

Dr. Soueif's Keynote Address at Launch
of al-Shurouq Penguin Joint Project

Like so many people, and I'm sure like everybody here tonight, I was delighted when my friend and publisher Ibrahim al-Moallem, told me of this project to bring Penguin Classics into the Arabic library – and concomitantly to put some of the classics of Arabic into the Penguin series. And I'm honoured to be part of this gathering tonight to launch the project.

Penguin books have a special place in my heart. The distinctive livery served as a guarantee – when I was growing up and ransacking my mother's library – that I would find between the orange and white covers a story that would engross me and a world that I could explore.

Penguin was an early lesson in the unity and diversity of art. That it made perfect sense for works as diverse as *Diary of a Nobody*, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *the Grass is Singing* to wear the uniform that signaled their belonging to the same universe: a universe in which through an artist's inspired and judicious use of words hundreds of thousands of readers were enabled to step into somebody else's world, somebody else's shoes, somebody else's heart for a while, and emerge a richer and better for it.

John Makison has spoken of the cultural and symbolic significance of the al-Shorouk Penguin Project, "building a small bridge of understanding between the Arab-speaking and English-speaking worlds at a time when so much of our dialogue is coloured by rhetoric and incomprehension."

But we should remember that the lack of comprehension has not always been evenly distributed between both sides, and that many Arabic speakers have long understood the West, and appreciated its achievements, and seen the problems and conflicts between, let's say, those who speak Arabic and those who speak English, as problems of politics and economics rather than culture. These are the people that Edward Said speaks of when he describes how "what distinguished the great liberationist cultural movements that stood against Western imperialism was that they wanted liberation within the same universe of discourse inhabited by Western culture."

These liberationists and thinkers, let's call them the inhabitants of the ground common to both Arab and Western culture, believed this was

possible because they recognised an affinity between the best of Western and the best of Arab culture.

Generations of them had, I guess, believed what Western culture said of itself: that its values were universalist, democratic and humane. They believed that once you peeled off military and political dominance, the world so revealed would be one where everyone could engage freely in the exchange of ideas, art forms, technologies. This was the world that my generation believed we had inherited: a fertile land; an area of overlap, where one culture shaded into the other, where echoes and reflections added depth and perspective, where differences were interesting rather than threatening because foregrounded against a backdrop of affinities.

The rewards of inhabiting the common ground are enormous. At its best it endows each thing, at the same moment, with the shine of the new, the patina of the old; the language, the people, the landscape, the food of one culture constantly reflected off the other. This is not a process of comparison, not a 'which is better than which' project but rather at once a distillation and an enrichment of each thing, each idea. It means, for example, that you are both on the inside and the outside of language, that within each culture your stance cannot help but be both critical and empathetic.

Then came neo-imperialism and with it the miserable and tragic events of the last twenty years; events which demonstrated to many of us common grounders how unreal was the world we thought we inhabited. But now we see the beginnings of a counter-movement that looks as though it is moving against the political and military trajectories that characterized the last two decades. This is a counter-movements that posits a kind of "globalization" different from that being pushed by the great powers. It is in the context of this 'alternative globalisation' that we welcome this new al-Shorouk Penguin project.

So many well-intentioned projects flounder because of the gap between the creative/imaginative/public spirited people and the ones with the financial and business know-how.

In the two CEOs of Penguin UK and al-Shurouq we have two individuals who are professionally rooted in the work of literary culture. Who understand the value of tradition but are quick to embrace innovation. Who understand the importance of the bottom line and have led their companies

to outstanding commercial success. But who have also demonstrated through their careers a commitment to public service.

It seems that al-Shurouq Penguin Project has found not only its right moment but its true and proper guardians and I'm certain I speak for all of us here tonight in thanking them for embarking upon this and in saying we will be looking out for you and wishing you a blazing success.