

The Books in My Life: A Memoir

Part 1

Tarif Khalidi

I have spent more of my lifetime with books than with people. The reason, perhaps, is that I have found a sort of amusement in books that I did not find with most people. Thus, over my lifetime, the number of friends that I had decreased and the number of books I befriended increased. I became older and more firmly isolated. My real world became that of reading and writing. Fakhr al-Din al-Razi described the behavior of the elderly as “doubting most of what is said, refusing to pass final judgments, cowardliness, fear, and an awareness of the repercussions of situations in addition to greediness for food, insolence, anger, and a love of safety.”¹ I do not know how many of these traits I currently possess, but I find some of them to be precise descriptions of the psychology and behavior of the elderly. I have no doubt that questioning everything, refusing to pass judgment, and an appreciation of situations’ repercussions are also traits often derived from the experience that one finds in books. Indeed, if books offered nothing else, their benefit would still be great. As for their other virtues, I can only direct the reader toward the magnificent and supreme depth of thought found in the first part of al-Jahiz’s *al-Hayawan*.

I must admit that the direct inspiration for writing my memoirs came from a number of books, most recently the British academic and critic John Carey’s *The Unexpected Professor: An Oxford Life in Books*, published in 2014.² In it, Carey narrates his literary life’s memoirs, describing the books that had an impact on his mind and imagination. The idea of the book attracted me, and my daughter, who is also a university professor and who had given me the book as a gift, encouraged me to follow in Carey’s footsteps. I found that a person who spends most of his life on research, education, and academic writing lives largely on the

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periphery of public life and great events. If there is any benefit reaped from the experiences of such a secluded life, it is through the books and theories that have occupied it.

Jerusalem, circa 1943

I think I was around five when I started to learn how to read. My first book was based on a new theory that children should start reading by learning complete words rather than the alphabet, a novelty at the time. I do not know the source of this theory, or whether it was imported from the West, but my mother later informed me that the great Palestinian scholar Khalil al-Sakakini had, with my father, developed this theory and adapted it to suit Arab children.³ Sakakini is a highly distinguished Palestinian writer and his memoirs, *Kadha ana ya dunya* (Such Am I, O World), are among the most enjoyable of the twentieth-century Arab world.⁴ In them, he reviews the history of Palestine during the first half of that century in the form of a diary that mixes seriousness and jest, providing a vivid picture of various personalities and intellectuals, men and women, in Palestinian society.

Going back to my first book, it was found in all Palestinian schools. The first words I learnt were *ra's*, *ru'us* (head, heads) and *dar*, *dur* (house, houses). We progressed in a bit to four-letter words, of which I remember *wadi* (valley) and *sari* (mast). Soon, reading became a great pleasure, especially when we reached the first joke in the book: “How delicious *karabij halab* are!” “Have you tasted them?” “No, but my teacher has, and he said they were nice.” “Ha ha ha!”⁵ The pleasure of reading increased when I became able to read the headlines in the daily newspapers that arrived to our house: *Filastin and al-Difa'*. These headlines relayed news of World War II, to which I paid scant attention, as my imagination was captured then by the adventures of the Sicilian bandit Salvatore Giuliano in the mountains and valleys of Sicily, and his amazing ability to continuously escape from the Italian police.⁶ My childhood enchantment with rogues, it seems, has continued, as a few years ago I embarked upon a collaborative research project about a bandit from al-Biqa' – the notorious Milhim Qasim.⁷

The first books I read were by the Egyptian writer Kamil al-Kilani, a pioneering children's writer in the Arab world and a friend of my father's. Kilani's books kept me



Tarif Khalidi with a book in his hands. Courtesy of Tarif Khalidi.

company for a number of years. He would choose from a wide array of international stories and make them flow in simple but well-written language. I still remember the story of the nightingale and the rose, and my sadness when the nightingale threw himself onto the rose's thorns, piercing his heart to paint his beloved rose red as she had wished. I later found out that it was one of Oscar Wilde's stories.

My first school was al-Umma School and the principal was Shukri Harami, from whom one glare was enough to silence the rowdiest of classes. He taught history and perhaps at the time I sought his approval. Hence, from that distant time, history became my favorite subject. My passionate interest in history pushed me from Kamil Kilani to Jirji Zaydan, whose novels I devoured: *al-'Abbasa, Sister of al-Rashid; al-Amin and al-Ma'mun; The Conquest of al-Andalus; The Fugitive Mamluk; Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi and the Intrigues of the Assassins*; and many, many other tales that I cannot now recall. No doubt, a whole generation of Arab youths read these alluring stories that revived Arab history as vivid literature, full of lifelike characters that the reader could almost see, touch, and converse with, feeling happiness during their joyous occasions and crying for their losses. Zaydan's stories included fast action within precise timing and location. The scenes within his stories were cinematic, stealing the readers' breath and leaving them unable to put the book down, even during meals or at bedtime. I do not know if an extensive literary study of these stories exists, but the marvelous magic with which Zaydan wrote his tales deserves such a study, in my opinion. It may have been that Zaydan derived his inspiration from Western historical novels, such as those written by Sir Walter Scott, but there is no doubt that Zaydan's mastery in reincarnating the past is superior to that of Scott; I later read the latter's novels and found them very long and boring, requiring a great deal of concentration and patience to follow their events.

The Diaspora

I was ten years old when we were forced to leave our home in Jerusalem, becoming refugees like hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who fled from Zionist terrorism to the surrounding countries. I was not aware of it at first, but this tragedy was manifested gradually in a sort of agedness that swept over the whole family, each experiencing it in their own way. Learning and education became of utmost importance, and the space and freedom of childhood receded. My father aged quickly and died shortly after the loss of Palestine; the feeling that education was a most urgent objective and the utmost priority increased. I did not absorb this initially; to the contrary, the quality of my readings perhaps deteriorated, as I abandoned Jirji Zaydan and took up the stories of Arsène Lupin, translated into Arabic, which were very popular in Beirut at the time.⁸ Arsène Lupin was a gentlemanly thief who, like an urban Salvatore Giuliano or Robin Hood, mastered the art of eluding the police and disappearing, foiled the plans of "true" criminals who sought to do real harm, and sometimes lent a helping hand to the weak and poor.

The deterioration in the quality of my reading was also manifested in my increasing passion for American comics, such as the cowboy stories of Tom Mix and Gene Autry,⁹ and especially the adventures of Little Lulu and her gang – Tubby Tompkins, Annie and Iggy Inch, and others. These comics had not been translated, so I had to read them in English, which was not all that difficult. Little Lulu portrayed an idealized small world of beautiful American suburbs, in which children played in total freedom and had never-ending thrilling adventures. I then moved on to the *Classic Comics* series, which adapted classical Western novels to comic strips.¹⁰ This agitated some of my family, who considered the comics a distortion of the classic novels; however, these comics encouraged me later to read the original novels. At that time, my family also subscribed to illustrated Egyptian magazines such as *al-Musawwar*, *Akhir Sa'a*, and *al-Ithnayn*, which I devoured greedily and awaited like an infatuated lover from one week to the next.

My family quickly intervened: What is this Arsène Lupin? What are these comics? What will become of him if he continues along this degenerate path? My brother Usama (God rest his soul) got involved and decided that the only remedy for this decadence was classical Arabic poetry, of which he had learned thousands of lines by heart. He started teaching me poetic meter, and I still remember the first one to become entrenched in my mind due to its musicality, *al-wafir: mufa'alatun, mufa'alatun, fa'ulu*. I found its beat attractive and simple, and easy to learn, so I composed a few verses in this meter, proclaiming affection and praise for my mother, as I was then going through the Freudian Oedipus phase.

This juvenile effort encouraged my brother to teach me poetry (paying me a quarter lira for each verse I memorized). The first poem I learned was al-Mutanabbi's elegiac poem for the sister of Sayf al-Dawla: *tawa al-jazira hatta ja'ani khabarun / fazi'tu fihi bi-amali ila al-kadhibi* ("The news crossed the peninsula until it reached me / and my hope urged me to disbelieve it"). We then launched into Abu Tammam and the ode on the conquest of Amorium, after which we moved to Abu Firas and the mourning dove (*al-hamama al-na'iha*), then to the poet al-Hutay'ah and *Tawi thalath*, and on to many other poems whose titles I cannot remember, but which implanted within me a love of poetry that was consolidated day by day.

When history became my profession, I continued to find value in poetry not only because of its literary beauty, but also because of its great importance in revealing the imagery and mentality of the past, to which we have not yet given sufficient attention. Thus, poetry for the historian offers a gateway to a bygone era; if we want to retrieve an image of the past, we should, no doubt, study its poetry (and its art, as well).

In England

In 1951, my family sent me to a boarding school in England. Perhaps they took this decision thinking that I had not yet been completely saved from perdition. God only knows that I was enthusiastic about joining such a school, as I had read, perhaps in

Classic Comics, the story of *Tom Brown's School Days*, first published in 1857, during Queen Victoria's reign, and which became a model for stories about boarding schools in England.¹¹ My days at the school were not at all like Tom Brown's, except in their brutality and the frighteningly hierarchical, military system. As for his exciting adventures, I had no similar experience during my four-year stay in that prison, though I shall not beg for tears or sympathy by describing my misery further. I have to admit that I benefited from two things: first, learning Latin and Greek; and second, the ability later to withstand (almost!) all of life's trials and tribulations by recalling the difficulties of those times.

Knowledge of Latin and Greek was the most important advantage I was able to take away from boarding school. At the time, the two languages still enjoyed a great deal of academic regard and respect. Moreover, specializing in them, and in Greek and Roman history, at A Levels meant entering the strata of elite students. Further, it meant being exposed to two civilizations that had a deep and widespread influence on European civilization, and on Islamic Arab civilization. Learning Latin was not difficult, especially since my knowledge of Arabic conjugation and syntax helped me grasp the foundations of Latin's conjugation and syntax, as we find the nominative, accusative, and genitive cases in Latin. Latin meter, too, is similar in many aspects to its Arabic counterpart. Latin remains, to a certain extent, in my memory until today. As for Greek, I found it difficult and more complicated – time quickly eroded its outlines, despite reading in class the plays of Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles, the histories of Thucydides and Xenophon, some of Plato's dialogues, and passages from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Homer's *Iliad*. In class, more emphasis was put on translating texts accurately than on literary analysis.

Antigone by Sophocles made a great impression on me. In it, a young girl, Antigone, is the exceptional spiritual protagonist, who courageously challenges not only the role imposed upon her by society as a girl, but also the tyranny of a manipulative ruler who feigns abidance by religious teachings. As for Latin literature, it was first and foremost represented by Julius Caesar's book on the Gallic wars, after which we gradually tackled Tacitus, the great historian of Rome. I found the latter's language much more difficult, but he is the foremost ironic historian. To this day I repeat his famous statement after the Romans destroyed the cities of Britain: *Auferre, trucidare, rapere, falsis nominibus imperium; atque, ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant* ("To ravage, to slaughter, to usurp under false titles, they call empire; and where they make a desert, they call it peace"). It is as if he is describing what Israel has done and continues to do in Palestine.

During those four years and the three years that followed at the University of Oxford, my mother, God bless her, sent me and my sister Randa weekly letters in Arabic, penned in the beautifully simple style for which she was known.¹² She was forced to wait for extended periods to receive a reply, which was often written in a comical mixture of formal (*fusha*) and colloquial Arabic. I mainly read in English and, from time to time, in French. Thus, Arabic faded off screen, as they say.

I specialized in history at university, and the curriculum then concentrated on the history of England in the Middle Ages, as if what was happening in Europe or Byzantium or the Arab and Islamic worlds during those eras had no connection whatsoever with

England. The only professor of medieval history at Oxford who mentioned, within his general lectures, civilizations and peoples beyond England was the famous historian Sir Richard Southern. He later wrote a small book, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages*, in which he analyzed the historical epochs of those outlooks.¹³ In my opinion, this book remains the point of departure for any study of this subject, despite the subsequent publication of a number of books on the same topic.

Years later, when I was planning a book on the writing of history among the Arabs, I had the opportunity to meet Southern over a cup of tea. As one of his major interests was the writing of European history, I sought his advice and asked him to point me to what had been written on that subject for comparison, which he did. I told him of my disappointment during my student years and he told me that the curriculum had improved since my time. He was tall, thin, and friendly, and resembled the saints – St. Anselm and others – whose biographies he wrote.

It became evident to me that my interests were no longer concerned with history per se, but with the writing of history and its philosophy, within which there was rich material for analysis, imagination, and research. I placed history aside and set forth into the study of its theories and intellectual points of departure. At the time, however, these topics were not very popular among English historians, as historical theories mostly came to them from Europe and in particular from France and Italy. I do not remember who advised me to read Benedetto Croce's *History as the Story of Liberty*, but, due to its complexity, it almost totally wiped out my new interests.¹⁴ However, I persevered and read it with the stubborn zeal of a young man – a quality I am no longer blessed with today. I understood approximately ten percent of Croce's theories, but his proposition that all history was contemporary history, and that the consciousness of the historian is what makes history, made a lasting impression on my mind. Croce was opposed to the great theories of history, one of the most important of which was, of course, Marxist theory. He was also against any attempt to articulate laws of history or to turn history into a science similar to the natural sciences. Later, I read *Napoleon: For and Against* by the Dutch historian Pieter Geyl.¹⁵ In this study of biographies of the French emperor, Geyl concluded that history is an eternal debate and that consecutive generations of historians find in it whatever suits them; reaching what one could call truth through history is thus well-nigh impossible. At the time, I was attracted by Geyl's book and another by the Belgian historian Henri Pirenne titled *Mahomet et Charlemagne*.¹⁶ In the latter, Pirenne proposes that the Arabo-Islamic conquests closed the commercial doors of Europe. This led to the development of the feudal system within Europe, as represented by Charlemagne's kingdom. In other words, Muhammad led to Charlemagne. I found within these books theories that one could describe as beautiful, as they present simple and clear understandings of history, just as Einstein summarized the laws of physics in a beautifully simple equation.

In brief, these books and others like them completely took control of my thoughts and when the time came for final exams, I received an excellent mark for historical theory and mediocre marks in purely historical subjects. The result was a third-class honors degree, or what is equivalent to a C. The family, which believed me to be a "genius," was let down,

as they had been let down before. I only felt that I regained some credibility fifteen years after my graduation, when I was invited to give the annual George Antonius lecture at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Oxford. Its title was “Space, Holiness, and Time: Palestine in the Classical Centuries.” The great and dearly departed Albert Hourani and other historians seemed quite taken with my lecture. I was satisfied by the admiration of the “Oxonians” and I felt that I had finally “taken vengeance” on my university.

At the American University of Beirut

After graduation, I set out to find a job, the American University of Beirut seeming to me the natural destination. It had been my father’s university and my many uncles’, and I had two brothers and a sister among the teaching staff. One of these relatives came to my aid, and the dean of Arts and Sciences, the dearly departed Dr. Farid Hanania, decided that I should join the department of General Education, as it was then called.

I must say a few words about this department, as it had a deep effect on my relationship with books and my later inclination toward the history of thought. The idea behind this department came from the United States, from Columbia University in particular, and it was built on the educational principle that students, no matter what their specialization, should not leave university without having studied some of the great classics of Western civilization, both ancient and modern. This idea was transported to Beirut and the department was established about five years before I joined it in 1960. The assigned texts were divided over two years of study into four historical sections: ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary. The texts were, in effect, excerpts, which the students read each week. Each week started with a public lecture on the assigned text for all the students, followed by an afternoon meeting with the staff to discuss the lecture and text. Most of the ancient and medieval texts were not unfamiliar to me, as many of the modern and recent ones were. But I found that all of the texts required a great deal of preparation so that they could be presented to the students within their conceptual and historical contexts. What is the importance of this text? How should we read it? What is its value in our times? What, how, why, and other questions ad infinitum having to do with the interpretation of texts.

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Then I reached Dante Alighieri’s *Comedia (The Divine Comedy)* – “comedy” during Dante’s time, of course, did not mean a humorous story, as there is no place whatsoever for laughter in Dante’s work, but rather a story with a happy ending. Dante’s poem, in its three parts, constitutes a journey, a pilgrimage even, into the afterworld, beginning with hell, continuing through purgatory, and ending in paradise. Its vastness and fantastic multidimensionality unfold upon a superbly constructed structure, its layers of symbolism reflecting Dante’s belief that our own world was a mere image or symbol of the Hereafter. The journey begins with the poet finding himself lost in a forest, the forest of doubt,

where he goes astray. This recalls *al-Munqidh min al-dalal* (Deliverer from Error) by al-Imam al-Ghazali; indeed, had al-Ghazali written of his spiritual journey in verse, we may have found sympathies between him and Dante on many matters.¹⁷ Moreover, a number of European and other researchers have suggested parallels between Abu al-‘Ala’ al-Ma‘arri’s *Risalat al-Ghufran* (Epistle of Forgiveness) and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.¹⁸ I still remember Dr. Richard Lemay, one of my colleagues in the department at the time, showing me some short sentences from Dante that had proven difficult to decrypt by experts over the centuries, and which he proved were in Arabic. The jury is still out, as the English saying goes, on the connections between Dante and Arab civilization, but the matter is no doubt worthy of further research.

Dante’s hell is in the shape of an upside-down cone within the earth, formed by God’s expulsion of Satan from heaven. This hole is real and symbolic at the same time, and tunnel-like structures extend along its internal sides. These contain various sinners, starting with those who committed minor “sins of the flesh” closest to the top of the hole, and reaching those who committed major sins (“sins of the mind”) at the bottom. Each of those sins has its own appropriate punishment whereby each sinner confesses to the nature of the sins. (Or, as is mentioned in the Qur’an, *wahum fi ma ishtahat anfusuhum khaliduna* (They lived amidst what their souls desired, eternally) and *dhuqu ma kuntum ta‘malun* (Taste that which you used to commit!))¹⁹ Sins of the flesh are punished as befits them: forbidden lovers are placed in a whirling tornado, so that they will feel in the afterlife the storms whipped up by their love, and so forth. At the bottom of the pit is a frozen lake, where we find Satan, eternally chewing the head of Judas Iscariot – betrayer of Christ, representing the Church – and Brutus – the Roman betrayer of Julius Caesar, representing the empire or state. Betrayal is among the most serious sins, according to Dante, as it completely freezes human emotions.

The poet’s journey takes him from one ditch to another that is even deeper. There, the Roman poet Virgil serves as guide, explaining in detail to Dante the formation and structure of hell. The two poets meet an endless stream of people from both modern and ancient times. Some express penitence, while others insist upon sinning even after death, or inhabiting a realm of both life and death – as is mentioned in the Qur’an, “and death will come to him from every direction, though he himself is not dead.”²⁰ These sinners have no hope of exiting hell, and remain there forever.

Purgatory is a cone-shaped mountain on the other side of the globe, formed as a result of the creation of the hole containing hell. It also has ledges spiraling outside it, climbed by those who hope to reach the peak and ascend to heaven. Some say that purgatory is the part of *The Divine Comedy* that is closest to reality, as there we are in the company of those who still hope to reach heaven by gradually shedding sins and purging the human psyche of its faults. At the peak, we reach an earthly paradise, where the purged soul surges toward heavenly paradise. Heavenly paradise, described in the third part of the comedy, is shaped like a flower (or perhaps a Roman amphitheater) and in it we find the saints arranged according to their closeness to the throne. This third part did not, over time, gain readers’ admiration to the same extent as hell and purgatory, as it is like a set

image with no action compared to the constant bubbling action of the first two parts.

The number of events, meetings, dialogues, wise sayings, images, scenes, and speeches contained in the epic of Dante's *Divine Comedy* is unimaginable. These are religious, scientific, political, and ethical, constituting the full spectrum of Dante's medieval European world. We Arabs play a part in this epic, too, having a role in a place called Limbo where there is neither torture nor hope. There we find ancient philosophers like Aristotle and Plato, as well as Arab philosophers like Ibn Rushd and Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi, regarded as an example of chivalry in Dante's time. As for the venerated Arab prophet, he alongside 'Ali (peace be upon him) are in the tunnel of those who split the Church, meaning that Islam, in Dante's view, is a Christian heresy.

In 1983, I visited Italy and wanted to see some of the places about which Dante had written. I took a rural bus to the town called Gubbio, and from there to the top of the mountain where the Sant'Ubaldo Basilica is situated. I entered the church, where I found myself completely alone, and saw before me, on a slightly elevated part of the church floor, a glass coffin in which the saint's body lay untouched by decay. I was totally intimidated, and perhaps even terrified, by this scene, and did not even wait for the bus to return to the village, instead running down a steep slope next to a small stream. In this state, midway down, I fell upon a white marble slab chiseled with some of Dante's verse: *Intra Tupino e l'acqua che discende del colle eletto dal beato Ubaldo, fertile costa d'alto monte pende* (Between Topino's stream and that which flows down from the hill chosen by the blessed Ubaldo, from a high peak there hangs a fertile slope). I was satisfied by this direct contact with Dante's world, feeling as if I had experienced a revelation or a state like that which comes upon mystics, though this is not my usual state of mind.

Many of Dante's verses have become embedded in my mind, and at times I still repeat them to myself – or to someone gracious enough to listen. For example: *Nessun maggior dolore che ricordarsi del tempo felice nella miseria* (There is no greater pain than to recall the happy time in misery). Or the excuse mentioned by Paolo and Francesca for fornication after reading a book about love: *Galeotto fu 'l libro e chi lo scrisse: quell giorno più non vi leggemmo avante* (The book and writer both were love's pimps. In its leaves that day we read no more). Or the final verse of *The Divine Comedy*: *L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle* (It is love that moves the sun and the other stars).

From Dante we turned to Niccolò Machiavelli (d. 1527 AD) and his famous book *The Prince*, in which many find a kind of constitution of what is now called pragmatic politics. This small book (one can read its twenty-six short chapters in only a few hours) produced such a tumultuous impact that it led many Europeans at the time to describe it as the work of the devil. Indeed, English literature of the period used the expression "Old Nick" to refer to both Niccolò Machiavelli and the devil.²¹ *The Prince* is dedicated to Lorenzo de' Medici, the governor of Florence at the time, and belongs to a literary genre common to the East and the West usually called "advice for kings" or "mirrors for princes." The most famous examples within Arab Islamic culture are *al-Fakhri fi al-adab al-sultaniyya* (The Pride of Sultanial Literature) by Muhammad bin 'Ali al-Tabataba (known as Ibn al-Taftaqi) (d. 1309 AD) and *Siraj al-Muluk* (The Lamp of Kings) by al-Turtushi (d.

1127 AD), though perhaps most similar to *The Prince is the Siyosatnameh* (The Book of Government), written in Persian by the Seljuk vizier Nizam al-Mulk (d. 1092 AD). These works, including *The Prince*, combine wise sayings and historical experiences to formulate advice for rulers, distributed within chapters devoted to particular subjects connected to affairs of governance or the governor.

Machiavelli's second chapter states that he who inherits rule from his father or forefathers does not need as much advice as those who come into power and establish their rule without family precedent. His book is specifically directed toward this latter kind of ruler, as they face more complex and difficult problems. This new ruler would, according to Machiavelli, find utility in cruelty and violence, but he advises that this be used only once and on a large scale. As for the ruler's generosity, it should be bestowed drop by drop. In the seventeenth chapter, Machiavelli explores the ruler's relationship with the masses as follows: "is it better to be loved rather than feared, or vice versa? The answer is that one would prefer to be both but, since they don't go together easily, if you have to choose, it's much safer to be feared than loved."²² Indeed, Machiavelli views the masses with contempt, describing "most people" as "ungrateful and unreliable; they lie, they fake, they're greedy for cash and they melt away in the face of danger. So long as you're generous and, as I said before, not in immediate danger, they're all on your side: they'd shed their blood for you, they'd give you their belongings, their lives, their children. But when you need them they turn their backs on you." However, the ruler "must avoid arousing hatred. Actually, being feared is perfectly compatible with not being hated. And a ruler won't be hated if he keeps his hands off his subjects' property and their women. . . . A man will sooner forget the death of his father than the loss of his inheritance."

The eighteenth chapter is the most famous and the one responsible for Machiavelli's bad reputation during his own time. The chapter starts with a call for the ruler to "be able to exploit both the man and the beast in himself to the full" – with the man associated with law and the beast with force. Machiavelli expands upon this with a metaphorical discussion of the ruler as adopting the qualities of the fox and the lion. The fox is able to discover traps and machinations, and the lion to ward off wolves. He follows this with the most infamous passage:

Hence a sensible leader cannot and must not keep his word if by doing so he puts himself at risk, and if the reasons that made him give his word in the first place are no longer valid. If all men were good, this would be bad advice, but since they are a sad lot and won't be keeping their promises to you, you hardly need to keep yours to them. . . . So, a leader doesn't have to possess all the virtuous qualities I've mentioned, but it's absolutely imperative that he seem to possess them. . . . It's seeming to be virtuous that helps; as, for example, seeming to be compassionate, loyal, humane, honest and religious. And you can even be those things, so long as you're always mentally prepared to change as soon as your interests are threatened. What you have to understand is that a ruler, especially a ruler new to power, can't

always behave in ways that would make people think a man good, because to stay in power he's frequently obliged to act against loyalty, against charity, against humanity and against religion.

These ideas are not completely alien to what we find in our own political texts and especially in the "mirrors for princes" literature. Turtushi, for example, tells us that after 'Abd al-Malik bin Marwan became caliph, he placed a Qur'an in his lap and said to it: "This shall be the point when you and I part ways." But closest in ideology to Machiavelli is what we find in Nizam al-Mulk's *Siyasatnameh*, which reads: "A ruler should commence war against his enemies but in a manner that leaves the opportunity open for reconciliation. He should draw up alliances and conventions, but in a fashion that enables him to break these agreements; however, he should undertake this in a way that would enable him to once again draw them up." The logic of the state, as we find within these texts, supersedes all else, including religious mores and injunctions if need be.

I do not understand why Machiavelli's book aroused such violent hatred against him. Did people at that time truly not know that rulers follow what we now call *realpolitik*? Or had the Church started to feel itself losing authority with the advent of new military-style European states willing to violate all norms to achieve their goals? Does this explain why the Church went on a rampage against *The Prince* and its author? Or did Catholic Europe then, as under Pope Alexander VI, intertwine theology and politics, and Machiavelli's affront had been to draw a clear division between them in an unprecedented, and outspoken, manner? I will leave these questions to the specialists, and let it suffice to emphasize the importance of these texts within both European and Islamic Arab thought, as Arab history often reveals obvious tensions between the sacred law of the religious scholar and *raison d'état* of the sultan.

The Microcosm of al-Jahiz

One of Plato's dialogues describes Socrates' last days spent in prison, awaiting the execution of his death sentence – which he had received for corrupting the ethics of the youth. Socrates accepted his death sentence, but compared himself to a fly, buzzing about the great sluggish horse of Athens, stinging it here and there to rouse it; eventually the horse lost its patience and hit the fly with its tail, thus killing it. This metaphor can also be applied to al-Jahiz's (d. 869 AD) role during his era, biting and stinging every which way, interrogating both private individuals and the public. He argued people's views and ideas and, failing to find anyone with whom he could actually debate, invented opponents to bring the debate to its intellectual closure. He was fortunate that his life did not end as Socrates's did. If we want to compare al-Jahiz to a Western figure, then, we might imagine him as a combination of Socrates and Montaigne, with a hint of Voltaire. However, such comparisons do not give him enough credit, as his influence spread in the centuries after his death, and we, the Arabs, have never neglected him, except during

modern times, despite the unprecedented opportunity for scholarly investigations and research into his writings.²³

It would not be incorrect to call al-Jahiz, who held that man was a microcosm that united various attributes found in the animal kingdom, a “microcosm” himself, for he seemed singlehandedly to shatter an old world and produce a new one. He caused a deep intellectual schism within Arab culture and devised new concepts for it, radically different from what had previously been known. Al-Jahiz roamed the fields of science and scholarship within his era, but he also researched societal beliefs and folk wisdom. He placed all beneath the microscope of his intellect, experience, and research, and transformed it from that which inspired awe of the past, to that which inspired amazement of the future and whatever the mind could bring forth in unending discovery. On this subject, he states:

Even a man credited with perfection, renowned for his intellectual ability and meet to outshine all other scholars, could not get to know all there is beneath a mosquito’s wing in a lifetime, even if he had the strength of all the wise observers in the world and could borrow the erudition of all the research workers endowed with a good memory, all the investigators and all the scholars who study ceaselessly and never grow weary of books.²⁴

The wing of a mosquito? It is truly strange, this metaphor, but it accurately reflects the strange mixture of imagination and reason within al-Jahiz’s thought.²⁵ Although most enlightened Arabs these days find Ibn Rushd a worthy idol when it comes to rationalism, they may not have paid enough attention to al-Jahiz’s enlightened outlook. I find within his writings scientific horizons wider than those of Ibn Rushd. Al-Jahiz was deeply interested in world civilizations and he believed that Islamic Arab civilization was the product of the nations of India, Greece, and Persia, which he consistently referenced and whose civilizational knowledge, he believed, were transmitted from one language to another and from one generation to another “until it reached us and we were the last to inherit and look into it.” However, al-Jahiz did not consider the progress of science and knowledge inevitable, as the human mind remains vulnerable to illness, the most disastrous of which is emulation, which impedes both mind and progress. Likewise, al-Jahiz wrote that religion adopted through emulation and fanaticism rather than the mind leads to the stagnation and deterioration of civilizations, his own civilization being no exception.

Wherever al-Jahiz passes, we can glimpse the imprint of his brilliant critical intellect, often accompanied by the sarcasm he employed to refute outdated or illogical ideas. He is the most prominent example within the history of Arabic and Islamic thought of what we now call the “public intellectual” – one with wide-ranging interests, who addresses the problems of the era, whether they be political, social, intellectual, or literary, and delineates their boundaries, analyzes their discourse, and places them within their historical context. Al-Jahiz never leaves these issues without brushing away the illusions, fanaticism, or traditionalism attached to them. Al-Jahiz is the door through which we can

delve into our civilization during one of its enlightened eras, and time has only made me more appreciative of his genius.

At the University of Chicago

In 1966, a new phase of my story with books began. The time had come to think seriously of my academic future, that is, of getting a PhD. I had no doubt that teaching had become my profession and there was no way to climb the academic ladder without one. With some difficulty, I obtained a scholarship to the University of Chicago in the United States. Thus I joined a group of colleagues who travelled to Europe and America in search of PhDs, dispersing us all over.

I had to choose within Islamic studies between medieval and modern history, and with no real hesitation – thanks to the six years I had spent in the department of General Education and those I had spent in British schools in the company of Greeks and Romans – I chose the former and moved directly toward the history of thought. From my university days at Oxford, I had been especially interested in the philosophy of history and its writing, so I decided to choose a subject related to the writing of history among the Arabs. At the time, the University of Chicago's department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations hosted a stellar group of professors, including the Iraqi Muhsin Mahdi, the German Wilferd Madelung, the Ukrainian Jaroslav Stetkevych, and the American professor Marshall Hodgson, author of the three-volume *Venture of Islam*, which I still consider the most important history of our civilization by a Westerner to date.²⁶

Hodgson was an eccentric person; indeed, he was touched by the madness of genius. He was a deeply committed Christian and belonged to the Quaker Society of Friends. He was particularly interested in Sufi Islam, an interest I did not share. Hodgson attracted a number of students who became like a part of his family, and he would spend long hours with them to help them solve problems, intellectual and emotional. World history was one of Hodgson's main interests, and he was one of the first to renounce a Eurocentric outlook of world history and to call for understanding Islamic civilization through a comprehensive world perspective. Hodgson developed his own terminology, which he considered essential for understanding Islamic history. He differentiates, for example, between Islamic and Islamicate, or what is religious and what is civilizational, allowing the sphere of the civilizational concept to expand far wider than the religious sphere, which requires a universal outlook toward the writing of Islamic history.

Despite my affinity for Hodgson's approach, Muhsin Mahdi, because he had written a book about Ibn Khaldun, was chosen to supervise my thesis.²⁷ Mahdi was a follower of the philosopher Leo Strauss and his famous book *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, in which he tackled an analysis of philosophical writing during Europe's religious Middle Ages, when philosophy was persecuted.²⁸ Mahdi's book about Ibn Khaldun, like his later works on al-Farabi, teemed with ideas borrowed from Strauss about how philosophy was written in the medieval period, during which religion prevailed, and the need for

intensive research to find the hidden meanings within these texts. Therefore, we find that Ibn Khaldun is, in Mahdi's opinion, actually a "hidden" philosopher. I did not like this theory, as every "classic" book really includes a number of books, and there is never only one "key" to decipher its symbols. Moreover, most later intellectual historians did not adopt Strauss's theories.

Mahdi first suggested that I write about the works of Ibn Hayyan al-Qurtubi (d. 1075 AD), but we ultimately settled on al-Mas'udi (d. 956 AD). My introduction to the world of al-Mas'udi was through al-Jahiz. The works of al-Jahiz ultimately overshadow al-Mas'udi's history, as they do countless works produced during the so-called Golden Age of Islamic thought, between the ninth and sixteenth centuries. Still, delving into al-Mas'udi's world, with his wide-ranging and open-minded interest in a variety of realms of intellectual inquiry, meant entering into a world similar to al-Jahiz's due to his open interest in a wide variety of the sciences. I could not find within al-Mas'udi's texts what we could call the Straussian dimension – that is, another hidden text. It seemed to me that al-Mas'udi was Shi'i, but his Shi'ism was not hidden but open-minded and with wide horizons embracing all the sciences of the times. He selected the most relevant theories, philosophies, and intellectual approaches to explain the historical and scientific phenomena addressed in his texts. This intellectual independence is what gave his histories their great distinction among all Islamic schools of thought, though most of his writings have been lost. It seems to me that in our intellectual history these days we prefer to place classical thinkers in narrow intellectual boxes – calling one thinker Shi'i and another Sunni; labeling them Mu'tazili, Ash'ari, Hanafi, Shafi'i, Sufi, and so on; identifying one as a *mutakallim*, another a philosopher, and another a *faqih*; saying this one is *usuli*, that one is more *akhbari*, and so on.²⁹ Such categories fail to take into account that many of these figures were selective and eclectic in their thought, that they had drawn their knowledge from literary sources and their encyclopedic or *adabi* perspectives.

The University of Chicago's doctoral program at that time included mandatory attendance at graduate seminars for about a year and a half before commencing one's thesis. In these seminars, students were exposed to a wide scope of subjects within Islamic studies, including *'ilm al-kalam* (Islamic theology), literature, geography, history, political theory, and so forth. Most of these were new to me, but I found in them both direct and indirect relationships to al-Mas'udi and the writing of history. Facing a rich plethora of texts, I read avidly. My years in AUB's General Education department allowed me to approach these texts with a comparative analysis, to place them within a universal context and not only to register an effect here or there. The impact of thought is not mechanically transported from one thinker to another, and these Arabic texts truly spoke to the whole world, East and West. Al-Mas'udi, for example, aspired to write the history of the world – not just the Islamic world. The same applies to the numerous texts that see in the Holy Qur'an a call to discover the world of knowledge, and not one that restricted knowledge or encouraged closed-mindedness by considering its content sufficient: the Qur'an, in this view, should be considered a point of departure and not one of closure. Indeed, I believe it possible to divide Islamic thinkers into two groups: the first sees the Qur'an as the end

of all knowledge and the other considers it the beginning. The latter approach, in my opinion, is what gave our civilization its great vivacity and richness during these periods.

Any reader of al-Mas‘udi immediately recognizes that the horizons of his writings are beyond mere historical narrative and include not only the history of the world as his fellow historians knew it, but also the histories of nations ancient and modern, and a number of sciences related to history, such as geography, the natural sciences, and *‘ilm al-kalam*. Al-Mas‘udi also offers definitions for various terms, such as nation, experience, research, and tradition. This led Ibn Khaldun to describe him as the “imam of historians,” despite the former’s (in my view) cruel criticism that al-Mas‘udi narrated “absurd stories.” Thus, al-Mas‘udi was my choice as the subject of my dissertation and it was a blessed one, opening before me an expansive window overlooking the Islamic sciences and civilization of his times. My dissertation was later published in English.³⁰ It was my first book, and when it first came out, I embraced it with a passion no less than that with which I embraced my children.

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Endnotes

- 1 From *Kitab al-Firasa* (Book of Physiognomy).
- 2 John Carey, *The Unexpected Professor: An Oxford Life in Books* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014).
- 3 The author’s father, Ahmad Samih al-Khalidi, was a leading Palestinian educator and principal of the Arab College in Jerusalem from 1925 to 1948. See “Ahmad Samih Khalidi,” *Encyclopedia of the Palestinians*, ed. Philip Mattar (New York: Facts on File, 2005), 279.
- 4 Khalil al-Sakakini, *Kadha ana ya dunya* [Thus Am I, O World] (n.p.: al-Matba‘a al-tijariyya, 1955). An unabridged version of Sakakini’s diaries, along with correspondence and other writings, were published in eight volumes by the Khalil Sakakini Center in Ramallah and the Institute for Jerusalem Studies between 2003 and 2010. See *Yawmiyyat Khalil al-Sakakini: yawmiyyat, risalat, ta‘ammulat* [The Diaries of Khalil al-Sakakini: Diaries, Letters, Reflections], ed. Akram Musallam (Ramallah: Institute of Jerusalem Studies and Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center, 2003-2010).
- 5 The joke is a pun, as *karabij* has a double meaning – a kind of sweet, and lashes with a whip!
- 6 Salvatore Giuliano was a Sicilian bandit who rose to prominence in 1943. He is the subject of a 1962 film directed by Francesco Rosi, and a number of biographies in Italian and English. See Billy Jaynes Chandler, *King of the Mountain: The Life and Death of Guiliano the Bandit* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1988).
- 7 See Tarif Khalidi and Mayssoun Sukarieh, “Halat Milham Qasim” [The Case of Milham Qasim], *Bidayat* 7 (Winter 2014), online at www.bidayatmag.com/node/177 (accessed 27 March 2018); Mayssoun Sukarieh and Tarif Khalidi, “Middle Eastern Banditry: A Study in History and Folklore,” in *In the House of Understanding: Histories in Memory of Kamal S. Salibi*, ed. Abdul Rahim Abu-Hussayn, Tarif Khalidi, and Suleiman Ali Mourad (Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, 2017).
- 8 Arsène Lupin was the fictional creation of French writer Maurice Leblanc, appearing in some 17 novels and 39 novellas by the author.
- 9 Tom Mix and Gene Autry were actors in Hollywood Westerns, whose film popularity led to spin-off comics and novels featuring characters of the same names.

- 10 The series launched in 1941 with a comic version of Alexandre Dumas's *The Three Musketeers*, and published 167 adaptations, the last being *Faust*, published in August 1962. See Michael Sawyer, "Albert Lewis Kanter and the Classics: The Man Behind the Gilberton Company," *Journal of Popular Culture* 20, no. 4 (Spring 1987): 1–18.
- 11 The novel, authored by Thomas Hughes, describes the experience of Tom Brown, a fictional boy based largely on the author's brother, at Rugby School, a public school for boys.
- 12 The author's mother, Anbara Salam Khalidi, was a prominent Arab writer, translator, and public intellectual. See Anbara Salam Khalidi, *Memoirs of an Early Arab Feminist: The Life and Activism of Anbara Salam Khalidi* (London: Pluto Press, 2013).
- 13 R. W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).
- 14 Benedetto Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty*, trans. Sylvia Sprigge (New York: W. W. Norton, 1941).
- 15 Pieter Geyl, *Napoleon: For and Against* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949).
- 16 Henri Pirenne, *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (Brussels: R. Sand, 1922).
- 17 For a recent translation, see R. J. McCarthy, *Al-Ghazali's Path to Sufism and His Deliverance from Error: An Annotated Translation of al-Munqidh min al-Dalal* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2000).
- 18 On this question, see the introduction to Abu al-'Ala' al-Ma'arri, *The Epistle of Forgiveness, or a Pardon to Enter the Garden*, ed. and trans. Geert Jan van Gelder and Gregor Schoeler (New York: New York University Press, 2013).
- 19 Qur'an 21:102 and 29:55, respectively, *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, trans. Tarif Khalidi (New York: Penguin Classics, 2008), 264, 325.
- 20 Qur'an 14:17, *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, 201.
- 21 On the origins of "Old Nick," see, for example, Anatoly Liberman, "Multifarious Devils, Part 2, Old Nick and the Crocodile," *OUPblog*, 5 June 2013, online at blog.oup.com/2013/06/old-nick-etymology-word-origin/ (accessed 21 February 2018).
- 22 This and the following translations are from Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. and trans. Tim Parks (Cambridge: Penguin Classics, 2011).
- 23 I myself found that I could not chase al-Jahiz's specter, and with some colleagues organized an international conference on him. Later, the proceedings were published in a book, which garnered critical acclaim and a World Book Prize from the Islamic Republic of Iran. See *al-Jahiz: A Muslim Humanist for Our Time*, ed. Arnim Heinemann, Manfred Kropp, Tarif Khalidi, and John Lash Meloy (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag for Orient-Institut, Beirut, 2009).
- 24 *The Life and Works of Jahiz: Translations of Selected Texts*, trans. Charles Pellat and D. M. Hawke (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 166.
- 25 For further discussion, see Tarif Khalidi, "A Mosquito's Wing: Al-Jahiz on the Progress of Knowledge," in *Arabic and Islamic Garland: Historical, Educational, and Literary Papers Presented to Abdul-Latif Tibawi*, ed. Riadh el-Droubie (London: Islamic Cultural Center, 1977), 277–289.
- 26 Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).
- 27 Muhsin Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History* (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1954).
- 28 Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1952).
- 29 *A mutakallim* is one versed in 'ilm al-kalam – a theologian. A *faqih* is specialist in religious law (*fiqh*). According to the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, the *akhbariyya* (sing. *akhbari*) are "those who rely primarily on the traditions, *akhbar*, of the *Imams* as a source of religious knowledge, in contrast to the *Usuliyya* [q.v.], who admit a larger share of speculative reason in the principles (*usul*) of theology and religious law." See W. Madelung, "Akhbariyya," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W. P. Heinrichs (Leiden: Brill, 2012), online at dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_8312 (accessed 24 April 2018).
- 30 Tarif Khalidi, *Islamic Historiography: The Histories of Mas'udi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975).