Eloquence

Taha Hussein

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If you are in opposition to the ministry, and you put to it a question about some of its doings, eloquence has a claim on you: that you be clear and direct, that you be precise and exhaustive, that you force the ministry to answer without evasion or twisting, without circumlocution or dodging, or else to withdraw and choose silence, so that its silence becomes an admission and a confession, and people record of you that you were an eloquent questioner who left it no way out.

And if the ministry wishes to answer one of these embarrassing, well-put questions, eloquence has a claim on it too: that it be clear and direct, that it be precise and straightforward, that its answer match the question in scope, neither exceeding it in breadth nor in length, and that its answer be strong without violence, gentle without weakness, one that settles the argument against you and forces you into silence, so that people record of the ministry that it was eloquent, that it left its questioner no way out, silenced him completely, and forced him to break off and submit.

These days a rhetorical contest has arisen between the ministry and its opponents, who come in every shape and color; for you know the opposition takes many forms: there are the opponents' opponents, who know nothing but opposition, accept nothing but opposition, because their quarrel with the sitting ministry is a fundamental one admitting no possibility of cooperation or agreement; and there are the opponents who were friends yesterday and turned enemies today, and who may well return to friendship tomorrow, if tomorrow's sun should rise upon the ministry still standing in its offices of power.

And there are the in-between opponents, those who display opposition while concealing support, who show the nation one face and the ministry another.

And between these opponents, in all their varied shapes and colors, and the ministry, a fierce and intricate contest of eloquence and rhetoric has arisen these days; the opponents rained down upon the ministry a volley of clear, direct, forceful, embarrassing questions, and people read these questions and duly recorded their eloquence, and the ministry

answered every one of these questions with clear, direct, straightforward answers admitting no evasion, silencing them completely, leaving them thoroughly embarrassed, so that people recorded of the ministry that it was more eloquent than its rivals, more in command of the reins of rhetoric than they, more capable than they of turning words to its purpose.

And you too might affect eloquence, and wish to embarrass me, just as the opponents wished to embarrass the ministry, putting to me a clear, direct, precise, straightforward question: where are these silencing answers the ministry gave to the people? But you may rest assured, sir, that you will get nowhere near what you want by embarrassing me, for you are one of two things: either a reader of newspapers, or one who avoids them. If the latter, then there is no dialogue between you and me; I accept no question from you, and I offer you no answer; indeed I am confident you have not really asked me at all, since you do not read the papers, and so know nothing whatsoever of this contest between the ministry and its opponents. And if the former, then tell me the opponents' questions to the ministry, and I will tell you the ministry's answers to these opponents.

One questioner asked: did Sidqi Pasha speculate in cotton? One voice said: yes. Another said: no, he speculated twice. Another said: no, three times. Another said: the sitting ministry speculated just as he did. And the questioners pressed the ministry to make the plain truth of all this clear.

And the ministry answered them yesterday with two answers, not one, in two official communiqués, not one. The ministry answered them that Al-Jihad had published a report about certain birds that scientific institutes send out, fitting metal tags to their legs, to certain countries, in order to study them and learn their condition. And Al-Jihad asked that whoever these birds fall upon, or fall to, write to the institutes that sent them, or write to Al-Jihad, so that it might write on their behalf to the institutes that sent them.

And the ministry of agriculture announced that the Giza zoological garden is the body responsible for such scientific inquiries, and that the birds should therefore be sent to it, and that people should write to it so that it might mediate between them and the scientific institutes that sent the birds. There is one answer.

And I imagine you do not doubt, do not hesitate, do not dispute, do not question, that this is truly embarrassing, truly silencing, truly conclusive: you ask about the cotton, and the speculation in it — was it once? Was it twice? Was it three times? Was it Sidqi Pasha alone? Was it the new finance minister too? — and you are told, with a graceful, elegant smile: what business is that of yours? What concern of yours is a matter you know nothing about and have no part in? Why waste your own time, and the ministry's, on something you ought not meddle with at all? Al-Jihad published that certain scientific institutes send birds to certain countries, fitting metal tags to their legs, and so on to the end of the account.

And the second answer is no less eloquent than the first; for the illustrated magazine Al-Hilal had published that a young man had hunted a leopard by Lake Manzala, and the ministry of agriculture denies this report, announcing that it contacted the Dakahlia governorate, and learned from it that this leopard was nothing but a wild cat, and that it had been hunted more than a year before.

And a questioner asked about the minister of agriculture himself: did he slander the former minister of agriculture, or did he not? One voice said: indeed he slandered him, and this slander was published in the papers, and it filled people's mouths, and some people set out to reconcile the slanderer and the slandered, but the slanderer refused while the slandered was willing, and people pressed the ministry to make the plain truth of the matter clear to them. And the ministry answered them yesterday with these two conclusive answers: Al-Jihad published that certain institutes send birds; and the illustrated Al-Hilal published that a young man had hunted a leopard.

And a questioner asked about the story of the Corniche, and the money lost in it, and the expenses Alexandria bore because of it, and who had lost this money, and who had made the city bear these expenses. And the ministry answered him yesterday: Al-Jihad published that certain institutes send birds, and the illustrated Al-Hilal published that a young man had hunted a leopard.

And a questioner asked about the governors who had been pressing deputies into service; and another questioner asked about the interior minister, whether he had been enticing deputies; and another questioner asked about the minister of agriculture, whether he had paid his taxes; and a fourth questioner asked about the minister of agriculture, what he

had done with what had been placed under seizure for the sake of taxes. And the ministry answered all of them yesterday with these two eloquent answers: Al-Jihad published that certain institutes send birds, and the illustrated Al-Hilal published that a young man had hunted a leopard.

And the papers claimed there was a fierce disagreement between the finance minister and his under-secretary, and a fierce disagreement between the financial adviser and his minister, and that the finance minister might be transferred to the foreign ministry, and that the English had entered into the matter, and that the English had come between the two factions of the People's Party, and that the finance minister refused to be transferred, and that the minister's rivals were pressing for his transfer. And the ministry answered all of this with these two eloquent answers: Al-Jihad published that certain institutes send birds, and the illustrated Al-Hilal published that a young man had hunted a leopard.

And this morning the papers informed us that the English had sent a memorandum to the prime minister, asking about the cabinet: did it stand in solidarity with the finance minister in what he had declared, that he would pay only in paper currency, and that he would not negotiate, since negotiation means give and take, and he has nothing to give? And we expected the ministry to answer the English just as it had answered Egyptians, with these two eloquent answers: Al-Jihad published that certain institutes send birds, and the illustrated Al-Hilal published that a young man had hunted a leopard.

But the papers informed us instead that the prime minister had replied to the office of the High Commissioner without mentioning the institutes that send birds, and without mentioning the young man who hunted the leopard; rather, he distanced himself from the finance minister, cast him behind his back, and declared to the English that the cabinet did not share his opinion, nor support what he had said. Which means that the English belong to that distinguished class to whom ministries ought not speak of what Al-Jihad published about institutes sending birds, nor of what the illustrated Al-Hilal published about the young man who hunted a leopard.

So if we ourselves ask the prime minister: is this news true? And if we ask the prime minister: how can the cabinet disown one of its own members, and yet keep him in office, neither dismissing him nor asking him to resign? — the ministry will answer us, without the slightest doubt:

Al-Jihad published that certain institutes send birds, and the illustrated Al-Hilal published that a young man had hunted a leopard — and it turned out to be a cat.

This eloquence deserves reflection and appreciation; for it does not merely silence its rivals, it fills their hearts with admonition and instruction, reminding them that humility is a virtue and pride a vice, and that Egyptians were not created for politics and its discourse, nor for administration and its oversight, nor for finance and its management, so that when they aspire to any of these things, they grow proud, overstep their proper bounds, exceed their proper station, and deserve to be disciplined by the ministry, and disciplined well, and brought back by it to what they ought rightly to ask about and discuss — namely, what Al-Jihad published about certain institutes sending birds, what the illustrated magazine published about a young man who hunted a leopard, and what the ministry of agriculture discovered, that this leopard was nothing but a cat.

And this eloquence recalls to Egyptians that story they all heard from their mothers and grandmothers, when they were children playing, and tales would beguile them — the story of the young man who entered a city and saw human heads hanging upon the king's palace, ninety-nine of them, and asked the fruit seller about these heads, and was answered that grapes were sold at a dirham a pound, and apples at two dirhams; and he asked the vegetable seller about these heads, and was told the price of leeks, onions, garlic, and eggplant.

And he went on going about among the people, asking them about the heads, and all of them spoke to him of anything but the heads, until God guided him to a barber who favored the truth, and who told him the story of the heads exactly as it was. It appears that this barber has not yet appeared in Egypt, for people will go on asking about everything that concerns them in politics, administration, and finance, and will hear nothing but the tale of the institutes that send birds, and the tale of the young man who hunted a leopard that turned out to be a cat.

And those who have gone to Paris, and frequented some of its comic theaters, will no doubt recall, on reading these two eloquent answers to people's questions, that amusing, witty song that appeared some years ago, which no Parisian, indeed no Frenchman, failed to learn by heart and sing, until it has now become one of those common, everyday phrases with which a man is answered when he asks about something that is none

of his business: "Did I ask you whether your grandmother rides a bicycle?"

So it seems there is no answer left for the Egyptians' story with the ministry but this one, and the tale of the institutes that send birds, and the tale of the young man who hunted a leopard that turned out to be a cat, are nothing but an exact likeness of that French song: "Did I ask you whether your grandmother rides a bicycle?" And wittier than all of this, more striking to the heart, more admirable still, more apt to enchant and bewitch the mind, is that God should inspire the ministry of agriculture with these two answers, so that the fog should lift from the whole ministry, and the gloom should clear from itself, from the prime minister, from the finance minister, indeed from the English, indeed from anyone at all to whom a question is put on any matter and who refuses to answer it; for all of them, whenever asked about something they would rather not go into, will say: Al-Jihad published that certain institutes send birds, and the illustrated Al-Hilal published that a young man had hunted a leopard, and the ministry of agriculture discovered that this leopard was nothing but a cat.

Do you not agree with me, dear reader, that the ministry has hit upon the eloquent, conclusive, embarrassing answer to everything people have put to it, and everything they will yet put to it? For my part, I assure you that were I in the prime minister's place, I would resign the premiership, and propose that it be entrusted to al-Manzalawi Bey; for he is fit for it, more deserving of it, and more capable of bearing its burdens; suffice it to say that Egypt, since it first knew ministries, has never known so deft, so eloquent, so rhetorically gifted a minister as this one, who, when asked about the dilemmas of politics, the problems of administration, and the disgraces of finance, answers: Al-Jihad published that certain institutes send birds, and the illustrated Al-Hilal published that a young man had hunted a leopard, and the ministry of agriculture discovered that this leopard was nothing but a cat.

O Egyptians, here is the tale of the institutes that send birds, and the tale of the young man who hunted a leopard; occupy yourselves with these two instead of public affairs, and let your writers, your poets, and your singers occupy themselves with them too, and let these two tales be the amusement of the winter season. Al-Jihad published that certain institutes send birds, and the illustrated Al-Hilal published that a young man had hunted a leopard, and the ministry of agriculture discovered that the leopard was nothing but a cat — and the ministry of agriculture

discovered too that these two tales are the best answer there is to give the opposition!