

MEMOIRS OF ARAB INTELLECTUALS: AN ARCHIVE OF INTELLECTUAL PRACTICES

Background Research Paper on the Autobiographies of Key Arab Social Scientists and Humanists for the Third Arab Social Science Report (ASSR)

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I- Introduction: *Why delve into the autobiographies of Arab intellectuals?*

The autobiographical works of Arab social scientists and humanities scholars constitute an extremely rich and valuable archive. Excavating this archive provides us with written traces that distill lives, which were consumed by activities of the mind – reading, learning, writing, translating, and teaching – as well as, in many cases, by public engagement and political practice.

First, they are a window unto the hopes, anxieties, fears, experiences, desires, and anticipations, which animated intellectual and political projects, and which more often than not, are excised from the ‘official’ works. Second, the memoirs’ narrative frames whether cast as a coming-of-age story (*bildungsroman*) characterized by a progressive overcoming of hurdles on the way to knowledge and maturity, an auto-critique in the wake of disenchantment, or a recovery-discovery of a particular identity, all point to how these intellectuals conceptualized the relationship between past, present and future – what Reinhart Koselleck dubbed the relation between the ‘space of experience’ and the ‘horizon of expectation’.

Third, and perhaps more importantly for the scope of this research paper, autobiographies provide valuable insights about the workings of Arab intellectual, and academic, spheres.

A) They provide detailed first-hand accounts of how the political powers of the postcolonial Arab states undermined the autonomy of research and teaching at their universities.

B) Through the personal stories they relate, which could easily be considered as ethnographic vignettes, they also illuminate everyday life at the university with the manifold relations professors have with the administration, their students and colleagues. Through laying bare how universities operate in their relationship with the state and internally, by describing the relations of hierarchy, patronage, nepotism and authority, the memoirs provide us with a sociological understanding of the institutions of production, transmission and circulation of knowledge. The sociological insights into the workings of institutions – the university primarily, but also United Nations institutions that some Arab intellectuals were associated with, and non-governmental organizations – are a salutary antidote against a detached history of ideas approach that abstracts Arab intellectual trends from its sites of production and transmission.

C) It is hard to think of modern and contemporary Arab social scientists and humanists without concomitantly thinking about the question of translation. Through the memoirs we can glean information on the processes of constitution of an intellectual's habitus via the different practices, which pertain to the different languages (and dialects) one spoke, read, wrote, taught in, and translated to and from. The question

of which foreign languages one masters is key for a number of reasons, not least the choice of where to travel to for graduate studies for those intellectuals who studied abroad, and the work-related possibilities after graduation, which contribute to the cultivation of particular intellectual sensibilities, conceptual proclivities and disciplinary approaches. (e.g. Francophone and Anglophone).

D) Last but not least, the autobiographies enable us to gauge how Arab thinkers navigated questions of positionality in their different iterations: geographical location, institutional affiliation, linguistic choices, genres of work, multiple audiences, and modalities of public intervention and political commitment.

II. A Preliminary Note on Women's Memoirs

In plowing through the autobiographies I consulted to write this paper, I could not help noticing the wide contrast separating the works written by women thinkers from those written by men. In a nutshell, thinking about and experientially confronting patriarchal norms, practices and institutions from the time one is born saturates most of the works written by female authors and is virtually absent from the works by male authors. I have worked with the three volumes of Nawal al-Saadawi's memoirs, in addition to the autobiographies of Leila Ahmed, Fatima al-Mernissi, and Radwa Ashur. The last author is the only one of the four which does not focus her work on the impact of patriarchal social systems on women's lives, modes of resistance to it, and personal experiences of confrontation with it. For instance, al-Saadawi writes at the beginning of her first volume of memoirs: "I have lived in Egypt from the time I was born till I became sixty years old. I

try to remember the day of my birth, and I don't remember anything, except that I was born a 'female'" (*AH*, 15). A couple of pages later, al-Saadawi narrates intergenerational stories of forced marriages of young women to older men that cut across classes: the story of her mother, a daughter of a bayk who was taken out of school at the age of 15 to marry her father who was 16 years her senior; and the story of her peasant paternal grandmother who was married at the age of 10 to a married man with two children who had lost his wife (*AH*, 17-20). She also underscores the intergenerational experiences of female genital mutilation: "In 1937 Egypt, when I was six years old, clitoridectomies [al-khitan] were done to all girls before the onset of menstruation. Not one of them, in the village or the city, in upper classes or lower ones, did escape. My mother Zainab Hanim did not escape, she could not save me, or any of her daughters. I saved my daughter, and countless other girls, when I began writing forty years ago" (*AH*, 45).

In narrating their own personal stories, these thinkers also tell the stories of more than a few women around them. They focus in particular on mothers, aunts, and extended family members whose souls and bodies have borne the brunt of patriarchal systems. Weaved into their personal narratives are acts of witnessing for women who were broken by the system, who suffered physically and psychologically, or who resisted it in their own ways in their own closed private spheres displaying an arsenal of weapons of the weak. Their memoirs are shot through with a sensibility of recuperating in writing the everyday lives and practices of women that are not usually recorded and therefore rendered invisible. These recuperated lives could be either marshaled to reveal the resources the dominated and marginalized women draw on to survive, or to reveal the

structural conditions of power undergirding some of the personal tragedies that are narrated. Leila Ahmed's memoirs are explicitly structured along an oral/written binary. For instance, Ahmed contrasts a women's Islam, which she learned from her grandmother and the other women in her family that is gentle, pacifist, and somewhat mystical and which is transmitted orally through practice with an official, textual Islam represented by the men of religion (ABP, 121-23). Both Leila Ahmed and Fatima al-Mernissi draw on the notion of the harem in their exploration of their own lives. Al-Mernissi does so literally, beginning her memoir with the following sentence: "I was born in a harem in 1940 in Fez" (DTP, 1). Leila Ahmed draws on the notion of a harem to connote women's time, spaces, and culture.

To summarize, in drawing attention to the stark contrast dividing women's memoirs, particularly the three feminist thinkers whose work I examined, from men's, I aim to underscore a few points. First, in their different ways, these works expose how the private sphere, which is less discussed overall by male authors, is saturated with power relations. Second, in doing so, these memoirs written from the standpoint of a minority constituency (not numerically of course but in terms of power asymmetry) extend beyond the sphere of personal experience which is the stuff autobiographies are made of to bear witness to the condition of women more generally, in patriarchal systems. Third, in doing so, they are impelled to confront questions about the relation of patriarchal systems to Arab cultures and religion, particularly Islam. Two of the four memoirs I worked with are written in English originally – Leila Ahmed and Fatima al-Mernissi – that incidentally are the two that deploy consciously the notion of the harem. I say so because these works are

very consciously addressing a Western gaze, and are speaking back to it. This speaking back could take the form of distinguishing oral from written in Islam in Ahmed's case or Mernissi's presentation of certain characters as models or exemplars. "Shahrazad, the famed character – narrator of the *1001 Nights*, for whom keeping her listener entertained was a matter of survival," Carine Bourget writes, "is held in high regard in Mernissi's memoir, where she is portrayed as a feminist model for women." In both of these memoirs which are preoccupied with speaking back to the West, and particularly speaking against culturalist stereotypes about Islam and women, the authors are keen to show the non-Arab reader that Islam as a religious tradition, and Arab cultures more generally, are not bereft of internal resources to fight against patriarchy.

III- Memoirs as Primary Sources: Some Risks

Relying on memoirs as a window into the transformations of intellectual, political and social worlds is not a risk-free endeavor. Simply put, their portrayal of a situation can be dishonest or some occurrences or characters made up. I mention this risk at this point because al-Mernissi's memoirs, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*, have been called into question for being fictive. Carine Bourget has compared the English original with its French translation that has been revised and adapted by the author and detected discrepancies between both versions. In particular, Bourget highlights a footnote that has been added in the French version which "contradicts the autobiographical pact established by the English version and the main text." In the footnote, Mernissi affirms

that the book is “not an autobiography but a fiction...[and] *to complicate things, one should remember that the version I presented coincided with a literary packaging I needed to seduce my reader.*”¹ The book though, at least in its English version is still promoted as a memoir, and is taught as such. Bourget has taught it as an autobiography and so did I in the past.

III- Passing Worlds of Life and Learning

A lot of autobiographies that seek to capture the authors’ past from the standpoint of their present are marked by a sense of loss and yearning, which at times takes the shape

¹ Here is the full text of the footnote in French and in Bourget’s translation: Cette version des faits concernant la demande d’indépendance . . . n’est pas historique, on s’en doute; c’est celle de ma mère, qui est un personnage de fiction, comme d’ailleurs l’enfant qui parle, et qui est supposée être moi-même. Si j’avais essayé de vous raconter mon enfance, vous n’auriez pas terminé les deux premiers paragraphes, parce que mon enfance fut plate et prodigieusement ennuyeuse. Comme ce livre n’est pas une autobiographie, mais une fiction qui se présente sous forme de contes racontés par une enfant de sept ans, la version des faits concernant janvier 1944, rapportée ici, est celle qui traînait dans mes souvenirs. Souvenirs de ce que se racontaient les femmes illettrées dans la cour et sur les terrasses.

Pour compliquer les choses, il faut aussi se rappeler que la version que j’ai présentée coïncidait avec un packaging littéraire dont j’avais besoin pour séduire mon lecteur.

This version of the facts surrounding the demand for independence is not historical, one can guess; it’s the version of my mother, who is a fictional character, just as the child who speaks, and who is supposed to be me. If I had tried to tell you my childhood, you wouldn’t have finished the first two paragraphs, because my childhood was dull and prodigiously boring. As this book is not an autobiography, but a fiction that presents itself as tales told by a seven-year-old child, the version of the facts about January 1944 told here is the one that was in my memories. Memories of what illiterate women told each other in the courtyard and on the terraces.

To complicate things, one should remember that the version I presented coincided with a literary packaging I needed to seduce my reader. (234–35n3, emphasis added). Carine Bourget, “Complicity with Orientalism in Third-World Women’s Writing: Fatima Mernissi’s Fictive Memoirs,” *Research in African Literatures* 44, no. 3 (2013): 32.

of reassessing the author's relation to their parents. In this section, I will pay particular attention to the educational worlds these authors inhabited and their retrospective assessment of it. This is particularly salient in our case since a number of 20th century thinkers have experienced both traditional and modern educational systems (such as Taha Hussein, Hussein Mruwwah, and Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri to a lesser extent) or are the children of parents who have done so themselves (Nawal al-Saadawi) or of clerics (Jalal Amin is the son of a Qadi Shar'I who was himself the son of a cleric). For older intellectuals, like Taha Hussein (1889-1973), one can chart a trajectory of moving out of traditional religious education into the secular modern space of the university, while for those who are younger, it was either their parents who had done so, or their experience consisted of moving between Quranic and secular schools at a young age, as in the case of Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri (1935-2010).

Taha Hussein's iconic *The Days* (Three Volumes) charts the journeys from the author's birth place in a village in upper Egypt to Cairo to France and back to Cairo. This journey corresponds to milestones in his intellectual formation, from memorizing the Quran in his first school to joining the Azhar before moving out of it and into the secular university – receiving the first doctorate awarded by the Egyptian university (1914), and later on traveling to France and writing a dissertation on Ibn Khaldun under the supervision of Emile Durkheim.

The arc of *The Days*' narrative traces Hussein's initial hope at joining the Azhar, followed by its waning before his final disillusionment: "There was not a single thing in all that he

heard said to give him a good opinion of either lecturers or students, and the longer he listened the less he thought of either...All of which aroused in the boy a flood of anger and contempt and disappointment” (*TD*, 195). Backbiting, intrigue, defamation, and the stupidity of teachers were behind his increased contempt (*TD*, 195-98). Hussein’s disenchantment increased in the wake of the isolation of Muhammad Abdu in the wake of his retirement from the Azhar (1904) after the Khedive denounced a group of modernist scholars including the Imam as the author refers to Abdu in his memoir. “As for the young man,” Hussein writes, “his heart was full of shame and anger and contempt for sheikhs and students alike, though he had never known the Imam or been introduced to him” (*TD*, 205).

The passing of Muhammad Abdu signals in the memoir a hinge moment that goes beyond the disenchantment with the Azhar and towards the attraction to lay secular culture. “But the boy,” Hussein writes, “noticed something else which increased his aversion to the Azhar and his contempt for both sheikhs and students. He found that the men who mourned sincerely for the Imam did not wear turbans, but tarboushes, and he conceived a secret inclination towards them and a desire to make some acquaintance with their society. But how was such a thing possible for a blind boy condemned without escape to the Azhar and its circle?” (*TD*, 205).

Hussein’s retrospective judgement of his Azharite days is harsh: “The four years I had spent at the Azhar seemed to me like forty, so utterly drawn out they were. They wore me down... It was a life of unrelieved repetition, with never a new thing, from the

time the study year began until it was over (*TD*, 245). Hussein depicts a world of rote learning that does not touch the student's heart, ignite his intelligence, and provide new knowledge: "The Azhar upbringing had nurtured me in the sort of talent it required: I had become competent to understand what the shaikhs repeated. But all to no point" (*TD*, 246). This account is in stark contrast with the one he gives of his first days at the secular university which was founded three years after Muhammad Abdu's passing (1908) by Saad Zaghloul, Qasim Amin and Lutfi al-Sayyid ("Introduction," *TD*, 101). In contrast to the Azharite's methods, Ahmad Zaki's teaching of ancient Egyptian civilization was characterized by clarity, lucidity, and a direct address to the students in the class. "How altogether strange and new it all was," Hussein writes, "exciting my mind and revolutionising my whole way of thinking" (*TD*, 248).

Taha Hussein's discussion of his time at the university distinguishes between the European and Egyptian professors in what I read as an attempt to not collapse modern university education with westernization on the author's part. He writes: "It was not only the part played by the foreign teachers which made life at the University such a delightful and continuous feast of good things. There were Egyptian professors, too, who added to its appeal and its fascination enormously...They strengthened and established my Arab, Egyptian personality, in the context of all the wide learning brought to me by the orientalist which could easily have engrossed me totally in European values. But these Egyptian teachers enabled me to cling to a strong element of authentic eastern culture, and to hold together congenially in a balanced harmony the learning of both east and

west” (*TD*, 282).

Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri, who grew up in Figuig, a small isolated eastern Moroccan city near the Atlas mountains and not far from Algeria, undergirds his memoirs with an overarching narrative frame that structures his *bildungsroman* like Hussein’s as an act of emancipation from the closed, repetitive worlds of traditional learning. For instance, in discussing Hajj Muhammad Faraj, the founder of a modern school in his hometown, al-Jabiri writes: “The rupture this man produced in the city of Figuig between the past and the future, the Masyad and the contemporary Arab school, the repetition [ijtitar] of life and making life, the isolation from the homeland as a result of geography and the unlimited engagement in the national militancy to make history, the history of the homeland; this rupture whose beginnings our friend accompanied and was one of its fruits, pushes him now, as he is recalling the events of his life as a child, to inaugurate himself a rupture in his own memories, between what has ‘gone with the past’ and what is still building the future. I mean the events to which our friend owes the reputation he later garnered on the Moroccan and Arab cultural scene” (*HFA*, 72).

On Method: A Note on Reading Practices

We could of course engage in a post-colonial critique of the modernizing binaries Hussein deploys in recounting his own life, such as Turban/Tarboush, Repetition/Progress, Convolutions/Directness, Closed world of the Azhar/The Open field (TD, 271), as well al-Jabiri's binaries of the structural time of repetition and the time of progress and history making. This retrospective epistemological critique, which has become much normalized – in a Kuhnian sense – in the last few decades berates Arab intellectuals for importing colonial epistemological taxonomies about the backwardness of their own cultures. This theoretical critique was a much-needed strategy to counter blanket culturalist statements about the Arab world, or the hubris of ready-made universals that don't require translation. It is less helpful for our purposes if we're trying to reach a historical and ethnographic understanding of the lives of intellectuals, as well as the production of thought, its transmission in educational institutions and its wider spheres of circulation. For this reason, I do not deploy this reading practice that homes in on epistemological assumptions in this paper in an effort to listen charitably to these intellectuals' voices as they distill their life experiences into texts.

IV. Undermining the Autonomy of Research and Teaching

One of the most fascinating aspect of the memoirs of Arab intellectuals is the thick

description of the different strategies the postcolonial Arab regimes that ruled the Arab world in the wake of decolonization drew on to undermine the autonomy of research and teaching in the universities. The memoirs reveal a good deal of information about the difficult labor conditions for Arab researchers in the social sciences and the humanities, particularly those of them who work in public universities.

The autonomy of research has always succumbed to different pressures in Arab public universities, even prior to the advent of the postcolonial regime to power. Taha Hussein relates that Egyptian students studying abroad had to have their dissertation approved by the Egyptian universities prior to their submission to their foreign universities (*TD*, 364). This took place in the wake of a commotion produced by a dissertation defended at the Sorbonne on the status of women in Islam, which had obliged its author, Mansur Fahmi, to leave Egypt for a year. Hussein remembers that he was summoned to a session of the Administrative Council of the University and interrogated about a thesis by one of the university's students in Europe, which was read to him:

“What, it [the voice of the questioner] asked, was the verdict of religion about matters with which the thesis dealt?

“It does not have to do,” I replied, “with *fatwas* in matters of religion.” My interlocutor said: “But we want to know what you think.” With a smile that concealed a certain feeling of anger, I retorted: “I thought I was in a University, where people are not judged for their ideas. If I were in the Azhar, I would not ask

myself what I thought: I would ask a *fatwa* from the opinion of someone else” (*TD*, 365).

In his own case, Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid read his dissertation on the social philosophy of Ibn Khaldun written under the supervision of an Orientalist (Prof. Casanova) and Emile Durkheim, for whom Hussein felt “an admiration that bordered on worship” (*TD*, 369) and who passed away before his defense. These instances of interference in the autonomy of research and the freedom of movement and thought of researchers seem very minor from the perspective of the postcolonial regimes that came to power a few decades later.

The first volume of Abdel Rahman Badawi’s *Sirāt Hayātī* carries one of the harshest condemnations of the post-1952 Egyptian system of rule. Its prose is also very bitter. Its overarching narrative frame is one of cultural and political regression of the post-revolutionary time in comparison to the past. It’s a history of decay in the quality of the texts taught, the quality of the students produced and their capacity to consult references in foreign languages (*SH*, 38). In a nutshell, Badawi paints a picture of a cultural and political postcolonial misery.

Having said that, Badawi provides us with an early description of the penetration of the Egyptian secret services into the university’s body in the wake of the 1952 coup d’état that brought the Free Officers to power. It is worth quoting his description extensively:

During those seven years (1960-66) the atmosphere in the university had been

corrupted without a possibility of remedy. Professors were competing to work for the intelligence services [mukhabarat], and to write reports to the security office, the general intelligence services, and the military intelligence; and the administrative positions: A head of the university [mudir], a vice-president of a university [wakil], dean of a faculty, wakil of a faculty, depended on those intelligence agents. And no one was appointed in those positions until approved by the intelligence. And the head of the university did not dare to propose a name to assume the position of dean until he received the approval of the intelligence....And the dean in every faculty had his faculty agents from every department who would report the political behavior of the members of the department. And the dean would in his turn notify the head of the university who would notify the secretary general of the university who was a former military of all the information he had about the political behavior of the teaching body. And the information gathered at the secretary general is then transmitted to particular sectors in the administration of the intelligence services, and at times to the manager of the security office in the ministry of higher education – who also has his direct agents amongst the faculty.

This intelligence organization had begun in 1956. It was then accompanied since 1962 with another organization, we had mentioned earlier, which was the secret organization that is supervised by the secret apparatus. This secret apparatus which, was supervised by a faculty member in every university, began drawing on

another faculty member in each faculty to have all positions under surveillance. And most of these agents were Marxists, or from those who trade in leftism, Marxism and communism, because this organization was the result of the domination of communists on centers of power.

Overall, the atmosphere at the university was one of total espionage, lurking terror, and active snitching (*SH*, 357-8).

The very early infiltration of the Egyptian security state into the educational institutions is also underscored by Jalal Amin, who recalls his own opposition, which was not his alone, to Nasser around 1954 “after hearing of the dismissal of a lot of Leftist and Brotherhood university professors, in addition to arresting them just for expressing their opinions, or suspecting that they had views which are opposed to the regime” (*MAA*, 177). Amin describes an atmosphere of generalized suspicion, with government eyes and ears everywhere, including in the classroom, and amongst the university staff, such as office attendants who make coffee to the teaching body (*MAA*, 194).

The regime also sent spies to write reports on students pursuing degrees abroad. He relates that he delivered a lecture (1963) for the association of Arab students in England, while a doctoral student at the London School of Economics, which lauded some of the Ba'ath's ideas, and contained some sarcastic remarks on Nasser's *mithaq* that was promulgated in the wake of the secession between Syria and Egypt in 1961 (*MAA*, 180). Nearly a month later he was summoned by the head of the student delegations and asked to hand in the text of his lecture, which he refused to do. As a result, Amin had a

file in the secret services which led to minor forms of harassment and punishment: an interrogation as soon as he went back home after graduating and an initial refusal to grant him permission to leave the country for a conference in London (*MAA*, 181, and 185). Leila Ahmed, who had a grant to pursue her graduate studies in England from the British Council, was denied a passport to leave the country for four years, not because of her own personal political activity (*ABP*, 27). Her father, the chairman of the Hydro-Electric Power Commission had opposed Nasser's plan to build the High Dam on ecological grounds (*ABP*, 17-18). Banned from publishing his views on the matter in Egypt, he delivered a paper with his findings, which was published at the Institute of Civil Engineers in London. Leila Ahmed's family, hereafter, lived under government censure, which included freezing their bank accounts, and forbidding her from traveling until she managed to being granted a hearing by a newly appointed minister, an engineer by training who privately supported her father's views, which resulted in her exit permit being delivered the day after (*ABP*, 29).

These practices, which were firmly established in the first years of the 1952 regime, remained in place until the Egyptian revolution. Radwa Ashour's memoir provides us with more thick description of the undercutting of the autonomy of academic fields through the constant monitoring of the teaching, circulation, public activity, and writings of university professors. It is to her memoir *Athql min Radwa*, published only a few years ago (2013) and in the wake of the 2011 Egyptian revolution, that I now turn for an account of the atmosphere university professors lived and worked in. Ashour notes how from the

late 1970s till the mid-1980s she would notice a student that irregularly attends her lectures, and who unlike the rest of the student seemed to be in his thirties (AMR, 14). The older student would make his appearances at times of important political events, such as during the days of Sadat's visit to Israel, and during the demonstrations against the Israeli raids on Tunis (AMR, 15). In the early 1990s, when Ashour was chairing the English literature department at the Ain Shams University, the same student appeared again in her classes: "It was clear that the man works in the university section of the state security services. Most probably he was a rare currency, since he was asked to attend lectures that as a result of the discipline, are in English" (AMR, 16).

Ashour's memoir adds an additional layer to the previous account by also mentioning the direct acts of violence committed by thugs [baltajiyya] on campus. It is worth quoting her reflections on the different modalities of state sponsored violence on campus:

I wondered whether the difference between the miserable report writer, and the muscular thug, is just a difference between different kinds of jobs or one between two different era and styles: veiled and explicit repression. The first bites you like a snake without a hustle or a sound, and the other is obscene in his aggressivity – shouting in your face, and moving his arms around, terrorizing you with his gaze and loud voice, before taking out the knife he's going to stab you with. Then I said this talk is not precise because torture in the detention camps was taking place all the time, indecent in its openness, despite being concealed by the prison walls

(AMR, 16).

Ashour goes on to narrate how a few months before the revolution in November 2010, thugs with chains and knives attacked students, while the president of the university issued a statement claiming that ‘foreign’ and ‘a few infiltrated’ professors broke into the university, and were confronted by students who defended the ‘reputation’ and ‘dignity’ of their university (AMR, 17). Ashour draws an interesting distinction noting that thugs have been used for decades by the security forces. What was new, on the eve of the revolutions, was that the authorities vocally endorsed their action, in contrast to the denial of any relationship with them in the past (AMR, 17).

From all the memoirs I read, Ashour’s is the only one that writes about the impact of the 2011 revolutions on academic institutions, giving us a glimpse of how life at these institutions changed albeit for a brief window of time. Here are a few changes that took place in the early months after the revolution, around the spring of 2011: The security guards left campus (137), students and a large number of faculty members were demonstrating calling for the resignation of the members of the administration appointed by the deposed president (142), and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces refused to issue a decree calling on them to stand down. A number of presidents, vice-presidents and deans resigned as a result of the demonstration, however, “the resignations presented by the presidents of Cairo University, al-Fayoum U., Port-Said U. and the U. of Janoub al-Wadi, for instance, were not only accepted more than a month after they were presented (143).

Overall, Ashour paints a picture of exuberance at initiating democratic practices either through demonstrations by faculty and students or the participation in the elections of the faculty university club. In January 2012, Ala' Fayez, a pediatric surgeon, became the first elected president of Ain Shams University. The newly elected president was different in his daily practices, his looks, his clothes and his spontaneity: constantly meeting his faculty members, assigning the faculty of law to the task of following through his students' causes – such as those who were arrested by the security forces, or were martyred. “We were surprised to see him on campus without a neck tie,” Ashour writes, wearing jeans and a blazer; or wearing a suit and a tie because there is some delegation around or an official function (228).

I underscore these seemingly mundane differences that Ashour is relating because they stand in contrast to the pre-revolutionary accounts of the internal hierarchies in academic institutions, not to mention, the relationship between students, faculty and staff, and amongst each other.

V. Public/Private Universities

Jalal Amin taught at public and private institutions in Egypt. His memoirs provide an interesting comparative perspective of the two worlds. After graduating from England in 1964, Amin spent a decade at the Law School of Ain Shams University. His experience is one of disenchantment. He describes the gap between his initial hope and the academic world he inhabited: “I was during this time...full of hopes for myself, my family, and my country, and was under the strong influence of ethical and social principles, in a way I

wasn't before and would not be after that...I was surprised at Ain Shams Law School by a very strange world, which had little that brings joy, and much that leads to depression and despair." (MAA, 211).

The atmosphere of generalized suspicion that is fostered by the state's eyes and ears at the university extends to its administration that does not have any confidence in the academic integrity of its professors, students and employees. The exams are surrounded by police-like procedures by the administration which fears the many instances of possible cheating: "The professor is asked to put a copy of the exam in a metal safe in the dean's office and to not hand it for printing, until dawn of the day of the exam. The professor then sits next to the typist a few hours before the exam, while the room is heavily guarded.." (MAA, 217). The exam which takes place under a large tent that can accommodate thousands of students who are proctored by high school teachers brought in "for an extra pound or two"(217). The administration, adds Amin, does not trust the students and the proctors who may make deals with the students to allow them to cheat for a compensation, since "students are very daring, and would do anything to attempt cheating in order to succeed with the least possible effort" (218).

Amin's critical comments do not spare his colleagues. He notes the increased appetite for making money amongst the professors, and the desire for upward social mobility amongst those in the majority who were of rural origins and were the fruits of Taha Hussein's introduction of free education that was later generalized by Nasser (214). For instance they would compete amongst themselves to teach the classes with high

enrollments for profit purposes (they would get paid more for those). Amin also takes note of the attraction of consumer goods and status symbols such as the professors driving Mercedes-Benz cars after coming back from being 'loaned' to an Arab country (213). Incidentally, Sonallah Ibrahim's seminal novel *That Smell*, which was published in 1966, mentions the desire for consumer goods, such as Ronson lighters which were ordered from Beirut; an implicit critique of the gap separating the regime's socialist ideology from the practices of Egyptian citizens.

Amin also relates how some of his colleagues wrote textbooks and imposed them on students, inflating their size without any reason but increasing the price of the book, which generated substantial income for the professors (216). Moreover, he once discovered that one of his colleagues had ripped off pages and sections from a book he wrote – National Economics – and was selling them as study aids to students, without mentioning their author or the source. After Amin complained, his colleague asked to be forgiven, and proposed to share the profits from the sales of the study aid with him (216).

When Amin was approached to teach at the American University in Cairo (AUC), he describes a stark contrast. His first impressions were that AUC was "like a small oasis in the middle of a vast barren desert," (275) in terms of the material conditions of labor such as cleanliness, and the beauty of the spaces with its well-kept garden, as well as "the youthful pretty girls," who have enough money to beautify themselves..." (276). It is practically the total opposite of what he used to see in Ain Shams University, where an atmosphere of sadness and poverty looms over the students, and the professors' offices

are empty only containing a chair and an office...and the floors are uncovered tiles, that are sufficient for the office dweller to catch a cold if you stay in your office for an hour in winter, which gets you to go back home the fastest way possible without meeting the students. “And the only clean restroom in the whole college,” Amin adds, “is on the upper floor where the dean’s office is located, which was the only office with a carpet, a fan, and comfortable seats. But even this restroom had a key that the dean’s office attendant kept in his pocket – and he’s tall, well-built attendant who was chosen to guard the dean’s office – and to open the restroom’s door to the dean and his close visitors, whenever they needed to use it.” (276).

When it comes to comparing the practices of students on both campuses, Amin underscores the existence of a good library at AUC, with an abundance of books and periodicals, whose resources students draw on. Moreover, he adds, the students are not surprised when their professor asks them to read a book or an article at the library (276). AUC’s students would spend most of their day on campus, attending lectures, reading at the library, attending talks, watching a good movie at the cine club or a play, or a concert produced by students (277). They could also have a good meal, which was well prepared in a clean kitchen. “The student of the law school at Ain Shams were fully deprived of all of this, and nothing would keep them on campus after the lectures were over, or even before that. (277).

In terms of teaching, AUC enabled Amin to teach a Western civilization survey course with a few non-Western authors which included 12 authors per semester – such as

Plato, Sophocles, Saint-Augustine, Machiavelli, Shakespeare, Darwin, Marx, Freud, Chinua Achebe, al-Tayyib Salih, Ibn Rushd, and Ibn Tufayl – which he enjoyed and described as: “The really exciting experience that one could not imagine being applied in one of the Egyptians universities with very large enrollments.” (277). In addition, Amin mentions that he could teach courses on economic development and Egyptian economics that were not part and parcel of the curriculum at Ain Shams but in the best of scenarios briefly touched upon in other courses.

Having said that, Amin’s initial excitement with teaching at a private university was later on moderated by observing how power operates in a private university. Amin relates two incidents: the first is about top-down decision making at AUC that puts on a veneer of democratic faculty governance (the president of AUC decided to close the university during the war of 1973 with Israel, fearing that the university may encounter some troubles because of the American alliance with Israel during the war. He formed a committee of administrators and professors that Amin was part of to follow the events closely and meet every day to determine the right time to resume campus activity. Amin was surprised that the vice president of the university, an Egyptian national, who was close to the American and Egyptian governments and was part of the committee walked into one of the meetings, after meeting the president, and said that the university will open its doors the next day. “We left [the meeting] stunned,” Amin relates, “while questioning the use of our previous meetings, except of course for the pretense of democracy and sharing opinions” (280).

The second story is not about top-down executive orders but about direct political intervention to bolster social status (President Sadat's daughter was engaged to a fresh AUC graduate, who was the son of a rich man, and the head of the Parliament at the time). The engagement announced in newspapers was coupled with the fact the young man who was not yet employed is a repetiteur (mu'id) at AUC, a job that doesn't exist there. The president of AUC was contacted in order to ensure the young man's hire. Amin relates that the president told the chair of the economics department "that the issue of the [Egyptian] government's recognition of AUC's degrees or not...is predicated on the economics department acceptance, or not, of the appointment of the lucky young man" (281).

Incidentally, and from the perspective of an undergraduate student, Hisham Sharabi, writing about his experiences at the American University of Beirut (AUB) around three decades before Amin, also underscores the powers of the administration on its student body:

The freedom we experienced at the American University was much less than what people think. Our life at the university was subject to two powers we had not capacity to confront: the administration's power and the professors' powers. The power of the administration was for us like that of state to citizen. It was total and comprehensive; we did not know where it began and where it ended (*JR*, 26).

I am mentioning these stories, because I think we can read them as ethnographic vignettes that give a vivid sense of some of the conditions of labor that Arab researchers

have to work with as they interact with the state, the administration of their universities, their colleagues and students, as well as the material infrastructure that houses their intellectual activities.

VI. Para-Academic Research Institutes

Samir Amin's (1931-2018) intellectual trajectory is contrapuntal in multiple ways to the rest of the Arab intellectuals surveyed for this paper. Unlike Leila Ahmed, Edward Said, and Hisham Sharabi, he did not, after his graduate studies in France, pursue a career in Euro-American universities. And unlike most of the other intellectuals surveyed he did not work in Arab academic institutions. In fact, Samir Amin broke with the very common binary trajectory between the Arab home and the Metropolises of the world – the back and forth between France, the UK, and the US on the one hand and the Arab world on the other. After a childhood and teenage years in Egypt, Amin, who was born to a French mother, studied in France, returned to work at a public planning institute established by Nasser in the late 1950s and then lived mostly in West Africa in Bamako, but for the most part in Dakar. Amin's life and experiences enabled him to draw comparisons between different postcolonial regimes breaking away from the centrality of Europe and the Arab world, such as when he draws his readers' attention to how both in Mali and in Syria the postcolonial elite utterly disrespected its citizens (*LFF*, 150). Amin very early on decided against becoming a professional academic: "After my university studies, I had decided not to pursue an academic career but to prefer positions (in Cairo and Bamako) that were

more directly linked to economic and social activity (LLF, 152).

Moreover, unlike a majority of Arab intellectuals whose graduate research pertains to their own societies, the relationship of the west with the Arab world (Leila Ahmed's work on the Orientalist Edward Lane), or on canonical Western authors/themes (Edward Said on Joseph Conrad, and Sadik al-Azm on Immanuel Kant), the scale and scope of Samir Amin's Ph.D. research is very different. His object of enquiry was capitalism, emphasizing the capitalist polarization between Metropoles and peripheries, which was submitted in June 1957. In the memoir, Amin writes, "the result in my case was an interesting thesis. It may not have excelled in the eyes of a mainstream academic, but I dare to say without false modesty that it was ten to twenty years ahead of what became the main current thinking on the Left, with its emphasis on capitalist polarization (later theorized in terms of 'dependence', 'world economy' or whatever)" (LLF, 65).

Amin's positionality is triply contrapuntal – geographically, institutionally and thematically – to the other intellectuals surveyed in this paper. I will focus in this section of the paper on Amin's para-academic life, which was consumed by working at, running, and founding research institutions. Amin worked at the small Mu'asassa Iqtisadiyya (Economic Institution), from 1957 to 1960, founded by Nasser in 1957 after the sequestration of the European capital that dominated the modern industrial sector. The Institution was tasked with preparing a weekly bulletin that "would serve an educational purpose for the often inexperienced Egyptian managerial staff; and to offer in-depth studies of economic problems in the sectors relevant to our enterprises" (LFF, 84). This

was a formative experience for Amin who immersed himself in researching the major sectors of the economy, and witnessed first hand “how the ‘new class’ was taking shape, how the private interests of many of these gentlemen dictated too many of the decisions, and how the workers’ representatives (one of Nasser’s initiatives, excellent in principle) were being marginalized, duped, or bought off” (*LFF*, 85). Subsequently, Amin worked for the planning department in Mali, before moving out of the orbit of the new nation-states institutions to join a UN team in 1963, working to found a new African Institute for Economic Planning and Development (IDEP), where he started by teaching “national accounting and African techniques (and experiences) of planning” (*LFF*, 156). Amin resigned in 1967 after clashing with the director who was “terrified,” by the conclusions of Amin’s research and “tried to avoid any research that might displease one government or another” (*LFF*, 155). He returned to IDEP as director this time around in 1970, and would stay there until 1980. He tried to implement his vision which was “to make IDEP a front-ranking centre for African theory and reflection; to take away from foreign ‘technical assistance’ or ‘cooperation’ agencies the monopoly of thinking about Africa. This meant emphasizing research and creating special teaching programmes to relay and continue debates” (*LFF*, 201-202).

I would like to cite extensively how Amin implemented his vision at IDEP, because I think there is something in it, even though IDEP was a UN institution, which could be of use in thinking about the role institutes, like the Arab Council for the Social Sciences, can play in a field which includes universities, state institutions and actors:

There were various formulas to achieve this. We offered quite long courses (one or two years), which could tackle issues in depth and associate students as apprentices in research projects, enabling them to acquire the tools of the trade. One of the main innovations was the holding of a 4-6 week programme of seminars outside Dakar. This had a number of advantages: in particular, each seminar could be attended by as many as 50 to 100 students at relatively little expense (the seminars were monolingual and most participants were already living in the country in question); and the operation helped to build closer links with the local universities that shared the responsibility for the seminars, and with the government departments in charge of development. IDEP thus frequently played the role of catalyser and shock absorber between mutually dismissive academics and civil servants, and between different political forces and theoretical currents who otherwise had very little contact with each other.

More than thirty of these seminar courses were organized during the 1970s, in a total of twenty-five African capitals, thus giving the Institute a continent-wide reputation. Each of these operations was a real event in the country concerned, long remembered and discussed by those who took part in it. As for myself, I have a sufficiently clear memory of ten (those held in Algiers, Bamako, Cotonou, Ibadan, Douala, Brazzaville, Kinshasa, Mogadishu, Dar es Salaam and Tananarive) to be able to speak about them in greater detail (*LFF*, 202).

If IDEP's main objective was "to create an independent center in Africa for critical

thought,” Amin would go to take a major role in founding additional institutions in Africa, and globally. Amin made use of the platform IDEP provided, particularly its national seminars, to bring together “the founding nucleus,” of the Council for Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA, founded in 1973). “The original idea,” he recalls, “was to create something along the lines of CLACSO in Latin America, whose outstanding executive secretary, the Argentinian Enrique Oteiza, had become a personal friend of mine” (*LFF*, 207). In recalling the founding of CODESRIA, Amin notes that CLACSO was easier to realize because Latin Americans moved from one university to another, aided by their common language Spanish, or the similarities between Spanish and Portuguese. “I thought,” he writes in a reflection on the question of linguistic difference, and difference in training and intellectual sensibilities that I will touch on later, “that a similar kind of institution in Africa could overcome the stupid opposition between ‘French-speakers’ and ‘English-speakers’, North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, West, Central and Eastern- Southern Africa; the idea of CODESRIA emerged against this background” (*LFF*, 223).

From his position as director of IDEP, Amin sought to branch out of the African continent to think about an international forum that would take part in filling the lacuna of thinking together on a global scope, which led to the founding of the Third World Forum. “The first aim,” he writes, “was to give critical third world thinkers the means to begin correcting the fundamental imbalance within all international bodies, where the world is always seen from the North” (*LFF*, 234). The forum’s first meeting took place in

Chile in April 1973 after the Allende government extended an invitation to the organizers, eight months later it would be officially founded in a meeting in Karachi. In revisiting the founding ethos of the Forum, Amin underscored that its aim was to bring together ‘thinkers,’ which he distinguishes from professional experts and professional disciplinary academics: “We wanted something different, something that went outside the requirements, conventions, and limitations of the academic world” (*LFF*, 226). The thinkers in question would “always be ‘cross-disciplinary’” and they should be “critical: that is, ‘organic intellectuals’” (*LFF*, 226).

VII. Languages, Translation, Systems, Pedagogy

The question of transmission of the humanities and the social sciences, which are relatively recent traditions of intellectual enquiry, and whose founding figures produced their works in European languages, poses very broad and thorny questions. The question of the linguistic conditions of the possibility of producing such knowledges and transmitting them to students is difficult to discuss separately from the entanglements of European languages with colonization, and what became of foreign language acquisition and teaching in the wake of decolonization. This section, of course, cannot give this question its due. It presents some views predominantly gleaned from the memoirs surveyed in writing this paper. While those views are certainly not exhaustive, they are resonant, and indexical of the conundrums facing the production and transmission of social science.

Abdel Rahman al-Badawi’s declinist perspective laments the misery of the

postcolonial era. Badawi criticizes the cancellation of foreign language teaching in elementary schools (26). As a result, “today’s university students can not consult foreign-language references, which lead to a tremendous impoverishment of college education” (27). Badawi also laments the disappearance of foreign language bookstores from Cairo, particularly German bookstores who had their golden years in the 1920s and 1930s. “Today,” he adds, “the state of foreign-language bookstores is miserable, they have disappeared, or nearly so. This is a precise measure of what happened to the state of culture in Egypt today. And do not tell me that the reason for this is the disappearance of foreign constituencies from Egypt, this is only one of multiple reasons, because the numbers of the Egyptians that used to frequent those foreign bookstores was no less than the foreigners” (38-9).

Very recently, Ahmad Beydoun, the distinguished historiographer who taught at the Lebanese University, voiced from a different generational, disciplinary and geographic positionality than Badawi’s, in a small autobiographical note he wrote on Facebook, parallel concerns about the poor linguistic capacities of students. Beydoun wrote: “A bitter feeling of failure has accompanied my more or less forty years of teaching which was not remedied by the warmth of those good and generous students. The main source of this feeling has to do with the fact that I, for the most part, taught students in their final years, who reached this stage with a poor preparation which is impossible for me to rectify in the time they spend with me, and which in certain respects (particularly in the

linguistic one) fell out of the scope of my duties.”²

Samir Amin’s memoir raises important questions, not only about the preparation of students, the different foreign languages they were trained in, but also in the case of economics, the question of commensurability, and translation between different systems. Amin draws a list of the problems he faced after he began teaching national accounting and African techniques, and experiences of planning. The first problem, he writes, is that the students had very different levels of education, and in “economics never more than an ordinary degree” (156), while retrospectively noting that there must have been stricter criteria of selection, “but in those days the directors were mainly concerned to push up total numbers“ (156). The second problem in Amin’s memoir is the classic post-colonial conundrum of teaching students who have different metropolitan languages, which IDEP attempted to resolve through resorting to simultaneous translation. This proved hard, Amin adds, particularly if the lecture was not supposed to be read out loud but “given ‘life’” (156), and direct translation involves some loss of meaning, in foreclosing “the element of direct communication” (156). Being bilingual, Amin attempted to resolve the issue by alternating lectures, and repeating some of the material, while switching to the relevant language during discussion.

Last but not least, Amin tackles the question of translation beyond shuttling between languages and at the levels of different systems of thought. In a course he taught on national accounting, he presented to students both the French and “Anglo-American system (which had been adopted by the UN with a few refinements), and tried to show

² Ahmed Beydoun, Facebook Post, September 27, 2019.

that it was possible to ‘translate’ accounts between the two” (157). I mention Amin’s idea of translation between different systems of accounting to underscore how the question of ‘translation’ transcends the question of language to wider issues that touch on the intellectual sensibilities, theoretical imaginaries, and systems of thought that all partake in shaping the habitus of thinkers and intellectuals.

Before assuming his teaching duties at IDEP, when Amin was working in Cairo at the Economic Institution (1957-60), he was invited to teach a “course on ‘financial flows’ at the Arab League’s institute for higher education” (88). Amin makes observations about the conundrums of transmitting knowledges which are for the most part produced in foreign languages:

My course was new and difficult, and there was no background reading in Arabic, very little in English, and only a little more in French...to which my doctoral students could refer. Besides, most of them had difficulty with English and did not know French. I therefore dictated and handed out a copy of the lecture, which I later used to compose the book. For the exam I set two questions: a 'normal' one, which told me who had more or less understood the subject matter; and a stock question from the course, which allowed those who had done some work to avoid a debacle. One of my students, who had been at Al Azhar, chose the course question and handed in a word-for-word copy, inserting dots here and there and sometimes accompanying them with the information 'here 8 words (or 2 lines) have been omitted'. What mark to give him? One, so as not to make it nought. He then came and accused me of being unjust, claiming that he really deserved 16.73

out of 20 or some such precise figure. When I asked him how he had reached it, he answered: 'It's easy: I used 83.65 per cent of the right words, in the right order.' It was impossible to make him understand that this proved he had no desire to master the subject (88).

Amin touches on the literature on the subject in Arabic, the students' difficulty with French and English and the pedagogical methods that produced students whose idea of answering the question is a verbatim repetition of the instructor's lecture notes. This last point raises a big question on the pedagogical methods that enable autonomous critical thinking which then act as the infrastructure that upholds the transmission and production of social science.

Lest it is thought, as Amin is insinuating, that the non-critical rote learning mode is exclusive to institutions of religious learning, such as al-Azhar, I now turn to Hisham Sharabi's retrospective critique of the pedagogy he was schooled in at AUB in the mid-1940s. Sharabi draws a distinction between the scientific method, which was easier to process by the students who studied the hard sciences and medicine at AUB, and those like him: "For those of us, who specialized in the human and social sciences, **understanding**, in the sense of theoretical constructs and connecting concepts to the historical and social reality, was a tremendous problem. I suffered the consequences of this problem right after I joined the University of Chicago, where I discovered that I could not understand the ideas, and formulations I was encountering in lectures and discussions" (26).

Sharabi holds the majority of the professors he studied under at AUB responsible for the foreclosure of fostering autonomous, critical thought. He presents the reader with a modernist critique of the paternal authority of university professors who operate similarly to fathers in families, and teachers in schools with the aim of subduing and psychologically subjugating their students (27). “This is why,” he adds, “it is no wonder that our critical and analytical capacities remained weak (as I discovered in Chicago), while the tendency to submit to the opinions of those who are more learned than us was strengthened; the professors and doctors whose ranks we dreamt of joining one day” (27).

His memoir is peppered with examples of paternal authoritarianism, and the importance of status:

All of my teachers, nearly without exception, used to follow the same style in their lectures, that of description, rhetorics [khutaba] and preaching. They used to look at things from their own personal perspective and were not embarrassed to present their own ideas as if they were fixed objective truths. And if we asked them questions that contained some critique, or could cause some embarrassment, they would take a defensive position, answering our questions with hostility that pushed us to be silent, and then back up.

I don't remember that any of our Arab teachers – except for Charles Issawi may be – sought to help us understand and think autonomously (27).

Sharabi inscribes his critique of AUB's pedagogical style, and his own auto-critique, within a passion/reason binary. In a nutshell, he relates that he was moved, and so were

his classmates, by passion, more than reason; by form more than content; by rhetoric more than meaning; and poetry and *belles lettres* more than critique and analysis. Sharabi notes how this tendency moved them away from grasping precise scientific terminologies:

I discovered my ignorance after a few weeks at the University of Chicago, when I found out that I don't understand the meaning of fundamental terminology such as: Concept, hypothesis, theory, critique; and that I can't use it properly in speaking and writing. Even after many years have passed when I had become a professor of the history of European thought at Georgetown University, I found out that Arab students (many of whom graduated from the American University) suffer from the same problem. I used to ask the Arab student to determine the meaning of some fundamental terminology: the meaning of concept for him (as it was for me), for instance, was just an 'idea' and (as it is presented in the Mawrid dictionary) there is no difference between it and idea, or notion, or thought; they were all synonyms. It was difficult for him (like it was for me) to understand the difference between hypothesis and theory, and to understand the relation between them. And critique means one thing for him, and that is criticism or disapproval (like it was for me) (34).

The deployment of different iterations of the passion/reason binary in Sharabi's text is coupled with a critique of the intellectual laziness of AUB professors - "I don't remember that a single one of them produced a valuable book" (33) - and the importance of the status of 'intellectual' amongst students who bought many books that were never read to bolster their status (39).

IX. The West, Again and Again

Music

The question of the West takes many forms and is tackled either explicitly in some of the memoirs or appears every now and then through the normative judgements made. Abdel Rahman Badawi's text is an example of the latter, for instance, he compares the strident sounds of his Egyptian village water wheels to melodies from Wagner's operas (*SH*, 11). His memoirs reveal a very strong psychic investment, perhaps the strongest from what I've read so far, in the idea of the superiority of Western civilization that starts with the ancient Greeks and ends with the Germans. Badawi's text is peppered with civilizational comparisons such as the one between Western classical sacred music and Islamic ones: "The reason behind the non-evolution of sacred music amongst the Muslim Sufis is the same that made lay music in Islamic countries elementary [‘awaliyya] – I mean the non-appearance of a musical genius in the Islamic world. The situation is similar to the situation of Islamic philosophy: a dearth of creativity" (*SH*, 107-8). Badawi's intense investment in arguing for the superiority of Western civilization marshals binaries such as the universal and the particular: "Arabic music is of the local kind, and that's why it only affects [tatrib] Arabs, it is a stupid presumption to ask of non-Arabs to be affected [yatrabu biha] by it." (*SH* 276).

For members of the generations of Arab intellectuals born in the first half of the twentieth century – Badawi, 1917; Sharabi, 1927; Jalal Amin, 1935; Said, 1935; Ahmed, 1940 – and earlier Taha Hussein (1889) the authority of the Western canon is very palpable. Jalal

Amin notes that in the wake of the Second World War, westernization, and American products, such as films, newspapers, clothes, cars, radio, records and phonography, increased exponentially (100). More importantly, Amin adds, that they have read passionately Tawfic al-Hakim's book *Zahrat al-'Umr* in which he describes his pre-war life in Paris, including listening to classical music and Beethoven's fifth symphony. "Al-Hakim," adds Amin, "described this [listening to classical music] as a necessary condition for someone to become an intellectual, and since we were interested in that at this age, we considered that listening to classical music is a matter of life or death...and this is how he became acquainted with the music of Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Chopin, Rachmaninoff, and Rimsky-Korsakov" (100). Amin embeds his recollections of his coming of age as a budding teenage intellectual through acquainting himself with the canon of Western classical music within a classed perspective that notes the abandoning of those classes who had the means to buy record players of what he dubs "old Arabic music and old Arabic singing" (101), such as Muhammad 'Uthman, Dawud Husni, Salih 'Abdel Hayy, or Aziz 'Uthman (102). The works by those previous generations of Egyptian musicians bored them, a boredom that was at times mixed with sarcasm, "since they thought it impossible to compare them to works by Beethoven and Tchaikovsky" (102). "It will take the passage of long years," Amin adds, "before we discover that it is quite possible to compare a beautiful music by Muhammad Othman or Zakariya Ahmad with a beautiful music by Beethoven or Bach, and to derive the same amount of pure pleasure by listening to both genres of music" (102). Amin embeds his recollections within a future reconciliation between his own cultural heritage, and the cultural imperialism of his

youth, which probably is the result of his reconsideration from the 1970s onwards of the idea of progress, and of the superiority of a Western model to be emulated (308).

Edward Said, who was born in the same year as Amin, and also raised in Cairo, similarly compares attending an opera by Giordano and a concert by Umm Kulthum, as a 12-year-old. He describes the latter as “an excruciating evening,” and Umm Kulthum’s style of singing as “horrendously monotonous in its interminable unison melancholy and desperate mournfulness, like the unending moans and wailing of someone enduring a long bout of colic. Not only did I not comprehend nothing of what she sang but I could not discern any shape or form in her outpourings, which with a large orchestra playing along with her in jangling monophony I thought was both painful and boring. By comparison, *André Chenier* [Giordano’s opera] had the dramatic animation and the plot line to keep me absorbed” (99).

Leila Ahmed’s bourgeois Cairene education left her with no command of written Arabic. The first pages of her memoir is a retrospective coming to terms with the question of cultural imperialism:

For me now there is no doubt that, at least implicitly, English was valued above Arabic in ways that would have marked it, in a child’s mind at least, as being somehow innately a ‘superior’ language. English was, to begin with, the language we spoke at school, where we were prohibited even in the playground from speaking Arabic. And it was the language of the people we looked up to at school, namely, our British teachers. And the language of the movies we went to and of

the glamorous worlds in which they were set, and of the books we read and *their* enticing imaginary worlds (*ABP*, 23).³

The question of Arabic music, standing for an inferior genre and a topic of sarcasm, comes up again in Ahmed's memoirs:

When my mother listened to the Egyptian singer Um Kulsum, the singer whom she and everyone else in Egypt admired...she mostly listened alone." (*ABP*, 24). "To us children," she adds in a sentence which reveals a similar structure of feeling as one inhabited by Said, "it sounded like endless monotonous wailing. And we took care to make this plain to our schoolmates, sighing and rolling our eyes when we heard it. They did much the same, particularly the children of Egyptians and other Arabs attending the English school. It was common, this show of looking down on Arabic music, among English schoolers. Arabic music was the music of the streets, the music one heard blaring from radios in the *baladi*, the unsophisticated folk regions of town (*ABP*, 24).

Truth and the Canon

To go back to Jalal Amin, he adds later in the book, that in his youth, he believed in something called 'the truth' and that there are "final answers" to important questions. The way to discover this truth and these answers were "to read the books and articles written by wise authors; to watch good plays and films and to listen to refined music" (380). Amin underscores that these practices were not just looked at as useful, rather they were considered duties: "This is why we considered ourselves negligent if we hadn't yet

³ Italics in original.

read Tolstoi's War and Peace or Dostoyevsky's The Brothers Karamazov, or Marx's Capital, or Darwin's The Origin of Species, or we haven't seen Shakespeare [sic] or Brecht in a theater, or watched the films of De Sica and Bergman, or if we couldn't distinguish between music of Bach and Handel, or Mozart [sic] and Beethoven" (380).

The idealist interpellation of these budding intellectuals by the idea of a 'truth' with a capital T, so to speak, that they are on the way to master is also a central feature of Sharabi's auto-critical recollections. He recalls continuing the conversation with his professor Charles Morris after his lecture, and saying:

Whatever it is, the truth cannot but impose itself.

Morris, after a moment of silence, said quietly:

-Forget about the truth. It is not our problem now.

I was stunned by what he said. I took the 'truth' to be something sacred and the subject of every research. I didn't understand what Morris [sic] meant until a long time has passed...Since then, I started to get rid of the obscurantist slavery of the 'truth' that my studies at the American University in Beirut sowed in my soul. (32)

Sharabi observes that by the end of his undergraduate years at AUB he had built a library that had hundreds of books: "My library contained most classical works from Homer to Nietzsche, and most of them were published either by Everyman in Britain or Random House in America. Owning books was more important for us than reading them...The few books I really read and left a great mark on me were Nietzsche's works in one volume which included 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra,' 'Ecce Homo' 'Beyond Good and Evil' and 'the Spirit of Music'..." Sharabi also read Dostoyevsky, Melville, Voltaire, Goethe amongst

others from what he dubbed readings on the “international/universal [‘alami] cultural plane.” In addition, he read contemporary authors such as Summerset Maugham, Aldous Huxley, Ernest Hemingway, Evelyn Waugh, and Graham Green, adding “what is strange is that after my freshman year, I completely stopped reading books in Arabic” (40).

Muhammad Abed al-Jabiri’s early years stand in counterpoint to the worlds of the urban bourgeoisie which Ahmed, Said, and Sharabi belonged to, as well as to the world of professionals and intellectuals of Nawal al-Saadawi and Galal Amin (the son of the judge and writer Ahmad Amin). As mentioned earlier, Abed al-Jabiri is from Figuig a town located on the doors of the desert in Morocco (19) which is inhabited by both Arabs and Amazigh, who all talked to each other in an Amazighi dialect (21). Al-Jabiri’s trajectory is a sobering reminder that the linguistic question in the Arab world is not only negotiated in the relationship of Arabic to Metropolitan languages. Figuig is as far as possible from Cairo and Beirut; a world of scarcity, whose main source of nutrition was dates (*HZ*, 111). “Our friend remembers well,” al-Jabiri writes, “that amongst the food items he had never seen before and got used to quickly in the ‘new world’ of the city of Wajda were a number of fruits and vegetables: “Bananas, mulukhiyya, quince, potatoes, the very sweet melons, not to mention the different kinds of pastry, sweets, porridges and bread” (*HZ*, 111).

After spending around two months at the age of 11 (1947) in the city of Wajda, al-Jabiri came back to Figuig having learned colloquial Arabic. He had begun learning Fusha in school a bit earlier: “The question of language did not pose any problem to our friend, neither on the plane of learning, or pronunciation. He had memorized around two thirds of the Quran at the Masyad at the age of nine, and learned the principles of reading,

writing and talking in French between the ages of eight and ten. He dealt with Fusha Arabic – alongside French as a second language – throughout his elementary school period and after. While Amazighi was his mother-language, colloquial Moroccan did not begin taking its place as a second-mother language, so to speak, until around his 11th year when he moved to Wajda for good to begin middle school” (HZ, 120). Al-Jabiri deploys an abstract/sensible (concrete) binary in the comparison of language putting Fusha on the side of the abstraction and Amazighi on the world of the senses (HZ, 119), which is reminiscent of Levi-Strauss’ distinctions in *The Savage Mind*. In doing so, al-Jabiri is arguing, albeit implicitly, against an Amazighi cultural nationalist politics:

Whoever presumes that he can content himself with Amazighi in an urban environment and in the world of thought is like the one who assumes to content himself with colloquial Arabic in talking to himself or to people about today’s world and its material and intellectual things. Those who don’t have recourse to Fusha of the speakers in colloquial, are like those Amazighi speakers who don’t draw on colloquial and Fusha; those ones cannot speak at all about our world’s material and moral issues, unless they mix their speech with French, English, Spanish or other languages (HZ, 120).

If I can venture a comparison about the contrapuntal position of al-Jabiri, I would say that while for the Cairene and Levantine intellectuals discussed their cultural and political Metropoles were the West, for al-Jabiri and his cohort of intellectuals, it was Egypt. Al-Jabiri remembers his, and his friends’ joy, when their ship heading to Beirut landed in Alexandria: “Egypt, in the minds of our friend and his companions, was tied to the radio

station 'the Voice of the Arabs,' and Gamal Abdel Nasser's speeches, and the voice of the Arab league at the UN in support of the Maghreb's cause, and Taha Hussein's *The Days*...Egypt – and the Arab East generally – were the direction the people in the Maghreb [sic] looked in [qubla]. It stood for nationalism and liberation, and progress" (HZ, 155).

X. Coda: Memoirs as a Genre and an Archive of Practices

The Ur-Memoir

I have spent some time discussing snippets of Taha Hussein's memoir in the beginning of this paper not only because of his tremendous stature in 20th century Arab intellectual life, but also because *The Days*, can be read as an *ur-memoir* of Arab intellectuals. For one it is mentioned in most of the autobiographies consulted for this paper. Jalal Amin mentions it amongst the autobiographies he recalled, and had in mind, as he was writing his own memoirs. Sayyid Qutb dedicates his own memoir *A Child from the Village* to Taha Hussein. Qutb, and al-Jabiri refer to themselves in third person as 'our friend' a strategy Hussein uses in *The Days*. While al-Jabiri associated Egypt before his first visit there, amongst other things, with Taha Hussein's *The Days*.

A Preponderance of Youth and Early Adulthood Memoirs

The memoirs read ethnographically, like I attempted to do in this paper, and provide us with an archive of practices that help us to draw on Marx and paraphrase him, and to recover the tailor's labor so that it does not disappear into the coat. In our case, the coat is the *oeuvres* these intellectuals produced, and the memoirs are the archives that distill

their lives, and give us a glimpse into the worlds they inhabited, the practices they partook in, and the conditions surrounding them. The lives they narrate are not incidental to the works they produced. Interestingly enough, the majority of the memoirs I consulted do not directly touch on the works these authors produced, or how they interacted with the intellectual currents of their times and inhabited the disciplines they came to teach. For instance, Taha Hussein published the first two volumes of *The Days* in 1929, and the third one in 1973. Yet the last volume only recounts the years between 1910 and 1922 covering his years of university life and his doctorate at the Sorbonne, ending when the author is around 33 years old. Fatima al-Mernissi and Sayyid Qutb's memoirs span their childhood years. Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri and Edward Said end their memoirs in the years of early adulthood before they began producing the works they became known for. Said ends *Out of Place* with the June 1967 defeat, which he would designate as his moment of conversion into a life of public engagement and political commitment. It is as if the memoir is specifically designated to bring back a previous and private life that had already ended in the late 1960s, the moment of discovery-recovery of Palestine⁴:

And 1967 brought more dislocations, whereas for me it seemed to embody the dislocation that subsumed all other losses, the disappeared worlds of my youth and upbringing, the unpolitical years of my education, the assumption of disengaged teaching and scholarship

⁴ I borrow the notion of discovery-recovery of identity from David Scott, *Stuart Hall's Voice: Intimations of an Ethics of Receptive Generosity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017): 101-2.

at Columbia, and so on. I was no longer the same person after 1967; the shock of that war drove me back to where it had all started, the struggle over Palestine. I subsequently entered the newly transformed Middle Eastern landscape as a part of the Palestinian movement that emerged in Amman and then in Beirut in the late sixties through the seventies (*OP*, 293).

Speaking back to the 'West'

Having said that, diasporic intellectuals, like Leila Ahmed and Edward Said, who in their youth were very much exposed to Metropolitan cultures, and were later the subject of its racializing powers turned the question of the West into an object of critical research inquiry. Leila Ahmed's memoir, as I mentioned earlier, is an attempt to come to terms with how these Metropolitan traces constituted her, while her research has debunked the colonial assumptions at the heart of the works of Arab thinkers, like Qasim Amin, who were once hailed as early proponents of women's liberation, while also arguing with white feminists' essentialization of Islam.⁵ Leila Ahmad's memoirs' retrace a fascinating history of early encounters with US based women's studies conferences and feminisms. It is worth quoting at length:

The women's studies conferences I attended when I first came in 1980 - I remember one at Barnard, and another in Bloomington, Indiana - focused primarily on white women and were overwhelmingly attended by white women.

But such sessions on Muslim women as there were left me nearly speechless and

⁵ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

certainly in shock at the combination of hostility and sheer ignorance that the Muslim panelists, myself included, almost invariably encountered. We could not pursue the investigation of our heritage, traditions, religion in the way that white women were investigating and rethinking theirs. Whatever aspect of our history or religion each of us had been trying to reflect on, we would be besieged, at the end of our presentations, with furious questions and declarations openly dismissive of Islam. People quite commonly did not even seem to know that there was some connection between the patriarchal vision to be found in Islam and that in Judaism and Christianity. Regularly we would be asked belligerently, "Well what about the veil" or "what about clitoridectomy?" when none of us had mentioned either subject for the simple reason that it was completely irrelevant to the topics of our papers. The implication was that, in trying to examine and rethink our traditions rather than dismissing them out of hand, we were implicitly defending whatever our audience considered to be indefensible. And the further implication and presumption was that, whereas they - white women, Christian women, Jewish women - could rethink their heritage and religions and traditions, we had to abandon ours because they were just intrinsically, essentially, and irredeemably misogynist and patriarchal in a way that theirs (apparently) were not. In contrast to their situation, our salvation entailed not arguing with and working to change our traditions but giving up our cultures, religions, and traditions and adopting theirs. (*ABP*, 291-2).

Edward Said's engagement with the question of cultural imperialism that began in the

wake of the 1967 defeat, and his dismay at the portrayal of Arabs in the Western media's coverage of the war wrote in the introduction to *Orientalism* under a subheading titled "The Personal Dimension":

Much of the personal investment in this study derives from my awareness of being an "Oriental," as a child growing up in two British colonies. All of my education, in those colonies (Palestine and Egypt) and in the United States, has been Western, and yet that deep early awareness has persisted. In many ways my study of Orientalism has been an attempt to inventory the traces upon me, the Oriental subject, of the culture whose domination has been so powerful a factor in the life of all Orientals.⁶

Jalal Amin's engagement came to re-consider the belief in the West's superiority in the 1970s while steering him towards an interest in religion in a time period that witnessed the waning of ideological polarizations amongst different shades of nationalists and Marxists, and a resurgence of questions of cultural authenticity and modernity. He began, at that time, to be grouped with the *Turathiyyun al-Judud* (MAA, 315). His book *The Arab Mashriq and the West*, Amin notes, "had drawn the attention of those who were much closer to me to religion, and who were much more vocal in their support of political Islam, so they invited me to attend a periodic reading group attended by those who were interested in question of 'turath', 'Asala,' and 'cultural, or civilizational independence'" (MAA, 314). With

⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1994 [1978]), 25.

time, Amin adds, he began preferring to no longer be associated with this group, since his view of turath, was more sociological than metaphysical, and his sympathy for religion sprang from his attachment to his nation, and not vice-versa. The relationship grew colder in the 1980s in the wake of a member of the group defending a shaykh who Amin thought was fomenting attacks on Egyptian copts in the media (314).

The Economists: Critics of their Discipline

The two economists' memoirs are the most explicit about their authors' critical relation to their own disciplines. Samir Amin, who studied in France, writes:

My work method involved reading all the basic classics, as well as opening out to other subjects such as politics and acquiring historical knowledge in every dimension. An understanding of society can never come from economics alone. What this also meant, however, was that I wasted little time on mainstream economic literature, the compulsory reading of which nowadays has an effect that I would almost describe as mind-numbing (*LLF*, 65).

While Galal Amin, who was a student at the London School of Economics, observes that real serious learning he achieved was in his first year when he was reading Marxist works, in contrast to four years that followed it when he was reading economics texts. "I don't think I would be steering away too much from the truth," he wrote, "if I say that most of my readings during these five years were 'sterile,' except for the fact that they resulted in

the two degrees [M.A. and Ph.D.]" (MAA, 148). If it were up to him, Amin adds, he would have compiled a reading list from the canon of literature, philosophy and history, with authors such as Machiavelli, Gibbons, Mill, or Hume, "in contrast to the tens of insignificant books and articles in economics that did not leave a trace on my soul or mind" (MAA, 149).

Nationalist Vanguardism, Postcolonial Disenchantment and the Precarity of Lives

Jalal Amin, a former Ba'athist, and Hisham Sharabi, a former Syrian Social Nationalist, give us also a sense of the disenchantment of many intellectuals which is born out of a sense of vanguardism and an interest in a national uplift or revolution that is dissipated as they face the multiple realities of power they confront. In both cases, intellectuals who are brimming with high hopes as they plan their return from the Metropoles where they studied and worked for some time are not welcomed by the beloved homeland which leaves them sour. Amin, as I mentioned earlier, highlights the gap separating his confidence, hope and ideals when he joins the University of Ain Shams after six years in England and the world he encounters. In a very telling story, he is interrogated by an army officer after he lands in Alexandria for the first time after his doctoral graduation: "...after he knew everything about me, he gestured contemptuously with his hand, meaning I could go now. This was not exactly the expected welcome upon my return to my homeland after a six years-long expedition during which I received a doctorate" (MAA, 182).

Sharabi's enthusiasm about his return to Beirut faces the political-legal-bureaucratic discrimination of the Lebanese state against Palestinian nationals. The first sentence of Sharabi's memoir is "In 1974, I decided to return for good to the Arab homeland" (*JR*, 7), after teaching at Georgetown University since 1953. Sharabi was initially denied a residency permit in Beirut to which he reacted: "I can't get a residency permit in Lebanon? Is this why I left behind a secure living and a permanent position and I accepted an ambiguous future and a perturbed life? I returned to work for this people and for this homeland...and I discovered, like every intellectual who comes back to serve his homeland that the people and the homeland do not care about him and his dreams, and that reality contradicts the vision..." (*JM*, 8). Sharabi ended up obtaining a residency permit through connections but decided eventually to stay in Washington, D.C. after the Lebanese civil and regional wars broke out in 1975. He began writing the book in the summer of 1975, and the introduction is dated as May 20, 1978. The narcissistic wound of the vanguardist intellectual who is ready to dedicate his life to the nation that ends up rejecting him haunts the author who ends his introduction with the following words: "I have a feeling now that I will spend the rest of my life here in these strange lands, and that I will die in them. But no...this will not happen. My people is a part of my life that I never let go of, and I carry my homeland in my heart, I cannot relinquish it. I will return one day..." (*JM*, 9).

Not all confrontations with the multiple powers intellectuals confront lead to Sharabi's disenchantment and exilic melancholia. Nawal al-Saadawi's trajectory, a life of struggle with the state and patriarchal power, stands as a counterpoint. She was

imprisoned in 1981 at the age of 50 (*AH 1*, 21). “In 1957 I was accused of not believing in God,” Saadawi writes, “and in 1962 they added to it a new accusation: Not believing in the glorious revolution.” (*AH 3*, 88). Her flat was under state surveillance for 28 years (*AH 3*, 80). In fact, we owe the writing of her memoirs to her being offered a visiting position at Duke University in 1993 after the government, who has been persecuting her for years, assigned her a bodyguard in the summer of 1992, because her name was put on a ‘death list’. “At night,” she writes,

I heard a voice coming out of a microphone. I did not know where it was coming from.

From the mosque’s minaret? From the church’s dome? The Disco Club, McDonalds?

A strange voice that travels in the darkness of night. Kill them wherever you find them, the unbelievers enemies of God, so and so, the names of writers, poets, thirty or forty names, and my name rings, and “Nawal al-Saadawi,” it goes through my head like a bullet, the letters of my name echo in the night: Kill the unbeliever, the enemy of God. The sound hisses like the breaths of a snake, and reeks of a petrol-like strange smell (*AH 2*, 24-5).

I end with this section featuring al-Saadawi, Amin, and Sharabi to underscore how the memoirs are not only the repository of these intellectuals’ practices, they are also the archive where one sees clearly the impact of the different forms of state and social powers Arab social scientists and humanists have been confronting in the postcolonial era. In the case of Sharabi and Saadawi, we also owe the memoirs to a pivotal time in their

trajectories' which created the time, and the space – outside of the Arab world – to sit down and revisit their lives and works.

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