

The Necessity of Studying Arabic Literature and History by the Method of Descartes

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The researcher must accustom himself to studying the history of those ancient nations fated to accomplish great works, and to the hardships, trials, and various misfortunes and vicissitudes that beset their lives, in order to properly understand the history of the Arab nation, and to trace everything in it back to its true origin. And if there is one thing for which those who have written the history of the Arabs and their literature can be faulted — one reason they have failed to reach the truth of the matter — it is that they never sufficiently familiarized themselves with the history of these ancient nations, or never thought to compare them with the Arab nation, as though the Arab nation were some singular people who had known no one and been known by no one, resembled no one and been resembled by no one, influenced no one and been influenced by no one, before the rise of Arab civilization and the spread of its dominion over the ancient world.

In truth, had they studied the history of these ancient nations and compared it with the history of the Arabs, their own view of the Arab nation would have changed, and the history of the Arabs themselves would have changed along with it. Of these ancient nations, I shall mention only two: the Greek nation, and the Roman nation.

These two nations were fated, in ancient times, to much the same course the Arab nation was fated to in the Middle Ages: both were subject, in their internal life, to these same shifting political vicissitudes; both arrived, in the end, at a form of political organization that drove them to move beyond their own homeland, raid neighbouring lands, and extend their dominion over the earth; and neither of them extended that dominion in vain — both gave benefit and received it, and left humanity a precious legacy we still draw upon to this day. The Greeks left philosophy and literature; the Romans left law and order.

Such, too, was the case of this Arab nation: it grew civilized, as the Greeks and Romans grew civilized, out of a state of nomadism; it was shaped, as the Greeks and Romans were shaped, by various political vicissitudes; and its own political formation arrived, in the end, at the

very same point the political formation of the Greeks and Romans arrived at — moving beyond its natural borders and extending its dominion over the earth — and it left, as the Greeks and Romans left, an enduring legacy to humanity, containing literature, learning, and religion.

There is, then, nothing at all surprising in the fact that the various vicissitudes that beset Arab life, in its different branches, should resemble, in so many ways, the vicissitudes that beset the life of the Greeks and Romans.

And in truth, calm reflection on the life of these three nations leads us to results that are similar, if not indeed identical. And why should this surprise us? Is not the resemblance among these three nations, which we have just pointed to, enough in itself to lead you to consider that one and the same set of influences, or closely related ones, shaped the life of these nations, and so arrived at one and the same set of results, or closely related ones?!

I do not, however, want to abandon the subject before us in order to investigate what points of agreement and divergence there may be between the Arabs, the Greeks, and the Romans; that is not what I have written this for. What I want to say, rather, is this: the literary phenomenon we are attempting to study in this book — the one that so alarms the defenders of the old ways — is not confined to the Arab nation alone, but extends to other ancient nations as well, these two immortal nations above all. The Arab nation will not be the first nation in which poetry was forged and falsely attributed to its ancient poets; poetry was forged, before it, among the Greek and Roman nations too, and falsely attributed to the ancient poets among them, and people were taken in by it and believed in it, and out of this deception and belief there arose a literary tradition people inherited from one another in perfect confidence — until the modern age arrived, and critics among historians, literary scholars, philologists, and philosophers were finally able to trace things back to their true origins, so far as it was within their power to do so.

You yourself know that this critical movement, as it concerns the Greeks and Romans, has not yet come to an end, and that it will not come to an end tomorrow, or the day after. You know, too, that it has arrived at conclusions that have utterly transformed what was once known and inherited as the history of these two nations and their literatures. And if you think it through, you will agree with me that the true origin of this critical movement lies, in fact, in the influence upon researchers in

literature and history of the very method I called for at the opening of this book — the philosophical method of Descartes.

And whether we like it or not, we must inevitably be influenced by this method in our own scholarly and literary research, just as the people of the West were influenced by it before us; nor can what we undertake in criticizing our own literature and history be anything other than what the people of the West undertook in criticizing their own literature and history — for our own mentality has, over the past several decades, itself been changing, becoming Western, or, let us say, closer to Western than to Eastern; and the longer time goes on, the faster this mentality continues to change, and the more rapidly it draws closer to the people of the West.

And if there are, in Egypt today, some who champion the old ways, and others who champion the new, this is simply because there are, in Egypt, some whose mentality has already taken on this Western coloring, and others who have gained little or nothing of it at all.

The spread of Western learning in Egypt, and its steadily increasing spread from one day to the next, along with the direction of individual and collective effort alike toward disseminating this Western learning — all of this will, sooner or later, make our own minds thoroughly Western, and will lead us to study our own literature and history under the influence of Descartes's method, exactly as the people of the West did in studying their own literature, and the literature of the Greeks and Romans.

I would like you to familiarize yourself, even briefly, with any of the many books currently being published in Europe on the history of Greek or Latin literature, and to ask yourself, after even this brief acquaintance, what remains of what the ancients once believed about the literary history of these two nations. Is what the ancients believed about the Iliad and the Odyssey true? Is what they spoke of — indeed, what they genuinely believed — concerning Hesiod and the other epic poets, true? Is what the ancients took as the very foundation of their politics, their scholarship, their literature, and their entire life, drawn from the traditions of the Greeks and Romans, true?

It is a genuine pleasure to read what Herodotus wrote of the history of Greece, and what Titus Livius wrote of the history of Rome, and what modern scholars now write of the history of these two nations. But you will scarcely find any difference at all between what Ibn Ishaq once

related, and what al-Tabari recorded, of the history of the Arabs and their literature, and what historians and literary scholars write of the Arabs in this present age — for the majority of these historians and literary scholars have not yet been touched by this modern method, and have not yet managed to have real confidence in their own scholarly independence, or to free that independence from illusion and legend.

And if it is this book's fate not to please the majority of these literary scholars and historians, we are confident that this will do it no harm, and will not diminish its influence on the rising generation; for the future belongs to Descartes's method, not to the methods of the ancients.