Sacrosanct...

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), August 31, 1934

These are our masters and our rulers — the ones the present cabinet wishes to protect by law, once they have departed this life, forbidding journalists, critics, and writers of literature and history from treating them in any way the rulers now in power would not approve of. And in truth, the matter of these sacrosanct masters will prove exceedingly problematic, exceedingly obscure, stirring up more varieties of doubt than could ever be counted, and more shades of suspicion than could ever be traced to their source. We do not imagine the cabinet means to forbid writers and historians from mentioning the dead at all, under any circumstances whatsoever. It means, rather, it would seem, to forbid them from treating the dead in whatever way might displease, or fail to please.

Who, then, is to judge whether what the writers say of them displeases, or fails to please? Is it the dead themselves? We have never seen a dead man rise from his grave to sue a living one over what was written or said about him. Is it, then, the living among the rulers and ministers? We should very much like to know how the living could possibly act as proxies for the dead in a matter the dead never authorized them to represent, declaring that such-and-such a judgment would please them, and such-and-such a judgment would displease them, and such-and-such a judgment would cause them harm.

This is a form of arbitrary control — and an ugly form of arbitrary control at that — exercised not over the living alone, but over the living and the dead both.

Suppose I write a chapter about some ruler who has passed on to the other world, and suppose this chapter fails to satisfy the present cabinet, which judges it an offense against this dead ruler, and so brings me before the courts over this chapter. It is entirely possible that the dead ruler's own opinion of this chapter, had he read it, would have been favorable; it is entirely possible that his approval of it would have been complete. For who knows — perhaps death erases from the souls of the dead every capacity for resentment, every inclination toward revenge; or perhaps death alters the very shape and nature and value of things in the eyes of the dead, so that they come, after death, to approve of what they once resented in life; and those who feared the truth and dreaded it, and

made war upon its champions while they lived, come instead to embrace the truth and find peace in it, and to love its advocates, once they are dead. And so the cabinet might well sue me on behalf of this dead ruler, when the very ruler himself, had he been granted resurrection, would have accepted my judgment of him, would have wished his entire record altered, and would have begged forgiveness of God and of the people for his failures toward both. For who knows — perhaps death restores people to right guidance, inspires goodness in them, endears to them what is decent, and sets their souls right after corruption, so that they accept counsel after death which they once scorned in life, and come to prefer forgiveness after death, having once preferred tyranny in life. And so, when the cabinet claims for itself the protection of the dead from critics and historians, it exercises arbitrary control not over critics and historians alone, but over the dead themselves, coming perilously close to committing against them an offense they may well resent, one that might provoke them to rise up, and to take their revenge upon the cabinet for it, haunting the ministers by day and visiting terrifying dreams upon them by night. Earthly life is a vain delusion, which persuades the living that they stand above criticism, above counsel, above guidance, and are sacrosanct against everything unbecoming of sanctified greatness. But the life to come is innocent of this vain delusion, free of this arrogance, cleansed of this corruption — so why, then, does the cabinet wish to pursue the dead with the very evil and sin belonging to this earthly life? And why does the cabinet wish to burden the dead with sins and offenses they themselves have no wish to bear? Has any one of the dead ever come to the Prime Minister, or to any of his colleagues, or to any of his advisers, waking or sleeping, to inform him that some critic had criticized him and thereby wronged him, or that some historian had described him and thereby pained him, or that he stood in need of having the state avenge him against this historian or that critic — such that this strange inclination arose to protect the dead by law from critics and historians?

And did the Prime Minister, or his colleagues, or his advisers, upon seeing and hearing the specter of this dead man — whether waking or sleeping — turn to those skilled in reciting incantations, chanting spells, and interpreting dreams, to establish beyond doubt that the dead do indeed demand this law, do indeed insist upon this protection, do indeed cry out against criticism and history?

The Prime Minister, his colleagues, and his advisers, so far as we know, are people possessed of a certain measure of culture — modern,

contemporary culture, which may be very broad, or may be moderate, or may be somewhat narrow. But it is, in any case, a modern culture, one that teaches those who hold it that when a man dies, he departs entirely from the phases of life, and his deeds and his conduct become the property of history, to be judged as history sees fit, not as people might wish, nor even as he himself once wished. And we believe our ministers, and those who advise them, are acquainted with something of the history of that great case much discussed in France some years ago. A certain historian of literature took up the famous writer George Sand, describing her conduct in life as unsavory, and chose to describe it with a certain frankness; the writer's granddaughter, offended by this historian because his offense against her grandmother offended her too, brought the matter before the courts, and the courts turned her away disappointed — for George Sand, once dead, no longer belonged to her descendants, but belonged instead to history. Or is what people are saying perhaps true — that those who draft this law, or advise in favor of it, are not thinking of the dead at all, but are thinking, rather, of the living, anticipating what may yet come, wishing to secure our ministers against criticism once they, too, have departed this house after a long life? This would be excess in caution, and excess in arrogance, and a vanity that gets ahead of events, and an excessive faith in oneself and trust in one's own authority. And yet a man who cannot protect himself in life from a mosquito's bite can hardly protect himself in death from the criticism of critics, and the history of historians.

Would the ministers, and those who commend this law to them, not agree with us that this manner of thinking, judging, understanding, and deciding hardly befits cultured people — people who, left alone with themselves, or speaking honestly to others, believe that earthly life is but sport and play and vanity, and that once a man departs it, he has no further claim on those he leaves behind, except insofar as he was great, conducted himself well among them, and offered them enough good that they should be bound, by that alone, to love him?

And why, moreover, do those who wish to forbid people from criticizing the dead in newspapers and books stop, in their vanity, at this limit alone — when by rights they ought also to forbid people from criticizing the dead by tongue, and in conscience as well, and ought to draft a law forbidding the living from thinking of the dead, whether in writing, speech, image, gesture, or thought, in any way other than what the dead themselves would approve of, and ought to prepare, for the

enforcement of this law, armies of men to watch over people whenever they speak, write, paint, or gesture, and armies of jinn and devils to watch over people whenever they think, or reflect, or find their souls troubled by thoughts the dead would resent?

There is another matter, too, which I confess I cannot understand how the ministers, and those who commend this strange law to them, have failed to notice: namely, the grave insult it would deal to Egypt's reputation throughout the entire educated world. For the moment this law is issued, people in every corner of the earth will conclude that every report circulated in Egypt, every piece of criticism written there, every work of history composed there, is falsified and corrupt, unworthy of acceptance or trust — because hypocrisy and falsehood, the distortion of facts, and flattery of the living and the dead alike, will all have been made compulsory in Egypt by law.

How fitting it would be for the ministers to reflect, and how fitting for those who commend this law to the ministers to reflect, that the public's fear of criticism ought never to force upon them the far graver terror of trespassing against truth and morality.

We are told that Ibn al-Zubayr once feared death, in his final days, dreading that al-Hajjaj would mutilate his corpse — and his mother, Asma bint Abi Bakr, may God be pleased with them all, said to him: "My son, the sheep, once slaughtered, feels no pain from the skinning."

Let those who draft this law remember that a man, once he has departed this world, is no longer injured by criticism, nor pained by history.