

As the Bodies Pile Up, or What is Political Literature Today?

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I. Writing, technology, and life

It is said that writing and slavery were born at the same time. The first written texts were lists of properties, then, written laws like Hammurabi's Code emerged. When we are able to codify the universe into signs, codify life into property, a true technology of power is born. Writing is a *carimbo*, the sign branded with fire on the skin of the slave. The first poem in the historical record was written by a woman, of course, the Sumerian priestess Enheduana (2286–51, BC), who employed her poetry to stage a double coup d'état: against both the political powers persecuting her and against the reigning gods. The very first recorded poem is thus an apocalyptic poem and a political one. The Maya Prophets also wrote prophecies about the end of the world in the famous *Chilam Balam*. These were poems that enabled them (according to Todorov's interpretation) to process the historical trauma of the genocide they were experiencing, to give order and meaning to the unspeakable

horror. Those prophecies of the Maya are often used today by the Zapatistas revolutionaries of the EZLN in Chiapas not just to process the historical trauma, but to revolutionize the world, to experiment with their position-in-the-world.

A couple of months ago, the young Palestinian poet Heba Abu Nada (1991–2023) was murdered in Gaza by the IDF in the ongoing genocide, one we are passively witnessing even as we watch it live (28,000 killed, 13,000 of them children, as of the writing of this text). In one of her last poems, she quotes the great poet Mahmoud Darwish (1942–2008):

يا وحدنا
ريح الجميع حروبهم
وُثِرَتْ أَنْتِ أَمَامَ وَحْدِكَ عَارِيًا
لا شعر يا درويش
سوف يعيد ما خسر الوحيد وما فقد
يا وحدنا
هذا زمان جاهلي آخر
لُعن الذي في الحرب فرقنا به
وعلى جنازتك اتحد
يا وحدنا
الأرض سوق حرة
وبلادك الكبرى مزاد معتمد
يا وحدنا
هذا زمان جاهلي
لن يساندنا أحد
يا وحدنا
فامسح
قصائدك القديمة والجديدة
والبكاء
وشدي حيلك يا بلد

Our Loneliness

By Hiba Abu Nada

How alone it was,
our loneliness,
when they won their wars.
Only you were left behind,
naked,
before this loneliness.
Darwish,
no poetry could ever bring it back:
what the lonely one has lost.
It's another age of ignorance,
our loneliness.
Damned be that which divided us
then stands united
at your funeral.
Now your land is auctioned
and the world's
a free market.
It's a barbaric era,
our loneliness,
one when none will stand up for us.
So, my country, wipe away your poems,
the old and the new,
and your tears,
and pull yourself together.

(Translated from Arabic by Salma Harland)¹

A first conclusion: Poetics is an ancestral reparation, an ancient redress for all the destruction our technologies of power have created.

II. Positions against Autonomy

The world of literature today is no longer what it was a hundred years ago. Humanity has multiplied exponentially, and the ivory tower of lettered white men has been stormed by hordes of people like us, for whom Literature was never meant—“a miscalculation of Western History” has happened. There are writers as great as James Joyce in hidden corners all over the world, ignored both by the market and by academia, which can’t keep up with so much talent, can’t discipline it and catalogue it—untamed poetics. Defending the autonomy of literature today or its universality is not just patriarchal and racist; it is also stupid. There are just too many poetics. Our diverse realities translate into many different literary positions, experimenting with position, with where this or that literature is placed in the world, is of the utmost importance for understanding the politics of literature today. One brief example: I believe that Cristina Rivera Garza is one of the best novelists in the world today. Her two last novels are sort of opposite twins. One has been a market and activist success, *The Invincible Summer of Liliana*, a heartbreaking tale about femicide in Mexico of the author’s sister by a toxic boyfriend. But such has been its success, that very few people have read her other recent book *Autobiography of Cotton*, published just a few months before, which I argue elsewhere is her true masterwork [Rosa]. In *Autobiografía del algodón* the “position” of the author explodes and she becomes so many masses and so many struggles, she becomes a plant (cotton) and a series of geological layers.

Second conclusion: The politics of literature today must experiment with the position of enunciation, affirming a position-in-the-world while radically avoiding the risk of reducing that creative position to a label, to a superficial gesture, to a stable “identity.”

III. What to do with so many bodies under the rubble

We like *Frankenstein*, and we see it as a moral tale: nurture your technologies, be a good mother to your creations, if you don't want your technologies to become killing machines (so, professors, let's give a lot of love to ChatGPT, so it doesn't kill us all!). Right after the triumph of the Haitian Revolution in 1804, Boisrond Tonnerre wrote the following passage that left such a strong impression in Dessalines, that he invited Tonnerre to join the group of revolutionary writers that ended up writing the Act of Independence of Haiti: « Pour dresser l'Acte d'indépendance, il nous faut la peau d'un blanc pour parchemin, son crâne pour écritoire, son sang pour encre et une baïonnette pour plume... Le nom Français lugubre encore nos contrées » [“To prepare the independence act, we need the skin of a white man for parchment, his skull for a desk, his blood for ink, and a bayonet for a pen. The French name still ‘grieves’ [lugubre] our lands.”] (quoted by Sybille Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed*, 201). Did Mary Shelley read Tonerre? It is plausible, the Haitian revolution was being covered all over Europe, as Susan Buck Morse argues when asking the same question about Hegel.

Third and last conclusion: Political Literature today remakes the position of literature in the world (the desk, the ink, the paper), in order to build with the new spoils of catastrophe that keep growing all around us. The great challenge of political literature today is to create the wildest poetics with the rubbles of the dying worlds as a medium.

Note

- 1 <https://arablit.org/2023/12/04/our-loneliness-a-poem-by-hiba-abu-nada/>.
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