Postscript. Among Digitized Manuscripts

Working in manuscript studies is an extraordinary grace. In my own field, Ignati Kratchkovsky (Игнатий Крачковский) wrote beautifully about this, in his *Among Arabic Manuscripts*; a memoir of his experience with manuscripts throughout his life (1883–1951). He writes about what tactile interaction can do, saying for example that "Many are the hands through which it passed in Africa, Asia and Europe before it came to rest on the shelves of the Manuscript Department."[1] He speaks of the highs "when some discovery will gleam like a tiny spark,"[2] and of the lows "bringing me often to the verge of despair and making me doubt my ability."[3] Kratchkovsky loves the manuscripts and the libraries they are in, but already in his time photographic surrogates were used. He laments its use in a passage that is worth quoting in full:

> This feeling of attraction aroused by a copy of the original is familiar to all who work on manuscripts, for in our generation one is often obliged to work on photostatic reproductions, something which was unknown to our predecessors, who always worked either on the originals or on copies made by hand. However skillfully made, these latter could not reproduce many of the details and from them one could learn only the contents of a work without actually feeling a "live" manuscript with all its unrepeatable individual traits.[4]

In his book, he works out what that feeling of attraction is by giving little anecdotes, or snapshots, of his interaction with manuscripts, libraries, and the people in and around them. Each snapshot sets a certain tone and gives one aspect of the multi-faceted experience of working with manuscripts. Kratchkovsky does this masterfully, especially by connecting stories in unexpected ways. What seemed an unimportant detail in one snapshot, takes a central role in another one.

I think it is important to say something about what that experience is, when working with digitized manuscripts. To do that, I wish to leave you with some of my own stories, inspired in style and content by Kratchkovsky.[5]

1 Kratchkovsky, I.Y., *Among Arabic Manuscripts*, transl. T. Minorsky, Leiden: Brill (1953), p. 31.
2 Kratchkovsky, p. 91.
3 Kratchkovsky, p. 76.
4 Kratchkovsky, p. 163.
5 I am also indebted to another citizen of Saint Petersburg of around the same time, Nicholas Roerich (1874–1947).

Death by Digitized Manuscript

One library relevant to my research has reached near-legendary status in making a fuzz about providing access to its manuscripts. One library kept the sole known manuscript copy of a text I was desperately after for my doctoral research. I mean one and the same: Topkapi Palace Museum Library. The name explains itself thus: Topkapi is the name of a former Ottoman palace that was turned into a museum, of which the manuscripts and books division was called a library. Scholars two generations above me reminisced of the time they hand-copied manuscripts in the reading room of Topkapi, with pencil and paper, as any kind of photographic reproduction was not tolerated. Scholars one generation above me were dismayed that now even readers were no longer tolerated in the reading room. For my own generation, Topkapi was merely a concept, without reality. To get to the manuscript I tried my usual tricks, asking colleagues if they got digital photos from there and if so how, especially by engaging my network in Turkey. But every time I asked I got the same answer: No, I do not know.

At some point, a document materialized with an even longer name than the library: Topkapi Palace Museum Manuscript Library CD Copy Request Form. I now had a form to request a digital copy put on a CD from the library which keeps the manuscripts belonging to the museum of what used to be a palace known as Topkapi. « Notice One » on the form indicated that the form was to be submitted in person, « Notice Four » asked for it to be e-mailed. Of course, Notice One turned out to be correct. And so I deliberated; should I really get on an airplane and spend days just to maybe get digital photos? I thought of Kratchkovsky and Brockelmann, and other scholars of the past, who would not think twice about it, and so I tried my best not to think twice either and plan my trip.

I stayed at the Netherlands Institute in Turkey, on Istiklal Cadessi, in the heart of old Pera. The next day, out I went, to the palace. After I was escorted to the right office inside the palace museum, I was simply asked: "Do you have permission from Ankara?" I had anticipated this question and promptly responded: "I don't need permission from Ankara for I do not need to see the manuscript itself, I only need photos." With a big frown, the employee told me that I first needed a permission from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

The following day, I went to the office of the ministry which was, of all places, located deep inside a shady, run-down mall, with its entrance next to a tattoo parlor. The guard frowned and waved to the stairs behind him. One floor up, opening a blind door and trying to get the attention of somebody nearby I was again waived up the stairs. On the second floor, I opened a blind door,

explained myself as best as I could and this time I was waived toward a blind door down the hallway. I opened it and saw a civil servant watching a television show on his computer, chair reclined, feet on his desk. A colleague of him came, and his German was very good. He asked "Do you have permission from Ankara?" And I responded in the familiar way: "I do not need permission, because I only need photos." He looked through my documentation and told me a third person was needed to sign the permit, who was not there.

The next day I was pleasantly surprised by a phone call: it was signed. Document in hand, I rushed back to Topkapi and was able, this time, to penetrate into the offices of the palace museum library. The remarkably helpful librarian asked me "Do you have permission from Ankara?" I said what I had to say, as I showed all the required documentation. I was after only one manuscript, but had asked for two others, of various texts of Suhrawardī, the Illuminationist philosopher of the 12th century. For these other two manuscripts, I was told, I could come back the next day to receive the CDs. The third one, the one I was actually after, a text by an obscure person named Tūdhī from the 13th century who wrote a commentary on a minor text by Suhrawardī, was to my horror not digitized. "Not to worry," she said while smiling, "we will digitize it and send you the photos by e-mail." Several hundred euros lighter I walked away doubtful they would ever get to it. I would never read this mysterious commentary.

On the plane, Turkish Airlines, I looked out of the window onto Europe. What was I thinking spending so much money on a wild goose chase!? Tūdhī would never show himself to me. History had already gobbled him up. Or could it? Could they actually be digitizing the manuscript right now? As I visualized them busy photographing I became more optimistic. Then, a first rumble rippled through the airplane. Then another. A jerk to the right, like a huge hand had pushed the airplane aside. Waves of turbulence tossed and flicked the airplane in every direction. A free fall of a full two seconds. People screaming, some crying. I crossed myself and despaired: "This manuscript will be my death!"

Philologika Electronica

"If a book is printed, there remains no flavor in it any more," Hoja Ismail once said.[6] This Turkish librarian of the mid-twentieth century is described by Helmut Ritter as "surrounded by flocks of cats, which he loved tenderly. They would be sitting on his lap, his shoulders, his arms, on the heaps of manuscripts

6 Ritter, H., "Autographs in Turkish Libraries," pp. 63–90 in *Oriens* vol. 6, no. 1 (1953), p. 64.

around him." Hoja Ismail understood the intrinsic value of moving about manuscript folios between your hands. Ritter was effectively exiled from Germany for twenty years, and found new friends in the hundreds, thousands of manuscripts that he met in the libraries of Istanbul. "The struggle between men and books," as Kratchkovsky puts it,[7] was easily won by the books, in the case of Ritter. His series of sixteen articles all entitled *Philologika* are a testament to the riches he found in his newfound friends. Then there is Franz Rosenthal's series of sixteen articles, all entitled *From Arabic Books and Manuscripts*, which is based on the riches he found in Istanbul and beyond. In the years that Henry Corbin was among Istanbul's manuscripts he collected enough materials for about sixteen editions, published throughout the rest of his life. Many, many other scholars passed Istanbul to taste some of that flavor.

I was determined to follow in their footsteps. In 2011, I settled for two months to work day in, day out at the Suleymaniye library, where most manuscripts are now centralized. The director gave me permission to work unto *niṣf al-layl*, which I asked him to repeat two more times because never had I encountered a special collections library open until midnight. A daily routine settled in. Walking down Pera, over the Galata bridge with its fishers, then an immediate right turn, winding up to the Suleymaniye mosque with next to it the library. For lunch going out for a grilled sandwich (*tost*) and then back to work. When my eyes were too tired, I would go back home by the same route, sometimes taking the Tünel train, the second oldest underground rail, to save me from the steep hill up to Istiklal. By night one of the many restaurants and a good conversation or some pages from Pamuk's *Istanbul*.

It was everything I had hoped for, except that my hands did not grace the old paper and vellum of manuscripts, but merely the grubby keys of a keyboard, attached to a computer. In the Suleymaniye library, I spent my working hours looking at a computer screen, figuring out what the best search queries were to get something meaningful out of the digital catalog that was written in a hopelessly unsystematic Turkic transliteration system, while the librarians took another of their many naps. Manuscripts were not to be shown to visitors, only the computer terminals. Despite the general awfulness of that, manuscripts became just one click away to instantly appear, and surely that is a good thing even if it kills Lady Serendipity, who smiled so generously on Corbin one day.[8]

7 Kratchkovsky, p. 34.

8 "During the course of a period of work at the Library of Santa Sophia (Aya Sofia), a lucky error in a shelf mark brought me a quite different manuscript from the one I was expecting, but which, in compensation, contained the Persian translation of the Recital of *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* with a commentary in Persian." Corbin, H. *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, transl. William R. Trask. New York, United States of America: Pantheon Books, 1960, p. 6.

I focussed on late fifteenth century Ottoman intellectuals, a group of people who remain obscure but whom I had gotten to know from studying with Ihsan Fazlioglu, who has been roaming this library for decades. Dozens and dozens, perhaps hundreds of manuscript whizzed by. Khojazāda's commentary on al-Ghazālī's *Tahāfut*, on which I would publish a few articles, Khojazāda's debate with Mulla Zayrak at the court of Mehmed II, a discussion on whether 'direction' is a real, absolute thing, or only relative, with contributions by Kastalī, Khāṭib Zāde, Sinan Pāshā, Khojazāde, Afḍal Zāde, 'Arab, Qāḍī Zāde, 'Alā' al-Dīn Ṭūsī, Bahā' al-Dīn and Nashajī, Khiḍr Bey's didactic poem *al-Qaṣīda al-nūniyya* and the commentary on it by his star-student Khayālī, and on and on.

In my off-hours, I went to places where these people either used to be or where their memory lives on. Machiel Kiel, architectural historian of the region, took me to Mulla Zayrak Cami and the Aya Sophia mosque and kept talking and walking until my ears got tired and my feet hurt. The intellectual epicenter for the folks I was interested in was Fatih Mosque with its eight *madrasas*. Those eight buildings are still there, but closed to visitors and overgrown with weed. Once I convinced a doorman to let me in, we were chased two madrasas down by a ferocious looking guard dog. As the city had evolved for a good five-hundred years, I found I best connected with my new friends through their digitized handwritings.

Only one time did I insist to see and handle a physical manuscript. Literally as they were getting it out, a phone was given over to me with the whisper that it was Professor Fuat Sezgin, the seemingly immortal[9] scholar who had from his younger years right here in this library, built a career that propelled him to head a research institute in Frankfurt, and now a museum in Istanbul. He was at the museum and needed me there this very instant. I obliged, and never did I see the manuscript I was hoping to hold.

The Case of the Missing Word

I was applying final touches to my book *The World of Image in Islamic Philosophy*, when I was reminded of an odd issue in the text of Shahrazūrī's commentary on Suhrawardī's *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq*. Hossein Ziai edited this text while working in Los Angeles in 1993, basing himself on manuscripts from Tehran, Istanbul, and New Haven. In it, a certain sentence reads, literally: "… it is known in what

9 Lady Serendipity threw an oddball at me while writing this short story. Merely days after I finished it, I got news of the passing of Prof. Sezgin, at age 93. I kept the wording here since it does justice to his personality.

that it is not …". At first, sometime in 2012 while working in Montreal, I translated it as "… it is known that it is not …". I did see the awkwardness of the *fī mā* ("in what") between *qad ʿurifa* and *annahu*, but I could not imagine what else it could mean other than what I translated.

On June 16, 2014, a sunny afternoon in the East of the Netherlands, I shared coffee, cake, and a long discussion on my research with Joep Lameer. He suggested a word was missing in the edition, between *fīmā* and *annahu*, and thought of *taqaddama*. Then the sentence would read "… it is known from what preceded that it is not …". This makes sense, as it is fairly common for a philosopher to refer to a discussion earlier in the book, in which some result was established which is now applied to a different context. "It is known from what preceded" is the typical way to say that. Given the substantial criticism that Lameer gave me that afternoon, the case of the missing word was far from a priority.

Now, on April 7, 2016, in New Haven, Connecticut, it all came back to me as I was revising this very translation, for my supposed book. What to do … what to do … I did not have a digitized manuscript of this text so I felt rather powerless, staring at my computer screen. Then it hit me: that manuscript Ziai used and liked so much, that was in the very same city where I am! I looked it up in the online catalog of Beinecke Library and filed a request. An hour or so later I received news that it was ready. Onwards. Looking around at my stuff I wondered what to take. I squeezed my phone and my wallet in my pockets and off I went.

Sitting down, my experience with manuscripts and my intimate knowledge of the text come together in what seems like an encounter with an old friend. Even though I had not handled this manuscript before, I know it, and the way the folios flip through my hands it seems that the manuscript knows me and is more than happy to let me go my way. I check my phone, on which I have a photo of the page of the edition with the questionable sentence. I check back in the manuscript and flip a little more forward. My eyes glide over the lines—one more folio to turn. There, there it is, and a little moment of triumph: I find the word *marra* scribbled above and in between *fīmā* and *annahu*! *Marra* means 'to pass, come before', which in this context is a perfectly fine synonym for the *taqaddama* that Lameer hypothesized. I turn to the camera function of my phone, snap a picture of the relevant folio, close the manuscript, pet the codex one more time, and give it back to the librarian. I pocket my phone and wallet, and retrace my steps back to my office. My laptop was still open, the cursor still blinking in my word processor. I amend my translation to read "it is known from what « came before » that it is not …". The case of the missing word can be closed.

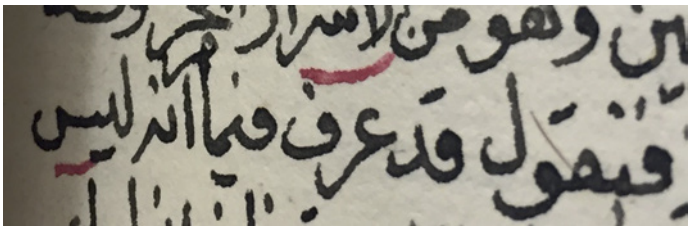

FIGURE 9.1A MS Landberg 7, f. 199b

فنقول: قد عرف فيما انه ليس

FIGURE 9.1B Edition Ziai, p. 509

In the Quiet and Still Air of Delightful Studies

It is past my normal bed time already but I cannot sleep. Outside, Montreal is quietly collecting more snow. I know dozens, hundreds maybe, of men and women are not so quietly at work to remove the snow from the city so that we can go about our normal business tomorrow. A battle between nature and mankind, so to say. I am thinking of my own battle, one with a handful of manuscript copies of a text written in the fifteenth century by an Ottoman philosopher called Khojazāde. The text is supposed to be a commentary on al-Ghazālī's *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* but it is not really a commentary. And neither is it a truly original piece, as I noticed that entire paragraphs coincide with passages from works by earlier, influential intellectuals such as Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī, Taftāzānī, and Jurjānī. It is not a unique text in another sense, namely, from the exact same time there is another text just like it by another court intellectual called ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn Ṭūsī. The similarity is no coincidence. Sultan Mehmed II, who had just conquered Constantinople, ordered the two to engage in a competition on who could write the better study of Ghazālī's *Tahāfut*. Fast forward to modern times and somehow the book of the loser of the competition, ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn Ṭūsī, had been edited while the winning book by Khojazāde remained unedited. And now I was editing three chapters of Khojazāde's book that together make up the discussion on God's knowledge, especially the question of how God can know particular things if He does not have a body to give him sense perception.

"The game comes running to the hunter," says Kratchkovsky, which had proven to be true in this case. When I looked closer into this debate staged by the sultan, on suggestion of my professor Ihsan Fazlioglu who also gave me some digital photos of relevant manuscripts, editing became an obvious

task. But it seems that the game can also lead on the hunter, pulling the hunter deeper into the forest of manuscripts with its labyrinth of marginalia and intertextual connections. On this night, I had stopped working because it was my normal bed time, but the manuscripts were not done with me yet. I knew on a rational level that these manuscripts were in Istanbul, quietly sitting on a shelf in a dark archive. But here they were, in my waking dreams, asking to be lit-up and seen on the screen of my laptop.

It was not like this was a fleeting desire soon to be overcome by sleep. I was in 'The Zone' and I was 'On Fire.' It was only earlier that day that I had cracked the intertextual code of Khojazāde's book and I had also just become more proficient in reading the particular handwriting of the manuscripts. And so, bundled up in my comforter on my couch, I opened my laptop again and plowed through folio after folio, typing out the text while noting differences in the manuscripts and highlighting intertextual relations, until the crack of dawn. The reflection of the moon on the snow and the screen of my laptop were the only sources of light, drawing my attention with laser-sharp focus on the manuscripts and nothing else. A cup of coffee and electronic music pushed my state of mind even further away from reality. "Tonight we are all manuscripts!" I cackled, as my hands raced over the keyboard.

When the snowplow crew came through my street, it must have been between four and five in the morning, I snapped out of my flow. I realized I was looking at the one digitized manuscript that could be Khojazāde's autograph and I wondered: what would Khojazāde think of all of this? What would happen if he just walked through the door and I showed him how I was typing out his book in the middle of the night, based on images of manuscripts, all appearing on this mysterious device, on the other side of the planet, having no real reason to do any of this other than better understanding what was going on five-hundred years ago? My mind shifted to Ghazālī and I wondered, what would it be like to be transported to the eleventh century and meet this great theologian? I would tell him that about five hundred years later two philosophers would write a study on his text and that about five hundred years after that I was studying all these texts based on digital photos. I would show him my iPad and swipe through the manuscripts and my edition. I would look over to Ghazālī and see him look back aghast. Mind. Is. Blown.

A year later I would walk through the madrasa in Istanbul where Khojazāde quite probably wrote his study, and in New Haven I once held a manuscript which is the artifact closest to Ghazālī himself.[10] But during that night in

10 It seemed even like an autograph, but Frank Griffel spoiled that dream for us. Griffel, F. "Is There an Autograph of Al-Ghazālī in MS Yale, Landberg 318?" pp. 168–186 in *Islam and Rationality*, vol. 2, edited by F. Griffel, Leiden: Brill, 2015.

Montreal, and ever since, I noticed an unbridgeable chasm because as close I was getting to these philosophers of long ago, they were not getting any closer to me. Then what drove me to do what I just did that night? I looked at my laptop and the manuscripts lit up with a beaming smile. Yes, it is not so much Khojazāde and Ghazālī, but these digitized manuscripts which have seduced me, and I let myself be seduced.

A Digital Balm against Schimmelitus

I really lucked out in my undergraduate years. I studied in a time when the Dutch government still gave decent financial support to students, no questions asked as long as you finished your degree. Equally, professors could offer courses without being too bothered by silly requirements like a minimum number of students. And so having started out with more than a hundred fellow students in my first lecture of the beginners course for Arabic, after a few years I was the last one standing. Bernd Radtke, a respectable scholar of Sufism, offered the advanced undergraduate level and since it was just me I was asked to come to his apartment rather than to meet at the university. Sessions would start with a mantra of half-Dutch, half-German complaints about me, the university, the city, society, and life in general. Then Turkish coffee was made. We would sit down at the dining table and get to business. His apartment was filled wall to wall, floor to ceiling, with all the usual reference works and tons of editions, translations, and studies from Islamic studies, with an emphasis on Sufism. We read chapters from Ibn Ṭufayl's *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* and Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī's *Maṣāriʿ al-muṣāriʿ*. These came from editions, but the text was always held suspect and every letter was overturned, questioned, interrogated. Perhaps he held a slight bias against editions from the Islamic world itself, preferring to use older editions if they came from the hand of a Western scholar. Nonetheless, only a small group of elect scholars were exempted from his contempt for the apparently rampant lack of knowledge of Arabic among editors. "Arabic is a very precise language," Radtke would often times say, as he was figuring out what a *-hu* ('him, his') was referring to and whether it should actually be *-hā* ('her, hers') or whether the verb should be amended. At that time I quietly disagreed with him since it was not clear to me at all why he was saying that a certain word was absolutely the subject or why a sentence definitely was missing a word.[11] I was reading above my pay grade and was already thrilled to get the gist of the sentence. Besides, maybe the original author had made a mistake, that's

11 Years later, when studying Persian, I appreciated his comment much better.

possible, no? But for Radtke, it was primarily the editor who was at fault. One would think, then, that he would be eagerly looking into manuscripts to check the edition and look for variant readings but he simply was not one to do much with manuscripts. His world was made of paper, print materials.

And so we worked for an hour or two, two times a week, each time making little more progress than half a page. Progress was not only inhibited by the very precise and scholarly manner of reading which he demonstrated to me, but also by the frequent interruptions in which Radtke would get up, scurry off to some shelf somewhere in his house (all the while shouting back at me about the historical or doctrinal context of what we were reading), and come back with an edition or study which he would thump on the table in front of me. He would then say something about the historical figure or the scholar who wrote that book and give me a little moment to browse through it. Invariably, each session a pile would grow on that dining table.

Without being aware of it myself, Radtke was introducing me to the way he as a professional scholar worked. He showed me how his entire life turned around it, basically living not in a house but in a library, and reserving the biggest room of the house not as a living room but for his study. He loudly scorned advertisements seen around the city that promoted a website about 'fun things to do on the weekend' (as though I could do something about it) and I overheard him on the phone with a university administrator, who was nagging him to register his vacation days, fuming that "scholars do not go on vacations!" His love for books and the texts they contain was evident and contagious, and his love-hate relationship with the authors of these books instilled a critical attitude of questioning theirs and my own assumptions and prejudices. Through all of this, admirably, Radtke was selfless enough to not force texts on me from his own expertise in Sufism. Of course he would occasionally mutter how idiotic these philosophers were (and how pathetic my Arabic was) but he encouraged me to make my own choices and never even so much as asked me if I would like to do more with Sufism.

Indeed, one fateful day I shared some possible topics for my undergraduate thesis and mumbled "maybe I want to write something about Ibn ʿArabī, I've read he is a very interesting figure." Radtke turned red in the face and snapped back at me "do you have a case of the Schimmelitus!? Oh you just wait!" And he stormed out, his chair slightly twirling on its feet. By 'Schimmelitus' he was referring to the famous scholar Annemarie Schimmel, whose last name he turned into some kind of a disease playing on the Dutch and German word for mould or mildew. I never pressed him on exactly what that was all about, but it seemed that Schimmel was to him the epitome of an uncritical, romantic approach that does no justice to historical reality. In other words, the exact

opposite of what he understood to be sound scholarship. When he came back he was staggering under the weight of four huge tomes that he smacked on the table with a loud bang. It was the Cairo edition of 1911, of Ibn ʿArabī's *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, running for about two-thousand pages. "THIS is what you will need to be reading if you want to study Ibn ʿArabī!" Radtke said, visibly annoyed. "This is what you would need to read for the rest of your life! So tell me, do you still want to write about Ibn ʿArabī in your thesis?" "No sir, I don't," I answered.

About eight years later I have got my first book out and I receive the good news that the Dutch government is going to support me for four years, to develop my second book. The topic: Ibn ʿArabī. It is not like I wanted it to be about Ibn ʿArabī—I try to be a man of my word—but my research path simply let me to it. Nor am I planning to read those four bricks of volumes for four years straight. I simply think I don't need to, since my workflow is entirely different from Radtke's. His world is print and mine is digital, and that makes all the difference. At the same time, if I were to show to him what I do, step by step, I do not think he would object. A critical close reading is still at the core of my doings, but it is wrapped in a distant reading method, by which I can whizz between different expressions of the same text (such as a manuscript, an edition, and a translation) and texts of different authors in matter of nanoseconds. For *al-Futūḥāt*, I even have a digitized copy of an autograph. Whereas Radtke puzzles over the correct spelling of a sentence through grammatical and historical knowledge, I switch back and forth between printed editions and manuscripts, I triangulate it by looking at how the text is written and interpreted by ancient commentators, and I check my own findings against modern translations and studies. This difference in workflow has also led to different questions that lead our inquiries. To put it simplistically, Radtke is after the author's intentions whereas I am going for the readers' response. For Radtke it is therefore necessary to stick to one author, preferably one text, and go round and round within that confined space until he can confidently say he has a good grasp of it. For the questions I ask, I need to confine myself to a much smaller unit, for example a chapter or a paragraph, and string together other texts that connect to that, repeating this often enough to be assured that I have sketched out the skeleton of the reception which cannot be drastically changed by future discoveries.

Unbeknownst to me I have integrated a lot of Radtke's workflow. I, too, live in my personal library, which I, too, have filled with books and articles that I love and care for. The difference is that whereas Radtke needed an entire apartment, I have condensed that space to a laptop and some external hard

drives. Just as he will browse his shelves, I browse my folders. Just as his living room is his study with his most trusted resources at hand, so my desktop is filled with shortcuts to my research tools. Just as he will collect a pile of books on his table, I will have a pile of PDFs open. And just as I have seen him write notes on index cards, I use a note taking app to organize stray notes. Could it be true that that grumpy man's way of living has rubbed off on me? I really lucked out in my undergraduate years.

Redundancy

"In June of 1835, Baron de Morogue, a member of the Superior Council of Agriculture delivered an address at the French Academy of Sciences [...] 'Every machine,' wrote de Morogue in his report, 'replaces human labor, and therefore every new improvement makes superfluous the work of a certain number of people in industry.'"[12] Now replace *machine* with *digitized manuscript* and *human labor* with *physical manuscript*, and you get what I thought to be true at first. Namely that physical manuscripts are made redundant when they are digitized.

I am reminded of the time I went day in, day out to Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Yale University. My aim was to find discussions of cannibalism in Islamic theological texts, if you will believe it, but that is besides the point. Beinecke Library is mostly under the ground, but the entrance is a splendid, very large cubic space whose walls are made of alabaster. When the sun is out, this gives a most extraordinary light inside, which in turn makes visible a smaller cubic shaped construction made of glass and steel. This cube consists of book shelves filled with splendid tomes of rare and valuable books. It is as though the collection is suspended in mid-air, forming a cultural brain. But if the books are the brain, then I as a visitor am only a passing thought. I digress. What I mean to say is that one day, all those shelves were completely empty. For a regular visitor this was a startling sight. What happened? I smiled at the thought that all books must have been digitized and upper management, seeing that the books themselves were now superfluous, redundant, ordered them to be burned. Soon all those shelves would be converted to server space and there would be a buzzing brain of super computers suspended inside Beinecke's cube.

I have come to realize this would be madness. One extraordinary thing about manuscripts is their ruggedness. If a manuscript of eight-hundred years

12 As cited in Roerich, N. *The Invincible*. New York: Nicholas Roerich Museum, 1994, p. 119.

old is still in its original binding, it will easily survive another eight-hundred years. Well, I do not know that for sure, but that is the impression they give me. I have seen manuscripts for which I would not be surprised that were I to drive over them with a tank, the tank would be damaged, not the manuscript. So, as long as you throw them in a v-shape on some pillows, you can be pretty rough with them. You can flip the folia through your fingers for a great browsing experience, or use a magnifying glass to painlessly zoom in on something. Above else, they are entirely self-contained; to use them the only thing you need is the manuscript itself. Compare that with digital files! Alter one character in the encoding of the file and the entire thing becomes corrupted. And with a push of a button the file is simply deleted and irrecoverable. Browsing is usually clunky, as you have to swipe up and down and usually completely miss the intended page. Zooming in will only go so far as the resolution of the photo allows you to. Above all else, digitized manuscripts need a hardware medium to subsist, and a whole set of hardware and software components to be used. Magnetic tape (still used by businesses for storing backups), if left alone on a shelf, will hold its data at most for thirty years. CDs and DVDs, if kept under laboratory-like ideal circumstances, will hold their data for at most twenty years. Flash storage, like SD cards, will last for at most ten years. Hard drives, finally, like the one in your computer, will typically not make it past five years before failing. Digital persistence is a joke. So whereas physical manuscripts can be shelved somewhere, forgotten for centuries, and then still be used, digitized manuscripts require continuous attention and rejuvenation.

It has happened plenty of times now, that I acquired another big batch of them, for example given to me on an external hard disk. I connect the hard disk for the first time to my laptop and I find the manuscripts organized in folders with collection names, then each manuscript is merely a number ending in the familiar .PDF extension. I scroll through them as an army officer marching up and down the square inspecting the new recruits. I stop randomly at several ones inspecting them more closely, to see their file size, if they can be opened, and to get an impression of the image quality. As I scroll through the list, the hard disk spins up and buzzes. I can hear the manuscripts whisper: 'sustain me and I shall be saved, and ever observe your commands.'[13]

After inspection, I welcome them into my family and commit to care for them. They are filed in the right directory with the right name. If they are especially important they are brought into a multi-layered system of offline and online backups. And even if they are not, they are copied onto another medium, for redundancy. That's right, in the digital world, for something to be

13 Psalms, 118:117.

sustained, it needs to become redundant. Two copies of the exact same file are stored on different devices, so that if one of them goes corrupt or the hardware on which it is stored goes bust, the other copy is still there and can be copied to a new device to again comply with redundancy. This is not forgery nor is there anything inauthentic about it, since every instance of the same file is equally the original as well as the copy. Each are redundant, vincible, under constant threat of going out of existence. Only by the frequent handling of a reader can they survive. Physical manuscripts, on the other hand, are invincible. It is exactly frequent handling that can threaten that. I suppose that this is why manuscripts remain at a distance and only sometimes call out to readers to come over and learn of their secrets. Digitized manuscripts, on the other hand, come running towards the reader. You cannot 'have' digitized manuscripts as you can have physical manuscripts lying around on a shelf or in a box. In order to have digitized manuscripts, you need to be among digitized manuscripts.

Leiden or 578

A manuscript came onto my radar, a copy of an unedited commentary by Shahrazūrī (d. ≥ 1288) on Suhrawardī's (d. 1191) *al-Talwīḥāt*. It was kept at the library of Leiden University, famous for its Islamic manuscripts. On a summer day, I went to Leiden to look at all manuscripts relevant to my project, and snapped some photos of this manuscript of interest, *Leiden Or 578*. I was lucky enough to break up my day among Leiden's manuscripts with a lunch with Professor Jan-Just Witkam. He was very generous with his knowledge, a similar generosity he shows through his website www.islamicmanuscripts.info. I had previously studied with Adam Gacek, so after this lunch I only needed to meet François Déroche to complete the holy trinity of Islamic Manuscript Studies.

For about a year, I made good and pleasant use of my digital photos of *Leiden Or 578*. However, the time had come to move elsewhere, much further away from Leiden than a simple train ride, and the manuscript was still on my mind. So I returned to *Leiden Or 578*, this time armed with a quality DSLR camera, intend on digitizing the entire manuscript.

I collect my manuscript and walk over to the reading table. I pass someone who is carefully measuring the length of a manicule, if I remember correctly, in a margin of what looks like a veritably ancient manuscript. It is a sweet sight, to see reader and manuscript working closely together. Sitting down at the reading table I first take my time to get reacquainted with my buddy. It is such a big, beautiful manuscript, with 270 large and thick pages, in a sturdy binding. Built

like a tank. Something that is going on next to me, on my right, is distracting me. Two people are talking louder than needed—don't they know that manuscripts require silence? I soon realize where they get the audacity from; one of them works at the library and therefore thinks she owns the place. This is all fine and well, but they are placing and pushing around handwritten, single pages directly on the table, and they mix up the stack of loose pages that they got. An urge builds up to say something about it, to point out the irreplaceable nature of the artifacts they hold and to remind them of the etiquette of leaving an artifact behind in the order that you found it. The quiet one packs up and gets ready to leave before my urge reaches a boiling point. Meanwhile, the librarian, the loud-talker, notices me. "Whats that!?" the loud-talker says, holding up a real-life manicule to my camera. Before I open my mouth she continues: "you can only take twenty photos with that!" I am a bit baffled. Next to the place, loud-talker owns my future photos as well? I have not heard of this rule before. Why would the library care that I make photos for personal use, of a couple of 700-year old pieces of paper on which is scribbled some dull philosophy? Would they stop me from copying the manuscript by hand, beyond twenty pages? I let out a sound as uncommitted and neutral as I can and fall back in my chair. In the corner of my eyes, I keep watch of the front desk.

After a while, loud-talker noisily announces she will take her coffee break and steps out. 'Perfect,' I think to myself. I pick up my camera and start snapping. The metadata of my images tell me that the photo of the front cover was taken at 9.35 AM. The last shot, of the back of the codex, is taken at 10.35 AM. In one hour, I took almost three-hundred photos, or around five per minute, at every step taking care to not harm my dear *Leiden Or 578*. Now that I have the manuscript digitized, you know what that means. Time to go. I give back my buddy to the front desk and make my way through the corridors. Near the exit of the library, I see loud-talker coming back from her hourlong coffee break. I nod and smile as we pass.

Dark Archive Fever

It is late in the evening and I have stumbled upon a very large collection of manuscripts on the internet. "The wealth of manuscripts overwhelmed and fascinated me," as Kratchkovsky would say.[14] I set out to download them, using right-click and selecting *Save*. I think it is better to have them, stored away

14 Kratchkovsky, p. 37.

locally on a hard drive, than to not have them. Ibn Taymiyya writes that "those who were present at the deathbed of Khūnajī, the chief logician of his time, reported that just before his death he said: 'I die knowing nothing except that the possible presupposes the necessary.' He then added: 'And presupposition is a negative attribute, so I die knowing nothing.'"[15] There is this trend to store everything in 'the cloud' which is a fancy word for handing over the data you own to big corporations. And 'handing over' is a negative attribute so I end up owning nothing.

The first attempt fails. I think it has to do with the file size, which make the server time out. I reach for a certain piece of software and give it instructions to download the manuscripts. I think it is simply better to have them on my own computer. Walter Benjamin has said that "the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity."[16] When I read a translation I look for editions to present themselves, and when I read an edition I look for manuscripts to present themselves. When I studied at McGill, I had a designated carrel in the library. I put all kinds of book on there, and one day I was reading a letter by the famous theologian Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī to a friend, and in it he referred to a passage of a certain, lesser-known work by Ibn Sīnā. I looked up and saw exactly that book sitting on the shelf of my carrel, literally within hand's reach. I suddenly felt so close to Rāzī, like he was talking directly to me. I want it to be like that always. Immersing myself among digitized manuscripts, I think I can get very close to it.

As for this download tonight, it has once more failed. The files are too big or the server is too unreliable. Time to pull out the big gun; a command line tool called *wget*. I do not like to use it because a command line tool only works from the Terminal (Command Prompt on Windows), meaning that you have to type out a command in this black and white screen, with no graphical interface and no mouse functionality. I end up with an incomprehensible command that looks like *wget -r -H -nc -np -nH --cut-dirs=1 -A .pdf -e robots=off -l 1 https://URLofManuscripts* and there is little else I can do than hit Enter and hope for the best. I really do want to have those manuscripts. Plotinus said in the Arabic version of the Enneads: "Asked about the gain (he had) from his love of knowledge, he said: In sorrow, it is my solace; in comfort, my pleasure; in times

15 Ibn Taymīya. *Ibn Taymiyya against the Greek Logicians*. Translated by W.B. Hallaq. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, p. 132–133.

16 Benjamin, W. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." pp. 217–51 in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, translated by H. Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969, p. 220.

of inertia, my stimulus; in times of activity, my tool; in dark hours my light, and when they are gone, my recreation and joy."[17] So it is with my digitized manuscripts. Other people may be washing their car and waxing it, and enjoy their time doing it; I care for my manuscripts by downloading, sorting, and copying. Digitized manuscripts are in a sense quite demanding and it is odd, then, that individual attention is exactly something that can hardly be given to them. For, while physical manuscripts hardly ever congregate in more than four digit numbers, and then only in the great libraries of this world, collecting digitized manuscripts (without a specific purpose) only becomes interesting when they come in five digit numbers or more. Once downloaded, they are stored away in a growing archive whose contents remains largely dark to me. Even when I look for and find a manuscript, I can lose track of it if I am not careful. One time I found the name of Suhrawardī, the philosopher I was investigating at the time, beautifully written together with his epithet 'al-Maqtūl'. I cut it out and saved it, but later when I wanted to use it in promotional materials and I needed to cite its origins, I could no longer trace it back to its origin. It retreated back into the darkness of the digital archive. This was not only a shame but also terribly annoying, because there was a scholarly argument to be made here. Some scholars have insisted that Suhrarwardi was referred to by admirers as "al-shahīd", meaning 'the martyred one,' but I think his followers used the same epithet everybody used, namely "al-maqtūl", meaning 'the killed one', given to him since he was put to death by the local ruler of his time. This beautifully rendering is proof for it, but if I cannot cite it, it is like it is not there.

My computer is churning away. I want to keep an eye on it but I also want to sleep. So I pull it up next to my bed and turn the brightness of the screen down to zero. This *wget*-method of downloading seems to be slow but steady. I am not entirely sure but I think these manuscripts I am steadily pulling in are stored on a server in no less than Mecca. This reminds me of Nicholas Roerich words: "Once when I was asked, 'What is the difference between East and West?' I said, 'The best roses of East and West are equally fragrant.'"[18] So it is for digitized manuscripts. It is a thought that lingers on my mind, until the steady crackling of my computer rocks me to sleep.

17 Plotinus. *Plotini Opera. Enneades IV–V* [*Plotiniana Arabica Ad Codicum Fidem Anglice Vertit*]. Edited by P. Henry and H.R. Schwyzer. Translated by G. Lewis. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer et Cie, 1959, p. 478.

18 Roerich, p. 126.

Gratitude

Being grateful means you show your appreciation for the kindness of others. Often times, you do this because there is nothing else you can do or give. There have been times that I needed a specific manuscript, from Istanbul, Damascus, Tehran, or Lahore. These are places that are hard or inadvisable to go to as a foreigner. It cannot hurt, of course, to send an email to the library, but often times I was left stranded in bureaucratic red tape.

I recall a particularly long episode with a library in Lahore. After e-mailing a few different people at the library, I got a response. This first point of contact was around the same time when I got my first smartphone. I remember being absolutely amazed when my phone bleeped and a message all the way from Pakistan appeared on my screen. After one and a half years of e-mailing and snail mailing back and forth, I was impressed at what could be done from a distance. However, it still took me a local friend to physically go there and make the final arrangements. As much as I meticulously planned that last phase and tried my best to involve my friend as little as possible, he still ended up paying the fee out of pocket and of course refused to be reimbursed no matter what I said or did. Gratitude can sometimes be very frustrating. Nonetheless, it was a great moment of triumph when the PDF of that digitized manuscript dropped in my email inbox.

Friends and colleagues in Iran are oftentimes much more industrious. For as much as Iranian culture 'stands on ceremony,' they have no qualms including a finder's fee in the total amount due if you ask how you can compensate them. I on my part take this as a cue to not bother with the libraries myself but simply give these people the full details of the manuscript, and let them do the rest. One to three weeks will go by and sooner or later a PDF will appear in my inbox. Paying for this is pretty much exactly what money is for, and yet it does make gratitude a bit awkward at times.

Then there is war-ravaged Syria, where I did not even think it was appropriate to start asking around people for favors. And so I kept my wishes silently with me for years. There was a time when ISIS burned and sold manuscripts and other cultural heritage objects. I was sometimes asked "is it not awful what they are doing there? The catastrophe! These artifacts are priceless!" Priceless they may be, but every second they waste their time with it is a second not wasted on torturing people. And actual people are far more priceless than these manuscripts, these manuscripts which we by and large did not look at anyway so why all of a sudden should we wish to save them? Unexpectedly, a colleague gave me a batch of his files among which I found a digital copy of the manuscript from Damascus I had in mind. Who was I to thank now? Sure

I thanked the colleague, but not for this find but only for the batch in total. He had, after all, no clue this one file was an important piece for me to complete a puzzle I was working on. Meanwhile, the people in the Zahiriyah library who had digitized the manuscript (or, rather, the microfilm of the manuscript), remained unknown and anonymous to me. So here we are. I got my stupid manuscript like a spoiled child who got his way, and I had nothing to offer in return as I could not even thank the relevant people. Gratitude can leave you sorely dissatisfied.

For Istanbul, too, it has at times been better to use an intermediary. Manuscripts from Turkey are popular, not only because many of them are excellent and precious, but equally so because they have been mass-digitized and mass-catalogued in a usable manner. That is not to say this has been *usefully* done, just that the way it is done is *usable*. Gratitude means you are happy with what you get and do not complain about what it is not.

Once in a while somebody will ask me who my contacts are so that they can request a manuscript, but I never give it out. These people in Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Pakistan do it as a service to a friend, even if they get money for it, and it seems ungrateful to send others their way as though this is a public service they offer. With every request, it remains a delicate balance who and when to ask. Nevertheless, the words of Kratchkovsky ring true today as they did a hundred years ago: whenever I come across an interesting or enigmatic comment about a manuscript, "my curiosity was aroused and I sought to obtain a photograph of the manuscript,"[19] wherever it may be on this planet.

19 Kratchkovsky, p. 136.