In the Ministry of Education: The School of Languages
By Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

We ought to congratulate the Ministry of Education. Indeed, we must congratulate the Ministry of Education, for it has appeared in a form that calls for congratulations. The Ministry of Education now has an official newspaper; it has, within this official newspaper, official writers who support it and defend it—however transparent the titles and flattering descriptions behind which they hide, descriptions that fail to conceal what lies beneath them.

The Ministry of Education now has an official newspaper. Yet this official newspaper harms the Ministry of Education precisely where it intends to benefit it. It praises the Ministry of Education rightly and wrongly alike; it makes no effort to distinguish what is sound from what is unsound, nor does it seek any genuine benefit. Indeed, it preserves neither its own dignity nor the dignity of the Ministry of Education, and it does not shrink from making people laugh at itself and at the Ministry alike.

Have you read what al-Muqattam published when it announced the examination results of the primary teachers' schools? It claimed that the credit for this dazzling success belonged to a certain official of the Ministry of Education, and it praised that official for what he deserved and for what he did not deserve. Yet it forgot—or affected to forget—that this official had been transferred only yesterday, or the day before yesterday, to primary education, and that he could neither have supervised it nor left any beneficial or harmful mark upon it.

Have you read al-Muqattam's praise on the day it published the results of the qualifying examination? This praise was distributed with admirable generosity, so that it reached those who have no share in education, whether small or great. It reached the presidents of examinations, the officials of the Ministry, the examiners, and all the rest.

In this manner the Ministry of Education obtains whatever praise and commendation it desires. It does not concern itself with whether this praise is deserved or usurped, nor with whether it is serious or frivolous. All that concerns it is that the newspapers praise it—much as some illiterate village headmen once delighted in praise in another age.

To this extent the Ministry of Education in Egypt has fallen: it purchases praise, even if the price is to make itself an object of ridicule for anyone who wishes to laugh. How, then, can this Ministry be expected to supervise knowledge and education with seriousness and productivity, when it is more eager for praise and flattery than for benefit and achievement?

The Ministry of Education thus has an official newspaper that defends it and praises it. In return, the Ministry permits this official newspaper and its writers access to its secrets, its inner workings, and the favors it bestows upon it to the exclusion of other newspapers and

other writers. Those other newspapers may incline toward the truth; those other writers may be restrained in praise and inclined toward criticism. They make requests that are postponed, promises that are broken. They ask the Ministry of Education for clarification, yet their requests go unheard and unanswered. This is a familiar trait of human nature, and those who administer affairs in the Ministry of Education are human beings like others, sharing in the same weaknesses and shortcomings.

The Ministry of Education confides its secrets and inner affairs to its official newspaper and official writers, and it publishes in it statements resembling official communiqués, through which it defends itself against the criticism of critics. We have read in al-Muqattam an account of the history of The School of Languages, of the discussions that took place concerning it, of the meeting held in the Minister's office, and of the decision reached in that meeting. All of this was published in the tone of one who is confident and certain, who does not speak from caprice and who claims to speak only from inspiration.

Yet despite all this, we doubt the truth of what was published. We believe that the Director of the Egyptian Antiquities Service does not share the opinion of the Ministry of Education, nor does Kamāl Pasha share this view concerning the teaching of hieroglyphics in this barren manner that readers have come to know. This is what we believe. We wish the Ministry of Education to assure us that we are mistaken, and that the specialists have entangled themselves with it in this error and have decided that hieroglyphics should be taught in Egypt in this ridiculous fashion. If the Ministry of Education assures us that we are mistaken, it will not be difficult for us to declare openly that the Director of the Antiquities Service has erred, just as the Ministry of Education has erred, and that he has adopted two contradictory opinions on a single matter: one in the report of the Royal University, and another in this most recent meeting.

But the matter of the Ministry of Education does not end here. It does not content itself with defending itself; it adds to this the defense of Kamāl Pasha, as though anyone were attacking Kamāl Pasha or attributing to him anything he might dislike. In this defense of Kamāl Pasha, it follows a crooked path whose evil exceeds its good and whose harm outweighs its benefit.

It casts aspersions—through insinuation and allusion—upon the French scholars who organized the Egyptian Museum and founded the science of Egyptian archaeology. We would have preferred not to be drawn into such matters, for they do not accord with dignity and they do not honor those who involve themselves in them, especially in days such as these. Nor does it suffice with disparaging Mariette and Maspero and those like them; it goes further and draws absurd distinctions among Egyptians themselves.

It wishes— or rather, its trumpets wish— to prove that Kamāl Pasha has rendered benefit and service, and that from him emerged the students in whom Egypt takes pride. But who has denied that Kamāl Pasha rendered benefit and service? Yet they claim for Kamāl's students what Kamāl's students themselves do not claim. They attribute to them works of authorship and translation which the students themselves openly acknowledge they did not

accomplish alone, but in collaboration with others who did not drink hieroglyphics or archaeology from Kamāl's breast, but learned elsewhere and by other means.

They claim that this translation and authorship are among Kamāl's achievements, while Kamāl's own students acknowledge that if they attained anything, it was because they spent two years in the museum learning under others, following methods other than Kamāl's. Indeed, they acknowledge that if they achieved anything, it was because they trained in the Egyptian Museum according to the method that we now demand the Ministry of Education adopt in teaching hieroglyphics and archaeology: the method the Egyptian Museum followed when it took Kamāl's students and others and taught them how hieroglyphics should be studied and how archaeology should be studied. It now intends to send them to Europe to complete their education there.

Yes—we want a School of Archaeology to be established according to this method. We want the foundation laid by the Egyptian Museum to be the basis of this school. We want this school to be in the museum, not in the Teachers' School.

We want this. But the Ministry of Education wants something else. The Ministry of Education may persist in what it wants, but its persistence will change nothing, nor will it make its new school useful or productive. We continue to insist that the Ministry of Education has failed—and that Kamāl Pasha has failed with it—in the teaching of hieroglyphics, and that there is therefore no sense in resuming this failure.

We also continue to insist that the Ministry of Education has cared for one matter with inadequate concern while neglecting another with grave neglect. It has concerned itself with the age of the Pharaohs and neglected the age of Islam. Even its concern for the Pharaonic age is deficient and unproductive; yet the Islamic age, the glory of Islam, and the art of Islam all deserve at least the same degree of attention, if not greater.

We ask the Ministry of Education to answer us: why does it hasten to teach the hieroglyphic language while giving no thought whatsoever to the study of Islamic antiquities? They will say: the antiquities of Tutankhamun and the sensation they caused. This is false. The Ministry of Education, like other ministries, has shown no real concern for these antiquities. It is enough to note that these antiquities are displayed in the museum and have not yet received an official visit—only Field Marshal Allenby and his wife have visited them.

Meanwhile, Islamic antiquities have appeared, antiquities of real value, which have stirred interest in Europe and in Egypt alike. Yet the one who revealed them was not an Englishman, but an Egyptian like you and me: Bahjat Bey—not Carter, and not Carnarvon. Al-Fusṭāṭ has been uncovered, books have been written about it, and Europeans have taken interest in it, while we ourselves remain entirely ignorant of it. What ignorance could be worse than this: that these books are written in French, printed in Europe, remain untranslated into Arabic, and yet possess undeniable scholarly and artistic value?

What has the Ministry of Education done to care for these books, for al-Fusṭāṭ, or for Islamic antiquities in general—when translating these works into Arabic and publishing them

would cost the Ministry of Education not even a tenth of what it will cost to print the dictionary compiled by Kamāl Pasha, whose scholarly value we do not yet know?

We ask the Ministry of Education again: why does it care for one thing and neglect another? We do not doubt that this neglect of Islamic antiquities does not arise from contempt for them. We are fully convinced that it arises from narrowness of vision on the one hand, and from the exploitation of public sentiment on the other.

The Ministry of Education is too narrow in outlook to encompass the idea of establishing a comprehensive School of Archaeology embracing all the epochs of Egypt. At the same time, it exploits public feeling, for people have heard of the newly discovered Egyptian antiquities and have desired their government to care for them. The Ministry of Education exploits this desire so that people may say it has responded to the will of the nation and secured the nation's benefit.

But people know that responding to the will of the nation must be done rightly, not in a distorted fashion, and that those who seek the nation's benefit must secure it fully, not partially. Therefore, if you wish, Your Excellency, to respond to the will of the nation by caring for Egyptian antiquities and Egyptian art, then let this care be sound and beneficial.

Let it take the form of establishing a comprehensive School of Archaeology, supervised by qualified archaeologists and taught by scholars who are professors of archaeology. Let it be a school to which students come to specialize in its various disciplines, and to which the public comes to learn the history of Egypt, the art of Egypt, and the glory of Egypt—learning that refines their judgment of Egypt.

Let this be done through the establishment of such a school, not through the creation of a hieroglyphics lesson and an afternoon visit to the Egyptian Museum. That is nothing but an assault on minds and a deception of people regarding their rights and their interests.

We return, finally, to remind you, Your Excellency, that when you wish to build a structure, you must lay its foundations and begin from below, not from above. Establish an Administration of Arts and Letters, entrust it entirely to specialists, and then charge those specialists with establishing the comprehensive School of Archaeology. Only then will you truly benefit, and only then will you truly be guided to what is right.

Ṭāhā Ḥusayn
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