

GOETHE MEDAL 2015

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH BY SADIK AL-AZM

WEIMAR, 28 AUGUST 2015

- Check against delivery -

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed my honor, privilege and pleasure to receive on this glorious day the Goethe-Medaille for the year 2015. After almost a half century of university teaching, research, writing and much stressful and stormy politico-cultural controversies in the Arab World, Europe and the United States, I can not Imagine a better way and/or more dignified manner of going into retirement than having my name associated with that of Germany's greatest poet and one of Europe's most celebrated multi-faceted geniuses.

I take this opportunity to express my deep gratitude to the Federal Republic of Germany for bestowing this official high honor on me at a time when my country, Syria, is bleeding and I am a refugee in Berlin. Here, I express my unending admiration for what Germany is doing by way of providing safe haven, generous hospitality and continued sustenance to so many of my Syrian compatriots displaced by the horrendous repression of barrel bombs, poison gas, scud missiles and the rest.

I also thank profusely the many members of my extended family, friends, colleagues and well-wishers who came from far and near to Goethe's Weimar to participate in this ceremony. Many thanks are due as well to the Goethe-Institute which skillfully provided us in Damascus and Beirut with the luxury of a relatively free space for honest debate and open discussion under severe conditions of oppression and censorship. Similar thanks are due to all the members and staff of the Goethe-Medaille multiple committees and working groups for making this gathering happen. My very special gratitude goes to Stefan and Gerlind Wild, my oldest and dearest friends in all Germany and to whom I owe a lot for first introducing my work in Arabic to German academia and then greatly facilitating my interaction with Germany's institutions of higher learning. Without their hospitality, generous patronage and personal care and attention over so many decades, this honor would not have been possible.

At this happy moment, I miss with great sorrow my younger brother, Said Al-Azm, who passed away last year. My sorrow deepens as I recall what a Germanophile my brother was for most of his adult life and how he would have loved to celebrate this glorious occasion as befits his mastery of the German language and his admiration and love for its culture.

My elite education in Damascus and Beirut gave me English and French, the dominant foreign languages of the Middle East. German had to be acquired the harder way at the level of post-graduate higher education. While at Yale university graduate school in the late fifties of the last century, I realized very quickly that specializing in the history of modern European philosophy, with special focus on the Enlightenment, was impossible without at

least a working knowledge of German. The German I acquired then was silent, it was directed only at reading and dealing with philosophical texts. Something like the Arabic of so many classical orientalists and their silent relationship and knowledge of Arabic master texts. It was an unforgettable surprise discovering that my German class mates in the one-year Kant seminar at Yale were reading the "Critique of Pure Reason" in English. When I inquired, they all said it was easier in English than in German.

The earliest philosophical studies I published in Arabic dealt with the concepts of "Essence and Space" in the philosophy of Leibniz and the concepts of space and time in Kant's early philosophy. After that I proceeded to publish essays and books in English on typically Kantian philosophical notions such as: space, time, the noumenon and above all his subversive "Antinomies of Pure Reason".

In Beirut and Damascus, with the passage of time and lack of practice I slowly lost my silent German. Then I became too old to try to recuperate the German I had lost. I simply went back to almost zero German. When the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin recently hinted at the idea of going back to German once more I quoted a piece of American practical wisdom by way of excusing myself: "you don't teach an old dog new tricks". So, I will remain at almost zero German, as it seems, to the end of my days and to my greatest regret.

One of my earliest primary readings in German was Chamisso's "Peter Schlemihl: The Man who Lost His Shadow". Not surprisingly, that led straight on to Goethe's Faust, of course with the help of dictionaries as well as English and French translations.

While teaching the history of modern European philosophy in Beirut and Damascus I discovered, by practical experience, that Goethe's Faust was the best and most arousing introduction to the spirit and meaning of modernity as well as to modernity's multi-faceted tragic implications and at times comic applications. Perhaps, something like "The Iliad" as an introduction to classical Greek civilization and culture. Goethe's Iliad of modernity, particularly Faust Part One, proved in its dramatic concreteness and poetic palpability to be far superior to the abstract dry prose of the standard text books introducing the history of modern European philosophy.

The Beirut and Damascus students, many of whom were already enchanted by "The Sorrows of Young Werther", were doubly fascinated by Goethe's poetic drama raising a riot of classroom debates, questionings, doubts, considerations and re-considerations, evaluations and re-evaluations as well as much individual and collective soul searching about that "To Be or Not-To Be" impasse of the tragic costs of becoming modern, on the one hand, and the pains of historical marginalization and possible extinction attendant on any whole sale rejection of modernity and the modern, on the other.

As we all know, Faust's relentless striving saved him in the end. I strove hard, as an Arab public intellectual from suffering Syria, to critically explore, shed light on and make sense out of the existential dilemmas, anomalies, paradoxes, conflicts and contradictions inherent in the inescapable globalizing modern condition. All done under the aspect of Kant's Enlightenment humanist ideal of free autonomous reason for each and all.

This was the sense of my international participation, both in Arabic and English, in the fin-de-siècle world-wide furious controversies sparked by four border-crossing, culture-transgressing books, namely: Edward Said's "Orientalism", Salman Rushdie's "The Satanic Verses", Fukuyama's "End of History" and Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations".

For me, all this commotion showed that a Goethean form of "Weltliteratur" that touches sensitive nerves in every living culture on the surface of the globe finally arrived to the enrichment and expansion of all of them.

Please accept my gratitude and many thanks for your presence and attention.