

The Method of Reform

Taha Hussein

Al-Muqtabas — February 1, 1912

I know of no way to reform the language save three ways, old rather than new — that is, I am not their originator, but reformers have gone before me to them. The first: the publication of the ancient monuments of the Arabs, and the revival of what they composed of books of learning and letters, that people may read them and thereby attain two necessary results — the one, a knowledge of correct Arabic style, a mastery of choice diction, and an appreciation of the great breadth of understanding and intellect the ancients possessed; the other, a feeling on the part of readers for the magnificence of that lost glory and vanished honor, a feeling that drives them to rise up to reclaim it, and to restore to it the political standing and lofty place that once were its own. Allied to this method is the translation of useful books composed by the Franks, that our minds may be broadened and our souls elevated by them. The Ustadh Imam — may God be pleased with him — went far indeed along this path, and founded the Society for the Revival of Arabic Books, which published *Al-Mukhassas* and other works; but he did not die, God rest him, before its charter had been dissolved and no trace of it remained in existence. And I read, in the past year, of a government resolution on this very subject, due to the efforts of my eminent teacher Ahmad Zaki Pasha; a year has now passed since it, and no result has appeared from it, and indeed I fear it may have joined yesterday's forgotten things.

The second: the formation of a society of men learned in the language, versed in its substance and its styles, who would undertake what this age requires by way of cultivating new coinages along one of the paths I mentioned above — namely derivation, figurative extension, and arabization — and who would work to replace many colloquial expressions with their classical equivalents, and would oversee the styles of writing, poetry, and oratory, defending them against whatever the intruders among self-styled poets and writers introduce into them. We stand in need of such a society now, as you know, because classical Arabic has today become a kind of specialized craft, and shall never regain its former standing unless skilled physicians are found among its own people — physicians adept at diagnosing its malady and seeking out its cure. Some years ago something of this sort appeared at the Teachers' Club, and we were heartened and hoped for the best; the newspapers

received it with praise and lavish commendation — but it was not long before it sank into a deep sleep, and its hope now merely dreams of eventual triumph and the fulfillment of its aims.

The third: accustoming children, from their earliest years, to correctness of speech, and to choosing what is best in expression, by whatever method proves possible, until they grow up with their Arabic instinct already strengthened, needing the rules of grammar only insofar as these constitute a kind of linguistic philosophy — which is indeed their true function. And I know of no one more capable of this work, nor better suited to it, than Ustadh Ahmad Effendi al-Qattan, in his own small garden-school, which he addressed you concerning only a few days ago. If this teacher can promise me that he will cultivate classical Arabic in this garden just as he cultivates character and intellect, then he shall have well earned my warmest praise; and it shall then be incumbent upon all of us to rise up and spare no effort in establishing this garden-school, and others like it.

And by these three methods, which I have now set out in detail, we may guarantee the language's recovery of its ancient glory.