On the Language Academy

Al-Masri, 15 May 1937.

1 I see no harm in returning to the matter of the Language Academy, having set it aside some weeks ago, and after the delightful article my friend Haykal published in al-Siyasa al-Usbu'iyya last Saturday; for it may be said that the Senate will take up the Academy's statute within days, and it may well be a matter of right, indeed of duty, for those who hold views on the Academy to lay their views before the Senators before this statute comes up for consideration — in the hope that God Almighty may grant our Senators a success He did not grant our Deputies, nor the government that founded this Academy, so that they may set the matter right, and establish for the Arabic language an academy that benefits it and does not harm it, and for Egypt an academy that adorns it and does not disgrace it — or else spare themselves, their language, and their country this whole discussion, which may be set aside without the celestial spheres ceasing their motion, or the sun rising from the west.

2 It occurs to me that among the particular benefits of democracy is that, in entrusting the people's affairs to the people, it permits people to enlighten the people's senators and deputies on public matters they have not themselves spent their time on, nor devoted their efforts to, and on which they must nonetheless render judgment out of genuine insight and deliberation, not out of mere imitation and convention.

3 The story of the Language Academy in Egypt, like the story of many an Egyptian institution, is not without its share of wonder; for the sense of a need to organize concern for the Arabic language had long been keenly felt, and there had been earlier attempts to establish an academy that would attend to the language, safeguard its soundness, and work diligently at its purification. It would have been natural for that sentiment and those attempts to culminate in an academy perfectly suited to the need that called for its creation and prompted the thinking behind it.

4 But Egypt, as you know, dear reader, has at certain times fallen ill with the malady of pomp, with an affectation of grandeur and magnificence, and a grasping after the trappings of false greatness, so as to picture to herself and to others that she has reached the same stage of progress as the European nations that dominate and rule the world. The strange thing is that this malady is remarkably skilled at exploiting

sentiment, seizing opportunities, and harnessing natural inclinations in pursuit of this affected greatness, this contrived pomp, this ornamentation that avails nothing and signifies nothing.

5 Egypt felt the need to attend to her language, and this malady seized upon that sentiment and exploited it, making Egypt believe it would establish for her an academy to attend to the language — then gave her an academy of which the very least that can be said is that, as constituted, it can do the language no good whatsoever, little or much, and may well do it harm of far-reaching effect.

6 For this malady, which created the Language Academy in 1932, did not look closely and carefully at the state of the Arabic language, nor at its needs, nor at the capacity of its own people — it looked, rather, with one eye toward Europe and with the other toward the Arab East, wishing to say to the people of the West: look, we too have an academy like yours, and to say to the people of the East: look, we have an academy like the Europeans', the likes of which Syria and Iraq do not have.

7 It wished this Academy to be propaganda — propaganda befitting Egypt's standing among the peoples of East and West alike: Egypt is part of Europe, and so our academy must be like Europe's academies; and Egypt is the leading nation of the Arab East, and so her academy must be the leading academy among the Arabic language academies. This Academy had to be one of those towering, magnificent edifices that scrape the sky and dazzle the mind, one the eye could not help but fall upon the moment it fell upon Egypt. It did not matter that this edifice should be useful and effective — what mattered was that it should be dazzling and splendid, making Europeans imagine we were their equals, and making Easterners imagine we had outstripped them to a point they had not reached, nor even aspired to.

8 And we could dazzle Westerners and Easterners alike, impressing upon them that we were capable not only of accomplishing what the East alone could not achieve, but of accomplishing what even the West itself could not achieve.

9 And so we could establish an academy not confined to Egypt and Egyptians, but shared in common between East and West alike — a mixed academy, like the Mixed Courts, except that the Mixed Courts included no judges from the East at all, only Western and Egyptian judges, whereas the Language Academy had to be even more thoroughly mixed than the Mixed Courts: Egyptians were to make up half its membership —

and half is a great deal — while the other half was to be divided equally and fairly between East and West. We are, after all, a fair-minded people, fair to ourselves before we are fair to others, and so our numbers in the Academy ought not to exceed half, lest we should have the majority that would let us settle the Academy's affairs however we pleased.

10 And so the government then in power, in that sweet and pleasant hour, procured a royal decree establishing the Language Academy, and congratulated itself on this Academy in the Speech from the Throne delivered before Parliament.

11 More delightful still than the founding of the Academy in this manner is that the Parliament then sitting, in that same sweet and pleasant hour, approved of it just as the government approved of it, and applauded it just as the government applauded it — but the people, who were at that time ill-tempered, bitter-natured, and perverse in disposition, met the Academy with a scowl, grumbling at it, resentful of it; and the philosophers and sages and men of original opinion of that time declared: this Egyptian people is spoiled and pampered, ignorant and gullible, nothing satisfies it, it ought not to be consulted about anything, the good must be forced upon it by sheer compulsion, and it must be dragged toward reform in spite of itself — for its nose was created for nothing but being dragged by, and being left to itself, being incapable, it would never find its own way to the good.

12 And so the Language Academy was established in these strange circumstances, working, one might say, on the margins of Egyptian life — or, if you prefer, on the margins of literary and linguistic life.

13 These strange circumstances further willed that many of those who might have had something useful to say about the Academy's affairs happened to be opponents of the government then in power, its adversaries and resisters — so there was no choice but to keep the Academy's affair hidden from them and concealed behind their backs, and to confront them with it, if the expression may be allowed, as a fait accompli.

14 I recall that the Minister of Education at that happy time wished to consult, on the matter of the Academy, some of the orientalists then working at the Faculty of Arts, of which I was then Dean; he summoned them to him, heard them out, and spoke to them, and when they left his presence, someone whispered to them that it would be best if they did not speak of this to the Dean of the Faculty of Arts — yet they spoke to the

Dean nonetheless, and told him everything they had said and heard.

15 In those circumstances, the Academy's membership could not help but be political, just as its founding had been political, and so the Academy was stamped with that reactionary character — and in this it had a fine precedent in the French Academy itself; for that too was founded for political reasons, and composed for political reasons, and stamped by Richelieu, the champion of personal authority, with his own powerful imprint, and it remained a powerful image of reaction until the French Revolution abolished it and established in its place the Academy of Sciences.

16 The French Academy was later restored once the heat of the Revolution had cooled, but it has remained, to this day, closer to conservatism than to innovation.

17 All these were external circumstances surrounding the Academy's founding, and they neither eased its affairs nor facilitated its task, nor made it beloved to the people, nor sat lightly on the people's heart; and if we turn to the internal circumstances that shaped the Academy and charted its practical course, we find them no better than the external ones — for the Academy was asked to do what it could not do, and burdened with what it could not bear. And there is nothing strange in this; for the Academy's founding was not, in reality, a serious matter at all, but was rather propaganda, politics, ornament, and illusion.

18 It did not matter that it should function — what mattered was simply that it should exist. But the Academy did not content itself with mere existence; it wished also to function, to prove itself worthy of the existence it had been granted and burdened with, and no sooner had it begun to function than it found itself facing obstacles there was no way to overcome, and so it fell to struggling and floundering, circling these obstacles without ever managing to cross them. You need only look at its journal to see the signs of this confusion and floundering, plain and clear enough to need no elaboration.

19 A schoolteacher exposes himself to ridicule if he asks the Minister of Public Works to entrust him with building dams and raising bridges, and exposes himself to the madhouse if he asks the Minister of Health to entrust him with treating typhoid, malaria, or bilharzia — since people these days are talking of Professor Bilharz — and exposes himself, I know not why, if he asks the Minister of War to entrust him with training soldiers and leading them to the battlefield.

20 I do not suppose you would dispute or deny this; and yet the schoolteachers of whom the Academy was composed were required to be learned in engineering, medicine, administration, warfare, and whatever sciences you please or do not please, sciences they had heard of, and sciences they had never heard of even in their dreams.

21 And they were told: gentlemen, you know the Arabic language and master its disciplines as the scholars of Basra and Kufa knew and mastered them in the third and fourth centuries of the Hijra, or in the manner those great masters of Basra and Kufa knew and mastered them; we have therefore made you members of the Language Academy this very evening, so that by tomorrow morning — that is, after a single night, or a few nights at most — you shall be scholars of medicine in all its branches, of mathematics in all its forms and varieties, of physics and chemistry, of the life sciences and the fine arts, of everything the human mind has grasped and everything the human mind has produced, of everything the heart has felt and everything that has stirred human feeling, and of everything that proceeds from the heart's feeling and the stirring of feeling. And you must know all this with a knowledge sound, precise, detailed, and masterly, enabling you to express these sciences in words correct, precise, and exact, from which you neither err nor deviate, words which nonetheless suit classical Arabic most soundly, most precisely, and most clearly of all.

22 Those who said this to them were, in my strong estimation, only joking; for they were, I should think, too intelligent to suppose this possible, and too intelligent to imagine that a man could coin the technical terms of the sciences correctly and successfully without having mastered those sciences thoroughly … they were joking, in my strong estimation, because all they wanted was politics and propaganda.

23 But jesting may drag seriousness along behind it, as Abu Nuwas said; for those who founded the Academy were joking, and the Academy did not understand this jest from them — or did not wish to understand it — and so it wished to be learned in everything, capable of naming everything, forgetting that when Adam named all things, he did not name them of his own accord, but that God taught him all the names.

24 Be that as it may, the Academy strove to name things — whatever pertained to science, to practical affairs, and even to novelties — forming committees, dividing among them knowledge and the known, being and beings, charging each committee to ascend to the highest heavens if it

wished, or to plunge to the lowest earths if it preferred, but in any case to find names for things, bringing them down from above or raising them up from below — yet names for these things had somehow to be found, or else the Academy's very existence would be futile, its founding mere play, and the money spent on it sheer waste.

25 And so the committees set to work, and soon became certain they needed someone to teach them the knowledge they had not themselves acquired, and so they summoned consultants, and physicians, natural scientists, chemists, and practitioners of this art and that came and went among them, whichever specialists you please and whichever you do not please, and each of these consultants took to selling these committees his knowledge at a paltry price, a mere handful of piastres — for a technical term, as I have been told by those who spoke of it, would sell for twenty-five piastres — and the consultant would bring the English or French word for some scientific or artistic term and render it for the committee in an approximate translation, until the committee, having understood him, or imagining it had understood him, would set about researching, investigating, delving, and deliberating until it found an Arabic word it supposed might serve to express this meaning it imagined it had understood.

26 More remarkable and more extraordinary still: those who founded the Academy brought in people well versed in a given science but who did not know Arabic well, and said to them: gentlemen, you are well versed in this science or that, and so we have made you members of the Language Academy as of this very evening; by tomorrow morning — that is, after a single night, or a few nights at most — you shall be masters of the language, knowing it and mastering its disciplines as al-Khalil and Sibawayh once knew and mastered it, and as al-Farra' and Tha'lab once mastered it; then name whatever you have learned and mastered of science by whatever you have not learned and do not master of the language.

27 And so the Academy's affair became a wonder indeed: people who knew the language well, and nothing else, were told: be scholars, and name what you do not know by what you do know; and people who knew some science well, but did not know the language, were told: be philologists, and name what you know by what you do not know. The source of this curious confusion lies in two things: first, that those who founded the Academy were merely playing, pursuing some form of governance, some trick of political arrangement; and second, that those

who founded this Academy possessed no sound knowledge, neither of the sciences to be named, nor of the language by which they were to be named — hence all these countless names you find in the Academy's journal, names that suit neither science nor language, that answer no need of the age, nor strike any chord of taste among writers and poets, and that have cost the state sums the Ministry of Finance could readily reckon, and cost the Academy's own men efforts they may reckon only with God Almighty.

28 For our government at that time was living in the twentieth century while acting as Richelieu had acted in the seventeenth, oblivious that three centuries separated it from Richelieu, centuries in which everything had changed, oblivious that the French Academy had scarcely been founded in Paris before other scientific academies arose around it, pressing steadily forward in advancing the sciences and naming them, and compelling the Academy itself to become nothing more than a recorder.

29 Yes, and our government at that time was living in the twentieth century while oblivious that language is not legislated by statute, nor imposed by decree, but rather sprouts up wherever it is needed — sprouting in the scholar's study, the experimenter's laboratory, the craftsman's workshop, and sprouting too in the street and the fields — and is then refined by usage, which spreads it, establishes it, and imposes it upon the Language Academy, whereupon the Academy merely records it, setting bounds and limits upon it.

30 Nor was this the only thing our government at that time was oblivious to — it was oblivious to a great many other things besides, and it built the Academy upon what it did not know rather than upon what it knew, so that the Academy arose deformed, barren, and doomed from the outset to failure.

31 The chief distinguishing trait of the Ministry of Education at that time was that it knew the beginnings of things while remaining ignorant of their middles and ends, and knew the names of things while remaining ignorant of their meanings and realities … it was told: dialects are a sweet and lovely thing, well worth attending to, studied by universities and schools in Europe, and taken up by orientalists — and so it said: since dialects are sweet, let us take a taste of them, let us sample a share of them — and so it made it one of the Academy's purposes to attend to the modern dialects of Egypt and the other Arab lands, never asking itself,

nor able to ask itself, what this "attention" might even mean, nor its extent, nor its consequences.

32 It never occurred to it that an academy charged with safeguarding the soundness of classical Arabic has no business studying colloquial dialects. It heard dialects mentioned, took a liking to the word, and inserted it into the decree establishing the Academy, saying to the Academy: you and whatever you wish, or you and whatever you are able! And the Academy has neither wished nor been able to do anything whatsoever about dialects to this day, though it makes a show of zeal for the matter, fearing lest Parliament should snatch it from its hands.

33 More remarkable and extraordinary than all this: the government asked the Academy to compile a dictionary, and the Academy duly announced that it would, but has not to this day begun compiling it — because it wishes to fetch its technical terms down from the sky, or dig them up from the earth. This is a long and arduous task, and the government, having despaired of this dictionary after waiting four years for it even to begin, set about establishing one itself last year through the Ministry of Education, and the Minister of Education at the time, Professor Alluba Pasha, graciously arranged for the Academy to be given a share in this dictionary project.

34 The Academy accepted this partnership reluctantly, having no choice in the matter; and no sooner had that Minister left office than the Academy, by way of its own decree, appealed to the sitting Minister, saying to him: do me justice, for your predecessor wronged me — give me back my dictionary, for the Ministry of Education seized it from me — and make it mine alone, excluding all others, for the previous Minister gave a share in it to those who had no connection whatsoever to the Academy.

35 And the sitting Minister granted the Academy's president his request, abolishing a committee that had already begun its work in earnest, and returning the dictionary to the Academy this past July — yet the Academy has done nothing with it to this day, and the dictionary has been delayed yet another year, because the Academy cannot begin it before settling its terminology, fetching it down from the sky or digging it up from the earth. This is a long and arduous task; so there is nothing for it but to wait.

36 And all the while, the state goes on spending money, and spending money, and all we reap from it is this journal the Academy publishes, which some of its own members acknowledge and others

vehemently disown.

37 Then the sitting Minister of Education wished to set the matter right, to reconsider the Academy's statute, and to bring the matter before Parliament, and so he drafted a law for the Academy in which he deferred to the Academy itself — being a man of constitutional principle, and having been a judge before he was a minister, he did not wish the Academy to feel it had been wronged.

38 And the Academy held fast to its old statute, loving it most dearly and clinging to it most ardently — but the sitting Minister had not, unlike the Minister of Tradition before him, developed a taste for the modern dialects, and so struck them from the new law, concerning himself instead with reviving ancient literature, since it is the very material from which both the linguistic dictionary and the historical dictionary are drawn.

39 At this the Academy grew angry, its heart filled with grief and regret, and it complained to the Chamber of Deputies, enlisting the support of certain deputies, suggesting to them what it suggested, and embellishing for some of them what it embellished — and lo, the law came before the Chamber of Deputies exactly as the government that had founded the Academy had wanted it, and exactly as the sitting Academy itself had wanted it, but not at all as the interest of scholarship wanted it, nor as Egypt's intellectual dignity wanted it; so the Academy, just as the Chamber of Deputies had constituted it, remains charged with teaching what it does not know, with coining the terminology of sciences in which it has not the slightest competence, and remains charged, too, with studying colloquial dialects while safeguarding the soundness of classical Arabic, reconciling these two contradictions at once — for God Almighty, after all, is able to gather the whole world into one, as Abu Nuwas said.

40 The Academy's statute is now before the Senate, so may the honorable Deputies permit us to tell them plainly that they erred and acted in haste, or that they ought to have sought the right course even as they made haste; and may they permit us to say to them: the interest of the language and Egypt's dignity oblige them to reconsider this law in detail, to lift from the Academy the burden of scientific terminology — for that is not its business, nor is it capable of it, and God burdens no soul beyond its capacity, nor does He impose upon individuals or communities more than they can bear — and to spare the Academy the colloquial dialects too, for that likewise is not its business, nor was it created for it;

two swords cannot be sheathed together, nor can water and fire coexist; if we want a body for the colloquial tongue, let us establish an academy for it, and leave classical Arabic to those who know how to study it properly, and know how to make use of that study.

41 Yes, and may the honorable Senators permit us to ask them also to reconsider the Academy's administrative arrangement; we do not wish the Academy to be made purely Egyptian, as it perhaps ought to have been from the start, for Egyptians always benefit from the assistance of Eastern scholars and orientalists — but we do wish the Academy's administrative affairs to belong to Egyptians, and to Egyptians alone: they are the ones who shall elect, and they are the ones who shall be elected.

42 As for our Eastern colleagues and the orientalists, let them take part in the scholarship alone; and then may the honorable Senators permit us to offer them a choice between two things: if they wish a language academy, then its proper purposes are the compiling of the linguistic and historical dictionaries, the revival of ancient literature, and the encouragement of modern literary production; and if they wish instead to coin the terminology of the sciences, then their way to that lies not through the Language Academy at all, but through establishing a Scientific Academy with its various branches, as exists in France, with the Language Academy as merely one branch among its others.

43 Let the Senators choose between these two courses, and let them avoid the confusion into which that earlier government fell; for it is not fitting that Egypt should laugh at her own expense, and make others laugh at her expense too, spending thousands of pounds every year on this mockery, which profits nothing and benefits no one.