

The Great Sin ...

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It was, in the eyes of some writers, a great sin, this thing I ventured upon when I set about preparing to translate the highest works of world literature into the Arabic language, and it appears that I have been steeped up to my ears in this great sin since my earliest youth; for in my student days I was consumed with devouring everything translated into Arabic, whatever its worth, whatever its import, because I saw in these books forms of knowledge I had never known, and saw in them a renewal of myself, an education of my mind, and a purification of my heart. And I had scarcely mastered the rudiments of the French language when a generous friend — God rest his soul — invited me to join him in translating a book of moral philosophy from French (it was Jules Simon's book *Le Devoir*, "Duty"), and I answered his invitation most eagerly, caring for it most deeply, longing for the knowledge I would gain from it, and happy that I would allow hundreds and thousands of young men like myself to gain new knowledge, educate their minds, purify their hearts, renew their souls, and add to their own energies a fertile energy that would benefit them and benefit others.

And no sooner had I finished my studies in France and returned to Egypt than I set about acquainting my fellow citizens with new forms of knowledge, by every means within my power — translating at times, summarizing at others, and always encouraging translation and summarizing; preferring translation whenever its means were available, and resorting to summary when translation was not possible, believing that Arab culture only grows strong, flourishes, and increases in fertility, richness, delight, revival of souls, and quickening of the renaissance in proportion to what is added to it from the cultures of foreign nations, whatever those nations may be.

And for this reason I translated, and summarized, and pushed others to translate and summarize a great deal from the literatures of the Greeks, the Romans, the French, the English, the Germans, the Italians, and the Persians — works on which generations of Egyptians and Eastern Arabs have lived for a time, and which I expect they will go on living on for times to come. Then it occurred to me that this activity, to which I had driven myself and driven others, was in need of some organization, and that the whole good lay in organizing the transfer of foreign cultures into

our Arabic language, so that, in a shorter or longer time, we might do what other nations have done, and transfer into our language the classics of foreign literature and culture — enriching the language itself, on the one hand, and reviving the hearts of those who speak it, and quickening the Arab renaissance, on the other. And I have always believed that Egypt holds a grave historical and geographical position among the lands of the earth, and that she has always risen to her weighty and noble duty: that of conveying Eastern culture to the West, and Western culture to the East.

And for this reason she is one of the foundations of humanity's intellectual life, and her strength, her vigor, and her rising to this duty are an essential condition for the light of knowledge to shine upon East and West alike, and for a balance to be achieved between East and West as well.

More than fifteen years ago I attempted to take up this organization, and to prepare an instrument for it within the Ministry of Education, and I attempted to render Shakespeare into Arabic for the benefit of those of our youth skilled in both English and Arabic, and to do likewise with the works of a group of eminent French writers who stand to France as Shakespeare stands to England; but the circumstances of the life we were then living prevented me from succeeding in what I wished.

And I did not attempt to do the same for the literature of other nations, because our knowledge of their languages was not satisfactory, and I found no choice but to bear that failure patiently until a better life than ours should become available to us; and I attempted afterward to carry this work forward without relying on the authority of the state, but I found no money, and was forced into a new failure.

And when I took up the burdens of the Ministry of Education, I attempted to resume this effort, and I set aside, in the Ministry's budget, a small sum of money to begin it; then I left the Ministry, and I never learned what fate made of this money set aside in the budget, nor of this effort I had attempted to carry forward. Then I was invited to the presidency of the Cultural Committee of the Arab League, and I found in its budget a small sum of money set aside for translation, which I directed toward Shakespeare; and had this money been greater than it was, I would have directed some of it toward writers of other nations besides Shakespeare — but something is better than nothing.

And I learned, from a conversation with our Prime Minister and with the Minister of Education, that the current government believes, as I do, in the necessity of translating the classics of foreign culture to the widest extent possible; and I rejoiced at this with the greatest and deepest joy, and I hope most sincerely that the revolutionary government's share of success toward the good in this matter will exceed that of other governments before it. But I had scarcely begun carrying out what I had resolved upon of translating Shakespeare when argument and counter-argument multiplied, matters grew confused in many minds, and pens ran in some newspapers with a great deal of talk that I would have preferred they not run with — for, to my deep regret, if it reflects anything, it reflects the hasty thinking, the rushed judgments, and the snatched opinions with which our intellectual life is now being tested in these days.

Some writers said: do not translate Western foreign literature, and do not translate Eastern foreign literature either. And the easiest reply to those who hold this view is that translating Eastern foreign literature is itself a duty, and the means and resources for it must be sought — and the first of these means is knowledge of the languages of this Eastern literature. Those who wish to translate what the people of India inherited from their ancients must, before anything else, learn the language in which this literature was written; and until that language is learned, and translators from it into Arabic are found — which we hope will be soon — it is well that we proceed with what translation we can from the Western languages our youth know well. And praise God, among our youth today there are those capable of translating from most of the great European languages; we lack only Russian, and it is no small thing that we can translate from English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish — something we had not even dared to hope for fifteen years ago.

And some said: do not translate literature, but translate science; for by science we live and on science we subsist, and science is what helps us exploit agriculture, industry, and commerce to the furthest limits of exploitation, and it is what makes us a strong nation, as it made the nations of Europe and America nations of vast power and great might. The least that can be said of such talk is that it reflects a shortness of thinking, a hastiness of judgment, and a snatching at opinion without reflection or patience.

For there is no doubt that science has a great importance in the life of nations, but there is likewise no doubt that literature is no less

important to the life of nations than science. And how I wish those who hold this view would tell me of a single European or American nation that lived by science alone, without an equally abundant share of literature to match its abundant share of science. It is the height of folly to claim that science alone is what revives and strengthens nations, and it may well be that literature's share in the life and strength of nations equals science's share, if it is not greater and farther-reaching still. And weighing science against literature, and their respective effects on the life of nations, against the needs of nations for one or the other, is an absurdity unworthy of educated people living in the age we live in.

And I have not yet forgotten what a member of the old Egyptian University Council once said to me, thirty-five years ago — he was an engineer — that if he could abolish all these courses taught at the University, and teach the students watchmaking in place of these literatures, he would do it, and would thereby make himself the happiest of men. I laughed, and those who heard this remark laughed with me, and we attributed that strange opinion to the old engineer's advanced age; but how much more so now, when we hear and read talk resembling it, written by its authors without hesitation or reserve, as though they were writing the whole of science itself for their readers, and pointing them toward the loftiest ideal peoples ought to strive toward.

And these gentlemen forget only one thing: that we know of no nation that has lived by science without literature, and that the life of nations by science alone is a hell from which we hope God spares humanity, for in it lies humanity's destruction beyond recall. And for whom do these gentlemen wish science to be translated? Do they wish it translated for the scholars who already read it in its various original languages — but they have no need of having it translated for them!

Or do they wish it translated for the people — and what would the people do with science once it is translated for them?!

Would they eat it or drink it? Do these gentlemen imagine that science is something the educated middle classes of the people's own sons can digest, let alone those who have not reached even a middling level of culture? Or do they mean that popularized science should be translated for the people? And who is stopping them from doing just that? There are already many who translate popularized science for the educated public at large — but we are thinking of something else, something altogether far removed from this.

We are thinking of translating the classics of literature and culture that drove nations to live, to progress, and to concern themselves with science itself, and that allowed scientists themselves to live, to benefit, and to be of benefit through their science. And who knows whether science could even have come into being, had literature not preceded it into existence!

And who knows whether science could have grown, had the growth and flourishing of literature not accompanied it!

And the strangest thing said on this subject is that translating Shakespeare is an evil, because Shakespeare was one of the royalist poets who flattered kings and the aristocracy and scorned the common people, and belittled the poor and the wretched. Such words are written in these very days, and find among the common run of people those who read them and give them a hearing, and this foolishness spreads among classes of people, so that the value of things is lost, and people's judgment and opinion are corrupted — as though our culture needed to be tested by so far-reaching a delusion.

And what does this writer, who broadcasts such talk among the people, think of the fact that the literature of humanity on which these long, long centuries have lived was, for the most part — if not entirely — a literature that arose in the age of kings and aristocracies, just as science, philosophy, and art arose in the age of kings and aristocracies, and were presented to kings and the nobility? Must humanity, for this reason, turn away from the whole of its cultural heritage, and begin its history from the close of the eighteenth century, when the Americans and the French published their declarations of the rights of man, and when democracy spread among people, and when the rights of peoples came to be recognized?

It would follow, then, that the libraries and the museums of art must be burned, that the enduring works of art must be utterly destroyed, and that the new humanity must live solely on what was produced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries — and it will not even be able to live on what was produced in these two centuries, since that too was derived from this vast heritage which this writer so detests, and from which he wishes humanity to turn entirely away.

We ask God for this writer, and for those like him, and for those who listen to him and follow him down this crooked and tortuous path, that He grant him soundness of judgment, guide him to the truth, inspire him

with what is right and make him speak it, and guide his pen to it as well — so that he may not corrupt people's minds with such foolishness, which ought not be published in these days.

Now then: translating foreign cultures — whatever their source, whatever their homeland, whatever their complexion — is a grave duty, and Egypt falls into the most hideous and shameful neglect if she does not rise to it, and does not hasten to rise to it by every means within her power.

She must begin with what she is able to do, and prepare the means to take up what she is not yet able to do, as soon as possible; for if she fails to do so, she will have betrayed her own history, played the fool with herself, and condemned her own sons to remain forever dependents of others, unfit to stand independently on anything whatsoever.

And I entreat God to spare Egypt and her sons this great evil, and I call upon my fellow citizens, with the most urgent insistence, to hasten toward Shakespeare and those like Shakespeare among the luminaries of literature and culture, in every land of the earth and in every generation of mankind — as readers, translators, interpreters, critics, and beneficiaries of all of this; for this is the intellectual life worthy of Egypt and of the Egyptians, and the life lived by the advanced and superior nations.

Now then: translating science is indeed a duty, and it falls to scientists alone to carry it out, with the state and the people assisting them in this translation. But whatever the case may be, Egypt's doors and windows must be flung wide open, so that science, culture, and literature may enter through them, with nothing standing between them and their penetration into minds, hearts, and the depths of consciences. Let the Egyptians, then, join me in this great sin — the sin of translating everything that benefits the mind, the heart, and the conscience.