Mayya's Abode

Al-Risala, 29 January 1934

O abode of Mayya, on the high ground, then the slope — it lies deserted,
and long has weighed upon it the age gone by.
I stood within it at evening, questioning it not, for it had no strength to answer, and no one dwelt within the abode.

Mayya's abode was not upon the high ground, then the slope; it was, rather, in the courtyard of al-Azhar, by the two prayer-niches, the old and the new — where movement never ceased, night or day, and where that strange, ceaseless din was heard, broken only at the hours of the communal prayer. I often found myself pondering it, asking myself about those innumerable parts, those uncountable particles, which composed its very substance and formed its temper, and which made of it a single whole in which no difference showed itself, no discord could be felt — yet, once resolved into its elements, revealed a boundless variety, an endless divergence: I heard the voices of some speaking of the world's goods and its diversions, and the voices of others speaking of life's earnest cares and its sorrows; some remembering God, some studying learning, some reciting the Qur'an, some reading whatever crossed their minds or would never cross yours, some venturing into every manner of discourse you might imagine, and many you never would. And out of all these voices there gathered a single sound — powerful, immense, deep, fierce, unified — that filled the whole space of al-Azhar from the moment you entered it to the moment you left, that filled the space of al-Azhar whatever door you had come in by and whatever door you passed out of, that filled every corner and every recess of al-Azhar's space, for all its many turnings, windings, and bends.

Yes — in this abode, which was never empty by day or by night, which never grew still in winter or in summer, which never felt the want of life, because it was itself all life; a life as vigorous, as full of motion and productive energy, as life can ever be. In this abode I stood, as al-Nabigha once stood at Mayya's abode — save that I did not stand at evening, but stood after the night prayer; and so I came to understand this manner of the ancients' poetry, or rather, I should say, I came to feel this manner of the ancients' poetry; for how often we understand poetry, old and new alike, without ever feeling it as its makers felt it, without ever being moved by it as poets themselves are moved.

And al-Azhar had become like Mayya's abode: emptied after being thronged, stilled after being astir, too weary to answer when a question was put to it; and al-Azhar, like Mayya's abode, had had a long age weigh upon it, and a long separation come between. Longer, indeed, had that age weighed upon it than upon Mayya's abode; for I do not think that span of time al-Nabigha spoke of, that had weighed so long upon Mayya's abode, was ever so excessively long, so nearly a thousand years, as this span I speak of now when I speak of al-Azhar — the very span I spoke of when I addressed al-Azhar two weeks ago. Long, too, had been the interval between al-Azhar and myself: I do not recall having entered it these dozen years or more, nor do I recall having wandered through it in more than twenty years; and yet I had always carried within me a living image of al-Azhar, vigorous, full of motion, immensely active, wondrous in its resounding din, resistant to all analysis.

I had set out toward al-Azhar two weeks ago, my heart beating with happiness and delight and longing for this image that had accompanied me for a quarter of a century, that had traveled with me through every corner of the earth, that had met with me every color of misfortune without ever growing weaker, without ever fading, without ever diminishing — and I was making my way with it toward its true original, in the courtyard of al-Azhar, by the two prayer-niches, so that it might draw strength from its strength, and life from its life. But when I reached the abode — would that I had never reached it! — I looked, and found the image stronger than the original; found the al-Azhar I carried in my heart far more full of motion, far more vigorous, far more alive, than the al-Azhar standing there in that quarter of Cairo.

Said my companions — all of them, like me, sons of al-Azhar whose acquaintance with it had grown distant, whose parting from it had grown long —:

“And what is to stop us from closing out Ramadan with a brief visit to al-Azhar, to revive by it the old days, and call to mind by it the years of our youth?”

I said:

“I am eager for that, indeed, and long for it.”

And so we went to al-Azhar, expecting to find there that image we had cherished, to hear there that din we had known, to mingle with it entirely, to be absorbed into it wholly, and to stand within it, as we had

done in our youth, in moments full of fruitful earnestness, and moments of jest tinged with love and tenderness. We pictured ourselves moving among the circles scattered through its precincts, listening to this shaykh reciting Hadith or exegesis, or telling the tales the preachers tell, delighted by his voice, his delivery, his understanding and his gift for making others understand, so that we would admire him and smile upon him; then passing on to that other shaykh, whose voice, or delivery, or some habitual mannerism, or some error of understanding, or some absurdity in his manner of explaining, would set us laughing, so that we would turn away from him laughing and jesting — until, having had our fill of all this, we would leave, having recalled ourselves to ourselves, made happy by our encounter with those sweet-torment days.

All this we had expected; but when we entered al-Azhar we met with nothing but desolation, felt nothing but silence; we knew nothing and no one, and nothing and no one knew us. We were nothing so much as phantoms or shades, passing through some empty, desolate place devoid of life and habitation; and I bear witness that we were met by al-Azhar's attendants, smiling upon us, making much of us, hurrying before us and around us, as though we were a party of tourists who knew nothing of al-Azhar and had no acquaintance with its hidden corners — guiding us, showing us the way, and treating us gently in conversation.

Confound you! I know al-Azhar better than you do, and am better acquainted with its landmarks; we did not come to be met by you with this gentleness — we would have far preferred that you meet us as your predecessors used to meet us, with that very roughness our souls used to love, even as we affected to shrink from it. Where is al-Jabalawi, and al-Jabalawi's men? Where are those staves they used to brandish, whose sound was so faint, and yet so terrible? Where is al-Ghurab, and al-Ghurab's days? Where is Ridwan, and Ridwan's troop? Where is al-Jundi, and al-Jundi's men? Where are all of them, and where is that awe that once surrounded them all, which we used to disdain and chafe against, and which we now recall with sighs of longing that carry our very souls away!

I do not know who it was that recognized us and hastened with our names to a noble gentleman among the inspectors of Virtue. And there I was, wandering with my companion through al-Azhar, he speaking to me and I to him, in that hushed, quiet voice we adopt when alone together, as though we were in some private house, or some church where a whisper is fitting — not in al-Azhar, which never loved anything but loud

speech and raised voices. And nothing startled us so much as the gentleman himself, approaching us with a beaming face, a smiling mouth, an open countenance, greeting us with the greeting of a noble man, inviting us to be his guests, and pressing us to go up with him to where the Qur'an was being recited and tea was being served.

We had wished only to be left alone with those standing columns, to renew our old acquaintance with them, to confide to them the memory of those days, to ask them what events had befallen them, what vicissitudes had come upon them since we had parted from them, and to win from them that silence which speaks more eloquently than words, and leaves a deeper mark upon the soul. But the shaykh had summoned us, and there was no choice but to answer; so we went with the shaykh where he wished, and climbed with him to one of those chambers we remembered from our youth, chambers whose very memory used to fill our hearts with awe and reverence, with dread and admiration. In those chambers the Shaykh of al-Azhar and the Mufti of the land used to reside; in those chambers the affairs of al-Azhar used to be managed, and the concerns of the scholars and students directed; and around those chambers there used to circulate a whole host of tales and legends about the lives of the shaykhs, their sayings and their deeds. These tales used to reach us, and we marveled at them and smiled at them, and drew from them their lesson, their moral, and their humor; and we used to carry these tales back with us to our villages in the countryside, telling them to our fathers and brothers, who marveled at them in turn, and thought highly of their subjects, and kept them as treasures for their evening gatherings, whenever morning broke or evening came.

We climbed with the shaykh to those chambers, asking him what had befallen al-Azhar, and what was the source of this silence; but the shaykh was silent as al-Azhar itself, unable to give any answer. Then we came, with the shaykh, upon a group of his companions, noble men like himself, who received us kindly and greeted us warmly, as the shaykh had received and greeted us; and we asked them, too, what had befallen al-Azhar, and what was the source of this silence — and there they were, silent as al-Azhar, silent as the shaykh, unable to give any answer.

Then the cups of tea were passed around us, and then God's verses were recited to us, in a sweet voice and a gentle cadence, in a correct, upright, pure recitation that reached the very depths of the heart. But who was the reciter? Where had he come from? What was his appearance, and what his dress? He was a man wearing a tarboosh, in a

garb quite unlike al-Azhar's own; for he was not a man of al-Azhar at all, but one of the workers from the wards. God be blessed! A man from outside al-Azhar reciting the Qur'an among the men of al-Azhar! This is a good thing — a very good thing indeed — but a strange one, one we could never have imagined meeting with in our own days there.

And we should have loved to meet with it now, with al-Azhar thronged and teeming with people, with the voices of the shaykhs raised in the recitation of the Qur'an; but al-Azhar was still and silent, and this worthy company of learned preachers had merely listened, in quiet attention, to the recitation of the Noble Qur'an issuing from a head crowned with a tarboosh. This is good, beyond all doubt — yet this image remains strange to our souls, and its place in our hearts remains uneasy and unsettled; though it may well be said that the shaykhs are conservative, and that we ourselves are men of renewal.

Then we took our leave, sorrowful and despairing; we had come to visit al-Azhar, and had not seen al-Azhar at all — we had seen only its ruins, and could not bear to linger long before them.

I said to my companions:

“But what is this silence, and how did al-Azhar come to it? Which of you would ever have thought that so mighty a voice could be condemned, in a single day or a single night, to this dreadful, terrifying hush?”

Said my companions:

“You forget that al-Azhar, once a mosque, has become a university; and you forget that a university, if it wakes by day, sleeps by night; and you forget that a university has a system that fixes its measure of motion and its measure of activity. Remember all this, and remember, too, that you are gravely mistaken if you think renewal confined to the university and its people; renewal is a far mightier, far more active, far wider-reaching power than you imagine. See how it has reached even al-Azhar, and taught it how speech belongs to the day and silence to the night — when once al-Azhar's speech never ceased, by night or by day.”

I said to my companions:

“Woe to renewal, if this is where it has brought al-Azhar! How much I would have preferred that al-Azhar remain a mosque, and never be transformed into a university!”