



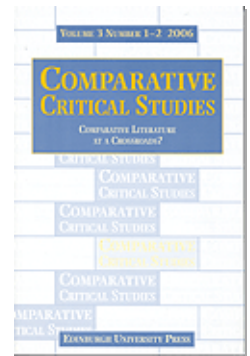
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Interview with Mahmud al-Mas‘adi

CONDUCTED BY MOHAMED-SALAH OMRI
ON 8 JANUARY 1994 AT THE AUTHOR’S HOME IN BARDO,
TUNIS, TUNISIA

Mahmud al-Mas‘adi (1911–2004) was a writer, anti-colonial militant and politician from Tunisia. He is known in the Arab world for a particular style of writing and an attempt at linking modern Arabic fiction to its past heritage through language and narrative style. He initiated one of the earliest efforts to engage Sufism in Arabic fiction. Most of his creative writings were drafted in the late 1930s and early 1940s. His books include *al-Sudd* (The Dam), a play published in 1955 and translated into French, and the two long narratives, *Haddatha Abu Hurayra qal. . .* (Abu Hurayra Told Us. . .), which was partially serialized in 1944 and published in full in 1974 and translated into Spanish, and *Mamlid al-Nisyan* (The Genesis of Oblivion), serialized in 1945 and published in full in 1974, and subsequently translated into French and Dutch. In addition, he has written critical studies on rhythm in Arabic literature in French and in Arabic as well as numerous articles and lectures. One of UNESCO’s representative authors, Al-Mas‘adi was the architect of the modern educational system in Tunisia and a key figure in the country’s cultural policy after independence in 1956.

M.-S. OMRI: *May I begin by reading to you a short passage from an interview you have given to the journal al-Nadwa, which appeared in 1956. You seem to remember the text. I quote:*

Question: Which writers, ancient and modern, do you prefer?

Answer: Among the old, Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani; Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi; Abu al-‘Ala’ al-Ma‘arri, from Arabic; Umar al-Khayyam, from Persian; Aeschylus and Euripides, from the Greeks; Shakespeare, from the English and Racine from the French. Among the modern, there are many writers: the Norwegian Ibsen; the Russian Dostoevsky; the Germans Nietzsche and Goethe; the French Valéry, Giraudoux, St. Exupéry and Malraux and the Arabs al-Shabbi and some of Tawfiq al-Hakim’s work, etc.¹

MAHMUD AL-MAS'ADI: Yes, I remember the passage. What I will add is the following. I just said that the influences were as diverse as possible. Some of the things that marked me will surprise you. You will be surprised to know that among the first things which influenced me was the rhythm of Koranic recitation when I was a child in the *Kuttab*. There was also the weekly repetition from the mouth of the *Imam* during the Friday prayer when he cited the Prophet's *hadiths*, saying '*haddatha Abu Hurayra qal...* There were also the numerous readings of French authors which I did when I was in school, from Ronsard, Montaigne, Racine, Corneille, Molière all the way to the writers of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries among the big names in French literature. There were also writers who belong to other European cultures in other languages whom I read in French translation because I do not know the other languages. You find their names among those listed.

I mentioned Dostoevsky. But there is also Rimbaud among those I did not mention and Gogol and Tolstoy. It is not possible to list all those I have read or those who marked me. All these great writers, poets and thinkers have enriched my thinking and my inner life, not only with their philosophical ideas, but also with their aesthetic and moral contributions. It is all this, that is, all these cultures with their various representatives, old and new, Western and Eastern – because I have not mentioned the East nor what I have been able to know of Hindu culture and Hindu thought; nor did I mention what the Arab and Islamic cultures have offered me.

I did not mention what my French teachers in secondary education and the Arabists and Islamicists at the university have taught me. They have enriched my inner life thanks to the knowledge – how shall I call it? – the intimate knowledge of great geniuses of French literature and of the Arab-Islamic culture that they made possible for me to acquire. It was with admirable Islamicists like Louis Massignon that I was able to enter the secrets of the spiritual life of Moslem mystics and sufis. It was perhaps through French literature, through my close experience, which I had during school years, with Racine and through him Greek mythology. It was through readings in Greek history and the history of Greek thought and, later on, Greek philosophy and literature, in particular the great names in Greek tragedy.

On this point, since I have the opportunity to speak about the influences that marked me more than others, I can say that one of the deepest influences on me was Greek thought, the Greek idea of tragedy

and the conception of human destiny as lived, analyzed and admirably represented in Greek philosophy and literature.

M.-S. OMRI: *When Abd Allah ibn al-Muqaffa' was asked about the reason behind his frequent pauses when he wrote, he responded: 'Speech crowds my chest so my pen stops to choose.' My question is: How do you write?*

MAHMUD AL-MAS'ADI: You put your question in Arabic, and I will respond to it in Arabic. Writing is like birth after long gestation. A text is like an embryo. It adapts like a human being and gradually takes its living shape, then appears by a sort of necessity. The birth itself is not easy. It involves suffering and requires care. The newborn needs considerable attention. The writer's work is revision. I have always been strict [*qasiya al-mu'amalah*] with what inspiration offered me until I reached a point where I was satisfied that the final shape is a true expression of what is inside me. I have not put anything out to the public in its first or second or third versions. This may be what Ibn al-Muqaffa' had in mind.

M.-S. OMRI: *Al-Mutanabbi writes: 'Restless ['ala qalaqin], as if riding the wind / Steering me South or North.'² Is this restlessness [qalaq] pertinent to Abu Hurayra?*

MAHMUD AL-MAS'ADI: The image is poetic. We are in the realm of poetry, imagination and imagery. I would like to point out a matter of principle. A part severed from the whole loses the meaning it acquires by being in a relationship with a whole. Taken separately, the part seems cut off, which changes its definition and meaning.

The poet experiences restlessness because he does not feel stability and rootedness, hence the gestures of someone moved by wind. He who is moved by wind is an object who does not have control over his movement. Restlessness means being unsettled. I apologize! I do not write without a dictionary nearby. [*Al-Mas'adi then gets up, looks in one dictionary and then in another, and continues:*] *Qaliqa* or *Qalaqa*. *Qaliqah* means not in its proper place, as in *'ibarah qaliqah*, as Arab rhetoricians used to say, i.e., an expression not in its proper place in the discourse. [*He opens the dictionary and reads:*] *'Qaliqah*, out of place, as in *hijara qaliqah*, a stone which is not in its proper place in a building.'

In this respect, Abu Hurayra refers to Abu al-'Atahiyya's line: 'I sought residence in every land / But found rootedness nowhere.'³ He is like life itself. Life is a continuous and renewed movement. Moving from one state to another does not stop until life itself ends, that is, until

death. People have misunderstood what I meant by 'Life is becoming, impossibility and tragedy. If it is to be reduced to an appearance, contentment and fixity, it would become a failure, a curse upon those who are fake.' The person who takes on this responsibility after gaining insight or discovering feelings and ideas through thought would not be able to settle down. That person is someone who accepts the responsibility of being, someone who goes through life as if it were an adventure and as if everything in front of him were part of this unknown. He needs to seek the unknown [*tatallu'*] in order to discover it [*ittila'*].

M.-S. OMRI: *You write in the introduction to Haddatha Abu Hurayra Qal..., 'You may need to know who is Abu Hurayra but I am not going to define him for you.' And you add in a footnote, 'One story mentions three people with the name Abu Hurayra: the first one is the Prophet's companion, may God be pleased with him; the second is the grammarian; and the third is this one.' Who is Abu Hurayra?*

MAHMUD AL-MAS'ADI: Abu Hurayra is a companion and a narrator [*muhaddith*] of the prophet's tradition. The Arabic language prevents anyone else from taking this name. The reader of Arabic would immediately think of the narrator. I was told that at a book fair, in Saudi Arabia I believe, people flocked to buy my book thinking it was a collection of *hadiths*. I avoided an argument about this and added the grammarian, although I am not certain about his historical existence.

M.-S. OMRI: *And Nietzsche?*

MAHMUD AL-MAS'ADI: He is part of the chemical reaction we talked about earlier. What I found in Nietzsche is the Faustian conception, which is Goethe's. Nietzsche, however, pushed the expression and representation to excess. This may be the negative element in his philosophy; negative, because it gave the critics a justification for what they accused him of, I mean claiming to be God (*ta'alluh*). 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra' is an expression invented by Nietzsche when he read Eastern literature and religious and theological sources (*The Torah*), when we consider the unlimited philosophical dimension associated with speech, which led men to consider the word a God: Moses spoke to God [*kalim Allah*], the *Koran* is God's word [*kalam Allah*]. I believe that Nietzsche found this notion and used it. In the end, however, there is a metaphorical relationship between the two because the expression '*haddatha Abu Hurayra qal*' is rooted in Islam, and that is its reference.

M.-S. OMRI: *I have two more questions. The first has to do with the Second World War. I am asking because you wrote most of your books during the war. Is there any relationship between the Second World War as an event and your writings?*

MAHMUD AL-MAS'ADI: The question is appropriate because it seeks the clarification of the relationship between the situation or the historical circumstances during which the book was written and some aspects of the book. Ghaylan's tragedy in *al-Sudd* is that he is a man who rebels against the gods and against death. He wants to create and wants to do what the gods prevent him from doing. His tragedy is that he is destined for what is human, death and annihilation, that is, impermanence. He cannot last, and what he does cannot last. During that period of human history, it was natural that I recall humanity's tragedy: one war after another, one destruction after another, one civilization after another rises then falls down. This side of the human tragedy has affected some aspects of *al-Sudd* especially in . . . [*al-Mas'adi hesitates*] and there is clear reference, where I thought symbolism was . . .

M.-S. OMRI: *Simple, perhaps?*

MAHMUD AL-MAS'ADI: Clear to the point that it may seem that I was accusing the reader of a lack of understanding. [*al-Mas'adi pulls out a copy of the book from the shelf*]

M.-S. OMRI: *I have not seen this illustrated edition.*

MAHMUD AL-MAS'ADI: This is the first one, 1955. The reference is in Maymuna's vision. [*He reads:*] 'I saw awesome disaster and horror. I saw water gushing in the valley making noises like the voices of the abyss itself. . . And the dam was unable to stop it' until she says, 'The dam was not made up of clay or gypsum. I saw a frightening and awesome sight of untold horror! I saw a dam completely made up of skulls arranged in the most perfect manner.' I meant by that the generations of people who build and see their creation destroyed. The reference is to the fact that a construction is not one stone but many, accumulated like human effort, throughout history.

M.-S. OMRI: *The last question: You introduce al-Sudd with the following statement: 'I wrote it in a period of solitude and meditation, then I put it to the test during years of life among people. I did not find it, in essence, alien to me nor did I reject it. Therefore, I decided to publish it in its shortcomings.'* (*al-Sudd*, 35) *My question is: This was your opinion in 1955. Does it remain true in 1995? Or, has some of your writing become alien to you?*

MAHMUD AL-MAS'ADI: I do not find anything of the sort in what I have written because I did not intend with my writings to lay out a philosophical doctrine that might become obsolete, or subject to revision, addition or deletion. What I wrote was the summary of the meaning of my experience in the world, of the essential and related issues that occupied my mind, my heart and my imagination. These are the meaning and the responsibility, linked to being in the world, which compel human beings to action, such as the duty to work and to create. Living requires us to contemplate the stages and dimensions of life, its meanings and the opening up [*tafatuh*] of its horizons. *Tafatuh* means the gradual opening up to the universe, which is an adventure like the one undertaken by Abu Hurayra.

NOTES

- 1 Mahmud al-Mas'adi, *Ta'sil li Kiyān* (The Authenticity of Being) (Tunis: Abd al-Karim Ben Abdallah, 1979), p. 43.
- 2 Abu al-Tayyib Al-Mutanabbi (915–965), *Diwan al-Mutanabbi* (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1964), p. 141. The line reads: 'Restless [*'ala qalaqin*], as if riding the wind, / Steering it South or North.'
- 3 Abu al-Atahiyah (747–826), *Diwan Abu al-Atahiyah* (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1980), p. 168.