

The Will to Reform: Milton's and Verney's Educational Projects

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John Milton and Luís António Verney, two major figures in their own right, are usually the object of quite independent approaches on account not only of the time span of a century which separates them, but also because of their distinct contributions to the cultures they lived in. However, they share the love for their respective countries and the wish to reform those social aspects which prevent progress. In this paper we wish to direct your attention to one specific issue which was dealt with by these two intellectuals, namely, the education of the younger generations as it appears in Milton's *Of Education* (1644) and in Verney's *Verdadeiro Método de Estudar* (1746).

In fact, Milton's prestige as a poet and a scholar of the seventeenth century English literature is so widely established that no further presentation is needed. His name always comes out invariably associated with the titles of his outstanding poetical works, *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, sometimes with *Il Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*... Thus, his prose works linger in the shadow of those poetical productions, being frequently studied as ancillary material to the understanding of his poetry. Moreover, the polemical tone which inspires his writings in issues such as the freedom of conscience, the liberty of expression or the divorce cause, conceals the more permanent effect of these essays.

Luís António Verney, for his part, gained recognition as one of the leading figures who brought the Enlightenment ideas to his native country, thus promoting the renewal of the somewhat backward Portuguese intellectual scene. Nevertheless, his major work, *Verdadeiro Método de Estudar*, comprehending sixteen letters on the subject of education, went through a rather problematic publishing process which delayed its expected results (Cf. Salgado Júnior, 1949: I, x-xi). Only much later did his long and detailed essay receive its due appreciation as the first systematic Portuguese work on pedagogy.

The political and religious circumstances then prevalent in Portugal, led the author to present it anonymously, and to create an authorial persona, an Italian Franciscan monk, in order to keep away from the inquisitorial courts. Even so, the book was forbidden and his secret easily discovered. This fact, together with his difficult relationship with the minister Francisco de Almeida Mendonça (Marquis of Pombal's cousin), whom he worked for in the capacity of secretary of the Portuguese Legation in Rome, deprived him of his post and caused his banishment from the pontifical state. He remained an outcast, living abroad, in Pisa, in very poor conditions for most of his life.

In spite of the ill relations between Verney and the political and religious Portuguese authorities, mainly during King José's reign, that is, under the rule of the powerful minister Marquis of Pombal, Verney's concern with the plight of the educational national system is evident from the complete title of his work: *Verdadeiro Método de Estudar para ser útil à República e à Igreja: Proporcionado ao estilo e necessidade de Portugal* (*True Method of Studying to be useful to the Commonwealth and the Church: Adapted to the Style and Needs of Portugal*. (Salgado Júnior 1949: 1).

The purpose of being useful to country and church re-echoes Milton's authoritative definition of education in his small tractate: "... to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright ..." (Sabine 1986: 59) and to fit "a man to perform justly, skilfully, and magnanimously all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war." (Sabine 1986: 62)

Unlike Verney, Milton's *Of Education* answered the reforming aspirations of some factions then in power. Written almost at the same time as his pamphlets on divorce and the *Areopagitica*, the essay, though regarded by the author himself as a minor work, went to the press at the direct request of Samuel Hartlib. This London merchant of Polish origin had multiple connections in the English Parliament constituted in the early forties, at the beginning of the crisis which opposed this institution to Charles I. Most of the time he was involved in several matters of public interest, such as projects for the improvement of agriculture and the reforming of education and had already promoted the publication of Comenius' pedagogical works in England. Pedagogy was a frequent topic in conversations between Milton and Hartlib.

Thus, Milton's contribution to this issue had a rather warm-hearted reception when compared with the censored first edition of *Verney's Verdadeiro Método* that was removed and no longer exists. The same kind of censorship which had been strongly criticised by Milton in *Areopagitica* as a means to destroy man's capacity of judging and perfecting oneself, isolated the Portuguese public from the wealth of thought and criticism produced under the Enlightenment optimism. So, Verney's dedication to the reverend fathers of the Jesuit Company can only be read as an ironic gesture towards those who refused innovation and kept to tradition as the stronghold of national order. Nevertheless, the future generations were to acknowledge the impact of Verney's work, and even during his lifetime several aspects of Pombal's teaching reform revealed, at least indirectly, Verney's influence.

Besides the specific publishing conditions and expectations of two communities where the religious fervour led to quite different practical attitudes as far as the upbringing of their younger generations was concerned, Milton and Verney are consistent in their criticism of the scholastic methods still applied in the learning institutions of each country and the waste of time it represented for the students.

This is quite understandable in Milton's case on account of the temporal proximity with the old system. Witnessing the scientific revolution started by the Galilean school, epitomised in England by Newton's research in physics and largely diffused by Francis Bacon, both in essays like *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) and *Novum Organum* (1620), and in his utopia, *New Atlantis* (1610), Milton agrees with the imperative introduction of the new branches of learning, as well as with the unparalleled role of direct observation of nature. He even refers in his proposal the importance of practical experts to guide the students in their natural History experiments:

"To set forward all these proceedings in nature and mathematics, what hinders but that they may procure, as oft as shall be needful, the helpful experiences of hunters, fowlers, fishermen, shepherds, gardeners, apothecaries; and in the other sciences, architects, engineers, mariners, anatomists." (Sabine 1986: 65)

However, Milton still defends the reading of the old masters' works not only to teach the ethical principles required for the edification of the soul, but he also values them as compendiums for the learning of matters like agriculture, physics, mathematics, geometry, geography, or medicine. Thus the old knowledge prolongs itself into the present, though channelled in clearer and more profitable ways.

In spite of the lapse of one century, Verney's experience is not significantly different from Milton's. There had been no Portuguese parallel to Bacon to undertake the nation-wide diffusion of the new scientific ideas. The influence of the Discoveries was followed by an almost lethargic period due to the subsequent dynastic and political convulsions and the prevailing role of the Inquisition in shunning the development of a national intellectual élite.

Both authors shared a common influence of the humanistic views on education from Rabelais's caricatural portraits, Erasmus's critical writings, or Montaigne's thoughts in *Essais*, to name just a few, as well as the more modern and systematic work of Ratke, and Comenius in the linguistic and pedagogical fields. Ratke's emphasis on the early learning of the native languages, and the instrumental character of classical languages demonstrated by the Bateus brothers in their Spanish/Latin dictionary and in Comenius' *Janua Linguarum* became well established. Moreover, Comenius' conception of the progressive stages of learning according to the phases of the student's growth, in *Opera Didactica Omnia* (1657), gives way to a more realistic approach to the pedagogical projects.

Milton was also well aware of the contributions from the Reformation thinkers, like Luther, Calvin and Melancton. Though their main interests were not of a pedagogical nature, the need to enforce the protestant doctrine involved them in the educational issue. Milton adopts a rather slighting tone when he briefly refers to Comenius' pedagogical relevance. However, the latter's religious and ethical concern as part of a correct educational system, together with the above mentioned new ideas prevail on the organisation of Milton's "institutions of breeding". Nevertheless this is certainly less detailed than in the former's *Opera Didactica*. He describes the gradual training of students from twelve to twenty one years old, evolving from sensible matters to more abstract disciplines as a means to a solid upbringing in a shorter period of time than formerly used. The daily readings of pious texts and the reserving of Sundays to the study of theology and church history concur to render an almost monastical atmosphere to those institutions.

In Portugal the Counter-Reformation tried to reinforce the role of the Catholic Church in the educational institutions. The Jesuit and the Oratory Companies led the way. No wonder that Verney first studied in the Jesuitical Colégio de S. Antão, and later attended the course of philosophy at the Oratorian Congregation. The curricula consisted of the study of the Latin grammar, rhetoric and then logic, physics and metaphysics. After a short incursion in the military career, he resumed his studies in philosophy and theology at the University of Évora. It was in this Jesuitical school that he eventually graduated in philosophy. His personal experience would later

emerge in his vivacious criticism about the method and the syllabus used. The reading of Bacon, Descartes, Gassendi, Lossada and even Locke and Leibniz, some in the original idioms, others in French and Italian translations, drew him to wider epistemological interests. Thus, perhaps, the urge to travel to Rome where he met other intellectuals. There he began to prepare his life work, the pedagogical compendium that would enlighten his countrymen.

The impoverished humanistic tradition which constituted the then applied syllabus made him organise an adapted curriculum starting with linguistic studies of Latin, Greek and Hebrew, in every way similar to the promptings advanced by Milton. For the effect Verney wrote some short grammars, and he intended to write a "Portuguese and Ancient Histories" as well to encourage the learning of this subject. He also promoted the study of rhetoric and philosophy with works consisting of logic, theology, metaphysics and physics. He also refers having written other compendiums on civil and canon law, as well as on other topics, with the exception of medicine. (Salgado Júnior 1949: V, li).

The vast scope of his work contrasts with the conciseness of Milton's proposal. The scarcity of sources, both national and foreign, in Portugal at the time justifies this feverish production. Verney was trying hard to overcome the void left by the inquisitorial censorship and like Comenius was writing directly to his own community's needs. The latter felt compelled to build up a cultural heritage in order to compensate his persecuted fellow countrymen, while Verney did just the same in order to fight off national stagnation and decadence.

Notwithstanding the close influence of the French pedagogical work of Rollin, *Traité des études* (1720) and *De la manière d'enseigner et d'étudier les Belles-Lettres, par rapport à l'esprit et au coeur* (1726-1738) in *Verdadeiro Método*, especially in the first seven letters, the model envisaged by the count of Ericeira must have also contributed to Verney's project. Despite the scanty information available, the academy the count started in his own house circa 1717-1720 seems to be the first systematic attempt to promote a new syllabus. Several lecturers came to teach on specific subjects covering different branches of knowledge, such as literary studies, history, philosophic and scientific studies and a course on methodology delivered by the count himself (Salgado Júnior 1949: IV, xxix-xxxii).

However, the count of Ericeira's pedagogical catalogue shows no interest in relation to the new scientific approach promoted by Francis Bacon and later by John Locke. These theories widely spread all over Europe were eventually known in Portugal through the efforts of those travellers who, like Verney, went abroad in search of a fresh intellectual scenario.

Castro Sarmiento and Pina Proença were both instrumental in promoting a new revised curriculum, the former on account of his ambitious answer to King João V's desired reform of the medical studies, and the latter as the author of *Apontamentos sobre a educação dum menino nobre* (1734) (Notes concerning the education of a young gentleman) (Salgado Júnior 1949: IV, xliii-1).

Pina Proença's title clearly reflects the idea of the gentleman which permeates most of the social conceptions of English eighteenth century thought and especially Locke's new pedagogical approach. Instead of a schooling curricular system, John Locke aims at the education of a new man, from the cradle to adulthood. The upbringing process must confer physical strength, good manners and a mental

capacity to absorb all possible knowledge, both subjective and objective, in order to mould the perfect gentleman.

Regardless of Verney's lack of explicit references to John Locke's works, his philosophic and pedagogical theories underlie most of the former's conceptions. Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* (1690) and also *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) were translated into French by Pierre Coste in 1700 and 1695, respectively. So Verney had an easy access to its contents. His critics generally agree on the frequent borrowing of Locke's empiricist theory in the letters dedicated to the philosophic studies. Nevertheless, there is a wider gap between the educational purposes of these two pedagogues. While John Locke neglects the prospective professional careers of his gentlemen, Verney never forgets the more practical purposes of his project, that is, to form men, and women in such a way as to make them useful to his own country.

Thus, in spite of the many obvious differences, it is Milton's commitment in preparing worthy commonwealth men that we find again in Verney's proposition in his first letter: a reflection concerning the methods of the studies in the Portuguese realm, whether they are fit to mould men in order to be useful to the Commonwealth and Religion (Salgado Júnior 1949: I, 17). Just like Milton, he wishes to populate his homeland with architects, lawyers, doctors, politicians, teachers, a new generation apt to lead the realm to a new era. Unfortunately Verney was not to witness the change; unlike the English commonwealth of the Cromwellian period, Portuguese society was slow to acknowledge its debt towards him.

References

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