

On Education and Teachers

Majallati, 15 May 1935.

1 I think people's talk in these days will turn increasingly to education and teachers, unless the events of politics, as they are wont to do, preoccupy them and divert them from every useful word and every beneficial deed. And if I judge that talk of education is likely to occupy people in these days, the source of that is this official bombshell, if the expression may be allowed. For the Minister of Education has dropped a bomb (though ministers are not in the habit of dropping bombs) in issuing his report on secondary education, setting out in it the defects of this education, and proposing what he sees as the means of reform. It is no business of mine to take up this report with criticism or praise, nor to debate the defects the Minister has formally recorded, nor to debate the proposals he puts forward so as to learn people's opinion of them. It is no business of mine to take up these things here; I may well have another occasion for them one day, outside the newspapers and magazines. What concerns me now is rather to note that the Ministry of Education has, in this report, passed judgment on itself — or that the Minister of Education has passed judgment on his own ministry — a judgment, or judgments, that public opinion had already delivered long before, and which the government had always refused to accept or acknowledge. Let us give the Minister of Education credit for his courage in speaking the truth, and let us give him credit, above all, for this valuable lesson he has delivered to his own ministry, in showing it, without hesitation and without mere insinuation, but with firmness, resolve, and plain statement, that the man deserving of that name is the one who does not scorn to acknowledge his own fault, and who seeks to remedy that fault once he has made it out and come to know its causes and its effects.

2 And we hope that the Ministry of Education will profit from this lesson the Minister has delivered, and that it will accustom itself from now on to facing the affairs of education with courage and resolve, acknowledging the mistakes it has committed and the errors into which it has fallen, and striving to remedy that error and those mistakes.

3 We also hope that the Minister of Education will study the other branches of education just as he has studied secondary education, and will issue, for each branch, a report like the one he has published concerning secondary education; for were he to do so, he would do a

service to Egyptians and to the Ministry of Education in several respects.

4 Among them, that he would uncover the defects of education and invite people to study them and to consider their reform; among them, that with each report he would set down a sound, precise, careful record for one branch of education, so that, once he had completed all his reports, he would have composed a delightful history of Egyptian education in this modern age, of benefit to this generation as it will be to generations to come; among them, that he would depart from this disgraceful habit that ministers have grown used to — a habit that has thoroughly corrupted their own affairs, and thoroughly corrupted the country's affairs besides, exposing the truth to grave danger, and setting official facts on one side — the side of doubt and suspicion — and the facts of reality on another side — the side of truthfulness and certainty, feared, more often than not, to be spoken aloud. This disgraceful habit is the one that leads ministers to believe that the first thing owed to their ministries is to portray them in an image of perfection that forces rightness upon them and guards them against error — so that they speak nothing but truth, bring about nothing but good, suffer no weakness in any respect, and fall into no lapse along any path.

5 So the Minister of Education, in departing from this habit, acknowledging his ministry's mistakes and striving to remedy them, has opened a new door that we hope ministers — above all, ministers of reform — will pass through.

6 I did not, however, write in order to discuss this report, as I have said; rather, I have taken it as a means of speaking of something else: the activity and dedication of teachers to their craft in foreign countries, and their being driven, in Egypt, to a listlessness resembling death. The post from France reached me on the very day the Minister of Education's report on secondary education reached me, and as I set about looking through the French newspapers I saw, among the various forms of activity French teachers pursue during whatever holidays are granted them, an astonishing thing — and then I saw, in the Minister of Education's report, this painful truth he had formally recorded: that the system of education in Egypt weakens not only the pupils' character, but weakens the character of teachers and headmasters too, and all but erases it entirely. It may do some good for the Egyptian reader to be shown something of French teachers' activity during their holidays; and it may do some good for the Minister of Education himself to be shown something of this activity too, so that he may be certain he was neither

mistaken nor excessive in pitying Egyptian teachers, and that these Egyptian teachers suffer an injustice at the hands of the Ministry of Education unmatched by any other, and bear from it a grave wrong — and that the reform of education has no way forward, however much effort is spent, however much strength exerted, however much money disbursed, unless teachers are granted that freedom which opens to them the doors of activity in Egypt, and which thick veils have been drawn to keep from them.

7 French teachers were enjoying their Easter holiday not long ago; yet they did not idle, nor play, nor give themselves over to sleep and indolence, nor haunt playing-fields and cafés — rather, they spent their holidays, or at least some part of them, holding various congresses, journeying to them from the farthest corners of the land, and taking up the study of the various subjects touching education and teachers, closely or distantly. And be assured they hold congresses of this kind every summer as well, sometimes in Paris, sometimes in other French cities, in the east and the west, the north and the south.

8 I do not wish to speak of teachers' unions and their various associations, nor of their countless educational journals, nor of the subjects they take up for study in these journals, nor of their participation in various international congresses; I wish rather to speak of their own private congresses, which they hold in their own country every year, and of the subjects they take up at these congresses.

9 Let it suffice me to mention here three congresses held by men of education in Paris during the Easter holiday. The first was the congress of the Union of Primary Teachers, held on the nineteenth of April, where they took up various subjects, the most important of which were these three:

10 First: their relation to the government since the year 1933. For French political events, and the fierce rivalries stirred up between the parties, had led the government to grow suspicious of men of primary education, fearing from them, given their leaning toward the extreme left, some danger to the republican order; then matters mended and conditions settled, and these teachers recorded, at this congress of theirs, that relations with authority had improved, affirming that they concern themselves with no politics, give no heed to strikes, and think, in teaching, of nothing but the homeland, its advancement, its independence, and its protection from foreign incursion. Second: the

advancement of the teachers themselves, and what is required of them by way of preparation to discharge their professional duty in the best manner possible — and here they arrive at a unanimous resolution of great consequence for French life, one the Egyptian Ministry of Education would do well to heed. They wish that none take up primary teaching save one who has obtained the secondary certificate before entering the primary teachers' college. And they do not want the easy, facile secondary certificate they call the modern secondary certificate, but rather this demanding certificate, which requires Latin — because they believe that knowledge of their own language, and the teaching of that language, depends on knowledge of Latin, and because they believe Latin has the most far-reaching effect in forming young minds. The gravity of this resolution lies in the fact that men of primary education, who number in France in the tens of thousands, together with the socialists and democrats of the north, had always been opponents of Latin, resisting its generalization with all their might. The French parliament had, at many a moment, been swayed by them, and so had lightened the teaching of Latin considerably, and had instituted secondary certificates that did not require it — causing men of primary education to shift from this view. That they should now demand Latin, after having so long pressed instead to be allowed entry to the university and to their degrees without any knowledge of Latin, is proof that French life is undergoing a momentous evolution toward a deepening regard for learning, looking upon it as a means of forming the man, not merely of earning a living. Third: the matter of pensions. For they demand that pension laws for primary teachers be organized in a way that guarantees them a peaceful old age, after they have spent their youth and their middle years in the service of the state and the homeland.

11 Nor is the second congress, held by headmasters and headmistresses of primary schools on that very same day, of any less consequence than this one; for the headmasters and headmistresses demand Latin just as the teachers demand it, and the headmasters and headmistresses demand freedom for the teacher and his protection from the passions of political parties and the appetites of ministers, and the headmasters and headmistresses demand the reform of the pension system just as they demand the reform of the social and health conditions of young pupils. What deserves attention is that men of government and parliament attend these congresses and take part in their discussions. The Director of Primary Education attends this congress, answers whatever questions are put to him, and promises to bring the congress's

resolutions before the Minister, and to strive to realize whatever of them can be realized. A member of the Senate attends that congress too, takes part in its discussions, explains to the assembled teachers the Senate's position with regard to primary education, and promises to defend their hopes and demands before the education committee and in the Senate itself — all of this taking place within the halls of the Sorbonne.

12 And there is a third congress, perhaps of still greater consequence than these two, held by men of general education, who devoted, on the twenty-eighth of April, one of its sessions to defining one of those weighty notions the French hold most dear, which we for our part should wish to take as an ideal model for education in Egypt: the neutrality of general education with regard to politics and religion. They record that the State neither imposes, nor ought to impose, upon its students any particular opinion in politics, science, morals, philosophy, or religion. The axis of education, rather, must be truth, and truth alone. They record that religion must be taught, but that men of religion themselves must undertake to teach it, on one day of the week, and that every teacher or professor has complete freedom in his political, religious, and moral doctrine, provided that he does not force it into his teaching, and does not trouble himself to press his students, whether by force or by gentleness, by open statement or by insinuation, toward one of his own opinions or one of his own doctrines. They demand that the law regulate, without ambiguity or vagueness, the rights and duties of teachers, and that the law protect the institutions of learning from any interference arising from political or sectarian passions of whatever kind. The one who announced these demands, proclaimed them openly, and won the unanimous support of the assembled congress, was a well-known professor of higher education at the Collège de France — Professor Leroy.

13 Where, then, is this freedom the French teacher enjoys in assembly, in thought, and in the open declaration of opinion, set beside the freedom of the Egyptian teacher? And where is this activity the French teacher expends in matters touching the affairs of education and of teachers, set beside the activity of the Egyptian teacher? And perhaps you will go on to ask about the source of Egyptian teachers' listlessness, their reluctance toward activity of this kind, their fearfulness of studying such subjects and declaring their opinions on them! But do not direct this question to me — direct it instead to the Ministry of Education, and do not wait for the Ministry of Education's answer, for it already exists,

stated plainly, in the report the Minister has published in these very days.

14 Does the Minister not himself acknowledge that the system of education in Egypt weakens not only the pupils' character, but weakens the character of teachers and headmasters, and all but erases it entirely?!

15 How, then, is the teacher to be active, how is he to think, how is he to declare any opinion of his own, when the very system of education is itself a war upon his character, standing between it and every form of activity?!