

The Story of the Language Academy

Magalati, 15 June 1935

I do not mean here our own Egyptian Language Academy — I mean, rather, that same Language Academy which, once named by this same term, is genuinely understood, at once, without any real need for explanation, or clarification: the very one founded, in Paris, three centuries ago, one the world will soon celebrate, for reaching exactly this same age, just two days after this same piece appears.

Cardinal Richelieu, France's own great minister, genuinely strove, to establish the French Language Academy, in exactly this same year, of the seventeenth century — and its own founding proved neither easy, nor simple, despite whatever strength, and power, whatever standing, and authority, its own great founder himself possessed. It proved, rather, genuinely, thoroughly difficult, genuinely, thoroughly convoluted — and it is precisely for this reason that a French writer was able to fashion, from its own difficult, convoluted founding, a genuinely charming, delightful story, published by *L'Illustration*, in a supplement, to one of its own issues, appearing this past January.

This same French writer is Émile Magne, and he titled his own story with this same charming title: *The Birth of the French Academy*.

I write this same piece, on the occasion of these same festivities, soon to be held, in Paris, two days hence, and genuinely hope this same piece might serve as a tribute, to this same great literary body, one the French themselves call — rightly, or wrongly, sincerely at times, mockingly at others — the very last body of the Immortals. Not every Frenchman, though, genuinely loves his own Language Academy, or approves of it, or admires it — many among them, indeed among their own finest minds, mock the Language Academy, and diminish her own worth, as far as they genuinely can, and find any genuine way of doing so.

Among these same indignant mockers, there are those who genuinely indulge, in indignation, and mockery, for as long as youth allows it — only to throw themselves, headlong, at the Language Academy, once approaching old age, or reaching the midpoint of middle age, wishing, even at the cost of their own nose, they might genuinely secure a single seat, among the Immortals' own seats.

Among these same indignant mockers, too, are those who genuinely persist in it, sincerely, and faithfully, in their own hatred, contempt, and rejection, of the Language Academy, refusing, with every genuine refusal, exactly this same immortality — one genuinely offering its own possessor nothing whatsoever.

There remains no doubt whatsoever, that many of those who will read this same piece have already read that same remarkable novel Alphonse Daudet once wrote, titling it *The Immortal* — declaring, on its own opening page, that he had never wished, did not wish, and would never wish, to become a member, of the Language Academy — before depicting, within it, exactly the kind of weakness, and mortality, and childishness, the very pettiness of soul, found among so many of its own members, one still genuinely stirring pity, and compassion, even now.

Among the genuinely familiar, widespread ideas held by the French themselves is that these same "Immortals" remain, taken altogether, among the men genuinely least fortunate, in achieving real immortality: they secure this same immortality, exactly as they stand at death's own door, already bending over the grave — and, once they have finally met death, and descended, to the very depths of the grave, they most often fail to retain, this same immortality, they only just attained, in their own final days, the passing days simply folding their own memory away, oblivion overtaking them, utterly.

What stands entirely certain, beyond any doubt whatsoever, is that the overwhelming majority of these same Immortals' own names, those who have worn the green robe, these past three centuries, have already vanished, remaining only in the Academy's own records, France's own official gazette, and certain history books. Nor does the immortality, of those members of this same Academy whose own names still remain visible, genuinely arise, from their own membership in it, or their own admission to it — it arises, rather, before all else, from their own literary, or non-literary, achievements, which have already imposed themselves, upon history, entirely on their own terms.

It seems most likely, rather, that the Academy herself genuinely benefited, from their own membership in her, and was genuinely honoured, by their own admission to her, far more than they themselves benefited, or were honoured, by having their own names registered, at the Mazarin Palace. Who could possibly claim that Victor Hugo, Anatole France, Marshal Foch, Marshal Joffre, or Raymond Poincaré, were ever

genuinely honoured by the Academy, more than the Academy herself was genuinely honoured, by them? Yet none of them, for all of that, would ever have consented, to publish a single piece, a single article, or a single book, without adding, to his own great name, exactly this same great title: Member of the French Language Academy.

Not every member of the Academy proves genuinely immortal, even though every single one is described as such — yet the Academy herself remains immortal, beyond any doubt: this same Academy, composed of neither these particular individuals, nor those, but remaining, rather, a genuine idea, in its own right, a genuine concept, of thought, a genuine stronghold, for the French language's own tradition, the French language itself, French literature, France's own worthy traditions, and French glory, in the most general sense.

This same Academy remains immortal, beyond any doubt — time itself genuinely incapable, of ever encroaching upon her, save to exactly the same degree it might encroach upon France herself. And so long as glorious France herself endures, her own Language Academy shall genuinely remain, upon her own head, a genuinely glorious crown.

In studying the very story surrounding this same Academy's own founding, and appearance, lies a genuine lesson, for whoever genuinely wishes to learn one, a genuine admonition, for whoever genuinely wishes to heed one, a genuine subject, of reflection, and contemplation, for those who genuinely love reflection, and contemplation, and a genuine path, toward comparison, and benefit, for those genuinely drawn to comparison, and benefit.

Perhaps the very story I have already alluded to above depicts this same great Academy's own founding, more beautifully than anything else. For, as we examine this same story, we see, at its own outset, a man, of ordinary, respectable standing, connected to one of France's own great men, working in the administration, of his own wealth, and his own estates — genuinely exhausted, by this same work, one particular day, and wishing to genuinely relax, and so visiting a friend of his own, a clergyman, one Abbé Boisrobert, a man genuinely favoured, by Cardinal Richelieu himself, entirely devoted to him, entertaining him, distracting him, and spying, on his own behalf, upon the nobles, and the great — a man who was himself a genuinely refined man of letters, an affected poet, and a genuinely flexible man of the cloth.

Once this same respectable man reached this same clergyman, and they fell into their own conversation, the clergyman learned that his own companion regularly frequented a private, secret gathering, of nine men, whom he named for him — men bound together, by genuine, sincere friendship, and a true love of literature. They would meet, from time to time, at one another's own homes, discussing literature, and poetry, philosophy, and wisdom, each presenting, to his own companions, whatever work he had newly written, the others receiving it, with genuine criticism, in strict, candid counsel, favouring neither leniency, nor evasion.

Once the clergyman heard, of this same group of men, exactly what he heard, their own matter genuinely troubled him, and he grew genuinely concerned, they might have formed some secret society, operating outside the law, conspiring against the great minister himself. He infiltrated them, then, spying on them, and connected himself to them, gently — yet no sooner had he listened to them, and spoken with them, than he found them genuinely harmless, both to the state, and to his own master, and even came to genuinely love what they were doing, dwelling upon it at real length, wishing he might genuinely transform this same circle, into something official, recognized by the state, and appointed by authority. He spoke of it, then, to his own master, who authorized him, in turn, to request these same men organize their own affairs, expand their own numbers, and prepare themselves, to become an official body.

We continue, then, through this same story, and find these same men of letters, once the great minister's own command reached them, genuinely troubled by it, genuinely alarmed by it, genuinely fearful, for their own freedom, and their own literature, from politics' own meddling, and authority's own scheming — yet finding themselves, for all of this, genuinely unable to do anything but submit, to what they were commanded, and respond, to what they were invited to do. They organized their own affairs, then, drew up their own rules, and began admitting, to their own ranks, a genuine assembly of literary, and poetic, luminaries.

Yet they genuinely felt they had already relinquished their own freedom, the moment they accepted authority's own patronage: the great minister genuinely disliked their own choosing, among literary, and poetic luminaries, whomever they themselves wished, nor whomever their own genuine merit qualified, to become members, of the Academy.

He preferred, rather — indeed, commanded them — to choose whomever he himself wished, whomever he himself approved of, and whomever their own political activities, open, or hidden, genuinely qualified, to constitute the Language Academy.

And once these same men had already submitted, once, they found themselves genuinely compelled, to continue submitting further still — could they possibly have defied the great minister's own command? They faced, rather, a genuine choice, between absolute obedience, and absolute ordeal — and chose obedience, over ordeal, drawing up their own rules, and expanding their own numbers, exactly as Richelieu himself wished, not as they themselves wished.

We continue, then, through this same story, and find the Cardinal Minister requesting King Louis XIII himself sign a decree, in which the state would formally recognize this same body — and the King duly grants his own request. This same body then genuinely rejoices, at this same decree: the French language had finally secured, for herself, an official body, to protect her from meddling, preserve her from loss, and guarantee her own growth, and purity.

This same royal decree is then sent, to the Parlement, for registration, exactly as the system, of that own time, required — and this same Parlement refers the King's own decree, to a rapporteur it had itself chosen, to study it, and present his own report on it. Yet this same rapporteur happened to be a man genuinely devoted, to his own stomach, throat, and mouth, genuinely coarse, of mind, and heart, preferring the art of cookery, to the art of literature, favouring every variety of food, over poetry's own arts.

The Parlement, and the Parisian people alongside it, genuinely loathed the Cardinal Minister, harbouring genuine suspicion, toward him, and toward his own actions, and his own supporters — and so neither the people, nor the Parlement, ever doubted, that the Language Academy was nothing but a genuine political instrument, for this same tyrant's own tyranny.

From this same source arose the people's own indignation, at the Academy, counting her own members among the very traitors — and the Parlement's own indignation, at the Academy too, heeding its own rapporteur's own plea, and refusing to register the royal decree, refusing, too, to recognize this same body at all.

People passed down, among themselves, that this same Parlement's own rapporteur used to say: Frenchmen's own bellies deserve genuine attention, far more than their own minds — for minds can genuinely be patient, while bellies find no genuine path, toward patience whatsoever. The Language Academy, meanwhile, throughout all of this, remained genuinely despairing, and destitute, genuinely sorrowful, and pitiable, possessing no settled place, of her own, to find genuine reassurance in, no refuge, to take shelter in — moving, rather, between the homes, of her own various members: a guest, today, of this one member, a guest, tomorrow, of that one.

The Academy's own members, whenever they left their own meetings, heard, and read, nothing but genuine mockery, and abuse — becoming, themselves, mere idle talk, the subject of evening gossip, indeed, the very subject of mocking songs, and biting jests. And they genuinely deserved a great deal, of the mockery befalling them: they had already burdened themselves, with tasks they genuinely could not bear — taking upon themselves the compilation of a dictionary, then never even beginning it; taking upon themselves the reform of grammar, then never reforming anything of it at all — spending their own continuous meetings, instead, on speeches, and lectures, with neither head, nor tail.

Their own master, the Cardinal Minister himself, eventually grew genuinely disillusioned with them, despaired of them, and turned his own attention, away from them, toward another literary pursuit he genuinely loved, and threw himself into: the Cardinal Minister loved the theatre, exactly as he composed poetry himself, and it occurred to him, one particular day, to select five poets — Corneille among them, his own chaplain Boisrobert among them too — proposing to them a subject, for a theatrical play, and sketching out, for them, this same play's own plot himself. All of this occupied him, entirely away from his own Language Academy: the play was duly written, he listened to it, approved of it, criticized one particular poet — Corneille himself — while approving the others, prepared the play for performance, ordered it staged, spent a great deal of money on it — yet the play failed, most miserably.

Corneille himself grew genuinely angry, at the minister's own criticism, exiling himself, from Paris, residing, in Normandy, for a while, genuinely indignant at the capital, devoting himself entirely to his own craft — and people awoke, one particular day, to find Paris speaking of nothing but Corneille himself, and a certain theatrical play Corneille had written, one that succeeded, most brilliantly, achieving a genuinely

tremendous triumph: Le Cid itself.

Throughout exactly this same period, in which Le Cid succeeded, and occupied Paris entirely, the Cardinal Minister himself was busy preparing, for the staging, of two other plays, ones he had himself proposed, and sketched the plot of, approving them, once written, and ordering them staged.

Once he heard of Le Cid, and the very triumph it had achieved, this genuinely angered him — though he concealed his own anger, ordering his own chaplain to attend the performance, and report back to him, on this same play. His chaplain came, then, praising the play, quite genuinely, faulting it only for failing to observe that same sacred rule, the rule of the three unities, one the Cardinal Minister himself genuinely upheld, and guarded, as though it were one of the state's own laws.

Yet the minister himself never genuinely grew angry, over the three unities — he grew angry, rather, over two entirely different matters. The first: that Le Cid genuinely glorified duelling, a practice he himself had already outlawed, having already executed certain noblemen, who had defied his own edict, and engaged in duels. The second: that Le Cid genuinely glorified the Spanish, at a time when Spain's own armies had already occupied certain French territory, never evacuating it, except after genuinely great effort.

And, as ill fortune would have it, the two same plays the minister himself had proposed were duly staged, meeting the same genuinely disgraceful failure the first same play had already met — while Le Cid, meanwhile, achieved nothing but ever-greater success, and triumph.

The Cardinal Minister himself genuinely wished he could punish Corneille, for his own success — yet what could he possibly do, with the public genuinely admiring the play, the court itself genuinely admiring the play too? The Queen herself had already attended it, twice — and so he found himself genuinely unable to avoid attending it too, ordering it staged, for himself, at his own palace, openly expressing his own admiration for it, and his own praise of it, and arranging, for the poet himself, a genuinely handsome, ongoing pension.

Yet he had already, genuinely, secretly, devised his own scheme, behind the scenes: a group of poets, and writers, began criticizing the play, genuinely fiercely, while another group defended it, genuinely vigorously — and the Parisians themselves became genuinely captivated,

by this same literary quarrel, with a fervour French literature had never genuinely known the equal of. Corneille himself defended his own work, exactly as a man genuinely convinced of his own genius, openly proclaiming it, would defend it — never even hesitating, to risk a genuinely dangerous allusion, aimed at the great minister himself.

A certain writer then published a genuinely fierce pamphlet, criticizing *Le Cid* — yet proposing, within it, a genuinely strange proposal, one undoubtedly originating, from the Cardinal Minister himself: that the Academy herself be asked to arbitrate, in this same quarrel, that had already erupted, among men of letters, over *Le Cid*.

The Cardinal Minister himself genuinely welcomed this same proposal, and encouraged it, ordering certain intermediaries to suggest, to the Academy, that she accept this same case. The Academy herself proved genuinely hesitant, at first, to even examine the matter — yet submitted, to the minister's own command, exactly as she had already submitted before.

Yet the Academy's own rules never permitted her to rule, on people's own works, except with the very authors' own consent — so there remained no genuine way around it, except that Corneille himself consent, to the Immortals' own arbitration, over his own play. Corneille had initially refused this same arbitration, for a genuinely simple reason: were he to consent, he would thereby establish a genuinely dangerous precedent, permitting some group of men, to arbitrate, over literature, and art, indeed, over liberty, and genius, itself. Yet Corneille found himself given a genuine choice, between accepting this same arbitration, and forfeiting the pension the minister himself had granted him — and he chose his own pension, and the minister's own favour, over liberty, and genius, submitting, then, to the Immortals' own judgment.

The Immortals began, from that same moment, examining the play, with genuinely careful study, forming, for exactly this purpose, various committees, these same committees producing report after report after report — each report duly presented, to the minister himself, who examined it, and altered it, changing, and modifying it, sometimes genuinely disliking a report's own tenor entirely, and tasking one of his own officials, to substitute, in its place, an entirely different formulation. And the Academy herself witnessed all of this, genuinely disliking it — yet submitting to it regardless: having already begun her own official existence, through submission, she found herself genuinely compelled, to

continue exactly this same submission.

Yet it was exactly this same case that genuinely secured the Academy's own official existence: since the Cardinal Minister himself wanted the Academy to rule, on *Le Cid*, and to rule on it, exactly as politics itself demanded, or exactly as the tyrant's own despotic caprice demanded, not as literature, and art, themselves demanded — this same Academy needed, then, to secure every genuine official trapping, that might render her own ruling genuinely official, genuinely deserving of reverence, and respect.

The Parlement, then, needed genuinely to register the King's own decree, needed genuinely to recognize the official existence, of this same supreme literary court. The Academy very nearly ruined the whole matter for herself, in fact: she had already prepared her own ruling, and sent it, to the printer, before ever sending it, to the minister himself — though intermediaries managed to repair this same mistake, securing the minister's own pardon for it. The minister himself then genuinely strove, to compel the Parlement, to register the royal decree — and the Parlement genuinely strove, in turn, to refuse exactly this same registration.

The matter finally ended, in a genuine crisis, between the government, and the Parlement — and word finally reached the Parlement, that the government, and the court, might well reconsider the Parlement's own jurisdiction, and might well curtail her own authority. And so the Parlement finally submitted, in the end, exactly as the Academy had already submitted, at the very beginning — registering the royal decree, in the year 1637, the Academy's own birth finally completed, after the Cardinal himself had struggled, over it, for more than two full years.

No sooner had the royal decree been registered, and the Academy become an official body, of the state's own bodies, than her own ruling, on *Le Cid*, was finally issued — a ruling satisfying Corneille not at all, containing, as it did, genuinely harsh criticism; satisfying Corneille's own rivals not at all either, containing, as it did, genuinely excessive leniency; satisfying the Academy herself not at all, containing, as it did, a genuine overreach, beyond right, and art alike — yet satisfying the Cardinal Minister himself entirely, containing, as it did, a genuine slight, against Corneille — this same bold poet, who had already managed, to speak in verse, and openly proclaim his own genius, declaring himself indebted to

no one whatsoever, for exactly this same genius, not even to the Cardinal Minister himself.

And so genuine espionage first prompted the very thought, of founding the French Language Academy, political tyranny itself served as the genuine means, of founding this same Academy, and politics' own injustice, toward literature, became the genuine cause, of this same Academy's own official existence. *Le Cid* herself became a genuine sacrificial victim, this same Academy fed, upon her own blood — yet the genuinely strange thing is that *Le Cid* never died at all: she triumphed, instead, her own wronged author triumphing, alongside her, into immortality — and the Academy herself never died either, triumphing, likewise, into immortality herself.

What genuinely died, though — died a death admitting of no genuine resurrection, no genuine revival whatsoever — was the Cardinal Minister's own tyranny, the Cardinal Minister's own literature, and the Cardinal Minister's own caprice.

Richelieu had genuinely wished to make right itself a mere path toward falsehood, to make literature a mere instrument of politics, and to make the Language Academy a mere tool of injustice — yet Richelieu himself failed, his own falsehood perished, and his own injustice proved genuinely incapable of ever reaching its own goal. *Corneille* lived on; *Le Cid* lived on; the Language Academy lived on; and France herself lived on, her own immortal literary crown shining, upon her own brow, once she had finally cast off, from her own brow, that other crown — one that had never genuinely drawn its own strength, or its own beauty, from art, and literature, nor from reason, and heart, but had drawn its own strength, and its own beauty, rather, from mere force, brutality, and tyranny alone.