

'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

life as the forbidden subject, and those who bring it up commit a fearful solecism.

Each of Gillian Tindall's stories is concerned with death (actual, reported, anticipated or in some other way obsessively present) in this social context. Nearly all of them reflect the awkwardness of death's mystery by having as their spokesman a member of that class most concerned to sweep death under the carpet. As a consequence, the speaking voice in these stories is often vulgarly middle-class, full of clumsy English middle-class phrases such as "a pretty ghastly social worker really," "come to think of it," "in point of fact," "thereby engendering a lasting social neurosis," "with such suitable appurtenances as riding lessons," "what with one thing and another," and so on. What *should* shatter the bland respectability of this prose-style—as it does the often bland lives of the stories' characters—is death's sudden visitation. But, although the stories are always interesting and often moving, Miss Tindall's style seems to be the victim of her bourgeois points of view.

Michael Taylor

### GEORGE GALAVARIS

#### *Invocation to a Pagan Divinity*

Greece: The Magic Flute, 1972. Pp. 127.

The eight stories of this collection show that the life of the imagination still has force and originality. In a literary world where a bourgeois enumeration of the material of daily living is the rule, the style of Galavaris stands apart for its passion and its mystery. Conceived in the allusive tradition of poetry and myth, each story achieves a distinction that is partly stylistic and partly the result of the strangeness of that other world which has haunted such others as E. M. Forster and Isak Dinesen.

In the "Voices of Crimson Hours," one has a sense of mystery that gives to the stories their pagan overtone.

For how long we danced I do not know. The tiers of rising foothills were rimmed with white in the distance and there was a flood of green moving through the silver lace of the branches. The moon had disappeared as the crimson hours descended. The flute wailed. The tone was powerful born not of wood but of pure metal. The faint light through the branches cast huge shadows around us, on the trees, on a petal. There was a luminous gulf between the trees and the shades began to descend one after the other, a procession of them. There I could see a youth walking side by side with the master, a pale light hallowed his fluttering hair, hallowed his temples. (p. 126)

Haunted by death, the stories nevertheless evoke another kind of life that is filled with heightened senses and emotions. At the end of "The White Swan," we find the following: "Odette is dead. Bloodless trees rise up in smoke. Voices come through the rain and the fog; they swell into a mighty sound. Shadows hover where the screams are heard. Its rings come quickly and enclose me. No gas lamps. The poisonous moon appears through the spider of the mist" (pp. 79-80).

It is a world filled with strange characters. In "The Boy With the Parrot," the main character is a youth who arrives mysteriously in the village. He is a combination of child and deity. The old man who is the speaker in the story says of him: "He had a peculiar gift we all noticed. He spoke the language of the animals. He talked to the horses. He would say something and it clearly communicated itself to the animal. It was not this gift or the light of dusk in his eyes that made him loveable to everyone in the village. It was the mystery about him and the parrot he had with him" (p. 99). In its color and its motion, the story reminds one somewhat of a painting by Chagall.

In "The God Invoked" a stranger appears and has supper with the father and the one who keeps repeating "I am not a witch. I am not mad." The stranger is described: "He walked slowly wearing a smile on his face such as I had never seen before. He never took off his big mantle. There were no words spoken.