Some of Our Literary Milieus

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This account will not be comprehensive, for it cannot be comprehensive, nor even approach comprehensiveness, since Egypt has various literary milieus I was never given the chance to know, nor to join.

And Egypt has literary milieus whose talk I caught only at the edges, without learning anything of real weight from their true substance… Some of these milieus still stand, still producing their various works and sending their differing currents into our literary life, while others have gone the way the days carry things off in this age, in which development rushes on toward some end, or toward no end at all; so I shall speak only of some of the literary milieus I came to know and was, without doubt, influenced by — and which I may, perhaps, have influenced in some measure in return.

This account will be closer to a reminiscence than to a study, and for that reason I begin by speaking of the first literary milieu I knew and shared in, for some years, at the opening of this century… If you enter al-Azhar by the gate of the Riwaq al-'Abbasi, you find the Azhar administration — or what was called the Azhar administration at that time — on your left, and the Riwaq al-'Abbasi on your right, and between these two buildings, in this narrow passage separating them, this first literary milieu arose, in the middle of the fourth year of this century.

The Riwaq al-'Abbasi was, at that time, a meeting-place for students of the new learning, Azharis and non-Azharis alike, twice each day: they met there as morning drew on, gathering around the Shaykh Sayyid al-Marsafi, hearing from him his commentary on the Hamasa on some days of the week, and his commentary on al-Zamakhshari's al-Mufassal on others; and they met there again after the sunset prayer, gathering around the Ustadh al-Imam, hearing from him, on some nights of the week, his lessons on rhetoric, and on others his commentary on the Noble Qur'an.

Both groups dispersed once these lessons ended, but a small band had taken this very passage, between the Riwaq al-'Abbasi and the Azhar administration, as its own standing-place, hurrying there before morning drew on to await Professor al-Marsafi's lesson, and hastening there again

after the afternoon prayer to await the Ustadh al-Imam's lesson.

This band had chosen this passage first for its position relative to the Riwaq al-'Abbasi, and second because it let them watch those entering and leaving the Azhar administration, and third because, lying as it did between these two buildings, it had come close to being a distinguished, aristocratic spot by sheer novelty and position. When this band gathered, it would speak of what it heard from the two professors — one or both — with admiration and reverence, and of what it heard from the other professors of jurisprudence, grammar, logic, and legal theory, with mockery and derision! It would then comment on those coming and those leaving, and on the differences among them in dress, manner, and bearing — treating it all as criticism, or as mockery and scandal-mongering, caring for nothing and no one, and shrinking from no word!

It heard from Professor al-Marsafi that there is no shame in learning, and heard from the professors of jurisprudence that there is no shame in religion; and so it settled in its own mind that there was no shame in anything at all, since nothing else carried the weight of religion and learning, and it was therefore entitled to meddle in everything, and to meddle in everything exactly as it pleased! It heard the two venerable professors, morning and evening, deliver biting criticism of al-Azhar and the Azharis, and so it took this as permitted to itself, indeed as a duty incumbent upon it, and went on with it without limit — until the Shaykh Hasuna al-Nawawi, God rest him, broke the band up one day, in a story I have told elsewhere than here!

From this first literary milieu emerged three men known to Egyptians of this generation: Mahmoud Hasan al-Zinati, Ahmad Hasan al-Zayyat, and Taha Hussein.

This milieu came one day into contact with a new literary milieu of another stamp altogether, one that arose neither in al-Azhar nor near it, but rather in Ghayt al-'Udda Street, where the offices of al-Jarida stood, under the direction, from its founding, of our venerable teacher Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid Pasha.

This milieu was captivated, as other young men of al-Azhar were captivated, by al-Jarida, for it portrayed a new mode of expression unfamiliar either in the conservative al-Mu'ayyad or in al-Liwa', which blazed with patriotism, but rather carried something of moderation and rectitude of thought, and carried, in particular, a breath of the new

whenever Lutfi al-Sayyid spoke of Montesquieu, Rousseau, Voltaire, and Jules Simon. Nor was this Azhari milieu's absorption of this new mode of thought and expression any less than that of the secular milieus of the higher schools, the Law School above all.

From this the young men sought out the director of al-Jarida, turbaned and fez-wearing alike, and his office became a literary club where they would meet in the morning, wearying the professor and putting him to every trouble in his search for the free moment in which to write his article! And they would meet there again as evening fell, each speaking to the other, speaking to the director and hearing from him, until the director took it into his mind to arrange some lectures for them, delivering some himself, and having others delivered by the other leading figures of thought and law of that time.

And so the rising young men met one another, and the walls between turbans and fezzes began to fall, and they met the mature young men, the middle-aged, and the elders among the leading figures of Egyptian life in all its various branches, and new blood began to course through a new generation of Egyptians.

Scarcely had the century advanced toward the First World War before this new milieu — turbans and fezzes together, or rather, this new milieu having by now founded for itself another club near its first one at al-Jarida. This club was housed in that very house which left upon Egyptian intellectual life the strongest and most lasting mark of all: the house of the Abd al-Raziq family.

This house was a club in the most exact and most modern sense of the word: its members found there whatever they desired of letters and learning, of seriousness and wit, of politics and society, and found there besides a table laid for lunch and dinner, to which whoever wished might come — and how many wished it! — and from which whoever wished might stay away — and how few wished that! — and found there besides whatever God willed of coffee and cigarettes, and whatever resembled coffee and cigarettes among the various kinds of diversion!

There was no difference between this club and other modern clubs, save that its members paid no subscription. And in this club, contact between turbans, fezzes, and skullcaps took place as widely as such contact could possibly take place, and so the new circulation of blood grew stronger, richer, and more vigorous still.

In this club the weighty literary and political columns of al-Jarida were composed, and in this club the weekly newspaper al-Sufur was founded. I do not know where it was decided to found al-Siyasa, but I know that the most important of what al-Siyasa published, in letters, philosophy, criticism, and politics, was prepared in this club, and left it either written out or nearly so, to be published in the newspaper al-Siyasa!

In the club of al-Jarida, and in the club of the Abd al-Raziq family, there graduated a generation of men of letters, scholars, professors, thinkers, and ministers, who carried forward a very great part of Egypt's intellectual, literary, and political life for some thirty years. In these two clubs the Umma Party arose at the start of the century, and in the second of them the Democratic Party arose after the war's end, and the idea of the Liberal Constitutionalist Party matured after the abolition of the Protectorate. Nor can this brief, general account find room for the influence these two clubs had — an influence reaching very far indeed — on the revival of the old Arabic literature, and on the direction of modern Arabic literature.

Yet the club of the Abd al-Raziq family was like a great river into which many small streams flowed: among them the club of the higher schools, among them those various Azhari milieus, among them scattered milieus that settled here and there in certain cafés! In Bab al-Khalq around Hifni Nassif, in the quarter of our lord al-Husayn around Shaykh Sayyid al-Marsafi, and in the Café Matatia and other cafés around Hafiz Ibrahim, who carried his literary milieu about with him as a tribe of the desert moves from place to place.

And in the aristocratic salons to which ordinary people had no access: in the salon of Princess Nazli Fadil, and at Saad Zaghloul's, and in another salon whose case was a wonder, where Egyptians and Easterners from the Arab lands, and some Europeans too, met around a young lady whose conversation, whether listening to her or speaking with her, was dear and delightful — the salon of "May" [Mayy Ziyada], which gathered every Tuesday as the day drew toward its close, and did not break up until the night was well advanced. Its beginning, in the time when I used to frequent it, was given to talk of letters, art, and learning, and its end, once the greater number of visitors had departed, left the chosen few to reading, music, and song.

And into this great river, into which all those many small streams flowed, there poured yet another stream, one of great consequence today: the Committee for Authorship, Translation, and Publication, which did not content itself with light talk, earnest talk, and the scattered publishing of articles here and there, but turned its activity toward translation, authorship, publishing, and the issuing of newspapers and magazines, and became one of the most important means by which our intellectual life passed beyond the borders of Egypt and spread through every region of the East, and through every class of the people living in those regions.

Any one of these small streams alone would deserve a book written about it; how much more so all of them together, meeting in this great river, and how much more so again the other rivers and streams that followed their own separate courses, independent and apart, most jealous of the independence and separateness they had chosen for themselves?!

There is no doubt that what most distinguishes the first half of the twentieth century, as measured against our intellectual life in Egypt, is that it carried that life from simplicity and ease into complexity and difficulty, and made the task of those who would write the history of Egyptian letters one of the most difficult and intricate tasks there is, and one of the most tangled!

And yet, for all that — or rather, because of it — this century granted that life a strength, a richness, a variety, and a diversity that restored to modern Arabic literature its ancient glory, and raised it to where it has become one of the great literatures of the world.