# The Power of Literature

In the most general sense, literature is a discipline that studies elegant, measured, and harmonious words uttered or written in verse or prose in a form that is congruent with the conditions of time and usually in compliance with the rules of the language. The Arabic word for literature is adab, which has a wider frame of connotation associated with good manners, gentleness, elegance, refinement, and perfection. It has often been interpreted in relation to a person’s lifestyle, conduct, and integrity and as a means to the flourishing of that person in spirituality and purification of the heart. In this sense, adab falls in the domain of books on ethics or of treatises on Sufism, and therefore it is not usually covered within the discipline of literature. Even so, drawing upon its semantic roots, it is possible to refer to an indirect connection between the two.

Moving on from that relation, I would like to open a small window onto the meaning of literature as I understand it. However, I must first beg that my readers pardon my humble statements on a subject that is in fact beyond my ability, and that they judge this essay not on how it stands, but for the good intentions with which it was written. I should confess that just as I and people like me with narrow horizons cannot judge matters even in our own field properly, so too is it very difficult for us to express other matters very clearly, even when we may have judged them correctly. And I think this is generally true of all who tackle this topic. For instance, after Imam Shafii had personally corrected his book Kitab al-Umm, and afterwards still others had repeatedly corrected it, he found that certain points still bothered him. He raised his hands to God and admitted that no book can be faultless, except for divine revelations.

Even the enchanting states inspired by the most magnificent pieces of writing, the greatest works of art, the most eloquent words, and the most dazzling conceptions which are not based on divine speech and are not illumined with the shining of His light have a completely relative beauty. And even if they hold any value in terms of being a reflection or an echo of the beauties He possesses, they can hold absolutely no individual value of their own.

Nevertheless, this reality should never dishearten us or paralyze our determination to work. We should always think, speak, plan, try to realize what we have planned, and while doing all this, we should never forget that we can occasionally make mistakes, that very often we can fall into error. This is natural; as soon as we recognize them, we will correct them, try to compensate for our shortcomings and stick to seeking the best possible alternative.[[1]](#footnote-1) Our decisions may not always be accurate, but we will try to fulfill what divine wisdom requires of us by implementing our human capacity for understanding and judgment ( ijtihad).

So these humble contemplations must be seen in the same way. In the previous article on speech and power of expression, I tried to explain that speech was born with humanity, developed with humanity, and it constitutes a very significant depth of being human. So speech reached its contemporary level of maturity through history after having been repeatedly distilled through countless filters of thought and fashioned by masters of words, and then became what we now call literature. In this respect, it can be argued that the present moment of literature is brighter than its past, thus it can also be said that so too its future will be brighter than the present, or at least it should be so. As Said Nursi explains, human beings will eventually turn completely toward knowledge ( ilm) so that they will derive their power from knowledge. As a result the ultimate say will pass into the hands of knowledge. At the stage when knowledge shows such a level of development, the command of language and eloquence, reaching its peak, will outweigh all other values. Possibly, in such a period, in order to make others accept their ideas, people will use language as a weapon, try to penetrate hearts through their facility with language and conquer souls with the charm of literature.

The reality of knowledge and speech manifested only concisely in Adam and it reached its most brilliant form with the Final Prophet, yielded its awaited fruit, and became fully realized in the Qur’an. Now, if the world is going to last any longer, in the years ahead, while knowledge reaches its peak, language too will rise to the rank of the interpreter of knowledge in almost all circles, accompanied by the most powerful of orators and richest of speeches voicing the truth.

The power of expression, which is always nourished and develops in the bosom of need and necessity, will flourish in this environment for one last time, make its voice heard as powerfully as it can. If you will, you could also say this will be the reliving of the Age of the Qur’an in its most mature state, an Age of the Qur’an where love of truth and love of knowledge, where zeal to understand and passion to explain, where human values and their appreciation will live alongside one another. Incidentally, I would like to underline one point: future architects of thought and masters of language should do whatever they can to protect and honor the power of expression, for it has fallen into the incapable hands of people like us. They should untie its tongue, so that it can voice our own world of thoughts. Otherwise, it is obvious that we will keep on hearing the cawing of crows where we expect to hear the singing of nightingales; we will not be able to be free of the distress of thorns on the way to roses.

The power of speech and refinement of eloquence have always developed, found its proper consistency, and come to maturity in the realm of literature and under the tutelage of literary thought. However, it is also very important what we understand—or we are supposed to understand—when literary thought or literature is mentioned.

Human beings have always expressed their feelings, thoughts, and the inspirations of their heart through cinema, theatre, and symbolic painting, along with oral or written literature. When the subject extends beyond spoken or written language, naturally gesture, facial expression, sounds and other means replace words and sentences. Even so, they have never been able to truly substitute for speech and writing. The most reliable way for a people to preserve their literature and make it flourish in its own framework and fertile ground is to put it into a written form. This turns it into a common source to which individuals may refer to at any time. It allows it to become as widely accessible as possible, paving the way for it to become the national style of an entire society, the nation’s shared property. It thus becomes a field of exposition for future generations, an exhibition ground of verbal excellence, and a trust to the common conscience, guarded by national memory and perpetuating its own origin.

In this respect, we have always sought literature in the magical world of written or spoken words and always realized our acquaintance and encounters with it among the pages of books and magazines. Whatever style is adopted in recounting a given subject – whether the work produced is approached with an artistic concern or expressed in a plain style, whether a small, select audience is targeted or large crowds are addressed – when literature is mentioned, what comes first to mind is the written word.

It does not make any difference whether the subject of a piece of literature is religion, an idea, philosophy, or doctrine; literature is one of the most important ways that humans can transfer the accumulation of knowledge they have gained through history from one generation to another. Through it they can sense all the depths and richness of yesterday in the present. They see the past and present as two dimensions of reality, and savor the future in its relative depth.

Furthermore, believers should firstly be faithful to their heritage and refer to it frequently, as much as they embrace universal human values. They should emphasize the essence of their common conscience and take it as an essential constituent. They should use this heritage as the canvas for the embroidery in which they depict their literary feelings and understanding of art, so that they do not destroy the spirit of their own literature, and are not constrained solely to foreign borrowings. If they use their own sources and weave their own cultural values on their own loom, there does not seem to be an obstacle to their progress, and they can walk to universality carrying the interpretations of their own time.

Believers should place the main sources of belief, cultural heritage and memory of universal values, in the center of their lives. Thus after having secured themselves from deviation, believers should strive to establish connections with the outside world; remaining indifferent to others’ values restricts what is normally broad and universal, is an obstruction to growth, causing agony for the living, and falling from the degree of being envied to a state of envying others; the condition of Third-world countries today presents so many living examples of that.

These countries always go through a period of standstill in their literature, sometimes due to customs, sometimes because of the influence of local understandings, and sometimes due to a fear of self-alienation—which can be empathized to a certain extent. Approaching literature liberally to a large degree ceased due to excessive reactions; some very important sources of inspiration were dried up, and efforts to enrich literature were perceived as fantasy and subsequently dismissed. Moreover, the field of literature was further narrowed at certain times by favoring a region or dialect at the expense of other varieties of the language; the branches with potential to develop were cut off and the roots were removed by prohibiting the field of literature from being ploughed. Thus, in such countries, the development of a language that may have been more representative of the wider society was prevented, and instead a dialect on the margins has been preferred over others, and as a result their literature was reduced to the voice of a small minority rather than becoming a respectable representative of literature in the world. This can also be called surrendering to oblivion.

In fact, what becomes dormant, stops growing, and what is not open to developing withers. Whatever is static then topples over. And that which does not give fruit dies. This is not limited to literature; it is true for almost every subject, from religion to thought, from art to philosophy.

Nevertheless, literature does not simply mean playing on words with written or spoken language skills and producing phrases people will like; it means making the art of expression lovable with the dimensions of eloquence and clarity. It is the water and air of feeding, adorning, and enriching daily language with the cleanest, purest, most lovable, and lasting material, and it is a treasure which increases with use.

A writer of verse or prose who pens his or her thoughts with literary considerations always relies upon a purpose and overtone; using a rich vocabulary, harmonious statements, and a grand style, writers activate words, long and short, aiming for excellence of expression. While moving toward this aim, writers place all the words or sentences they have picked and fitted in their places in such a way that they all sound out like notes serving to support the general theme of the tune they play. As these sounds and notes voice their intended ideal, they continue to play in the background, reflecting the author’s mode of thinking, general tendencies and mood.

In a lyric verse, produced by a master of expression the words, feel as if they are filled with that person’s excitement. The words, sentences, or lines, springing from a literary heart kindled with epic feelings, ring in our ears like the march of a glorious army. All the words in a masterfully written drama resonate in the depths of our soul and almost bring to life the story therein. A literary person is able to think very differently and reach different judgments; writers always pursue quality and strive to leave future generations a legacy they will gladly inherit and respect.

Actually, like literary language, daily language also has its own kind of beauty, ease, allure, and naturalness that entices pure pleasure. However, literary language is poetic, musical, and constructs a pleasing whole in harmony with the meanings it holds. It is superior in linguistic utilization, taste, and refinement in the way that demonstrates coherence within the text as a whole and cohesion between words and sentences. Let alone feeling and savoring these, it is sometimes very difficult for people who lack the aptitude to even understand them.

All that notwithstanding, it is not correct to regard literary style as the language of an upper class or an aristocratic group. On the contrary, even if they cannot penetrate as far as the secondary meanings and connotations suggested by the composition, people of every level should somehow be able to understand, and they should be able to benefit from that source, even if only in a limited way. Thus, in time they will be elevated to a level where they can express their feelings and thoughts more comfortably and gain greater language skills through the expansion of their knowledge. In the meantime, they will consolidate what they already know of language, enrich it by making suitable contributions as far as they can, and add new depths to their horizons of thought.

No matter at what level, the language almost all of us speak today, which has quietly settled in our memories through generations, is to a great extent the fruit of master poets’ and writers’ concerted efforts that have been adopted by our souls. With the sensitivity of a goldsmith, these masters of expression presented us with the beautiful jewels of expression and necklaces of words that they prepared; thanks to their legacy, we express ourselves through this rich resource to the best of our abilities. Even though not everybody understands the magnificent works they produced and the aesthetic depth in the spirit of those works, all of us have always appreciated them and felt eager for more. For such a level of appreciation one does not need to know the writer’s artistic anxiety, power to construct, mental strain, success in planning, nor his or her true value to the extent a skilful goldsmith knows the precious stones.

People have always held the literary artists in high regard, certainly with exceptions. They have applauded these people’s efforts, appreciated their labor, and frequently expressed this appreciation by imitating them. Then what falls to literary people is that they put their language skills and artistic talents at the service of the right, good, and beautiful, instead of hurting the souls of the masses— who can be regarded as their apprentices—by describing what is corrupt, or contaminating people’s pure thoughts with dirty images, and condemning them to the slavery of materialism with descriptions of carnal desires. According to Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, people of letters need to have high morals and act within the universal codes of conduct prescribed in divine scriptures. He also reminds us of the divine source where the *“power of expression”* originates from and advises us to duly respect this capacity, which is regarded as an important depth of our humanity.

Literary styles of expression are different than other styles. For example, in scientific writing or speech it is essential to have a sound pattern of reasoning, a systematic thought, well-versed statements, and no mental, logical, and emotional gaps should be left unfilled. Oratory style emphasizes proofs and arguments, maintaining interest and enthusiasm, making occasional repetitions, supporting the narration with paraphrases when necessary, using colorful expression, and enlivening the speech by inspirational shifts without detracting from the main axis. On the other hand, literary style requires a variety of linguistic arts, such as vividness of expression, accuracy of language, beauty of presentation, richness of imagination, the utilization of metaphors, parables, idioms, figures of speech, and allusions—as long as it does not reach the point of excess. Because excess will spoil—as in everything else—the naturalness of language and muddy the heavenly spring of expression, people of sound taste will mostly find it strange. As Said Nursi also expressed, the wording should be as ornate as the nature of the meaning allows. Form should follow content, and while it is being crafted, permission for literary license should be requested from the meaning in order to avoid excess. The brightness and resplendence of style should be given proper due, but the aim and intended meaning should never be neglected. The imagination should be given room to maneuver, but not at the cost of the Truth.

1. The author refers to a theory in the methodology of Islamic jurisprudence, which is called ashbah bi’l haqq (*“very much like the truth”*). According to this theory, when an absolute ruling on a certain issue cannot be found in the Qur’an or in the practice of the Prophet, scholars exercise the procedures in legal methodology and reach a decision with a hope and conviction that their decision is the closest to the will of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)