

Poor Thing

Evening Conversation

Kawkab al-Sharq, 22 April 1933

It is the Faculty of Arts — or if you prefer, call it the university — or if you prefer, call it every institution in Egypt in this blessed era, presided over by ministers who truly look after the country's interests, truly care for its hopes and its future, and spare no effort or energy in the service of its public goods, and withhold from its advancement neither little nor much of their funds.

Poor Faculty of Arts — its wings have been clipped until not a feather remains! The chains and shackles have been piled upon it until it cannot move! The windows of light and air have been stopped up until it can neither breathe nor live a decent life. Were it not that Egypt does not know despair, and that the dark days however dark they grow pass away with the rising and setting of the sun, and that what souls find hateful in a matter has a relief like the loosing of a hobble — were it not for all this, we would say to the Egyptians: may God grant you great recompense for the Faculty of Arts!

I think and dwell long in thought, I consider and ponder deeply, I interpret and explore every avenue of interpretation — yet I cannot understand this monstrous war that continues to blaze against the Faculty of Arts from the university, from the Ministry of Education, from the government, and from parliament.

There was in the Faculty of Arts a man whom the government disliked and expelled from it, claiming thereby to have served the university and given sound counsel to it and to the Faculty of Arts. It was therefore reasonable, after this man was expelled from the Faculty of Arts and from the university, that the Faculty of Arts should receive from the university and from the government neither wrong nor harm, and that no fire nor torment should reach the Faculty of Arts from the university and the government. Yet wrong continues to be poured upon the Faculty of Arts, and the war continues to blaze against the Faculty of Arts. What has this wretched faculty done to deserve this? And what is this hatred that fills hearts against it, fans flames around it, and makes it a target for arrows and an object for events?

Where are we going? Forward or backward? They found our freedom excessive and restricted it; they found our democracy excessive and shackled it; they found the university's independence excessive and erased it and finished it off. Do they find our scholarship excessive too? Do they find even pure culture excessive?

Do they insist on driving us back to ignorance after knowledge, and to darkness after light? Do they insist on ruling only a people so ignorant it cannot understand, or comprehend,

or estimate what is intended for it? And how can the Egyptians permit themselves to assist in this evil and plunge their hands in this great sin? The Faculty of Arts was founded broad and deeply committed to scholarly study, and it had barely been founded before it was already engaged in widening its horizons, deepening scholarly inquiry within it, and opening doors to culture that had not previously been opened in Egypt. The Egyptians went along this path with it joyfully and hopefully, driven forward by hope and encouraged by success to continue — so why are they today turning it violently back from its path? And why are they closing these doors from which Egypt was expecting every good, and which were the only path by which we could benefit from their assistance, then become independent, then approximate the Westerners in the advancement they have reached, then become self-sufficient in educational matters, then elevate our Arabic literature to the place of honour it deserves among the world's literatures? Is all of this worth nothing compared to five thousand pounds to be saved in the university's treasury or the state's treasury? Why do they not save this sum from the subsidy for foreign actors and dancers instead? Which is more tolerable for Egypt: abolishing theatrical performance at the Opera, or crippling study at the Faculty of Arts? Which is more tolerable for parliament: closing a house of dance and song, or narrowing a house of knowledge and education — and what knowledge and what education? The most intimately connected of all branches of knowledge, old and new, to our national identity, and the most tightly linked of all forms of education to our nationhood?

Before me now is this law approved by parliament, accompanied by a register of the chairs it authorised in the university. It is enough to look at this register to grieve and mourn, and enough to look at this register to force oneself to great effort to ward off the anguish that assails you and the despair that overwhelms you when you see Egyptians doing wrong to Egyptians.

The Faculty of Arts had fourteen or fifteen chairs; they have been reduced in the new law to nine. And do you know which chairs were abolished? The chair of Arabic philology — so Arabic literature will henceforth be studied in the Faculty of Arts without the language or its philology being studied there. The chair of Semitic languages was abolished — so the study of Semitic languages in the Faculty of Arts will become a secondary supplementary subject; it will become a complement after having been a foundation, a branch after having been a root. Our language will remain unknown in the Faculty of Arts as it is unknown in other scholarly institutions; our knowledge of the Semitic languages will remain limited in the Faculty of Arts as it is limited in Dār al-‘Ulūm; our Arab national identity will remain deficient in the most shameful way from this angle; and we will remain dependents of European orientalisks as we were before in our Arabic language and in our other Semitic languages. Two chairs of history were abolished, leaving this discipline with only one chair — to serve sometimes as ancient history as it does now, sometimes as modern history, and sometimes as medieval

history. The study of history in the Faculty of Arts will revert to the disfigured, distorted, superficial form it had in the Teachers' School. The chair of Greek and Latin studies was abolished, and the study of these two languages has become a facade, a form, a mere appearance that deceives the eye and signifies nothing. The Egyptian Museum will continue to depend permanently on foreigners to study its Greco-Egyptian antiquities; the Alexandria Museum will continue to depend permanently on foreigners to study its Greco-Roman antiquities; our history in the age of the Greeks and Romans and in the early Islamic era will continue to be permanently confined to foreigners who study it and write about it; and we will continue to be dependents of foreigners in all of this. Our knowledge of modern European literatures will remain limited to surfaces and peels — because our government wished to save a thousand pounds a year.

All these chairs were abolished from the Faculty of Arts in the new law. The system and programme of study must inevitably be revised in a manner suited to this abolition; this edifice that Egypt built with such painstaking effort, and which had begun to bear fine ripe fruit, must inevitably be demolished; and the Faculty of Arts must inevitably be reduced to a school like the other schools established by the Ministry of Education — schools of which the English can approve, unlike anything else. I ought in all fairness to record that this abolition is not something that has suddenly arisen in these days, but is rather something planned from long ago. I had arguments about it with a group of senior officials whom I prefer not to name now, and our noble mentor Luṭfī al-Sayyid Bey had stands against these officials in its regard. But I had believed that Luṭfī's departure from the university and my departure from the Faculty of Arts would restore the matter to its proper course and divert evil from this wretched faculty. I had thought that the attempt to tamper with these chairs had been a form of the politics of embarrassment, designed to compel the former university director and the dean of the Faculty of Arts to retire. But the matter is far more dangerous than all of this; it is a conspiracy against higher education in Egypt; it is a plot that has been hatched against the Faculty of Arts by those who are incapable of understanding what the Faculty of Arts is and how it should be, and by those who fear the influence of the Faculty of Arts in shaping the young generation and spreading high culture within it.

But if I am to blame anyone in this matter, I will not blame the Minister of Customs nor the men of his ministry, for they are too incapable to understand what the Faculty of Arts is and how it should be. Nor will I blame the English, for they are too clever to allow the Faculty of Arts in Egypt to open for the young the doors of hope and guide the young along the path of freedom and independence. Rather I blame the university members who allow the government to clip their wings after the feathers grew and flourished, without alerting it to where the danger lies in this matter. How can university members permit themselves to see one of the university's faculties being plotted against with this plotting and schemed against

with this scheming, and look on and then say nothing? Does the Faculty of Medicine consent to the government not withholding from it the chairs it wanted, granting it as many as it pleased, while a third of the Faculty of Arts' chairs are abolished outright? Does the Faculty of Law consent to the government granting it as many chairs as it desired — making sixteen chairs in it, including four for civil law and three for political economy — while only nine of the Faculty of Arts' fourteen were retained, among them a single chair for the Arabic language and a single chair for history? Does the Faculty of Science consent to having two chairs for chemistry, with the Faculty of Arts having a single chair for the Arabic language? And two chairs for mathematics, with the Faculty of Arts having a single chair for the Arabic language? And three chairs for zoology, with the Faculty of Arts having a single chair for the Arabic language and a single chair for history? Where is university solidarity? Must we record that this blessed era has abolished university solidarity — each faculty contenting itself with the chairs it obtained and leaving the Faculty of Arts to the government to oppress as it sees fit? Must we record that the university has lost its solidarity and left the Faculty of Arts as prey to the spoilers, just as the press has lost its solidarity and left Tawfīq Diyāb to face treatment as a thief and a highwayman? Yet the Faculty of Arts has a protector who is above all protectors, a sufficiency who is above all sufficiencies — the one who founded it and undertook to watch over it with his exalted care. So who will inform His Majesty the King that his faculty is receiving in the university every variety of injustice?