

Deception

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), 1 September 1934

Some people wish to impose it upon Egypt by force, and to make it one of those acts for which whoever undertakes it is rewarded with comfort, security, and peace of mind, while whoever refrains from it is punished with harm to his own person, his property, and his family — even as civilization demands, and progress demands, and morality demands, and religion demands, that deception itself be counted among the gravest of sins, one for which those who commit it, those who call for it, and those who become entangled in it, ought all to be punished.

That is to say: should a ruler among rulers die, it is apparently thought improper — so it is said the ministry intends to legislate a law binding on journalists and historians — that anyone should write of him a plain word of truth, or that history's judgement of him should be rendered clearly, or that he should be portrayed to present and future generations with any real honesty, showing people what good he did, that they might praise and take it to heart, and what evil he did, that they might condemn and avoid it.

Instead, it seems, the dead are to be treated exactly as the living are treated, and writers and historians, when writing about them, are to feel the very same pressures they feel when writing about the living: every variety of flattery and appeasement, of guarding one's own interests, of fearing consequences, and of avoiding exposure to punishment.

The law that is to be issued, should it indeed be issued, will thus insert itself between writers and historians and their own consciences; it will force these consciences into whatever they dislike; it will require every writer, every historian who deals with the dead, to weigh carefully what is permissible and what is not, to work out what may be said and what may not, to search for what will please and what will not — and to say, of all that, only what will not expose him to investigation by the public prosecutor, then to trial before the courts, then to a fine, or imprisonment, or both together.

It will thus be imposed upon writers and historians, whenever they deal with the lives of the dead, that they must not tell the whole truth, that they must broadcast among the people something other than what is accurate, that they must become instruments of deception — and what

deception! — the deception of entire generations, deception in a matter in which people have never before known deception to be forced upon anyone at all.

And strange it is that these elementary principles — principles a civilized man need only think about for a moment to find them intolerable, to recoil from them, to loathe them as he would loathe the most injurious thing imaginable to the soul — should find, among educated Egyptians, some who feel at ease with them, who champion them, who wish them to become a law binding upon the whole people, no less.

And strange it is that Egypt has men who make of history a profession — some finding in it pleasure, others finding in it profit — and both these and those take pains, or make a show of taking pains, to be true historians: that is, men who submit to whatever the profession of history demands — the preference of truth above all else, the preference of free methods of inquiry above all else, the refusal to submit to any restriction that would corrupt history, or the freedom of historical inquiry, whatever the circumstances.

Strange, too, that in Egypt we read of such men, and that they themselves read and hear the news broadcast of this scheme now being plotted against history, and yet it does them no harm — or at least does not appear, to others, to harm them at all. Instead, they are submissive, acquiescent; they say not one word, show not the slightest objection, do not rise to defend the dignity of scholarship, do not stand guard over this sacred trust — a trust no scholar is worth anything at all unless he defends it with every ounce of strength, effort, and capacity for defence he possesses.

And strange it is that the ministry, in contemplating this law, has not thought through its implications and consequences, nor prepared the means to enforce it properly, nor devised any method of imposing oversight upon the University, or upon secondary and primary schools. For history is taught at this University and in these schools; and its teaching at the University remains, to this day, free — so this freedom, too, must now be restricted, and inspectors must be appointed to review professors' lectures before they are delivered, and to listen to them as they are being delivered, in order to protect whichever ruler has already departed this world, or is yet to depart it. And the teaching of history in secondary and primary schools follows official textbooks composed for it

back when history was still free — so committees must now be formed to purge these textbooks of every germ of freedom and truth, and these books must be rewritten entirely, so that history might be restored to whatever serves personal whims and appetites, rather than the portrayal of truth and accuracy. And inspectors must still be appointed even so, since history teachers in the schools do not always confine themselves strictly to the official textbooks, but expand upon them, digress from them, and might, perhaps, touch upon some dead ruler in a manner the ministry would not wish him touched upon — and so the inspectors must be there to hold them firmly back from that, to protect the dead, and to enforce this remarkable law!

And strange it is that history has its own international congress, meeting every three years, and that this congress has a permanent committee that follows the progress of historical studies, whatever advances they make and whatever weaknesses beset them; and that Egypt has a delegation representing her on this committee, whose members are chosen from among the historians of the Ministry of Education and of the University; and that our ministry has given no thought at all to this congress, nor to this committee, nor to this delegation that represents Egypt upon it. Perhaps the ministry ought to give some thought to all of this, and charge our Egyptian delegation with presenting to the permanent committee, and then to the congress itself, this bold new doctrine of how history ought to be understood and written — of how the dead ought to be protected from its judgements, from the opinions of its writers, and from truth and honesty in general.

For who knows? Perhaps this doctrine might win the approval of historians the world over, and the falsification of history might become a new principle of scholarship, a modern rule of research — and the credit for this innovation might be recorded to the everlasting honour of the Egyptian ministry!

And strange it is that the League of Nations has established something called the Institute of Intellectual Cooperation, in which every nation participates, Egypt among them, with Egypt paying this institute a certain sum every year; and that the chief concern of this institute is to protect scholarly inquiry in general, and historical inquiry in particular, from every kind of assault. It would only be right, then, for our ministry to instruct our plenipotentiary minister in Paris to present this bold new doctrine — of how history ought to be understood, and of how the sanctities of scholarship ought to be preserved — before the Institute of

Intellectual Cooperation, in the hope that it might approve this doctrine, and then present it to the League of Nations, so that it too might approve it, and then propose a draft international treaty establishing the imposition of historical deception upon historians in every country on earth...

Our ministry has been negligent in this sort of publicity, has fallen short in its own promotion; so it falls, at the very least, to journalists to accomplish what the ministry has not accomplished, and what historians have not accomplished either.

The journalists have resolved to convey their disapproval of the ministry's action to press unions and to PEN clubs across the world; they ought, then, to convey this same disapproval to the International Permanent Committee for Historical Studies, and to the General Congress of History, and to the Institute of Intellectual Cooperation, and then to the League of Nations, so that people in every country on earth might learn that there exists, upon this earth, a ministry that wishes to restrict the freedom of historical inquiry, and to subject free scholarship to whatever the whims and appetites of political self-interest may demand.

And let people know, further, that Egypt, praise be to God, is neither asleep, nor stagnant, nor remiss — but rather wide awake, energetic, in deadly earnest, contriving something in this matter that neither man nor jinn has ever contrived before her: punishing historians for the crime of declaring what they believe to be the truth...

Taha Hussein