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The Quest for Freedom
in Modern Arabic Literature

Essays in honour of Mustafa Badawi

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E·J·B R I L L

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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 *Ibdā'*, the distinguished poet Aḥmad 'Abd al-Mu'īṭī Ḥijāzī. Reproducing Haddāra's letter, Ḥijāzī 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 Ḥijāzī's rejoinder to Haddāra, attacks and condemnations were directed at Haddāra from Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī,³ Ghālī Shukrī,⁴ a group of intellectuals and writers from the University of 'Aṣyūṭ,⁵ Muḥammad Barrāda,⁶ Ḥilmī Sālim,⁷

¹ For the text of Haddāra's letter See *Ibdā'*, Vol. 10, April, 1992, p. 5.

² Aḥmad 'Abd al-Mu'īṭī Ḥijāzī, "al-Ḥiwār Badalan min al-Muṣāḍara, al-Ḥiwār Badalan min al-Wishāya, al-Ḥiwār Badalan min al-Irhāb" *ibid*, pp. 4 and 6-7.

³ See *al-Akḥbār*, 8/4/1992 and *ibid*, 15/4 1992 for Haddāra's reply as well as for al-Ghīṭānī's comment on Haddāra's answer.

⁴ See *al-Aḥrām*, 15/4/1992.

⁵ See *Ibdā'*, vol. 10, May, 1992.

⁶ See Muḥammad Barrāda, "al-Wushāt Dākhil al-Ḥaql al-Thaqāfī", *al-Waṣaṭ*, no. 18, 1/6/1992, (pp. 57-8).

⁷ See Ḥilmī Sālim, "al-Muthaqqaf wa al-Mukhbīr .. al-Kitāba wa al-Dasīsa", *al-Quds al-'Arabī*, vol. 4, no. 964, 18/6/1992, (p. 6).

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 'Uṣfūr, 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 'Uṣfūr 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

⁸ See Maḥmūd al-Wardānī, "Ḥālat al-Duktūr Haddāra, *al-Ḥayāt*, no. 10727, 23/6/1992.

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

¹⁰ See "Mufataṭah", *Fuṣūl*, vol. 11, no. 3, Fall 1992, 2nd impression, January 1993, pp. 5-8.

¹¹ See 'Abd al-Nabī Ṣtaif, "Ḥāmish al-Ḥuriyya fi al-Mumārasa al-'Adabiyya", *Fuṣūl*, vol. 11, no. 1, Spring 1992, p. 48.

¹² The samples include:—'Abbās Maḥmūd al-'Aqqād, "al-Adab wa al-Dawla" and "Risālat al-'Adīb al-Tabshīr bi Dīn al-Ḥurriyya", in Muḥammad Khalīfa al-Tūnīsī, *Fuṣūl min al-Naqd 'Ind al-'Aqqād*, (al-Khāngi Bookshop, Cairo, n.d.), pp. 302-3 and 304-5.—'Alī 'Uqla 'Arsān, *Dirāsāt fī al-Thaqāfa al-'Arabiyya* (West Tripoli, n.d.).—Shukrī 'Ayyād, "al-Adab wa al-Ḥurriyya" *Fuṣūl*, vol. 11, no. 1, Spring 1992, pp. 12-13.—Faysal Dārraj, "Istibdād al-Thaqāfa wa Thaqāfat al-Istibdād", *Fuṣūl*, Vol. 11, no. 2, Summer 1992, pp. 9-23.—'Abd al-Karī, Ghallāb, "al-Adab wa al-Dawla", "al-Adab wa al-Iltizām" and "al-Iltizām al-Dhātī", in his *Diḡā' an Fann al-Qawl*, new edition, (al-Dar al-'Arabiyya Kitāb, West li 'l-Tripoli, 1984), pp. 96-101, 102-107 and 108-113.—Ghālīb Halasa, "al-Iltizām wa Ilghā", *al-Adab*, *Faṭḥ*, 1/1/1986, pp. 69-71, 180-4.—Tāhā Ḥusayn, "al-Ḥurriyya wa al-Adab", in his *Min Tarīkh al-Adab al-'Arabī: al-'Aṣr al-Jāhili*

Furthermore, one can also notice the following:

- a. All Arab critics seem to have an ambivalent attitude towards freedom in literature. For while they all insist on the writer's freedom to write in the way dictated by his artistic sensibility, they counterbalance this by a constant reference to his commitment towards his society, nation and humanity, to the necessity or inevitability of orientation in literature and art, or to the social, moral, and political function of literature.
- b. Most discussions of the question of freedom in literature and art take place within the larger context of the question of freedom in Arab society, particularly intellectual freedom and the role of thought in general in shaping modern Arab society or in confronting the challenges facing it at all levels.
- c. Despite the fact that the critics believe strongly that freedom is something inherent in the very act of creative writing, they nonetheless discuss it externally, concentrating mainly on its relationship with authority which, in the eyes of these critics, seems to be capable of giving or denying the writers all forms of freedom. Whether political, social or religious, authority in the Arab World has the means to respond to any act of freedom articulated in any work of art. Political authority does not only have the means to stop the dissemination of the work of art but also of making its producer pay for his or her opposition to or even criticism of the established order. It has, and actually uses most of the time, both the carrot and the stick and it does not spare either in subjecting creative writing to its objectives and making it subservient to its vision of the world. Social authority performs its censorship through instigating the general public as well as through inciting political authority against any writer who dares to disturb or challenge the prevailing values and order. As for religious authority, it has the advantage of its close relationship with the masses which it mobilises against infringement on any sacred or religious practices, rituals, values, or conventions by any writer. In addi-

wa al-ʿAṣr al-Islāmī. (Dar al-ʿIlm li al-Malāyīn, Beirut, 1970) pp. 53-7. "al-Adīb Yaktub li Khāṣṣa" *al-Ādāb*, May 1955, pp. 9-16, "al-Ḥayāt fi Sabīl al-Adab", in his *Khiṣām wa Naqd*, 10th impression, (Dar al-ʿIlm li al-Malāyīn, Beirut, 1980, pp. 108-127).—Ḥusām al-Khatīb, "Asʿilat al-Naqd fi Nādī al-Ibdāʿ wa-al-Ḥurriyya", *al-Maʿrifah* vol. 31, no. 348, September, 1992, pp. 45-66.—Raʿīf Khūrī, "al-Qalam Masʿūl Ijtimāʿiyy", *al-Tarīq*, vol. 7, no. 4, April 1948, pp. 3-11.—Muḥammad Mandūr, "*al-Naqd wa al-Nuqqād al-Muʿāṣirūn* (Dār Nahḍat Miṣr, Cairo, n.d.).—Muḥammad al-Nuwayhī, *Tabīʿat al-Fann wa Masʿūliyyat al-Fannān*, 2nd impression (Dār al-Marifah, Cairo, 1964).—Khalid al-Shamʿah, "Mashrūʿ al-Naqd wa Mahsrūʿ al-Ḥurriyya", in his *al-Naqd wa al-Ḥurriyya* (ʿIttiḥād al-Kuttāb al-ʿArab, Damascus, 1977), pp. 186-93.—Nabīl Sulaymān, *Asʿilat al-Wāqʿiyyah wa al-Iltizām*, (Dār al-Ḥiwār, Lattakia, 1985).—Jābir ʿUṣfūr, "Muftataḥ", *Fuṣūl*, vol. 11, no. 3, Fall, 1992, pp. 5-8)

tion, this authority usually adapts a pragmatic attitude towards its political counterpart and calls upon it to intervene and protect these threatened religious or sacred values and practices, forgetting most of the time its supposedly secular nature which puts it in the opposite camp.

It is therefore high time that the question of freedom in literature and its study (including literary criticism) is considered from an integrative point of view. It is vitally important for the student of this sensitive issue to take account not only of the various external constraints on the freedom of both writers and critics in Arab society, but also of the internal constraints inherent in the very act of writing. It is hoped by examining the issue from this integrative perspective to show that what is needed in Arab society is not to look for freedom, but rather and more urgently, to inject more freedom in to the act of writing itself. The act of writing is already bound with so many internal chains as well as with so many external constraints. It is, therefore, in dire need of drastic measures in order to enable it to articulate freely the ambitions and aspirations of the Arab majority, and to respond to the real needs of this society which is facing constantly all sorts of challenges at all levels, particularly now in the shadow of the so-called new world order.

II

When producing his discourse, the Arab writer enjoys very little freedom. He performs his act of writing while so many internal and external constraints are at work, curtailing his freedom to the point of non-existence. The language system, the literary system, the institution of genre, the national and foreign cultural heritages, the reader and society, all, each in its own way, contribute to diminishing his freedom despite the fact that most writers believe naively that writing itself is an act of freedom.

To begin with, the natural language, the very medium used by the writer is governed lexically, phonetically, phonologically, morphologically, semantically, syntactically, discursively and contextually by a comprehensive and cohesive system termed by Ferdinand de Saussure as *langue*. In fact this system acts as a modelling system for all forms of language practice performed by individuals. Besides this system which constrains the freedom of the writer, there are the rules, canons, conventions, criteria, standards and values which the writer takes into consideration when producing his literary discourse. These rules, and canons form also a coherent system which mould the literary practice of individuals. Viewed from a semiotic point of view, the language system, which is no more than a system of signs, as well as the literary system,

which is a system of signs also, are two modelling systems¹³ which shape the literary discourse produced by the writer. For the writer in fact has to cope not only with the conventions and rules of the linguistic signs in the primary modelling system of the language he uses as a medium of his art, but he also is obliged to employ these signs according to supplementary conventions which give them meanings and effects other than those they would have in ordinary every-day language. Actually it is these supplementary conventions¹⁴ which turn his discourse into fine art or literature. They form in fact the literary system which governs not only the production of his individual literary discourse but also the reception of such discourse by the reader.

In addition to these two systems which limit the freedom of the writer, there is still the institution of literary genre which is adapted by him as a form for his literary discourse. For literary genre is not "a mere name". The "aesthetic convention in which a work participates shapes its character". Literary genres "may be regarded as institutional imperatives which both coerce and are in turn coerced by the writer".¹⁵ Literary genre is therefore, an important constraint on the freedom of the writer in his production of literary work. It acts as another modelling system of the literary discourse produced by the writer. Furthermore it governs the reception of the work by the reader. For the judgement of a poem, a play, a short story, or a novel involves an appeal to one's total experience and conception, descriptive and normative¹⁶ of poetry, drama or fiction. This total experience in fact determines to a great extent the reader's expectation of the literary work and his attitude towards it.

These three internal constraints are not the only factors which diminish the freedom of the writer. For besides its internal system which governs his individual discourse, language is not "mere inert matter like stone but is itself a creation of man and is thus charged with the cultural heritage¹⁷" recorded in that language. In fact the Arab writer who uses Arabic as a medium exposes himself to the influence of other cultural traditions which have been translated into Arabic and made available to him through the channel of translation. The Arabic cultural tradition as

¹³ For an excellent study of the notions of "Primary modelling system" and "Secondary modelling system" see Ann Shukman, *Literature and Semiotics: A Study of the Writings of W.M. Lotman* (North-Holland Publishing Company, Amsterdam, New York, Oxford, 1977), pp. 23-4 and 120-3.

¹⁴ Jonathan Culler, "Semiotics" in A. Preminger et al. (eds.), *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Enlarged Edition (MacMillan, London, 1974), pp. 980-1.

¹⁵ René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd Edition, (Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1980) p. 226.

¹⁶ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 22.

well as other foreign cultural traditions which have been assimilated by the writer directly or indirectly form a kind of dominant structure which functions as a magnetic space within which the individual discourse of the writer is produced. This seems quite natural if one remembers that individuals acquire their linguistic ability not theoretically but practically through the many texts they assimilate throughout the various stages of their lives. Likewise, writers acquire their national language through their daily encounter with texts throughout the various stages of their cultural formation. When they produce their own text they do so by using the texts they previously assimilated and the process which governs this textual production has been well characterized by Bakhtin and Kristeva and is widely known as intertextuality and transposition.¹⁸ In a way the individual literary text produced by any writer is in fact nothing but a reproduction of a "new" text out of already existing texts, and the margin of freedom enjoyed by the writer in this process of reproduction is extremely limited.

The previous interrelated structures, the language system, the literary system, the institution of genres, the cultural tradition whether national or foreign, are all part of an even larger structure which is the social structure in which the recipient or the reader plays an ever increasing role in shaping the literary work produced by the writer out of his so called "free will". In fact the reader is viewed nowadays as the co-creator of the literary work, the agent through which the potential aesthetic experience inherent in the genuine work of art is transformed into an actual and real experience. Nonetheless, both writer and reader are members of a society and literature itself is a social institution whose production, dissemination and consumption are all performed within society. No one can better sum up the complex relationship between literature and society than René Wellek who writes:

Literature is a social institution, using as its medium language, a social creation. Such traditional literary devices as symbolism and metre are social in their very nature. They are conventions and norms which would have arisen only in society. But, furthermore, literature 'represents' 'life', and 'life' is, in large measure, a social reality ... The poet himself is a member of society, possessed of a specific social status: he receives some degree of social recognition and reward, he addresses an audience, however hypothetical. Indeed, literature, has usually arisen in close connexion with particular social institutions, and in primitive society we may even be unable to distinguish poetry from ritual, magic, work or play.

¹⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Translated by Margaret Waller with an Introduction by Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia University Press, New York, 1984), pp. 59-60. See also: 'Abd al-Nabī Ṣṭaif, "al-Tanāṣṣ", *Rāyat Mu'tah*, Vol. 2, no. 2, December 1993, pp. 51-4.

Literature has also a social function, or 'use', which cannot be purely individual. Thus a large majority of the questions raised by literary study are, at least ultimately or by implication, social questions: questions of tradition and convention, norms and genres, symbols and myth. With Tomars, one can formulate:

'Esthetic institutions are not based upon social institutions: they are not even part of social institutions: they are social institutions of one type and intimately interconnected with those others'.¹⁹

The writer is a social being who performs certain social functions within the relevant social institution. He uses a social medium which is language (the social aspect of language is studied by a particular discipline which is socio-linguistics) to produce a social discourse which is recognized by society as literature²⁰ (the social aspect of literature is studied also by a particular discipline which is the sociology of literature). The process of literary production is performed within certain social institutions be they educational, cultural or informational and through certain channels which can only exist in a society. Society exerts its most direct and crude influence through the apparatus of censorship and indirectly and more subtly through the apparatus of literary study and scholarship which are performed by a group of specialists whose social function²¹ in dealing with literature is too obvious to need any discussion.

III

Literary criticism distinguishes itself from other kinds of criticism by the fact that it uses the same medium used by its subject matter, namely the natural language. Thus it is a discourse whose very subject is another discourse and its medium is therefore a metalanguage. Yet, since it is a systematic knowledge of literature, literary criticism employs the natural language in such a way as to facilitate the production and comprehension of this knowledge, using this language as a tool for thinking systematically on literature.²² The natural language used in criticism consists mostly of idioms, terms and concepts which help the critic in his explanation, analysis, interpretation, comparison and judgement of the literary work under consideration.

¹⁹ René Wellek and Austin Warren, *ibid*, p. 94.

²⁰ Roger Fowler, *Literature as Social Discourse: The Practice of Linguistic Criticism* (Batsford Academic and Educational Ltd., London, 1981), particularly Chapter Five, pp. 80-95.

²¹ See 'Abd al-Nabī Ṣtaif, "al-Dirāsa al-ʿAdabiyya: Mashrū ʿiyyatahā, Ashkāluhā, Ṣilatuhā", *al-Mawqif al-ʿAdabī*, Vol. 21, no. 248, December, 1991, p. 18.

²² See 'Abd al-Nabī Ṣtaif, *Fī al-Naqd al-ʿAdabī al-ʿArabī al-Ḥadīth*, Vol. 1. (Damascus University Publication, Damascus, 1990-1), p. 17.

Using such a medium as a tool in producing his discourse, the literary critic subjects this discourse to the strain of three systems which all operate on it simultaneously and consequently exposes it to the constraints inherent in each system. The literary critic does not only have to cope with the language system of his discourse but also with the literary system of its subject matter i.e. literature, and still further with the critical system within which he is operating. Thus there are three systems working at various levels to govern the production of his discourse or to model it, each according to the standards, patterns, criteria, conventions and norms it entails. Right from the beginning, the critical discourse is subjected to three levels of internal constraints that limit the freedom of its producer.

In addition to these internal constraints, there are the various aspects of the contextual relationships in which his discourse is located. There is first the immediate context²³ of the critical discourse, the time, space conditions and environments which surround the process of production of critical discourse. Secondly there is the context of culture²⁴ to which the immediate context of the critical discourse is closely related. This context comprises "the whole network of social and economic conventions and institutions constituting the culture at large",²⁵ especially in so far as these bear on the immediate context of the critical discourse and influence its structure and guide its interpretation. Thirdly there is the context of reference or the intellectual and theoretical frame of reference which determines the exact signification of each term, idiom and concept employed by the critic in his discourse. In fact this context of reference works as an infrastructure which governs the production of meaning or the literary thought which the critic strives to articulate.

Literary criticism is also a human activity.²⁶ It uses a human medium, it is produced and received by human beings of a particular sex, age, cultural and social background, political and ideological orientation and world view, a human being who lives in certain physical, economic, social and psychological conditions and performs a social function. All of this has its impact on the production of the critical text and constitutes further constraints on the freedom of the critic—constraints which prevent him from constructing his discourse in the way he wishes.

Furthermore literary criticism is produced within particular social

²³ Roger Fowler, *Linguistic Criticism* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1986), p. 86.

²⁴ M.A.K. Galliday and Ruqaiya Hasan, *Language, Context and Text: Aspects of Language in a Social-Semiotic Perspective* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989), pp. 46-7.

²⁵ Roger Fowler, *Linguistic Criticism*, p. 88.

²⁶ For more details on this aspect of literary criticism see 'Abd al-Nabī Ṣtaif, *Fi al-Naqd al-Adabī al-'Arabī al-Ḥadīth*, Vol. 1, pp. 31-8.

institutions²⁷ such as schools, universities, periodicals, books, public lectures, conferences, seminars, radio and television. Each institution imposes its conventions, regulations, values and set of criteria and principles on the process of the production of critical text and consequently limits still further the freedom of the writer. Besides, aesthetic and artistic values and criteria are socially grounded and form in turn a social structure which exerts its influence on the literary critic when he confronts any work of art and reduces what has been the extremely narrowed margin of freedom he is supposed to enjoy. The literary critic is a writer and as such he has to bear in mind his reader and cater for the latter's need. Like the producer of his subject matter he is under the strain of the national and foreign cultural heritages he is exposed to throughout the various stages of his formation. Thus he is in fact left with an almost non-existing margin of freedom which he likes to think he is enjoying. Actually this freedom is more fancy rather than a reality, a false hope rather than a truly viable ambition. It is in short, a fiction, like literature itself is merely a fiction.

IV

As has been demonstrated, neither the Arab writer nor the Arab critic enjoys any measure of freedom, which belongs, in fact, to the realm of wishes and desires rather than to that of reality. As a cultural product, writing in the Arab World is an activity that is tightly bound with so many internal and external chains. To worsen the situation even further, most modern Arab cultural institutions became mere servants to the established political institution, thus neglecting society at large. This is quite natural when most of these cultural institutions are created, funded and run by the state. Their allegiance is, therefore, to their pay master rather than to Arab society as a whole. It is essential that this unhealthy condition be rectified if the cultural product of any type is to contribute to the overall development of the Arab by liberating his abilities and energies and directing them towards building a better future. This can only be achieved if the main cultural institutions in the Arab world return to the old system of endowment of *waqf*. Every capable Arab individual or economic institution should contribute to the creation of this *waqf* so that any cultural institution responsible for producing any form of writing, including literary and critical writings, could gradually disengage itself from its attachment to the state and shift it towards society. Once this has been done, the cultural production of the nation becomes a weapon that can protect the freedom of its member against

²⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 26-9.

any infringement whether from the outside or the inside, particularly from the established political institution whose very existence depends on subjecting the entire society to its one-sided view of reality. Of course, some might argue, quite understandably, that this would mean, in practice, substituting one pay-master for another. However, since the new pay-master is the society at large, the society with all its classes, groups and institutions, neither the writer nor the critic in the Arab World would have the same objections that they would have otherwise against authority, because the sense of belonging to such a society would, no doubt, lessen their sense of the lack of freedom. Participating in building this society in the fashion they choose, wish, or desire, would make both Arab writer and critic feel that sacrificing any aspect of their individual freedom is not a waste. It is, in fact, a contribution towards creating a healthier and more human space for writing. After all, writing is a form of desire fabricated through the medium of natural or human language. The quest for freedom undoubtedly reigns supreme in the realm of desire created by the word of the writer.

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