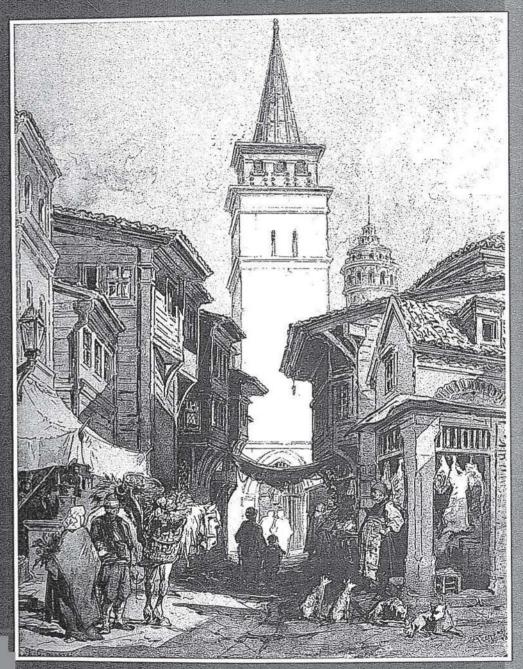
# ISTANBUL AS SEEN FROM A DISTANCE

Centre and Provinces in the Ottoman Empire



Edited by Elisabeth Özdalga, M. Sait Özervarlı, Feryal Tansuğ

SWEDISH RESEARCH INSTITUTE IN ISTANBUL







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## Iraqi Memoirs of Ottomans and Arabs: Ma'ruf al-Rusafi and Jamil Sidqi al-Zahawi

SAMI ZUBAIDA

I embarked on research for this paper with some excitement. I knew that many Iraqi personalities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries knew Istanbul, lived there for periods of time, were involved in Ottoman affairs, and that some had Turkish mothers and/or wives. I anticipated narratives and gossip about Istanbul life, impressions, evaluations, anecdotes. Naively, I had in mind, if not parallels, then approximations to the travel literature of the Middle East: Evliya Celebi's narratives, Tahtawi's accounts of Paris. But I found very little.

The Iraqi statesman Jafar al-Askari (d. 1936) started as a student in the Harbiye in Istanbul, graduated as an officer in the Ottoman army, achieving high rank. He fought in many campaigns, including the Balkan war of 1913, then in Tripolitania against the Italians, with, among others, Enver Pasha. He ended up in British captivity, then joined the Arab Revolt, and embarked on a political career in the new Iraqi state till assassinated, as prime minster, after a coup in 1936. His memoirs for those earlier years are all about the military campaigns and political events and personalities. Istanbul is blank.

Many of those men who wrote their memoirs in later years, when they had attained position and rank in the independent Iraq, presented their earlier years as a prelude to their Iraqi careers, validating their patriotic Arab and/or anti-colonial stance. As such, their Turkish experience was subordinated and overlaid, and only those aspects that contributed to their later careers were recalled. Personal recollections of daily life, of pleasures, of sexuality, marriage and family life are seldom, if ever, mentioned.

An earlier traveller, Abu al-Thana' al-Alusi (1802-54) was more forthcoming. Having lived and died as an Ottoman, the question of subsequent Arabness did not arise. He was the scion of a distinguished family of ulama (his lineage continued to feature prominently in religious and political life until the 20th century). In a dispute with the Ottoman wali, he was dismissed as mufti of Baghdad. He travelled to Istanbul in 1851 to petition the sultan and his entourage, and to

<sup>1</sup> Jafar al-Askari, Mudhakkirat Ja'far al-'Askari (Surbiton: LAAM, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> See Samia 'Itani, "The Travels of Muhammad Shihab al-Din al-Alusi, Abu al-Thana': Arabic Rihla Literature in the 19th Century," PhD thesis No. 2459, SOAS, University of London, 2003, in which the Arabic text is reproduced.

present his new Exigencies (tafsir) of the Our'an. He wrote accounts of his journey to the city and his return (by land to a Black Sea port, then by boat to Istanbul). In his stilted rhymed prose writing (typical of the genre), Al-Alusi has many ornate passages describing the stops and hardships along his path, and about Istanbul. It is primarily about personalities, and how he was received in various places, and whether the people were welcoming or cool, and those who petitioned him for an ijaza, licence, and so on. He described the features of the places he visited sketchily, mountains and forests, climate and water, number of mosques, inns or houses of notables where he was lodged, mosquitoes and other insects, Christians, and so on. His most personal observations concerned hammams, bath houses, and in particular the quality and attractions of the mudallik, the masseur. He was charmed by the youths, amrad, who undertook these tasks in Turkish hammams: 'His skin more tender to the touch than butter, his saliva sweeter than honey (not that I tasted it)'. He recalled with disgust their equivalents in Baghdad, 'their white beards dripping malodorous sweat'. He then expresses pious reservations about such temptations: a man should only allow his wife or slave-girl to touch him.

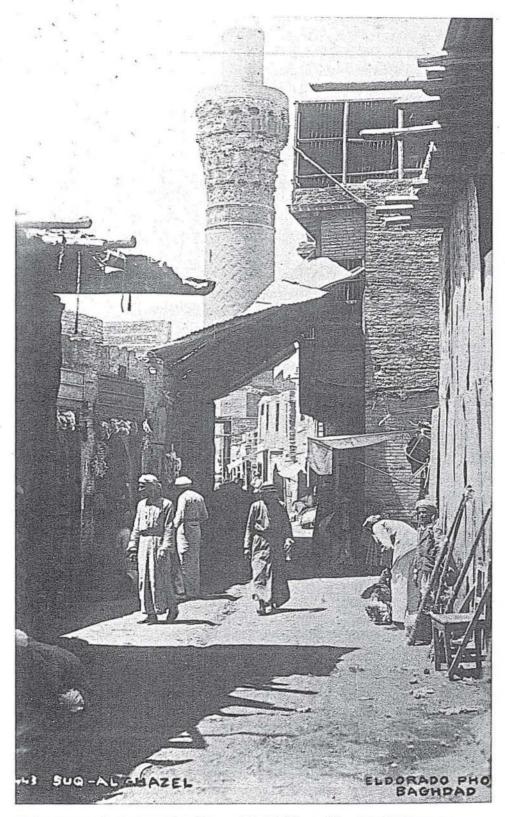
For this chapter I will forego the exotic curiosities of al-Alusi in favour of the later Iraqi travellers, the two poets Rusafi and Zahawi, because of their greater pertinence to our times and concerns.

#### Rusafi,3 1875-1945

Ma'ruf al-Rusafi had humble origins: his father was a bash-jawish (sergeant) in the Ottoman gendarmerie in Baghdad. His education started at a kuttab school with traditional mullas teaching Arabic reading and writing through the Qur'an and religious literature. At the age of 11, he was accepted into the Rushdiya al-Askariya school, a government military academy, after being examined in reading and writing.4 This was a great advance for a boy from a poor native background. The students were dressed in school uniform with a tarbush/fez: they became efendiya, a source of great pride for the family. Instruction was in Turkish, which Ma'ruf did not know well, and he subsequently expressed great surprise that he managed to progress from class to class with his poor competence in Turkish. He did, however, fail in the third year, but in arithmetic. He hated the regime in that school, which was harsh, with strict discipline and frequent beatings. When he failed he did not persevere, but left for a more traditional religious education in a mosque school. He changed costume again, now to the turban and the cloak of the religious classes. His teacher was the distinguished and renowned scholar and public figure, Mahmud Shukri al-Alusi (grandson of Abu al-Thana', mentioned above). It was there that Ma'ruf excelled in language, religion and the literary genres, becoming a favourite disciple of the said al-Alusi. He memorised many classic texts and much poetry, and from there proceeded to write his own. It was al-Alusi who gave him his title of Rusafi: one of the notable shrines in Baghdad was that of the mystic saint Ma'ruf al-Karkhi (al-Karkh being the west side of the Tigris in Baghdad, the other side being al-

<sup>3</sup> Yusif 'Izz al-Din, Al-Rusafi Yarwi Sirat Hayatihi (Damascus: Al-Mada, 2004) contains passages of autobiography, as well as biographical notes by other authors.

<sup>4</sup> Rusafi'a account of his early life and education in 'Izz al-Din, Al-Rusafi Yarwi Sirat Hayatihi, 219-34.



The bazaar surrounding the Suq-al Ghazel Mosque in Baghdad. Postcard from the early 20th century. Cengiz Kahraman Archive

Rusafa). As a gesture of esteem for his pupil Ma'ruf, al-Alusi decided to call him al-Rusafi, in juxtaposition with the saint of the same name from the other side of the river. After many years of study, Alusi granted Ma'ruf an *Ijaza*, a licence, the traditional equivalent of a degree.

At age 25, Rusafi started a career in teaching, first in various provincial schools, but ultimately in the I'dadi al-mulki school, a government high school in Baghdad, in about 1905. It is there that Ma'ruf learned to drink araq through his friendship with a history teacher. He became a devoted drinker for much of his life, till illness intervened. By then, Rusafi was acquiring renown as a poet, with work published in mainstream Egyptian and Lebanese literary reviews, as well as in Iraq.

#### Istanbul/Asetana

With the proclamation of the constitution in 1908, Rusafi was invited to Istanbul by Ahmad Jawdat Bey (Beg) of Igdam newspaper with the object of editing an Arabic supplement.6 He travelled with the deputies elected from Iraqi constituencies. The newspaper project failed and Rusafi was in Istanbul without work or income. He was taken in by Jamil Sidqi al-Zahawi, the other prominent Iraqi poet (with whom he had a turbulent relationship), who was living in the city at the time. He received financial aid from other Arab intellectuals there. Eventually, Rusafi made contact with Hikmet and Khalid Sulayman, whom he knew through Baghdad connections, brothers of Mahmud Shawkat Pasha, then army commander in Salonica (later to become prime minister in the Young Turk government, and Rusafi was to write an eloquent eulogy after the assassination of Shawkat in 1913) and was encouraged to travel there. It was on the way to Salonica that the 31 March 1909 rebellion against the Unionists occurred. Rusafi, still clothed in traditional style with a turban, was arrested on suspicion of being in the ranks of the conspirators, but later released when his bona fides were established. When he returned to Istanbul after a few days, he hastened to change his turban for a fez, and wore a Western (Frankish) suit.7 He stayed in Istanbul for some months, supported by Arab personalities, then provided with funds to return to Baghdad, but not for long. Rusafi was soon summoned back to Istanbul to produce a monthly Arabic magazine, Al-Arab. The owner, Ubaid-Allah Efendi from Mardin, then got him a job teaching Arabic in the Mulkiya school, which was subsequently closed down, upon which he moved to another teaching job at an Imam-Hatip school teaching Arabic rhetoric. This he continued to do for four years till he was elected a deputy in the second Majlis!

Rusafi was well in with the Unionists and an enthusiastic supporter of the constitution and modern reforms and secular orientations, views that were to remain with him in subsequent political affiliations, though not with much consistency (consistency wasn't a common virtue among the literate classes at the time, especially not in Iraq). In Istanbul, he was lodged in the house of the said Ubaid-Allah, next door to the residence of Talat Bey, later pasha, one of the Unionist

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 116-17, 183.

<sup>6</sup> Accounts of Rusafi in Istanbul, ibid., 235-40.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 99-100.

leaders, who engaged Rusafi to teach him Arabic. According to the latter, Talat was not a keen student, preferring to engage Rusafi in political discussions. Talat got Rusafi nominated as a deputy in the second Majlis of 1912, and he was asked which part of Iraq he would like to represent. He chose the constituency of Muntafik in the south, and was duly elected while sitting in Istanbul, probably never having been to that province! He never joined the Unionists formally, he related, nor was he formally engaged with Arab nationalist associations, though he was friendly to them (a position not always consistent with his Unionist and Ottomanist affiliations). It was during those years that Rusafi entered a Masonic lodge, paid for by his Unionist associates and Arab friends. He was, in this respect, integrated into the Unionist milieu. He subsequently tried to dismiss this episode as youthful conformity with his friends.

Rusafi remained in Istanbul till 1919, seeing the Great War there, but left no word about it. He then had a teaching job in Jerusalem. He was subsequently summoned to Iraq by the party of Talib al-Naqib, one of the contenders for the then proposed throne of the country, whose quest failed, and Rusafi was left unemployed. He then embarked on a career of opposition to the British and the monarchy of Faysal I, who was his contemporary in the Ottoman Majlis, and whom he resented and continued to attack with biting satires. At the same time, he begged for positions and favours, which he sometimes obtained through the personalistic networks and factions of Iraqi politics. At one point, he was elected to the Iraqi parliament, but continued to have a chequered and fractious career till his death in 1945.

Rusafi's personal life and his writings on religion<sup>8</sup> were considered scandalous by many. While drink and love of boys were not unusual, most respectable people pursued them discreetly, but Rusafi was open and boastful. In his later years in Baghdad, he inhabited a house in the neighbourhood of the official brothel area. Though not sexually inclined to the women there, he established close associations, and they were in and out of his house and participants in his parties, with dancing and drinking. He died in that house in poverty.

Rusafi did marry once, and the inconsistent stories of that marriage place it in Istanbul. He related that while living in Ubaid-Allah's house he returned one night drunk, and made sexual advances on the maid servant, who protested loudly. Ubaid-Allah then advised Rusafi that he get married, and offered to matchmake, with the aid of his sister, who then came up with a local girl called Fatima. Rusafi related that he settled down to contented married life for some years in Istanbul, but could not take the wife with him when he left the city. He intended to bring her to Baghdad when circumstances allowed, but never had enough money to do so. One suspects that he did not pursue the matter earnestly. Eventually she divorced him. There is an alternative narrative from people who

<sup>8</sup> Kitab al-shakhsiyya al-Muhammadiyya: aw hall al-laghz al-muqaddas, (The Book of Muhammad's Personality: Or the solution of the sacred puzzle) (Cologne: al-Jamal Publications, 2008) is a biography of the Prophet in 765 pages, completed in 1933, following the episodes of his life and mission, highly favourable to Muhammad, but the 'solution' of the puzzle is always in terms of a rational interpretation of the history, which is seen by orthodox believers as heretical, detracting from the absolute truth of the sacred history and the Qur'anic text. As such, Rusafi did not want the book published in his lifetime, but gave the manuscript to his friend, the prominent intellectual and politician, Kamil al-Chaderchi. The Iraqi publisher in Cologne acquired the text and published it in 2002. It is sold under the counter in some Beirut bookshops.

<sup>9 &#</sup>x27;Izz al-Din, Al-Rusafi Yarwi Sirat Hayatihi, 257-8.

knew him that the wife in question was not Fatima from Istanbul but Balqis from Izmir, which is of little importance, except for the mystery of why there is this confusion.

What remains a great disappointment to the social historian is that Rusafi had so little to say about his daily life in Istanbul. We know that he wrote poems on the taverns and brothels of Beyoglu, which he, apparently, first frequented dressed in his traditional religious garb with a turban! One line on the quarter itself: 'The smile of civilisation (hadhara) shines out of its lips, and its lights are brighter than lightening'; and on its girls and drink: 'amongst them she who gives drink (tasqi), and she who takes drink (tusqa)'. This enthusiasm for civilisation, pleasure and fun, radical politics and disdain for religion and authority, continued to mark his life and social relationships, and got him into trouble as well as exhilarating adventure.

### Jamil Sidqi al-Zahawi 1863-1936"

Zahawi and Rusafi were the two most prominent and formative poets and public figures who straddled the late Ottoman era and the new Iraqi state, and marked the episodes of that turbulent history with their pronouncements. While Rusafi was always provocative and contrary, Zahawi was politically astute, and some would say, opportunistic, though he did take some principled stances.

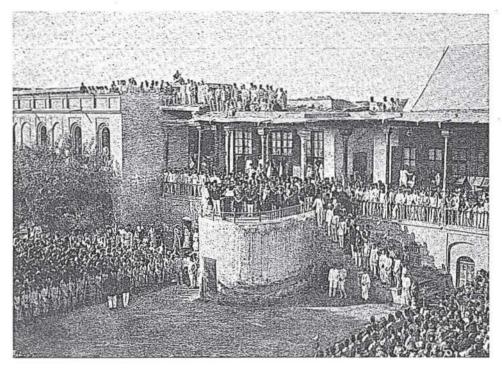
Zahawi was born into a family of religious scholars and functionaries (his father was mufti of Baghdad), of Kurdish ethnicity, but not allegiance. He knew Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Kurdish, and attempted, with little success, to learn English in later life. 12 After the usual religious/literary education, he was appointed to the education (ma'arif) council in Baghdad, then as manager of the government printing press and editor of the Arabic section of the official gazette, al-Zawra'. Zahawi went to Istanbul in 1896, seeking a career and patronage. He ingratiated himself with Abu al-Huda al-Sayadi and his circles, and his break came with the Ottoman-Greek war of 1897, when he wrote a long poem in praise of Sultan Abdulhamid and the victorious Ottoman forces, entitled Al-Fath al-Hamidi, Hamidian Conquest, which he recited to Abu al-Huda, who admired it and relayed it to the sultan.13 The latter awarded Zahawi with the Majidi medal, then sent him on a mission to Yemen as a preacher, wa'idh, part of the sultan's campaign to convert the population of the empire to Sunni Islam, preferably Hanafi. Zaydi Shi'ism and allegiance to its imam were among the rebellious elements in that country. Zahawi saw great poverty, hardship and oppression in Yemen, which, according to his accounts, disillusioned him with the Ottoman regime. He returned to Istanbul after a few months, in 1897, where he was appointed to a teaching post. It was then that he became involved with the liber-

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 255-6.

<sup>11</sup> Biographical material on Zahawi drawn from Al-Zahawi: Dirasat wa-Nusus (Al-Zahawi: Studies and Texts), collected and edited by Abdul-Hamid al-Rashudi (Beirut: Maktabat al-Hayat, 1966). This is a collection of autobiographical extracts, poems and commentaries by other authors. Henceforth cited as Rushudi. I also draw on the biographical introduction by Abdul-Razzaq al-Hilali to Diwan Jamil Sidqi al-Zahawi (Collected Poems) vol. 1, (Beirut: Dar al-'Awda, 1972). This is critical of what it presents as Zahawi's political opportunism. The pages of this introduction are not numbered but indicated by Arabic letters.

<sup>12</sup> Autobiographical notes, Rashudi, 46-50, 118-26.

<sup>13</sup> Hilali, Introduction.



A more visible presence of the centre? Inauguration of the government building in Baghdad. The journal Malumat, 4 July, 1895, Vol. 6.

al/constitutional opposition, and frequented the secret assemblies of one Safa Bey, a poet. It was at one of these meetings that Zahawi recited his poem containing a fierce and satirical attack on the Hamidian regime, its repression and its spies, and anticipating its demise (Zahawi claimed later that he read this poem to Abu Al-Huda, which seems strange). Some of the verses are about the sultan's ubiquitous spies. It was one of those spies infiltrating the liberal groups who reported Zahawi's proclamations, leading to his brief imprisonment, then expulsion from Istanbul back to Baghdad in 1900.

Another episode in Istanbul at this time was Zahawi's visit to the British embassy to deliver a poem in praise of the English and their civilisation, and their military victories in the Boer War. <sup>15</sup> Zahawi related subsequently, in reply to his detractors, that he visited the embassy in the company of other Ottoman liberals, who were flattering the English in the hope they would support their constitutional aspirations. He was to return to the praise of the English after their occupation of Baghdad in 1917. <sup>16</sup>

In 1905, Zahawi, in Baghdad, in teaching and editing posts, then gets into trouble with the Ottoman wali, Abdul-Wahhab the Albanian. He is denounced for heresy and attacks on religion. Part of Zahawi's strategy in these tensions was to flatter Abdulhamid and render service to him, this time with a book and poetry against Wahhabis of Arabia and their propaganda against the Ottomans and their Islam. The book's title had an old-fashioned religious ring: Al-Fajr al-Sadiq fi alradd 'ala munkiri al-tawassul wal-karamat wal-khawariq, 'The True Dawn in

<sup>14</sup> Rashudi, 66, 159, 209, 227.

<sup>15</sup> Hilali, Introduction

<sup>16</sup> Rashudi, 403-7.

the refutation of those who deny intercession, miracles and wonders', in which he defends traditional popular religion of saint veneration (at odds with his rationalist and positivist philosophy, as we shall see). Included in the book was a poem entitled 'Yıldız', generously praising the sultan and his ever vigilant defence of Islam and Muslims.<sup>17</sup>

The year 1908 and the constitution fired Zahawi's enthusiasm, and saw him returning to Istanbul, now appointed by the Unionists to a university post teaching Islamic philosophy and Arabic literature. In 1912, he was elected deputy in the Majlis for the Iraqi constituency of Muntafiq. 18 There is an ambiguity here, given that Rusafi also claims to have been elected for Muntafiq, suggesting two deputies for the same constituency or perhaps election at different moments: Zahawi subsequently represented Baghdad. He was clearly close to the Unionists, but later claimed that he became disillusioned and attacked them when they showed their dictatorial tendencies, especially in relation to Iraq and the Arab world. One anecdote he recalled was regarding a proposal to introduce the Sahih of Bukhari (a canonical compilation of the Prophet's traditions, hadith) into the curriculum of the naval college, to which he retorted in a Majlis speech that ships were powered by bukhar (steam) and not Bukhari, which aroused a mixture of laughter and anger. 19 Illness forced his return to Baghdad, but he was then elected to the Majlis again, this time for Baghdad. It seems, however, that he was in Baghdad when the British forces arrived there. He relates that he was about to be arrested and exiled to India, but he was able to show them that he was a correspondent for the Egyptian al-Mugattam magazine, which was close to the British there. Consequently, he was released and appointed to the education council and to the law college, where he Arabised Turkish legal codes. It was at this time that he proclaimed his support for the British occupiers in a published poem, including the line: 'Pay attention, O Arab, and end your allegiance to the Turks, an evil nation/ and support the English, men of justice and sincerity in action and in speech'. 20 For an erstwhile Ottoman supporter of the 'Caliph' Abdulhamid, then of his nemesis, the Young Turks, such denunciation of the Turks in favour of the British may appear treacherous or overtly opportunistic. Hilali, in his introduction, demonstrates what he considered Zahawi's political opportunism. He ardently supported the Unionists and the constitution and considered himself to be an Ottoman liberal. That is after his advances towards and reversals in relation to Abdulhamid. During the Great War, he continued to champion the Ottomans, and in 1916 wrote a eulogy to Enver Pasha as the conquering hero. After the war, however, Zahawi protested his support for the Arab cause, and, according to Hilali, even inserted poems into his Diwan expressing grief and outrage at the hanging of Arab patriots in Syria by Jamal Pasha, while in fact he had been silent on that affair. He then transferred his allegiance to the British, as we have seen, praising their superior traits in comparison with the Turks. Hilali argued that in the 1920 anti-British revolt in Iraq, Zahawi continued to support the British and praised the governor, Sir Percy Cox. Zahawi subsequently claimed that he was neutral in that episode. There was clearly political

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 228, 401-2.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 48, 228-9.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 403.

opportunism here. In addition, however, we may discern some consistency in the shifts: the aspiration to modernity, rationality and 'civilisation'. This was first expressed in his Ottoman liberalism, positivism and 'scientism'. With the demise of the Ottomans, he turned to British imperialism for the delivery of the region into modernity and away from tradition and obscurantism. He subsequently, in the 1930s, expressed his admiration for Atatürk and his reforms, as well as for Reza Shah in Iran, both of whom he ranked as renewers and reformers, alongside Hitler and Mussolini, whom he included in that pantheon.

Zahawi says very little about his personal, family or sexual life in Istanbul or elsewhere. He wrote that he was married to a Turkish girl, Zakia Hanim, when he was 30 and she 16. He hints that this marriage was arranged by his family, so it is not clear whether he married in Istanbul or Baghdad. They had no children but the marriage lasted all his life. Zahawi, like Rusafi and other liberals, was a firm defender of women's rights, and articles he wrote on the subject got him into trouble, at one point costing him his post at the law college. He also stated, in passing, that in his first period in Istanbul he fell in love with a 'Spanish' Jewish girl, Rahel, who returned his love, and was very sad when he was arrested and expelled back to Baghdad. He mentions this several times in his memoirs, but always in one or two sentences in passing, without attention to context or consequence.

#### The Ottoman Cultural and Political Milieu

We note in both our Iraqi poets a strong attraction to the ideas and tropes of European modernity, of science and rationality in human affairs, and an ambivalence towards religion, with strong dislike of its conservatism in social matters. They were both advocates, for instance, of Darwin and evolutionism. Zahawi related that he was confronted in a Baghdad cafe by an angry reader of an article expounding and praising Darwinism. 'Are you saying that my father was a monkey'? demanded the angry man. 'No', he replied, 'it was my father'. Zahawi wrote treatises on scientific subjects (but with little knowledge). He advanced a refutation of the theory of gravity, arguing that objects fell not through attraction, but repulsion from heavenly bodies. He also wrote on diverse subjects such as the science of horse racing and the habits of birds. Zahawi proposed a new universal script in which all languages could be written. As we saw, both poets were ardent advocates of women's liberation and critics of the traditional sharia.

In terms of their ideas and worldviews, our two poets were very much of their generation of the Ottoman modern intelligentsia, including their ambiguities and inconsistencies. Niyazi Berkes, among others, has surveyed this ideational land-scape. Under Hamidian censorship, little could be written or published directly on politics and religion. The discourses of science and modernity/'civilisation', however, found full scope in the publications and public debates of the day. News of scientific discoveries, biographies of famous men, and science fiction were all popular themes. The Jules Verne and Alexandre Dumas romances, translated and serialised, had a large readership. Positivism and rationality and the

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>22</sup> Niyazi Berkes, The Development of Secularism in Turkey (London: Hurst, 1998 [1964]), 276-81.

ideas of the European Enlightenment were prominent features in the discourses of the intelligentsia through the 19th century, boosted by the Young Ottomans in their publications, and in the Masonic lodges that harboured them. This positivism, oddly, seems to have coexisted for many with strands of Sufi mysticism. Thierry Zarcone<sup>23</sup> has chronicled these dual orientations, with the same personalities subscribing to Bektashi tariqas and Masonic lodges, to Ibn Arabi and Herbert Spencer. What these seemingly odd couplings shared was a rejection of the orthodox, legalistic religious authority of the ulama, in favour of free philosophical speculation and rational social reform. We see similar syndromes among the Iranian intelligentsia of the time: mystical secret societies, positivist modernism and Masonic lodges. Rusafi and Zahawi partook in these ideational currents and their contradictions. Rusafi was to reject religious orthodoxy in his poetry and social critiques, as well as in his bohemian lifestyle of open drink (again echoes of the Ottoman intelligentsia's celebration of drink as an aspect of medeniyet, civilisation), pederasty and association with prostitutes. Zahawi, more respectable and diplomatic, continued to pursue science and reform, dabbling in scientific theories and getting into trouble through his social advocacy against religious and patriarchal authority.

The two men constituted ideational bridges between the ferment of Ottoman reform and the ideologies battling for the modern nation state and society. In the current difficult situation in Iraq and much of the Arab world, liberal and secular intellectuals are trying to revive the memories and thoughts of these pioneers.

<sup>23</sup> Thierry Zarcone, Mystiques, philosophes, et francs-maçon en Islam: Riza Tevfik, penseur ottoman 1868-1949 (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1993).