

'ABD ALLAH AL-KABIR
al-Sollam al-Rokhami
(The Marble Stairs)
Cairo: Dar al-M'aref, 1965. Pp. 263.
Piaster 10.

News has reached us that a major publishing firm in Cairo will be soon publishing 'Abd Allah al-Kabir's second novel *I'trafat 'Aasheq* ("Lover's Confessions"). We have also been informed of the many difficulties and hardships the publisher had to overcome in order to get the censor's permission for publication, even when half the manuscript had been suppressed. The censor's objections were mainly based on the detailed description of passionate love, erotic lust, and sensuality. Since we intend to review *I'trafat 'Aasheq* as soon as it reaches us, we think that it might be a good idea to introduce Mr. al-Kabir's first novel to our readers, for it represents a certain literary trend that exists in Egyptian narrative literature.

Mr. al-Kabir's *al-Sollam al-Rokhami* ("The Marble Stairs," 1965) is a rather traditional novel of love and self-abnegation. It describes a short-lived love affair between a middle-aged, middle classed teacher and his young, rich, but already engaged girl student. In a very elevated style the author depicts a game of enticement and seduction that leads the protagonists to disenchantment and secession. Because of its very simple and conventional plot Western critics might be tempted to discard it offhand as outmoded and old-fashioned. But considering the stagnant social patterns and the rigid moral codes of this Islamic country before the military defeat of 1967 (which, according to Najib Mahfuz—*JFR*, 1[1974], 68—has caused tremendous social and moral upheavals), one appreciates the courage and integrity of this author for touching some—for the Arabic reader—very explosive questions about chastity, adultery, and illegitimacy.

Nevertheless, it is the style of this novel and not the content that makes it a remarkable work. The author—an Arabic philologist who is in complete command of this rich but treacherous language—apparently believes, like many other early "composers" of Arabic narratives, that a story, no matter what theme or plot it has,

should be written in a poetic and graceful style, and that dry, prosy, and casual language has no place in literature, even when it deals with an unassuming and democratic genre such as the novel. Therefore, it is understandable that only the sophisticated reader would enjoy and appreciate this kind of writing, and that the majority of readers might regard the rather lyrical style as demanding and pretentious and, as a result, label it tedious and exhausting.

But writers like Mr. al-Kabir insist on distinguishing between literary novels and popular stories, between ambitious narrative writing and simple storytelling; they believe that a novelist's function is not only to amuse and entertain the reader, but also to enrich and rarefy his world. And for this reason we are curious to see whether Mr. al-Kabir has decided in his second novel—or in what is left of it—to abandon his orthodox aesthetical views and join the neorealists and neonaturalists who dominate the literary scene in Egypt today.

S.K.

GILLIAN TINDALL

Dances of Death

New York: Walker and Co., 1973.
Pp. 221. \$6.95.

Gillian Tindall's short stories in this book are all about death: in particular, the "ordinariness of death, the awkward mystery, within the context of daily life." I like the phrase "the awkward mystery." It conveys very well modern man's half-fearful, half-irritated response to the one natural event over which his technology has still only very limited control. And it also conveys that middle-class (perhaps only the English middle-class) obsession with death as a social phenomenon, as though not dying in front of the neighbors were the accomplishment of a life-time's decorous living. As Miss Tindall notes, death has replaced sex in middle-class family