THE QUESTION OF FREEDOM IN MODERN ARABIC LITERARY CRITICISM

I

Early in 1992, a call for papers was sent out by the newly appointed Editor of the highly respected and well known quarterly of literary criticism *Fuṣūl*, asking various writers, critics and intellectuals from all over the Arab World, to contribute to a special issue of the journal on the theme of "Literature and Freedom". Unlike many who seized the opportunity and wrote most willingly about their views on the subject, Professor Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Haddāra of Alexandria University decided to respond differently and wrote¹ to President Mubārak of Egypt calling upon him to intervene and stop Marxism from spreading its poison in the country. The President referred Haddāra’s letter to the publisher of the journal, the Egyptian General Establishment of Books whose director in turn referred it to the also newly appointed Editor of *Ibdāʿ*, the distinguished poet ʿAbd al-Muʿtī Hijāzī. Reproducing Haddāra’s letter, Hijāzī devoted his editorial² to answering its allegations and to discussing its implications for the process of cultural production in the Arab World in general, and Egypt in particular. Much to the delight of *Fuṣūl*'s editor, the publication of Haddāra’s letter was the first spark in a long, heated and lively chain of discussions of the issue of authority and freedom in culture, art and literature.

These discussions in fact were the best advertising and information campaign for the planned issue of *Fuṣūl*. Besides Hijāzī’s rejoinder to Haddāra, attacks and condemnations were directed at Haddāra from Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī,³ Ghāli Shukrī,⁴ a group of intellectuals and writers from the University of ‘Aṣyūt,⁵ Muhammad Barrāda,⁶ Ḥilmī Sālim,⁷

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Maḥmūd al-Wardānī,8 and others, Furthermore the planned issue of the journal was extended to three in order to accommodate the many contributions received. These contributions came from critics and writers from all over the Arab World. They included 32 articles written by Arab critics, 45 statements by Arab creative writers and 4 foreign contributions, translated especially for the journal.9

Haddāra’s call for authority to intervene and protect Egypt from the Marxists ʿUsfūr, Ḥijāzī and Shukrī and their attempts to incite Arab writers against the various taboos which constrain artistic creation, brought the issue of authority and its role in suppressing creativity in Arab society to the fore. It was natural, therefore, that most of the contributors concentrated on authority as the biggest obstacle in the path of creativity in the Arab World. This in fact was duly noted by Jābir ʿUsfūr himself in his editorial10 which introduced the 45 statements of Arab writers which appeared in the third and final part of the special issue of the journal. This was reprinted to meet the great demand for it all over the Arab World.

The presence of political suppression in the consciousness of Arab writers turns it into a kind of internal censor that controls the writer from within and makes him reproduce this suppression and disseminate it around him. In fact the Arab writers’ emphasis on this external constraint on their freedom is shared also by most Arab critics who concentrate almost exclusively on it in their discussion of the issue. Examining representative samples of Arab critics’ statements on the question of freedom in literature one is easily struck by their extrinsic perspective,11 in spite of the different generations, different social backgrounds and different intellectual and political orientations.12

9 Fusūl, vol. 11, nos. 1, 2 and 3., Spring, Summer, Fall 1992.