describing the banquet held for the Prime Minister at the Egyptian Legation in Rome, and the other banquet the Prime Minister held for Mussolini. For in this description there is what vexes and tempts all at once: extravagance in luxury, excess in refinement, flowers as though none could be found in Rome itself, so that they had to be specially brought from Genoa—and all of this, no doubt, at the state's expense. And the people here endure every shade of misery; some of them lie sleepless all night, not knowing what they will do to feed their children on the morrow. And if this extravagance could not be avoided, nor the bringing of flowers from Genoa, at a time when the official gazette publishes more than a thousand property seizures in a single week against the common people and the great alike—then taste, at the very least, demanded that the fragrance of these flowers not be allowed to waft all the way to Egypt, and that none of this news be announced in the newspapers. For the Egyptian, like any other person, has a mind with which he understands, and a heart in which every variety of feeling stirs—among them the feeling that money ought not to be spent in this fashion, at a time when the government finds the harshest difficulty in collecting its revenues, and the peasant is subjected to the most dreadful hardships and trials in paying what he owes.

And the people do not stop at this measure of criticism, but go beyond it to something else for which they bear no blame—the blame for it lies with the newspapers. For the newspapers publish for them, every day, news of heads of government visiting one another and moving from capital to capital, and yet no such violent uproar is raised around them as was raised around the Prime Minister when he visited Rome, nor do the newspapers occupy themselves with them as they occupied themselves

with the Prime Minister when he visited Rome. We read, from time to time, of MacDonald traveling to Paris; others slip away to London—yet we do not see the newspapers concerning themselves with the banquets held for them or that they hold, or with the flowers brought for them or that they bring; the newspapers concern themselves, rather, with their political talks and their efforts in the service of France or England.

Worse than this, the news broadcast about the Prime Minister's travels and his stay abroad does not amuse only the Egyptians, but amuses foreigners as well; for it is translated for them in the foreign newspapers every day, and they make sport of it among themselves when they gather of an evening. And in truth, they do not laugh at a matter particular to the Prime Minister alone, nor do they make sport of a matter particular to the Prime Minister alone; rather, they laugh at all Egyptians, and make sport of all of them together.

They say: how far this people is from dignity and freedom! Were it truly dignified and free, it would never have consented to see its money spent in this fashion and in forms of extravagance like it. They say: how small this people's share of taste is, and how fitting it is that it should be thought a parvenu! Had it possessed any measure of taste—even had it been but newly acquainted with political life—it would never have accepted being mocked by the newspapers to this degree, which publish such news for it, believing it will read it and find in it amusement and entertainment! So say the foreigners.

As for the Egyptians, they say the same thing when they are alone among themselves. They laugh at this news, mock the newspapers that publish it, and feel shame before the foreigners who will read it. But what can they do, when the order is stable, the Constitution stands, freedoms are guaranteed, and speech is permitted to every person? What can they do? And why should they reform the government's taste, when they have proven powerless to reform its domestic and foreign policy, to reform its administration, or to hold it to being an Egyptian government rather than a partisan one?!

The Egyptians endure the government's taste as they endure its policy, its administration, and its continuance in the seats of power. And the strange thing about this crookedness of taste is that it has spread so far as to touch even those connected to the government, closely or distantly: scarcely does a traveling minister of state move, stir, or speak before the telegraph wires him with what he did or said; scarcely does an

ambassador of the state do anything of the little seriousness or the much absurdity he is capable of before the newspapers overflow with his seriousness and his absurdity. And the same holds for the deputy ministers, senior and junior officials, those who represent Egypt at conferences, and those who pass their examinations! The news of all of these is published at length and in great detail, with whatever exaggeration is thought fitting to deceive the public and toy with their minds. How badly Egypt needs a school of taste to be founded, where officials and politicians might learn—above all a certain company of ministers and would-be ministers, and deputies, senators, and those who put themselves forward as candidates for the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate! If you doubt it, consider this honorable deputy, whose taste did not prevent him from writing, in Italian—a language he neither speaks nor understands—an article published in an Italian newspaper in praise of the Prime Minister, while the Prime Minister was in Rome and the Italian newspapers were praising him with whatever they pleased, whether he wished it or not!

Do you think this deputy, had he graduated from this school of taste, would have put his name to an article in an Italian newspaper written in a language he neither understands nor speaks? Men like this deputy are many; you meet them in Egypt, you meet them in the East, and you meet them in the West, advertising their countries badly—not because they intend any harm, but because they are driven to it inescapably, driven to it by the fact that they never passed through a school of taste.

Some weeks ago I read an article published by a deputy speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, a man who had once been a counselor and has now become a political leader. I read this article, written by its author to criticize the policy of the opposition, and I was tempted to draw the Prime Minister's attention to it—not because it contained any excess of abuse or extravagance of invective, for that is nothing to pay attention to now, but because the newspaper that speaks in the voice of the Ministry and of Parliament, and represents the cleverest of men, the most capable of men, and the most graceful of men, ought not to mention cutlets, meat pastries, and nougat sweets. Had this leader, the counselor, the deputy speaker of the Chamber, ever passed through this school of taste, he would have known that such expressions, even if they are permissible for some newspapers, are not permissible for the newspaper of the government and of Parliament, and that, even if some people are allowed them, they are not allowed to leaders who write on high politics.

This school of taste is one of the necessities of the new life in Egypt; for the regimes change from time to time, governance passes among different circles, and the representation of the people is entrusted now to these men and now to those. And many among both groups have no prior acquaintance with governing, nor with representing the people, nor with what either requires of grace and taste. But who is to found this school? I hope the present government gives no thought to founding it; for I fear that, should it do so, it would make away with whatever sound taste still remains in Egypt.