

Our Arabic Literature Is a World Literature

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The Second Congress of Arab Writers was held last September in Damascus, and among the valuable lectures delivered there was this precious lecture, pages of which we publish here.

What Is World Literature?

The first thing I would like us to ask is the meaning of this phrase "world literatures" — what is meant by this phrase, and what do people understand by it?

I should like — before anything else — to set aside an idea common in these days, an idea whose source is an old illusion whose fog it is high time should clear from us; for world literature, to many people these days, denotes simply those literatures that are read in many countries, and in the Western European and American countries especially; because these countries have been known to people in these ages as strong and dominant, spreading their power and dominion over many lands of the earth; so people feel that the literatures read in the countries of these powerful states are the world literatures. English literature, for instance, is a world literature because it is read in many countries — it is read in Great Britain, read in the United States of America, read in the Dominion countries, and then translated into the various European languages.

It is indeed a world literature, there is no doubt of that; but we think, or some of us still think, that for our Arabic literature to be a world literature, it must be read in such countries as those in which that English literature is read.

The same is said with respect to French literature, and German literature, and Italian literature, and Russian literature, for instance. All these literatures are world literatures, there is no doubt of that, because they are read in their original texts in many countries and translated into the languages of many countries, so they are world literatures; but the mistake we must avoid from now on is to think that our literature will not be a world literature unless it is read in those same countries.

World literature, I believe, is literature by which many generations in many lands of humanity live; world literature is not the literature of whoever possesses might, power, and dominion, but rather the literature that gains its power and its hold over souls, and its spread across the lands of the earth, from its own nature, not from any strength that comes to it from political might, or economic capacity, or any other of those sources that enable nations to be strong and dominant.

Is our Arabic literature, then, of this kind? Is our Arabic literature a world literature? And what is its standing among these world literatures?

It is very clear that, when we speak of Arabic literature, we cannot speak of the literature of one particular age alone, but must speak of Arabic literature as a whole, of Arabic literature from its beginning to where it now stands.

Ancient Arabic Literature Is a World Literature

The thing that is beyond doubt is that our Arabic literature, in its early ages, was a world literature as elevated and as powerful as world literatures can be — no two people disagree on this, nor does anyone dispute it save fools; and I mean by literature here its general sense — literature as the expression of the human mind's production within a given nation.

This Arabic literature, and its Arabic language, was a source of rich, powerful, enduring life for many nations on earth; for it had scarcely gone beyond the Arabian Peninsula, from ancient times until the rise of Islam, before other nations besides the Arab nation were already influenced by it, and after the rise of Islam it imposed itself upon almost the whole of the ancient world, so that it became the literature of the Islamic nation, not of the Arab nation in its narrow sense, but rather the literature of the nations that submitted to the Islamic state, whatever the languages or characteristics of these nations might be.

And I should like to draw attention to a simple idea, a comparison between Arabic literature and the two great ancient literatures, Greek literature and Latin literature; for Greek literature, in ancient times, was a world literature, and may well be the first literature to deserve this name; for it was not confined to the Greek nation that produced it and enjoyed it, but rather went beyond the borders of the Greek lands, especially after Greek dominion spread eastward, following Alexander's conquest of whatever lands he conquered.

And this Greek literature, and Greek culture, and the Greek language, remained the foundation of civilized humanity's life for more than ten centuries, and in this way we may say that Greek literature is the first world literature historically speaking; for there were nations on earth that spread their dominion over humanity before the Greek nation, but they were unable to extend that dominion beyond mere political and material power, and could not reach the depths of souls or the innermost recesses of hearts, nor compel individuals and groups outside themselves to speak their language and share in its production, whereas Greek literature was able to achieve all of this, so that peoples who had previously had no connection whatsoever with the Greek language came to share in producing literature in it.

The Greek language imposed itself first through politics, and second through the strength of this language itself and the strength of its literature and culture, so that they took it for themselves, for their own hearts and minds, a language in whose literary production they took part as though they themselves had been of the Greek nation itself.

And in spite of all this, and in spite of all that was granted this Greek literature of dominion over the whole of the ancient East, however much the nations living in the ancient East might differ among themselves, in spite of all this, Greek literature was unable to impose its language upon the peoples such that they would take this language as the language of their daily life; rather, it imposed its language and its literature only upon one particular class — the class of those who worked in politics, and the class of those who worked in cultural and scientific affairs.

The Egyptians, for instance, continued to speak their own language, which later developed into the Coptic language; the people of Syria continued to speak their Aramaic language in its various dialects; the people of Iraq continued to speak their Aramaic language, or whatever their ancient Babylonian and Assyrian language had become; the Persians continued to speak their Persian language; and all the while, there existed classes of scholars and men of letters who learned the Greek language, and took part in studying it and in producing works in it, and took part, little or much, in its literary production itself.

The Greek language, for all the power of Alexander, and for all the power of the generals and kings who succeeded Alexander, and for all the power of the states that arose from Alexander's conquests, was unable to influence the life of these peoples truly deeply; the peoples remained in

possession of much of their own languages, retaining their various languages, and the Greek language remained merely the language of politics and the language of culture, nothing more.

The Romans came after the Greeks and imposed their language upon western Europe, but were unable to resist the Greek language in the East; the Greek language remained the language of politics in the East, and the peoples remained in possession of their own foundations and their own languages, producing in their own languages and producing sometimes in the Greek language, but retaining their foundations entirely intact; and the Latin language, for all the power of the Roman Republic and for all the might of its dominion — the dominion of the Empire — was unable to impose itself except in western Europe, in Italy, France, Spain, and Britain, because these lands had, at that time, no prominent civilization of their own.

As for our Arabic language, it had scarcely gone beyond the Peninsula before Islam when it was already spoken by many of the people of Syria before the Islamic conquest, and spoken by many of the people of Iraq before the Islamic conquest as well, so that it was a spoken language alongside the other languages that even the Greek language had been unable to erase or weaken.

And after Islam, and after the Noble Qur'an spread through the lands that were conquered, we look, and truly, things were changing; history was taking a new path we had not known before; and these languages which had resisted the Greek language and Greek dominion, and had resisted the Latin language and Roman dominion, could not withstand the Arabic language — not because Arab dominion forced people to be ignorant of their own languages and to adopt Arabic as their own, but because this Arabic language is distinguished by something of a natural power, distinguished by something of a special enchantment that penetrates into hearts, takes hold of minds, and claims people's faculties entirely for itself.

And thus the second century [of the Hijra] had not come, nor had it even passed, before the Arabic language had become the language of the peoples in many lands of the earth — in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, North Africa, and in Spain as well.

The Supremacy of the Arabic Language

The Arabic language became a spoken language, and a language of science, literature, and culture, in the Persian lands, and reached, in those days, as far as the lands of India as well, and the islands of the ocean likewise. And then we look, and find that this Arabic language was not content merely to spread and to become a common language of culture, politics, literature, and speech, but claimed these peoples, or most of these peoples, entirely for itself; and the languages that had remained alive, resisting the Greeks and the Romans and the Persians before them, these languages gradually dwindled, their dominion narrowing little by little, until they were confined to monasteries and certain special gatherings, and then became ancient dead languages studied by scholars and students of historical and linguistic research, while the peoples forgot them entirely.

The Egyptian people, for instance, do not speak the Coptic language; the Syrian people do not speak the Aramaic language; Iraq does not speak an Aramaic language, nor does it speak that language which the ancient Arabs used to call the Nabataean language, which was a remnant of the language of Babylon and Assyria. All these languages have become ancient dead languages known only to scholars, while the peoples remain entirely ignorant of them.

Nor was the Arabic language content with this; rather, it proved itself to be a language that is not content merely to dominate and overpower, but is an ambitious language, eager to absorb and digest everything it could encounter of the various branches of research, science, and civilization; so that everything the Greeks wrote, and most of what the Romans wrote, and whatever the African and Asian peoples the Arabs came to know had produced — all these civilizations and all these cultures, the Arabic language absorbed and transformed into a single culture and a single civilization: Arab culture and Arab civilization.

And the certain truth is that Arab dominion did nothing to impose this language; indeed, we know more than this — we know that many Muslim judges in Egypt used to learn the Coptic language so as to be able to hear the Coptic litigants and to be able to judge between them with full knowledge of what they said and what they contested. This is what the Muslims did when they settled in the lands God had opened to them.

And in spite of all this, and in spite of all these things that peoples inherited and passed down through generations, and in spite of this great tolerance by which the Arabs distinguished themselves in their rule over

all the lands they were able to rule, in spite of all this, the Arabic language was able to go beyond the single generation that spoke it — the Arab generation — and to become the language of these many generations of people across the ages and the passing centuries.

More than this: when this Arabic language went beyond the East, and beyond the lands that spoke a language of its own kind — for there is some kinship between it and the Semitic languages — when this Arabic language went beyond the East and settled in western Europe, in Spain, it did nothing to impose itself upon the conquered; rather, the conquered themselves competed to learn it, to master it, and to share with its own people in it and in the production of their literature.

And some priests wrote, in those days — the third century of the Hijra — some priests wrote, grieving and lamenting, depicting the heart that sorrow was melting within them, because Christian youth was abandoning the Latin language seriously, and hastening to learn the Arabic language, and writing nothing in the Latin language, which is the language of Christianity, even while remaining faithful to their Christianity.

And this priest who wrote this text forgot only one thing: that he himself, when he wrote in the Latin language, was influenced by the Arabic language, influenced by that exceptional Arabic language which the Arabs considered the most marvelous thing people could possibly produce; for the Latin language knows no rhyme, neither in poetry nor in prose, and this priest of ours was writing his Latin, in this very text I have just referred to, in Latin rhymed prose that the Latin language had never known until it came to know the Arabic language and its rhymed prose reached it.

The West Is Indebted to Arab Culture

And with all this, this European and American West is indebted for its culture to the Arab nation first, and to the Greek nation after that; more than this, the Arabic language tried to impose itself not by political dominion — as I said — but by human dominion, and it was granted success, finding only one single homeland that tried to resist it and succeeded in this resistance — this homeland is the Persian homeland; it succeeded in this resistance after three centuries, but during these first three centuries, it had taken Arabic as its language of speech, of literature, and of scientific production; and when it later achieved this success, and modern Persian became the language of daily speech among

the people and the language of transaction among the Persians, the Persians could not escape the influence of the Arabic language, and they will never escape it to the end of time. This is for two simple reasons: because their sciences continued to be written in the Arabic language until a very late age, until the ninth century of the Hijra — if the Persians wished to write on science, they wrote in the Arabic language; and because Persian poetry, which is written in the Persian language, is measured and scanned according to the meters of Arabic poetry; all the meters of Persian poetry are the very same Arabic meters, taken from the Arabs, and the *Shahnameh*, which is a depiction of the glory of the ancient Persians, and which is one of the wonders of Persian narrative literature — for all its length — proceeds according to the meter of an Arabic poetic meter, the *mutaqarib* meter.

All of this, if it indicates anything, indicates that our Arabic literature, in its early ages, was indeed a world literature in the widest and strongest senses of that word; it was a world literature because it encompassed the whole civilized world of that time, and it was a world literature because it imposed itself upon nations that had not known it and that had their own languages and literature, so that they forgot their languages and literatures and became enamored of the Arabic language and its literature; and it was a world literature in a particular sense, because it brought many nations to take part in preparing this human civilization by which humanity lives today; for it is folly, and detestable fanaticism, for anyone to deny that the science the Arabs translated from the ancient nations, and added to what they added, is the very thing that was transmitted to Europe during the Middle Ages, and that enabled western Europe to undergo its first renaissance, and enabled it to become civilized little by little, until the conquest of Constantinople, when Europe came into direct contact with Greek sciences and Greek culture, thanks to the Arabs, as well as indirect contact.

Claims and Errors

After all this, there are problems that have been raised, and continue to be raised, around this ancient Arabic literature which we say is a world literature in the widest sense of that word.

Some Europeans say: Arabic literature is a naive literature, lacking many of the things that distinguish Western literatures, and we ourselves believe them, or many of us believe them, in this claim; they say, for instance, that Arabic literature was devoid of dramatic literature, and

that there is no theater in ancient Arabic literature, and this is true, there is no doubt of it; but we know that Latin literature, for instance, had no theater either before Greek theater became known and was transmitted into the Latin language, and the Romans imitated the Greeks and established their own theater.

And the modern European languages did not know theater for a simple reason: they were not a Greek nation, and they did not have these ancient pagan cults and religions that the Greek nation had, which required forms of worship, among them worship through dramatic performance.

And the Arab nation did not translate Greek theater for a simple reason: Greek theater, at the time when the Arab nation was translating, was buried away in monasteries and churches and in books, and it was forbidden to be performed and forbidden to be read, because the Christian religion forbade it absolutely and considered it a remnant of paganism.

And the Arab nation did not know the Iliad and the Odyssey for a simple reason: because the Iliad and the Odyssey were not known and were not published, but were rather counted among the works of paganism, so Christianity forbade them and it was not permitted to anyone to examine them.

Narrative literature does not exist in the Arabic language, as is claimed — this too is one of the many common errors; for Arabic literature does not lack narrative literature, but its narratives are of its own nature, the nature of the Arabs.

And those who read our ancient poetry, and read the accounts of wars, and the Days of the People, and the Days of the Arabs, and read the Naqa'id poems between Jarir and al-Farazdaq and al-Akhtal, know that Arabic literature has never been devoid of tales of heroes and wars, and all that the Iliad depicts, and all that Greek narrative literature depicts.

And there is another error that is said: that our Arabic literature is not like modern European literature, does not resemble French and English literature, and does not have in it all these many things that are found in these modern literatures. This, applied to our ancient literature, is injustice, utter injustice; for our ancient literature lived in ages that have been gone for long centuries, and it is not reasonable for us to demand of an ancient literature that it conform to, resemble, and match

the requirements of the modern age in which we now live; for we are not able to advance the cycle of time before its appointed hour.

Our ancient literature, then, is a world literature in the widest sense of that word, and I described it long ago, in certain remarks, as occupying the rank next after ancient Greek literature, placing it between these two ancient literatures, Latin and Greek; I said: the first world literature in ancient times was in Greece, followed by Arabic literature, and after it comes Roman literature ...

Our Modern Literature Is a World Literature

As for our modern literature, is it a world literature in the sense I have just given, or is it a local literature?

It is the height of folly to say that our modern Arabic literature is a local literature and not a world literature; first, because it is a literature produced, understood, and enjoyed by a vast number of generations of people from the Arabian Gulf to the Atlantic Ocean, and if this vast portion of the world is cultured in its taste, its mind, and its sensibility, speaks one language and writes in one language, and understands a significant literature whose nature or forms may vary — then it is an Arabic literature that every human being in this part of the earth enjoys and that every human being is influenced by.

This literature could be called local literature if what is produced in Syria could not be read or translated by Egyptians, and when Egyptian literature were impossible to read in Syria, or in Iraq, or in Morocco; but since what is written in Iraq and in Syria we are able to read in all the lands of the Arab world, there can be no doubt that our modern Arabic literature is a world literature — and now, in the sense I denied it at the beginning of this talk; that is, that our literature should be a world literature that the foreign Western nations concern themselves with.

I believe that our modern Arabic literature has also begun to become a world literature in this sense as well, and Europeans and Americans have begun to take interest in it, to celebrate it, and to take upon themselves no small effort in reading it, and in translating it into their languages.

And the Russians were the first among the Europeans to do this; they were the first to attempt to translate what the Arabs have written in this century, and then other nations followed them, translating some

Arabic works into various languages — into English, French, German, and Spanish.

We Must Be Arabs

And in spite of this, there are things that stand between our modern literature and this world status to which many people aspire.

These things fall into two categories, which I shall summarize briefly; the first category comes from us ourselves, from our writers; for our writers need to take greater care with their literature than they have taken until now, need to give their literature a doubled attention, requiring them to understand their ancient literature before producing their modern literature, and requiring them to open their minds to all modern literatures and cultures, whatever their source may be; for if we relied on ancient literature alone, we would be ancient history living on in the modern age, and if we relied on modern European literature alone, we would absolve ourselves of our own nationality and all our history; and so there is no choice for us but to combine, in our minds and hearts, this ancient heritage, which only one who denies himself could deny, and without which there can be no foundation for anything modern, together with this modernity, which is among the requirements of the life we actually live.

We must be Arabs, and we must know all that other nations possess; and if our writers can begin to cultivate themselves with the widest possible culture, in the ancient and the modern, and the deepest possible culture, in the ancient and the modern, then on the day they can do this, they will feel, and will find within themselves, this broad human feeling that does not extend into the modern world alone, but extends into the depths of time, extends into the ancient as well; on that day, Arabic production will be a human production in the widest senses of that word, and on the day our Arabic production becomes a human production in which the ancient and the modern are harmonized in a wonderful musical harmony, on that day our literature will impose itself upon foreign languages by sheer force, and will compel foreign peoples to translate it and to read it in their own languages, translated.

In spite of all this, our literature has already begun to spread, little by little, in Europe, more than is thought; because up until now we have been waiting to see our books spread in foreign languages, and we do not see ourselves as having produced a world literature unless it is published in the newspapers that so-and-so's book has been translated into this or

that language, and this is something that means absolutely nothing ...

Our literature is far more significant than we know and than we estimate, and it is enough for me that you should travel around the lands of Europe and America to see Arabic books that would never occur to any of you being taught in European universities, read by their students in the Arabic language, who write about them to their professors, comment on them, and discuss them, and who then set out afterward for these Arab lands to meet their authors and writers and to speak with them, and then return having learned about them whatever they were able to learn. What more do we want, if the works our young people are now producing are being taught in universities and set as subjects for advanced examinations in some French universities? Is this not proof that our literature has already begun to go beyond Arab borders, into other lands besides these Arab lands, into lands that until recently we regarded as lands of power, might, and dominion ...

The West's Resistance to Us

Our literature, then, has already begun to be translated into foreign languages, and has begun to be taught in its original texts in the various foreign universities of Europe and America, and so, in this respect, it is advancing toward modern world status; but in spite of all this, it meets with grave resistance from the West, and this is the second category we must attend to, and we must prepare to defend ourselves against this resistance; this resistance comes from the fact that the West still, to this day, looks upon the Arab nation as a nation that has submitted to its dominion, and still aspires to subject it to its political dominion, or its intellectual dominion, or its economic dominion.

And so: our ancient Arabic literature is a world literature in the widest sense that worldliness can be, and our modern literature has already begun to become a world literature in the true sense; but it needs a very great deal of effort to impose itself upon the West, and to impose itself upon the various nations, whatever their strength, and whatever their might; and the most important thing, before anything else, is that the Arab writer should feel that he is a human being who does not work for himself alone, nor for his homeland alone, but works for all people; and he is therefore compelled to know the knowledge of all people, and to profit from this knowledge, and then compelled to benefit all people.

And our way to this — as I have said and always say — is simply to open our minds and hearts to our ancient heritage first, and then to

modern cultures, whatever they may be and from whatever source, and whatever the differences between them. On the day we do this, I assure you that our literature will be a world literature, whether you understand by this word its true meaning, which I have just depicted, or the meaning our young people aspire to when they wish their literature to be translated into foreign languages.

On the day we are strong within ourselves, strong in our thinking, strong in our practical life, we shall impose ourselves upon Western literature, and compel the West to translate us, just as the West now compels us to translate it.