

The Bitter Truth

Al-Ahram, 28 October 1949.

It seems that writing from mountaintops about matters of education vexes the Ministry of Education, so I shall now write about matters of education from Paris, not from mountaintops, and I shall write about them, God willing, from the banks of the Nile, not from mountaintops, in the hope that writing about matters of education from the plains will fall better upon the hearts of those responsible at the Ministry of Education than that writing which descends from mountaintops; for in all likelihood they do not love ascent, but love rather the easy course upon easy, gentle ground. And it is likewise most probable that their preference for ease and facility, and their dread of ascent into the mountains and climbing to their peaks, is what has driven them, and driven the people together with them, into this tangled, barren predicament from which they find no way out, neither for themselves nor for the people; for life is not all ease, but rather a mixture of hardship and ease, and it is not all repose, but rather a mixture of repose and toil, and it is not all commanding and forbidding, but rather a mixture of command and deliberation, of prohibition and desistance, and it is not merely going out to the office when the morning sun climbs high and returning home when the day advances, drawing one's salary at month's end and tormenting one's subordinates in between, giving rein to caprice and entangling the interests of the people — rather it is labor by night and labor by day, from which repose is snatched only by stealth, for whose sake strength and time, rank and money are sacrificed, and which rests upon sheer sincerity, true honesty, and sound intention that thinks more of profiting from what those who came before achieved than of disdaining what those who came before achieved.

Had the affairs of the Ministry of Education proceeded along these lines — preferring the interest of the people over the interest of party, over self-interest, over the interest of faction and partisans, and shunning politics with its passions, its appetites, and its taste for crookedness and distortion — it would have had a standing other than its present standing, and an effect other than its present effect.

And when one of this Ministry's under-secretaries found himself compelled to write this article, which I have now read in Paris, I very nearly laughed, were it not that grief, sorrow, despair, and failure drip

from every sentence of it, from every word of it, and were it not that this article was intended to make the people swallow some of the bitter truths it never imagined it would have to swallow, after certain people had held out promises to it and gone to excess in the hopes they dangled before it and the aspirations they adorned for it.

For this article wishes to make the people swallow one bitter truth: that the Ministry of Education confesses its complete, total failure in what it undertook of educational affairs over the course of five years; and it wishes to make it swallow another bitter truth: that the Ministry of Education will not attain what it wishes, nor will it deliver to the people what it wishes of the spread of education; because the causes of that are difficult, not easy, and severed, not connected.

For the buildings have not been erected, nor is it expected that they will be erected any time soon, and the teachers have not been trained, nor is it expected that they will be trained any time soon. The eyes are sharp but the hands are short, the hopes are vast but the capacity is narrow, and the affair of education in this is like the affair of any other public utility. Egypt has nothing to do but wait, and not grow weary of the long waiting; for the Ministry of Education does not possess the magic wand with which it might point to obstacles and have them humbled, or to difficulties and have them eased. Nor is the present Ministry of Education answerable for any of this; rather, those answerable for it are those who enacted the policy of expanding education, and made primary education free and open to whoever among the sons of the people wished it, whatever their station. Those who committed this enormous offense and perpetrated this grave sin are the ones responsible — first, because they committed the offense and perpetrated the sin, and second, because they did not prepare what ought to have been prepared, so that Egyptians might find in the schools what they needed.

So says an under-secretary of the present Ministry of Education, forgetting only one thing, quite a trivial one: that those guilty offenders perpetrated their sin in the year 1944 and left the Ministry of Education in 1944, when study was just about to begin, and they were not given the chance to remain in the Ministry of Education to carry on with their enormous offense and grave sin, not to say to the end of the course, but I say not even to the beginning of the course; and had they been given the chance to remain in the Ministry of Education until they carried out the policy they had drawn up, and completed the offense they had undertaken, education in Egypt would have a standing other than its

present standing, and the people would have been occupied with earning their living rather than afflicted, as they are now, with the humiliation of themselves so that their sons and daughters might win their right to education.

And the under-secretary of the Ministry of Education who wrote this article knows full well that those offenders had prepared their program, drawn up their plans, and set aside the money needed in the Five-Year Plan to carry out those plans. And he knows full well that those who came after them demolished what they had built, spoiled what they had set right, and cancelled the money that had been set aside, and drew up a new policy and new plans, wasting no little time in drawing them up, and wasting no little time in preparing to carry them out, only then to be taken by surprise by the consequences of a policy built upon caprice, one that demolishes what the adversary built, not because it was bad, but simply because it was the adversary who built it.

And the under-secretary of the Ministry who wrote this article knows full well that the policy those offenders drew up had been ratified by a legitimate parliament, so that it was incumbent upon him and his colleagues to respect what parliament had ratified; but they had grown accustomed to respecting nothing, and to according no one any reverence.

And the under-secretary of the Ministry who wrote this article knows full well that those offenders were expelled from the Ministry of Education with violence, the expulsion of an enemy, not the parting of a friend. It was not fitting for them to say to those who expelled them, "We had been managing the matter in this way or that" — and had they said so, they would not have been heeded, nor would any weight have been given to what they said.

And the under-secretary of the Ministry who wrote this article knows full well that those offenders, after they had been expelled from the Ministry of Education, and after they had seen their policy demolished with no regard for the public interest, no respect for the laws, and no reverence for the decisions of parliament, did nothing more than warn and counsel, and call to the right course, and for that they suffered much harm. They did not conspire, secretly or openly, against those who were tampering with the affairs of education, as others conspired, secretly and openly, against those who were setting the affairs of education right.

The under-secretary of the Ministry who wrote this article knows all of this full well, and knows that his colleagues let their own willfulness run away with them in matters of education, just as their willfulness ran away with them in other matters besides education, so that all of this had a calamitous outcome, and the result of it was that he wrote this bitter article to make the people swallow these bitter truths, and to ease his own conscience and the conscience of his colleagues of heavy burdens.

Now that he has confessed that he and his colleagues have suffered this appalling failure, I affirm to him, in a frankness free of all ambiguity, in a sincerity free of all idleness, in a complete forgetting of what is past and a complete attention to the days to come, and in an overlooking of all the stinging words and ill deeds that have befallen us, that those offenders who expanded education and imposed the free provision of primary education are ready today, just as they were ready in 1944, to go on with that offense of theirs which is bitter to the taste of some, but sweet to the taste of the whole people.

Ready to expand education many times further than he and his colleagues expanded it, and ready to impose the free provision of secondary and technical education, after having imposed the free provision of primary education.

Ready for all of this, and to bear its burdens, and to answer for these burdens not before parliament alone, but before the whole people, and before the judiciary too, should the matter require them to stand before the judiciary.

Ready for all of this and for more than all of this; for in their hand is a magic wand that is not in his hand nor in his colleagues' hand, and this magic wand is that they love the people and the people love them, that when they speak the people listen to what they say, and when they call, the people answer their call, that they love the men of education and the men of education love them, that they neither wrong nor transgress, neither exalt nor magnify themselves, but see themselves as servants of the people, not masters over it, and hold themselves to account before holding others to account against one another, and spend their time, their effort, their health, and their money, if they have money, for the sake of the public interest, favoring the people with every good thing, and favoring themselves with nothing but what sustains their own upright bearing, preserves their dignity, and enables them to work and produce.

They are ready for all of this and for more than all of this; nothing stands between them and fulfilling what they have promised except that the Ministry of Education is not in their hands — so let him and his colleagues leave it, then, now that they have set down against themselves this bitter failure, and let them hand over its reins to those offenders who love the expansion of education, and who give knowledge to the sons of the people without selling it to them for a paltry price of counted coins, as onions and leeks are sold.

As for what follows: I had forgotten that the writer of this article is an under-secretary of the Ministry of Education, possessing nothing of this Ministry's policy, yet he wrote his article as a responsible politician writes, so I went along with him in his arena for a while, until it became clear to me that I was addressing someone with no real authority in the matter, and I recalled the saying of Ali — may God be pleased with him — to Ibn Abbas, as it is related: "It was but a flash of bravado that blustered, then settled down."