The University Spirit

Editorial Introduction — al-Hilāl

It was al-Hilāl's high regard for the personality of Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn that led us to propose this subject to him. We were certain that he is the most qualified voice to treat this vital question, so deeply tied to our intellectual life and its cultural future. In doing so, al-Hilāl did not presume upon the doctor, but merely sought the insight of one who has long stood at the forefront of efforts to revive the university spirit in Egypt.

The Essay

I did not choose this subject myself. It was al-Hilāl that imposed it upon me—graciously but firmly—as it so often does with its friends among writers. And how often has al-Hilāl presumed upon its friends! How often has it burdened them with such friendly tyranny—and how readily do those friends submit, like students who must accept whatever topic their professors assign, and write upon it as best as their minds and moods may allow, whether the result be good or bad, sound or absurd.

Now that I have yielded once more to al-Hilāl's authority, I can hardly rebel against it. Let me therefore write, as I was bidden, on this "university spirit" with which inspiration—or perhaps caprice—has moved al-Hilāl to test and to try us. May God grant me the grace to find the right thought, the right word, and the right tone to offer to my reader.

To begin, I must admit that I can scarcely discern a precise or clearly bounded meaning for this expression *"university spirit"* that al-Hilāl asks us to spread among students. The phrase itself is new in our language. It cannot be more than twenty years old—perhaps fifteen at most. I do not think it became current in Egypt until the founding of the Egyptian State University, when His Excellency Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid Pasha, the University's first rector, began to speak of his institution and to explain what he understood by the word *"university"*—and what professors, students, deputies, and senators alike should understand by it. Around that same time, certain Egyptian scholars returning from Europe began to discuss the idea of the university, its higher ideals, and the moral meaning attached to it in the academic world.

It might be interesting—had time and occasion permitted—to trace the first modern Arabic text in which this expression "university spirit" appeared. But that is a linguistic and historical inquiry al-Hilāl would hardly thank me for pursuing. What is certain, however, is that while the phrase is linguistically pure Arabic, its meaning is foreign in origin. It was borrowed from Europe and America, and clothed in a clear Arabic form, like the words *automobile*, *bicycle*, *gramophone*, or *radio*—terms linguistically correct yet denoting novelties unknown to earlier ages.

Had al-Jāḥiẓ or his contemporaries heard the phrase *"university spirit"*, they would have understood nothing of it until we explained what we mean by applying this old Arabic word *"spirit"* to a modern, imported notion.

Yet two observations must be made for fairness and precision.

First, although the concept may be recent in its modern sense, it is not entirely new to our civilization. Something akin to it has long existed among us—perhaps not under that name, nor with conscious reflection, but as a lived and inherited tradition. The learned circles of al-Azhar, for instance, have for centuries maintained their own ethos—a shared discipline and set of customs binding teachers and students alike, observed across changing times and conditions. This, in its way, was the "Azhar spirit." The same could be said of other centers of Islamic learning across the Muslim world.

Similarly, in medieval Europe, the ancient universities—Paris, Oxford, Cambridge—each had its own university spirit, its distinctive character that evolved with the centuries. Thus, what we call the university spirit is not new in essence, neither in the East nor in the West. What is new is only the modern habit of speaking of it consciously, of naming it, of making it an object of deliberate cultivation.

The university spirit, then, is a living, dynamic thing. It changes and develops, as human civilization itself changes and develops. The Academy of Plato, the Lyceum of Aristotle, and the School of Alexandria—all had their own particular university spirit, shared between teacher and student, transmitted from generation to generation, zealously guarded against decay or distortion.

That is the first point.

The second is that those who speak today in Egypt of "the university spirit" do not all mean quite the same thing. The spirit varies with each university, shaped by its history, customs, and ideals. The *French* university spirit is not the same as the *English*, nor is the Oxford spirit identical with that of Cambridge. Even within England, the universities differ: the newer institutions of the nineteenth century, founded in reaction to the old, developed their own atmosphere. In France, the Sorbonne has one kind of spirit, the provincial universities another, and the modern institutes of Paris yet another. Germany and Italy show similar diversity. Cross the Atlantic, and the difference grows wider still: Europeans smile at certain American universities, while Americans laugh heartily at the quaint traditions of Europe's.

The university spirit, then, differs greatly from one milieu to another—from temperament to temperament, from nation to nation. In England, physical sport is integral to university life, yet in France it is almost irrelevant; a French student may be thoroughly imbued with the university spirit without ever taking part in athletics. In America, however, sport is the very heart of university life, the first element of its spirit.

Hence Egyptian graduates who speak of the university spirit rarely agree on its meaning. A graduate of the Sorbonne understands one thing by it; one from Oxford or London, another; one from Berlin, Leipzig, or an American university, something else entirely.

Still, despite these variations, the modern world—with its rapid communications, its shared scholarship, its international congresses, and its incessant flow of books, journals, radio, and cinema—has brought universities closer together. During the past summer, in Paris, I attended an international conference on higher education, where universities from East and West were represented. There we heard professors from Europe, America, Asia, and Africa speak about the university and the meaning of its spirit. The discussions were fascinating—deeply divergent, often contradictory, yet all perfectly intelligible, leading at last to shared conclusions and common resolutions.

And so, after this long prelude, I may answer briefly the question that al-Hilāl posed: *What is the university spirit, and how can we spread it among students?*

The university spirit, which transcends all differences and rises above all divisions, is nothing other than the love of truth and the pursuit of it. It is the desire for knowledge and the devotion to learning—not for utility or gain, but for its own sake. It is this spirit that allows scholars of vastly different backgrounds to understand one another and to reach common ground.

The university spirit elevates the mind above pettiness, purifies it of selfish aims, and frees it from the immediate interests that sow discord and spoil human fellowship. It is the spirit that makes men brothers in learning, uniting them in affection and equality, in liberty and mutual respect.

As for how to instill it among students—the way is simple. It requires no harshness, no force. Let the teacher be a true example to his pupils: not an autocrat who imposes his will or opinion, but a companion in the shared search for truth; one who guides through affection, not intimidation; who teaches through cooperation, not contention; and who shows humility before knowledge and before those who seek it.

The university spirit is, in essence, *collaboration in the pursuit of truth*. You cannot teach it except by embodying it. Whatever differences in form or circumstance may exist, its essence remains always the same: *a love of truth, and submission to its authority.*

By Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn
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