The Formation of the Cultivated Elite

Al-Ahram, 2 March 1939.

The hall of the Sacred Family School witnessed, on Monday evening last, an outstanding literary gathering, at which a large audience of the cultivated elite assembled to hear Professor Dr. Taha Hussein Bey deliver his splendid address on "The Formation of the Cultivated Elite."

The Dean sat as he was accustomed to sit among his students, addressing them in a manner that commanded both their ears and their hearts, and turned to them, saying:

People speak to you a great deal of your responsibilities; some speak of agriculture, industry, and commerce, others of defense and how it ought to be organized, and these sweet discourses and pleasant hopes distract them from the most essential element of our life and our renaissance. I know of no civilized nation's life that can proceed soundly in any of its affairs without education; and those who speak of agriculture, industry, and defense deceive themselves, and deceive the people along with themselves, when they neglect the foundation of all of this, namely education. I do not wish to speak to you of education in general, nor of primary or secondary education, nor even of higher education; I wish instead to speak of the formation of a cultivated class capable of understanding life, of gauging its difficulties, and of enabling this country to reach the place it must reach among the nations now rising. How is this cultivated elite to be formed, in a manner serious and fitting to our dignity? People's answers to this question differ, and most of what is offered as an answer rests on self-deception. Among the easiest answers given is that schools and university faculties must be multiplied; but you may look about and observe a number of those who have graduated from these schools and faculties, and speak with them, and you will soon feel that these people have been schooled, and have won their university degrees and the posts these prepare for them, but have not won any share of culture. How many skilled physicians and engineers there are, excelling in their craft, yet no different, culturally speaking, from the common run of people! It is not important for the cultivated man that he should have completed the stages of education or excelled in his craft; the cultivated man who deserves that description is rather the one who can understand the problems that confront him and his fellow

citizens, who can speak of them as one who understands them and gauges their gravity, and who knows their circumstances and the means of their remedy. If you see the engineer who can speak of nothing but engineering, or the lawyer capable of nothing beyond legal work, if you see such men, then say of them that they are men who have received higher education, but are not cultivated. We must not, then, deceive ourselves with the great number of university graduates, nor suppose that their great number increases the number of the cultivated, unless our education itself is capable of making the educated man cultivated. Have we, in truth, arrived at the formation of this class? For my part, I say that there are in Egypt a fair number of young men able to speak well on literature, politics, and social affairs, but do they truly fulfill what we hope of the cultivated? Do they embody what we all seek — Egypt's rising to the level of the nations we aspire to keep pace with? For my part, I am deeply sorry to answer no; for the cultivated among us are few, and even so, how have we produced this class at all? Did our schools produce them? Did our curricula produce them? Is it in the nature of our schools and curricula to direct their students toward this end? I am sorry to answer no… We have not concerned ourselves with culture, nor wished to conceive of it rightly, nor risen from practical life to that excellent intellectual life which stands apart from the constraints of daily bread. Those who send their sons to school think of nothing but certificates and the employment that will enable them to live, for learning among us is a means and not an end — and I do not resent that it should be so — but there must exist, at the same time, a class that holds learning fit to be sought for its own sake, the mind fit to be elevated for its own sake, and the heart fit to be refined for its own sake. And so it will be, the day this feeling exists in Egypt, the day we understand that education may serve mere intellectual advancement and refinement for their own sake. This is a purpose toward which the souls of Egyptians must be directed, and toward which, in particular, the souls of those charged with education in Egypt must be directed; for we may excuse Egyptian families when they understand learning in that purely material sense, but the men of education must themselves embody that other party, who feel intellectual advancement for ends beyond the satisfaction of bodily needs. Nor is it the duty of those who oversee education merely to multiply schools, or to introduce this subject or that. That alone is not their duty; they must also devise their systems and found their schools in such a way as to instill in the rising generation this new conception of learning. The school must be an educator of the pupil, and a guide to his family. Do you suppose we have arrived, in matters of education, at anything of this kind? Do the

men of education view the question in this light? What I sense is that there is no difference whatever between the teacher and any other holder of a certificate; there is the ordinary teacher who discharges his mechanical duty and then turns to his own affairs. Were the Ministry of Education to conduct a precise census to determine the number of teachers who love learning for its own sake, who are eager to increase their share of it, who devote their leisure to reading this book or that, and who frequent literary salons and art museums, were the Ministry to conduct such a census, its result would be truly painful. We know well enough that our men of education frequent the clubs and coffeehouses far more than they frequent libraries and museums, because they were never prepared to love learning, but were sent to school merely as one of life's means of livelihood, just as the physician and the engineer are prepared — and that is not how the youth of a civilized country such as Egypt ought to be prepared; they are hopes and aspirations. And if it is conceivable that we should picture the ordinary physician, it is not conceivable that we should picture the teacher as a mere tradesman, since we depend on him for the formation of the minds of the coming generation's sons. Woe to a nation whose youth cannot be better than its elders! Woe to us if we content ourselves with our sons being an exact copy of ourselves! A father prepares his son for a life better than his own — how, then, can the nation fail to feel this same feeling? How can the government and the men of education fail to feel it? If our educational affairs produce only what resembles us, shall we truly have discharged our duty toward the generations to come? No… Ask yourselves: are you satisfied with your teachers? If you answer truthfully, your observations will be harsh. There are among you some who attend my own lectures, and I confess to you frankly that I leave them dissatisfied with them, precisely because they are satisfied with me! I detest the man who is satisfied with himself, and who demands that others be satisfied with him! Such a man has come to a halt, with no hope of rising further. Let us ask, then, how many Egyptians there are who are dissatisfied with themselves? I am sorry to say they are few, for otherwise the number of café habitués would be smaller than we see it to be. And do not suppose that I rely on the state, the government, and the schools for the formation of this elite, nor do I believe this is a matter for which systems and laws can be legislated, since it is not among those things that can be made by order or decree. What I ask of the schools is only that they not stand as an obstacle in the way of the outstanding cultivated man's emergence. The obstacles must be cleared from before Egyptian youth, for however excellent his nature and intelligence may be, his character will be spoiled

if the way is not prepared for him. The simplest thing to ask of the government in Egypt is that it organize education in such a way as not to corrupt the minds of the young, stifle their faculties, and extinguish their personalities. And among the worst things to which people can sink is to ask their governments not to act, rather than asking them to act! There are, however, positive things I hope we may consider for the formation of the cultivated elite, among them that we make general education available to all Egyptians alike, and that we absolve ourselves of that dangerous opinion which would limit the number of the educated so that no crisis of the unemployed might arise among us. That crisis does not spring from education, but from the failure to order our social system soundly. Education is not the source of the crisis, but the source of our awareness of it, and that is a good thing. Indeed, I would wish that crises should arise among us from education, rather than that we should rest content in ignorance. The social order is not protected by ignorance — and which of the two is better: that ignorance, its crimes, and its consequences should be the foundation of Egyptian life, or that learning, its crises, and its consequences should be its foundation? Which is better: that our turmoil should issue from knowledge, or from ignorance? The learned grow angry, and so they write and protest; the ignorant, however, turn to crime. Education must be made freely available, but it must also be refined, and our examinations must rest on diligence, resolve, and rigor — and life itself will be entrusted, after that, with completing the refining! The cultivated elite exists among us potentially; for it to exist in actuality, intelligence must be placed in direct contact with the civilized cultures of the world, and by this I mean that I should hate to see the Egyptian mind condemned to remain confined to Arabic alone, or to go no further than English or French either — for you all know there are other cultivated nations with whom we have contact, and we must not make our minds the exclusive preserve of this nation or that. The doors of culture among us must be flung wide open, that cultures may enter as the open air enters. By this alone can we form the free, discerning, capable mind. For either we confine ourselves to one particular culture, or culture among us is rationed so that foreign elements enter only in small measure — and this is an evil that does not accord with our dignity. Then, too, I ask for something still more important: that our Arabic language and our Arabic literature be made the foundation of every sound and excellent culture. And I assure you that we have not given our language its due. Ask yourselves: do you truly know it? Are you truly capable of expressing your meanings through it? For my part, I bear witness that you are not capable of this, and that any

culture not resting on the national language is no more than a borrowed culture, and that he who does not know the language of his homeland is not cultivated — and I fear to say that I doubt, and doubt gravely, his very manhood! But how is our language to be taught? That is a long story, much discussed already, and I do not think we can do it justice in a lecture. I assure you, however, that the Ministry of Education knows the sound way to this, and that His Excellency its Minister knows it full well, yet does not follow that way. Why? Is it because he does not wish to? Or because our tangled political circumstances paralyze competent men and force people to see the good and yet not do it? I bear witness that some of our ministers have possessed as much competence and sincerity as we could ever wish ministers to possess, but our circumstances force the most competent of men into silence, so that he sees the good and does not do it — and if I pity any Egyptians, I pity most of all a group among our ministers who wish to act and yet do not act. And I return once more to assure you that there are things indispensable to the formation of the outstanding cultivated man, the most important of them two: opening the doors to foreign cultures, that they may mingle with our own; and taking care that the Arabic language become a truly Egyptian language, the very substance of young people's discourse and their tastes. If we succeed in this, we shall have reached the beginning of the road that leads us, in the end, to the formation of the cultivated elite.

With this the Dean brought his rich and gracious address to an end; and all pressed forward to congratulate him, and the young men went out turning over in their minds the views he had sown in them, and his students went out proud before others, and before the lecturing professor himself, that they were the students of Dr. Taha Hussein!