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Panel: Writing from Where I Stand

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Today I will talk only about the novel and cut out any discussion of other forms, which I have trouble summarizing. I will put to you a question I frequently ask myself about fiction: What can the defenseless art do in the face of all accumulated human errors? What can the defenseless novel do amid the systematic destruction of life, love, truth and beauty? And can this wonderful art, with all its variations, resist all the ugliness of mankind?

The day I discovered the novel I saw light at the end of the dark tunnel. Before that moment, my life had been merely a series of fragmented moments which could not be put together. Fiction was able to compile those moments, granting me the power to be able to assemble my own life. I still do not understand the source of this power in an art as fragile and tender as the novel, how it is able to strengthen a defenseless writer like me. What can the novel do for the fragile and isolated millions who die of starvation every day? What can it do for the desperate? What can it do in the face of dictators with armies, prisons and laws? And finally, what can it do in the face of certainties, ideologies and religions?

Since that day of introduction, I have become more familiar with the powerful vengeance of this tender art, a vengeance that causes tyrants to fear their real image. Only art (and here I mean not only the novel, but all art) can grant the oppressed the power of revenge and make their tormentors at last accountable.

The ancient question asked by all art may be death, but it is the question of life that continues to drive art forward with a constant momentum. As a writer, I gratefully recall moments in which fiction and the novel gave me hope again and restored to me the confidence that what we do as writers is not just gossip, but an act of power which no one should underestimate. The act frightens our enemies. It is no wonder that ideologies of darkness and backwardness cannot possess art, nor can they make art their servant. All literature written by “official writers,” writers defending tyrants, has been only a weak art unable to withstand the test of history. Only art which illustrates the hopes and sufferings of mankind remains in the golden registry of history, and is shared by people and given respect through the ages.

Sometimes, I ask myself what I would have done if I were not a novelist. I can not answer this question. I feel, as a writer, like Ahab, Melville’s captain in Moby Dick, misunderstood by all, for no other sailor comprehended what all this challenge meant to him. Nor did they know do know the secret of the task’s authority and power, or of its tenderness.

Literature and fiction are similarly difficult to comprehend. Fiction is an art which proves, day after day and page after page, its true capacity for development, richness and vastness. Nevertheless, it has remained a mysterious art, one that cannot be fully understood, and an art that is, after all else, irresistibly charming.
I believe that the novel is still able to record human suffering as it happens, and to record human hope as well. Fiction is not a weapon of blind revenge, but a useful tool, to be used to ask basic existential questions, even if these questions must be asked again and again, even if humanity has not yet found definitive answers to these questions. The novel and its surprising evolution still excite me and return me, once again, to the moment of our first meeting, which remains, for me, a memory of pleasure. It is as if it were just a few moments ago, and will linger forever with me.

I am not sure who spoke first spoke the words. It may have been the great poet Mahmoud Darwish who said, before anyone else: "O death, all arts have defeated you." I conclude with his words, though now it is I who speak them. Yes, dear death, all arts have defeated you.