ARABIC FICTION AND THE QUEST FOR FREEDOM

I laugh in the dark,
I cry in the dark;
in the dark I also write
till I no longer distinguish pen from finger.
Every knock at the door, every rustle of the curtain,
I cover my papers with my hand
like a cheap tart in a police raid.
From whom have I inherited this error,
this blood as skittish as the mountain panther?
No sooner do I spot an official form on the threshold
or a helmet through a crack in the door
than my bones and tears start to shudder,
my blood scatters to the four winds
as though some eternal squad of progeny police
were chasing it from one vein to the next.


Introduction

The topic chosen by a revered and beloved teacher is rich in potential significances. On the purely semantic level, the word “quest” implies the process of searching or looking for something, implying thereby, of course, that the entity that is the object of such a project is currently lacking. Within the context of narratives and, in particular, the study of them by specialists in folklore, the quest has often been placed within the framework of a journey, one that has on occasion consumed an entire lifetime. And then there is the word “freedom,” a concept which, in the wake of the rationalizations of Western politicians regarding recent events in Eastern Europe and the Arabian Gulf, has come to be almost meaningless. However, the very same word was clearly replete with significance for American slaves in the 19th century, such as the renowned Frederick Douglass; in their narratives the freedom to have charge of one’s own life and identity was indeed a quest.1 The word “freedom” may be followed by any of the following: “from,” “of,” or “to”: freedom from oppression—colonialism, forced marriage, censor-

ship; freedom of thought and expression, or religious belief; freedom to write, to read, to criticize. When Najib Mahfuz was asked recently what is the subject closest to his heart, the one he most likes to write about, his unequivocal answer was:

Freedom. Freedom from colonization, freedom from the absolute rule of a king, and basic freedom in the context of society and family. These types of freedom follow from one to the other.²

In narrowing down such a broad spectrum of possibilities, I have chosen as my starting point a quotation from I. F. Stone’s book, the Trial of Socrates, where he states his belief that

no society is good, whatever its intentions, whatever its utopian and liberationist claims, if the men and women who live in it are not free to speak their minds.³

I wish to investigate the issue of freedom of expression as a factor in the development of modern Arabic fiction; in particular, novelists in prison, novels about writers in prison, and the imprisonment of the novel.

Novelists in Prison

In broaching the general topic of writers’ freedom, I am acutely conscious of the old proverb: “People in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.” The publication history of D. H. Lawrence’s Lady Chatterley’s Lover, James Joyce’s Ulysses, and Henry Miller’s Tropic of Cancer, not to mention the fate of Solzenitsyn’s oeuvre, should be sufficient to prevent us becoming too superior about Western notions of freedom of publication. And, lest those examples should be thought somewhat dated in 1993, let me refer you to the recently published book of Joan DelFattore entitled, What Johnny Shouldn’t Read (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), which details the mostly successful efforts by Christian fundamentalists in the Southern States of America to have certain texts banned from school libraries and curricula.

The freedom of writers of fiction in the Arab world to write and publish their creative output is restricted in varying degrees and by a number of methods, both overt and covert. Among the most obvious is

² Najib Mahfuz, interviewed by Charlotte El Shabrawy in Paris Review 123 (Summer 1992): 70. More recently, Mahfuz has opined that: “If anything like that [the publication of pioneering works by the likes of ‘Abd al-Rāziq or Tāḥā Ḥusayn] were to occur in these times, it would bring down disaster on its author. The all-pervasive atmosphere of terror squelches freedom, thought, and creativity, all of them.” Al-Shumā‘ 26 (Oct.-Dec. 1992): 20.