

The Faculty of Arts

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An interview with Dr. Taha Hussein Bey, Dean of the Faculty of Arts.

The editorial office of Al-Muqtataf put the following two questions to Professor Dr. Taha Hussein Bey, Dean of the Faculty of Arts: First, what contribution has the Faculty of Arts made to the intellectual revival of Egypt over the past ten years? Second, what is the ideal image you would wish for the Faculty of Arts? He was good enough to give the following answer:

1.

The Faculty of Arts has exercised a very clear influence upon the development of Egyptian thought, an influence visible in two important respects: in the manner of conceiving things and judging them, and in scholarly life itself, and in scholarly output.

However strange this word may sound, it is, for us, a plain fact: our students and graduates have produced work in their fields as translators, authors, and journalists, and their teachers have, of course, produced work of their own as well.

I should like to know of any other school, anywhere in the East, that has achieved in so short a span what we have achieved. We may well have, over these past ten years, 'absorbed' — as you put it — the best of what earlier institutions before us had to offer... but is not 'absorption' itself proof of vitality and life?

If you want an example of what we are engaged in, know that the Arabic language now owes to the Faculty of Arts the finest historical account yet produced of intellectual life in the first two centuries of the Hijra. Had Ahmad Amin not worked at the Faculty of Arts, this achievement — one the whole of the intervening centuries had failed to produce — would never have come about.

The Faculty of Arts brought into being something called the excavation of purely Egyptian antiquities, and of Greek and Roman antiquities as well; it alone brought about the scholarly participation of Egyptians in the sciences of archaeology, geology, and prehistory.

The Faculty of Arts is the one that produced the first scholarly Arabic works in geography — the two books on the Nile Basin and on the inhabitants of this globe are among the finest works combining scholarly and literary pleasure alike. I challenge any school anywhere that has occupied itself with the geographical sciences to have achieved what our Department of Geography has achieved.

It seems to me, too, that the Faculty of Arts is the first institute to have produced, in Arabic, a literary translation of Goethe's Faust and Hermann und Dorothea, rendered directly from the German, not relayed through any other language.

Our Faculty, moreover, is the one that established the Institute of Islamic Antiquities, which did not exist before now; and for the first time in Egypt's history, the Faculty of Arts introduced the study of classical Latin and Greek, to contribute to the discovery of, and benefit from, the two greatest intellectual civilizations of the ancient world.

Nor can we forget that the Faculty of Arts made a significant contribution to the broader literary movement, of a kind no other institute made: we celebrated the millennial anniversary of al-Mutanabbi, in a week we devoted to a thorough study of him. More than this, we produced two books — one by Dr. Abd al-Wahhab Azzam, and a second by myself, soon to appear. Had it not been for the Faculty of Arts, I would never have thought to study al-Mutanabbi and write about him.

Beyond the Faculty itself, our professors take a genuinely active part in scholarly life at large. You are, I think, aware that the one preparing the critical edition and printing of the book al-Suluk is Dr. Ziyada, one of our professors of history. Our Faculty likewise plays a considerable role in shaping general educational policy, through the opinions we submit to the committees of the Ministry of Education, and through the books and curricula we help draw up for secondary and specialized studies.

It is the Faculty of Arts, too, that has represented Egypt at the various scholarly conferences touching upon the humanities. We have represented her three times at Orientalist congresses, in a manner that raised the literary standing of the whole country; Professors Mustafa Abd al-Raziq and al-Khouli likewise took part in congresses on the history of religions, and Professors Mustafa Amer and Awad took part in conferences on geography and population.

The Faculty of Arts is, moreover, the first institute to have impressed upon the Government and upon our young people the value of expeditions to the countries of the East: our professors and students have undertaken journeys to Syria and Iraq, and we sent a representative of our Faculty to the Ferdowsi celebrations in Tehran.

There is, too, a matter of real importance that people do not yet fully appreciate: the University's mission to the lands of Yemen is a project conceived by one of our own graduates from the Department of Geography, Dr. Hazin, and it has already achieved results of considerable significance.

First: geological discoveries of real importance, along with discoveries relating to insects and plant species. Second: the mission brought back with it some hundred and fifty new archaeological inscriptions, which one of its members will take as the subject of a doctoral dissertation. Third: the mission filled recordings with the dialects of southern Yemen — the first work of its kind ever undertaken in this respect.

And before all this, the members of the mission showed themselves fully prepared to brave danger: they suffered the illness and hardship that commonly befall adventurers in pursuit of noble ends, and all of them felt a certain pleasure in this very suffering, for the sake of achieving their scholarly aims.

So much for what concerns our professors. As for the list of books the Faculty of Arts has funded and helped bring into print, one may consult it in the University library.

As for what concerns our students and graduates, and their intellectual activity, I leave the accounting of it to the interviewer himself — who is, after all, one of the Faculty's own graduates, and better placed than I to know it (1) — not to mention the many master's and doctoral theses.

And it may well be that our Faculty is the very one that first introduced Egyptians and other Easterners to the *Shahnameh*, presenting it to them in a printed and revised edition.

(1) Dr. Taha here refers to the efforts of the various university bodies working to spread general culture, such as the Committee for the Translation of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, the University Committee for

the Dissemination of Learning, and the Papyrus Committee, along with the successful efforts of many students and graduates in authorship, translation, and journalism.

In 1932, the Faculty of Arts took part in the purely intellectual movement of that year, when the Dean of the Faculty of Arts was removed from his position; university men then rose in that grave uprising to defend the dignity and independence of the University, resisting the Government for a month, and setting, in doing so, examples that will never be forgotten. That revolt left a profound mark on the intellectual outlook of the younger generation of university men.

As for the nation's general advancement, our Faculty has taken a clear and evident part in it: it is the Faculty that opened the doors of higher education to young women, and it now has 187 young women at work across all its departments. It has, moreover, taken a further step, in bringing onto its teaching staff three women — Miss Suhair al-Qalamawi (Arabic), Mrs. Duriya Fahmi (French), and Miss Fatima Salem (Classical Studies) — who now teach both male and female students alike.

The result is that the students and professors of the Faculty of Arts may well take pride in their Faculty's impact in this short span of time, and may look forward to seeing these achievements grow greater still as time goes on, without heeding what the malicious may say. For the caravan moves forward successfully despite the hardships it meets, and indeed depends upon these very hardships, since their presence is itself an essential condition of its success. They are the test that disciplines it, instructs it, and puts its men through the most thorough trial. It does not want easy success; it wants, rather, the difficult success that instills courage, self-confidence, and hope in the future, and that produces the very manhood Egypt needs in this new age.

2.

What I hope for, and what I am working to achieve, is that the Faculty of Arts should serve three purposes: First, reviving our Egyptian and Arab past. Second, establishing a clear and strong connection between ourselves and Western civilization. Third, showing Europe what it ought to know of our genuine readiness for a rich and fertile life, and for contributing to the advancement of human civilization.

However far the Faculty of Arts may go in achieving these purposes, it will never be satisfied — nor will its people, students and professors

alike, ever be satisfied — for satisfaction is the very sign of indolence and stagnation, and these are the two things it detests above all else.