

TRANSLATION

Speech of Professor
Yahya Haqqi

On the occasion of receiving the King Faisal International Prize
For Arabic Literature
Tuesday 9 Sha'aban 1410H
6 March 1990

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate Thanks be to God,
peace and blessings upon our Lord Mohammad, God's messenger to all
mankind

Your Royal Highness Prince Abdallah bin Abdulaziz
Crown Prince and Deputy Prime Minister
And head of the National Guard
Your Highnesses
Your Eminences and Excellencies
Distinguished guests

My heart tells me that those responsible for this Prize were saying to themselves: let no one believe that the creation of this Prize is in imitation of others, nor a desire for recognition nor to attract praise; rather it is to give our noble nation its due, a nation upon which Islam dawned, inciting it in its eternal Book to the contemplation of the world and the quest for knowledge at any cost, and the erection of the balance of justice and effacing the barriers between sexes and colors, to the protection of individual dignity and collective interest, a nation passionately in love with art in the form of poetry, a nation that made the first attempts at fathoming the genius of art, a nation that tells the poet seeking that genius: go to the valley of Abqar to be infected with the spirit there. To this day, scholars are seeking the secrets of genius. This nation, before others, was also aware of the meaning of art and that it is an imagining in search of truth; they say "the purest poetry is the most fictitious" and established the best method for and in villages calling for independence to search for self and identity. In music this

claim was echoed by Sayed Darwish, in Sculpture by Mukhtar, whom I consider the most creative artist in Modern Egypt, and in economics by Tala'at Harb, the founder of the Bank of Egypt. It was also reflected by a group of young people who learned a foreign language, and tried to express this feeling of nationalism in the short story, focused on the common people and the man in the street. This group was called the Modern School Group; they bought a manual printing machine with their pocket money and issued Al-Fajr Magazine. I gave details about them in my book "The Dawn of the Egyptian Short Story" which I refer you to, not to promote it, but to save time. I joined this school and participated in its activities. I quickly realized that my struggle was not "With the secrets of the Short Story, but rather with the secrets of Formal Arabic. It is not a matter of knowing it, rather it is growing intimate with its nature. I committed myself to use each word in the right place, not just out of respect for language but also out of respect for the reader, even though I tried to amuse and entertain him. I have explained this in my book "Steps into Criticism" and again disclaim promoting my books.

Formal language was facing a crisis in naming modern achievements. The late Mohammad Al-Mowailhi was the first to tackle this question. Thus the door was opened to search for Arabic terminology for translation of Western terms. No doubt, we have made good progress since then, but we have not yet reached our goal, which is truly saddening. We do have language academies, but I do not see the necessary communication among them. When Algeria and Morocco won their independence they started Arabization. I turned to the Arabian West instead of the Arabian East hoping to find the modern terms we needed.

The art of the story has made contributions to formal language, which are not matched by other forms of literature, as it has dragged it from the world of pure ideas and mental abstractions into the modern city which is full of modern developing intellectual power, telling the would-be poet to memorize two hundred thousand verses, then to forget them; thus the nation was able to build a civilisation with whose history you are more acquainted than I, and its suns and its moons.

The heritage of that nation has been subject to destruction, to loss, and to plundering; the little that remains we have not yet collected, nor have we published it, a truly saddening state.

Then it came to pass that the torrent ceased and drought prevailed; and the question resounds in my heart: "how and where and why this decline?" and I await the reply from our scholars of history and civilisation, hoping they will rush to me with the answer.

We are described by the West as a developing nation, but this designation does not fool us, they mean that we are a backward country, and science is rushing madly in all directions without heed to

the serious damage caused to the environment or, indeed to the future of the entire planet. We must chase it, but even if we do chase it to tomorrow, it will leap to the day after tomorrow, and after that, and I do not believe our generation shall witness our catching up; all we can do now is to prepare to encourage scientific research in every field; scientific research is nothing but talent and imagination and a team and a laboratory and continual communication in an atmosphere of freedom.

I have to extend my thanks to the Selection Committee for honouring me as the sole winner of the prize, and reminding those who might have forgotten, that I am one of the pioneers of the short story in Egypt. Thus I was taken back almost sixty five years to the time of the childhood of the short story; no single effort brought about this genre, nor caused a transition to a new literary style; rather, it was the child of a national feeling. Egypt was occupied by the British army, and England emerged victorious from the war. Despite this, all of Egypt rose in streets. inventions and products in search of names. In this context I would like to mention another distinction of the pioneers of the short story who refused to use colloquial language in their works. They were not enticed by opponents of formal language, who maintained that style should correspond to reality, and the doorman and the butcher should speak colloquially in the stories' dialogues, otherwise we are straying from reality, even though all stories are fiction upon fiction. I must warn that formal language as it is being taught in schools is undergoing a serious crisis: errors abound not only in diction but even in writing among doctoral candidates. This year is designated by the United Nations as the year to eradicate illiteracy. Other nations have gone before us in this field, and it would be a shame if we failed in eradicating illiteracy; but I insist that our task be national, not governmental; I appeal to our educated youth to realize this endeavor. Some of our educational institutions have unfortunately declined from national to governmental programs, such as Al- Azhar program and the Village Kuttab program.

How I wish I could have attended this ceremony in person, and stood before the Deputy of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, and shaken hands with him and wished him along, with his country and family, all success, and ask God to have mercy on the founder of this country King Abdulaziz Al Saud, who was a genius in war as well as in diplomacy. I participated in his Majlis in 1929 while I was a secretary in the Egyptian Consulate at Jeddah. I also ask God to have mercy upon the late King Faisal who is to be credited for the assistance he offered to Egypt enabling her to win the last war. This is what I wish, but I was held back by my old age as I have become able to walk only with the help of another. I don't know whether it was in a daydream or in sleep that I saw a man who came and asked me: "Are you fed up as I am" I realized he was Labeed and hugged him and kissed him and did not ask him, as people ask, how are you?