Nor This Either

Just as al■Farazdaq brilliantly portrayed my friend Abd al■Rahman Azzam in the verse:

“Our wisdom weighs as heavily as mountains in its gravity,
Yet when anger seizes us, our temperament becomes like that of jinn,”

so too did al■Harith ibn ‘Abbad perfectly portray my friend al■Mazni when he said:

“I was not among those who kindled its fire—God knows this well—
Yet today I myself burn in its flames.”

For my friend al■Mazni did not ignite this controversy surrounding that brief sentence which my friend Azzam extracted from a long chapter. He did not at first bring cavalry or infantry into this battle. But once the fire blazed and the dust rose, he himself rose and took flight into the field, demanding combat and contest.

Al■Mazni rose in defense of freedom of opinion, yet he chose the wrong path in defending it. He accused his friend of error and misjudgment—errors which he considered beyond dispute—and then continued circling around these supposed mistakes in search of some further slip or weakness. But I am not immune from error, nor free from human failing. No one among men has the right to claim infallibility for himself. Yet what fault is mine if in this particular case I neither erred nor slipped? I merely represented a truth that admits neither doubt nor argument, a truth overlooked only by those who possess not a tenth of al■Mazni’s learning and culture, or by others who know the truth perfectly well yet deny it and turn away from it because some hidden interest prevents them from walking the straight path toward it.

And I wish sincerely to assure al■Mazni that I place the friendship between us above both the seriousness and the triviality of disputes, above what is explicit and what is indirect, above what is clear and what is obscure. Whatever he may say about me openly or by implication will never diminish our friendship in the least, for—praise be to God—I know how to judge human weakness with fairness.

I have always wished, and still wish, that my friend al■Mazni would distinguish between a man who says, “I did not make a mistake,” and another who says, “There is no possible road by which I could ever make one.” The first merely asserts a fact; the second claims for himself a kind of infallibility not

granted to human beings.

Let al■Mazni know, and let Azzam know, and let those Egyptians who support them know, and let the Syrians know as well, that I remain entirely committed to my original opinion. I shall not change it, nor can I change it, because I neither love nor possess the ability—and no one possesses the ability—to alter truth according to circumstances.

Another thing amused me greatly in *Al■Balagh*, and I would like to believe it did not originate with al■Mazni himself, for he stands above such things in my estimation. The newspaper claimed yesterday that I borrowed from it what I wrote to the Syrians in defense of freedom of opinion.

I might almost have wished to admit to *Al■Balagh* that I had indeed borrowed from it and sought its assistance in this difficult question—the question of opinion and its freedom. I do not dislike bringing pleasure to *Al■Balagh* if an honorable and reasonable means exists for doing so. Nor would I hesitate to seek assistance from a gifted writer such as my friend al■Mazni if I truly needed his help. Yet I regret profoundly that I wrote my letter to *Fata al■Arab* on Wednesday before *Al■Balagh* wrote what it published, and that I delayed publication of my own letter for two or three days so it might first reach Damascus before appearing afterward in Egypt.

If *Al■Balagh* requires witnesses to confirm this, those witnesses are alive and capable of testifying. They will not hesitate in the slightest to do so.

Besides, neither what I wrote in my letter to *Fata al■Arab* on Wednesday nor what *Al■Balagh* wrote on Thursday contained anything original or extraordinary worth quarreling over concerning who first discovered it. I merely stated on Wednesday—and *Al■Balagh* repeated on Thursday—simple truths commonly known among people, truths so obvious that it is sad enough we still need to reaffirm them, let alone pretend we invented or discovered them ourselves.

So let *Al■Balagh* be at ease and moderate its vanity and self■importance. God Almighty did not grant to it alone knowledge of elementary truths and first principles. Better for *Al■Balagh* to continue along its path without turning right or left, and without pausing at matters it knows perfectly well can neither advance nor delay anything, matters that satisfy neither truth nor usefulness nor conscience under any circumstances.