Humiliation

Kawkab al-Sharq, 19 May 1933

It appears that the intellect is being subjected in these days to a vile ordeal the like of which it has not faced for a long time in this modern age — and politics is the source of this ordeal. For politics has refused to do anything but seize power and transgress in its exercise, inflict injustice and pile excess upon excess, and subject everything to its whims and appetites — including that sacred ember by which God made man human, by which God gave people a dignity to be preserved and a sanctity to be honoured, by which God made man the master of the nature that surrounds us and the sovereign of the small world in which we live.

The nations have known, in this modern age, varieties of oppression and forms of tyranny — yet they have not been exposed to the humiliation of the intellect, the contempt of its dignity, its subjugation to the aggression and tyranny of politics, and the enthronement of ignorance over it, to anything like what some countries are experiencing in these days.

In Germany, hundreds of thousands of young men and students gather, carrying books and clutching volumes under their arms, until they reach a square or several squares; there they pile up these books and volumes that the intellect laboured to produce, set them alight, and burn them to ashes — all the while joyful and exultant. An intoxication seizes them resembling the intoxication of drunkards, filling their hearts with rapture at this monstrous blaze that devours the intellect and its rich and precious works and fruits.

This happens in Berlin and happens outside Berlin, and is sanctioned by an organised government that counts itself among the civilised governments and insists on being — and insists that it wants to be — in the front rank of the great powers of this earth.

Yes, and the scientific, literary, and artistic academies are dissolved, and men who were the source of pride and glory for Germany and for all humanity in science, art, and literature are expelled from them — and if they are not expelled deliberately, harsh circumstances are brought to bear upon them, forcing them to expel themselves from these academies. Once their places have been vacated, other men are installed in their stead — men who have distinguished themselves in nothing and are known for no rich and precious works — but they are the emissaries of politics, its followers and auxiliaries, who place it above everything, seek access to it by every means, and sacrifice everything for its sake, even science, art, and literature.

Yes, and throughout all this, printed books are banned from readers — they may not be sold and may not be bought — and the names of a category of authors are announced whose right to address the public has been utterly annulled; the Germans should not read them, and

German bookshops should not sell their books or display them for sale.

Yes, and a German minister does not scruple to give a speech and broadcast it to millions of Germans, saying in that speech: «The time has come for Germany to purge the filth of the intellect.»

God be exalted — people have believed for centuries upon centuries that the ember of the intellect is precisely what purified humanity from the sins of whims and appetites and from the filth of emotions and instincts. And now, in the view of some Germans, the intellect produces filth, and Germany must be cleansed of its traces! If you seek the cause of this monstrous revolt against the intellect in Germany, you will find only one thing: politics. Rage against the Jews — its source is politics. Rage against communism, socialism, and democracy — its source is politics. Rage against science, literature, and art — its source is politics.

Woe to people from politics — it has tyrannised over them and transgressed against them until it has compelled them to disown themselves, their history, and their ancient glory.

Before all this, the intellect was humiliated in Russia: scholars and writers were driven out, made to taste varieties of degradation and torment, and subjected without respite to the Bolshevik policy until they were brought under its sway and compelled to become its auxiliaries and mouthpieces. And if the situation of scholars and authors in Italy has not reached what it has reached in Russia or in Germany, still the condition of these people is not one of flourishing and advancement, nor of security and ease, such that they should be envied for it or find contentment in it. The intellect and whatever it produces of science, literature, and art must bow to the authority of Fascism — or else it will be visited with humiliation and exposed to varieties of harshness and forms of deprivation!

Professors and teachers must swear an oath of loyalty to the new order — not merely in their political lives, but in their teaching as well. The intellect must abdicate its personality and become supple and yielding, taking on the shapes that politics wishes it to take. As for the majority of these professors and teachers, they have sworn the oath; as for the minority, they heeded the warning and were dismissed from universities and schools, scattering across the quarters of the earth, fleeing with the dignity of the intellect from sedition and humiliation.

A year ago, and then again some months ago, I read books by one of the greatest Italian scholars — a man who has raised the name of his country in scientific circles for many long years. He had refused the oath that was demanded of him, and his life is lived between hardship and tribulation, in a manner that brings no honour to modern civilisation.

Egypt cannot but have the intellect tested within it as it is tested in these advanced European countries, and politics cannot but humiliate the intellect — not only in Egypt — just

as it humiliated the intellect in Germany, and as it humiliated it in Russia, and as it humiliated it in Italy. For the source of political tyranny is one and the same in all these countries, however much its epochs and forms may differ: it is rage against democracy, its denial and repudiation, and the attempt to purge peoples of it. Some wish to extend the dominion of workers over other classes and thereby realise the tyranny of workers; others wish to combat communism and enable the middle classes to crush it and thereby realise the tyranny of those classes; and others find before them neither workers hungry for power nor middle classes needing to resist and defend themselves — but they find themselves, their ambitions, their whims and appetites, and their conviction of their own infallibility, and they wish to subject an entire nation and a whole people to their own authority. All of these fear the intellect and so combat it! All of these need the intellect and so flatter it! And all of these employ the instruments of violent material force to humiliate the intellect and bend it to their will.

How eager we would have been to leave Germany, Italy, and Russia to their revolutions and upheavals, were it not that these countries hold up dangerous examples to people and tempt them — as these countries themselves were tempted — to combat the intellect and subject it to forms of tyranny.

No one has the right to dictate to a foreign nation its politics, or to meddle in its affairs. But who claims that the intellect belongs to one nation and not another? Or that it is the exclusive preserve of one people and not another? Who claims that a German book, when its author gives it to the public and the press disseminates it among them, belongs to Germany alone and not to other countries? Not at all — the German intellect is not the property of the Germans alone; both intellect and book belong to all people, and the assault upon them is an assault upon all people, and subjecting them to humiliation and destruction is tyranny over all people. All people therefore have every right to be distressed by this and to repudiate it — how much more so when this tyranny invites imitation and calls to emulation and following.

I do not think that this violent movement now taking place in Germany — which seduces the intellect, persecutes it, and surpasses every limit in its seduction and persecution — has merely deprived Germany of the affection of the advanced European nations alone. It is also liable to deprive Germany of the love of the Eastern nations that aspire to freedom, and to the freedom of the intellect in particular, that struggle in the path of this freedom, and that encounter in this struggle severe hardship.

Egypt must have its share of the seduction and persecution of the intellect — for Egypt is a part of Europe, and must take its portion of everything that happens in Europe!

The democratic revolution appeared in Europe and some of us rose against it in Egypt! The heresy of dictatorship appeared in Europe and some of us became infatuated with it in

Egypt! The humiliation of the intellect appeared in Europe and our government pursued it zealously in Egypt! Is what is happening at the Egyptian University now anything other than this? The life of the government and the university is nothing but an unbroken war between politics and the intellect, in which politics has triumphed over the intellect with a resounding victory — the only consolation being that this victory is temporary, and will vanish with the disappearance of its source, which is the present Ministry.

The regulations and laws of the university have been changed, and we have pointed to the danger of this change and the cunning it embodies against the intellect, its humiliation of the intellect, and its enthronement of politics over it. The university has begun to submit to the new order, and its evil consequences are becoming apparent within it — what an evil, what an abomination, what a degradation that brings no honour to any face!

Here is the new University Council, convening in its aristocratic form for some days now, with the majority of university members excluded from it and told: wait until the summons reaches you. They wait, humbled; and this aristocratic council adjudicates the affairs of the university while its people are absent — and what wretched adjudication it renders — until, when it has finished its business, it summons the university majority, who come obediently and participate in what is of no avail.

It was proposed to this aristocratic council that a group of assistant professors be promoted to full professorships — it refused, on the grounds that these professors had not obtained a doctorate. Yet it found that it owed a debt to some of them, and discharged it — not through academic promotion, but through money. It promoted one to the rank of full professor and granted him two increments by exception, as though academic endeavour were measured in grades and allowances in an institution where it ought above all to be measured in academic titles.

Come, O university members — compete for grades, crowd around allowances, put your academic efforts up for sale and purchase; for this is the utmost you can aspire to now!

And there is another ordeal for the intellect in the university: the plan to exclude from the faculty councils — just as they were excluded from the University Council — a category of assistant professors who are the very people upon whom the university was built. From today they will have nothing but the delivery of lectures, and foreigners and senior administrators will adjudicate their affairs while they stand humbled!

This is not how the Egyptian intellect is honoured, nor how Egyptian competence is nurtured, nor how Egypt is prepared to shoulder responsibilities and face adversity. But why do we aspire to what many Europeans do not aspire to? The scholars of Germany are

humiliated — the scholars of Italy are humiliated — so why should the scholars of Egypt not be humiliated? There is a difference that the government has either failed to notice, or noticed and deliberately chosen to disregard: it is that the scholars of Germany and Italy are humiliated by Germans and Italians — whereas the scholars of Egypt are humiliated by foreigners, with the approval of their own Egyptian government!

God help this wretched country — its ill fortune has refused to do anything but keep it perpetually subject to the guardianship of the infallible among guardians!

As for me, I extend to the present Ministry my most sincere congratulations on its achievement in humiliating the Egyptians. Having humiliated the university professors to this degree, it ought not to covet yet more power! And I extend my most sincere congratulations to the university members — having sunk to this degree of degradation, they need fear no further injustice hereafter. And what injustice could be worse than what they are already in?!