

Translation Speech

PROFESSOR WEDAD AFIF KADI

Co-Winner of the 1994 King Faisal International Prize
for
ARABIC LITERATURE
(Studies Dealing with Ancient Arabic Prose)

Your Royal Highness Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz,

Your Royal Highnesses,
Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Guest,

It is a great honor to stand before you today as a recipient of the King Faisal International Prize in Arabic Literature for 1414/1994. This is an occasion that calls for joy and reflection: joy at being awarded this prestigious prize, and at my encounter with this distinguished Foundation of patronage of scholarship; and reflection on my achievement in order to renew my commitment to scholarship on the literary and cultural aspects of this our great Islamic civilization.

I have had a fascination with ancient Arabic Prose ever since I was a junior in college, when I took a course on it offered by my venerable teacher, Professor Ihsan Abbas, and discovered that the great writers of Arabic prose, like al-Jahiz and Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, were giants of thought in addition to being masters of style. This idea made me ask my teacher whether I might write my paper on the religious thought of al-Jahiz rather than on a stylistic aspect of al-Jahiz' prose. My teacher agreed, and that paper, written thirty years ago, was the beginning of a long journey that remains in progress.

During these three decades, I have conducted research in the intellectual realms of Arabic literary prose, analyzed its basic forms, traced its development, and tackled important issues related to it. I have studied several aspects of Tawhidi's work, particularly his vision of his society, his existential analysis of man's alienation in society and in the universe, and his exposition of the relationship between the intellectual and political authority. I have investigated other prose writers' contributions to Islamic political thought, like Badi' al-Zaman al-Hamadhani and Ibn Hayyan al-Andalusi. And I have analyzed the works of the founder of Arabic prose, 'Abd al-Hamid al-Katib, trying to define the role of the state in the formation of early Islamic political thought. I have examined the question of the authenticity of early Arabic prose epistles, particularly 'Abd al-Hamid's, and ascertained the deep impact of the Qur'an on the structure of prose, as it is portrayed in the letters of 'Abd al-Hamid and Bishr Ibn Abi Kubar al-Balawi. I have also been engaged in editing major prose works, like Tawhidi's al-Isharat al-Ilahiyya and al-Basa'ir wa al-Dhakha'ir, and have compiled an anthology, my Mukhtarat min al-Nathr al-'Arabi, which presents Arabic prose as a great world literature with essentially human concerns.

Throughout my work on prose, my central concern has been the quintessential question of structure and its related linguistic, stylistic, social, and political concerns. For it has seemed to me that understanding, and then interpreting the underlying structure of prose is the most informative method by which we can comprehend the formative stages of this prose, its development, genres, forms and functions. Much of this work on structure has aimed at preparing the

way for a historical dictionary of the Arabic language. My final aim, however, is to come closer to an Arabic hermeneutical theory--a theory which enables us to arrive at an inner, indigenously-based reading of our prose and literature, one in which the propositions of the social sciences and modern literary theory are auxiliary tools, not theoretical foundations, for the deep understanding of our literary tradition.

Having moved into new horizons in a far continent, I feel blessed that I can carry to my new home the message of scholarship and of Islamic civilization as I have interiorized it from the giants of Arabic prose and other architects of this civilization.

In concluding my speech, a few words of thanks are appropriate. My achievement would not have been possible but for the help I have received from many people and institutions to whom I am deeply grateful. I am indebted to my family, whose members have shown patience while I sat for days doing my work; and to my teachers, for their readiness to invest time and energy in training me. I remember with fondness the American University of Beirut, my Alma Mater, where I spent my formative years; and I acknowledge with great appreciation the support of the faculty and administration of my university, the University of Chicago, who nominated me for this Prize, and showered me with abundant personal and professional recognition.

Above all my deepest, heartfelt thanks and indescribable gratitude go to the founders and staff of the King Faisal Foundation, and to the Selection Committee. Without you, Sirs, we would not be here, celebrating scholarship with you. In an age when the greatest attention is paid to the loudest, it is heartwarming to see that silent work still speaks, and that there are ears which can listen, no matter how deep the silence is, from whom it emanates, and from how far away it comes.

Gentlemen, I humbly, gratefully and respectfully thank you very much indeed.