

REVIEW ESSAY

Tarantino in the Ottoman Empire: Glorious Viziers, Pulp Fiction, and Scrambled Narratives

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I wanted to break up the narration, not to be a wise guy, a show guy, but to make the film dramatically better that way. . . . A novelist would think nothing about starting in the middle. And if characters in a novel go back and tell past things, it's not a flashback, it's just telling a story. I think movies should benefit from the novel's freedoms.

— Quentin Tarantino¹

I wrote a prosopography twenty years ago. I published a biography two years ago. In the first case, I offered the collective biography of 282 servants of the late Ottoman period (1839–1909).² In the second case, I presented the monograph of a grand vizier from the second half of the 18th century, Halil Hamid Pasha (1736–85).³ In the former, I delivered an academic work (stemming from a PhD dissertation) focused on the study of the careers of central and territorial administrators. In the latter, I recounted the rise and fall of the head of the Sublime Porte. A priori, these two books had nothing in common, except that they dealt with pashas. If I mention them together here, it is not to describe the personal evolution of my research. It is to shed some light on an observation that is regularly made, that is, of the inadequacies of the biographical genre in Ottoman history.⁴ It is to reflect on how to remedy this situation.

¹ “Interview with Quentin Tarantino, Peter Brunette/1992,” in *Quentin Tarantino: Interviews*, ed. Gerald Peary (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 23.

² Olivier Bouquet, *Les pachas du sultan: Essai sur les agents supérieurs de l'État ottoman (1839-1909)* (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2007).

³ Olivier Bouquet, *Vie et mort d'un grand vizir: Halil Hamid Pacha (1736-1785), Biographie de l'Empire ottoman* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2022).

⁴ Derin Terzioğlu, “Tarihi İnsanlı Yazmak: Bir Tarih Anlatı Türü Olarak Biyografi ve Osmanlı Tarihyazıcılığı,” *Cogito* 29 (2001): 284–96; Virginia Aksan, “The Question of Writing Premodern Biographies of the Middle East,” in *Auto/Biography and the Construction of Identity and Community in the Middle East*, ed. Mary Ann Fay (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 191–200; Colin Imber, “Review of *The Sultan of Vezirs: The Life and Times of the Ottoman Grand Vizir Mahmud Pasha Angelović 1453-1474*,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 14, no. 1 (2003): 116–18; Hülya Adak, “Gender-in (g) Biography: Ahmet Mithat (on Fatma Aliye), or the Canonization of an Ottoman Male Writer,” *Querelles* 10 (2005): 189–204; Olivier Bouquet, “L'autobiographie par l'État sous les derniers Ottomans,” *Turcica: Revue d'études turques* 38 (2006): 251–79; Özgür Türesay, “Tarihyazımı ve Biyografinin Dönüşü,” in *Halil İnalıcık Armağanı*, vol. 1, *Tarih Araştırmaları*, ed. Taşkın Takış and Sunay Aksoy (Ankara: Doğu Batı Yayınları, 2009), 329–49; Ali Akyıldız, “İnsanı Yazmak: 19. Yüzyıl Osmanlı Biyografi Yazıcılığı ve Problemleri Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme,” *Osmanlı Araştırmaları* 50 (2017): 219–42; Ethan L. Menchinger, *The First of the Modern Ottomans: The Intellectual History of Ahmed Vasif* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 2–3.

My work has led me to consider several avenues. I would like to outline two of them here. On the one hand, I think it would be useful to bring biography and prosopography closer together, by basing the conception of the former on the method of the latter. On the other hand, I believe we should propose biographies that differ from those written to date, drawing inspiration not only from academic works, but also from fictional arts. Take TV series, for example. Several colleagues have studied their relationship with truth.⁵ They have rightly noted that they often make “poor use of history.”⁶ I agree: in general, historians have nothing to learn from these series; most of them are riddled with errors. But why shouldn't they be inspired by the themes these series deal with?

Leslie Peirce published a biography on Roxelana, the wife of Sultan Suleiman I. She says she was influenced by the *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* (Magnificent Century) series broadcast in 2011–14 on the Turkish channels Show TV and Star TV: “The royal children, for example, were key players in the television drama, inspiring me to give them a greater presence in the book than I might otherwise have.”⁷ This tribute comes at the very end of her book, in the section reserved for acknowledgments. She does not insist further on this point.⁸ It seems to me, however, that she touches on a major issue, that is, the ability of historians to account for the very nature of the Ottoman dynasty, and therefore of imperial power. By dint of insisting so much on the centrality of the sultan in the functioning of institutions, have our colleagues accorded enough importance to the sultan's family entourage?

To what extent can historians use what they see on TV or in the media as material for their books? I imagine that in the future, authors of biographies will try to measure the stakes of such a question. My questioning here is of a different nature. It is not about the usefulness of drawing inspiration from the fictional arts to choose themes (which may be a good thing) or to draw specific information from them (which seems more problematic to me). It aims to identify what, in novels or films, could help a historian construct a narrative. When I wrote the biography of the Grand Vizier Halil Hamid Pasha, I was influenced by the scrambled narratives developed in the works of Daniel Mendelsohn and Quentin Tarantino.⁹ Let me explain why.

In Need of Biographies

Why does Ottoman history produce so few biographies? It is often said that this is the effect of the sources exploited by historians: easily consultable on site or at a distance, public archives are of unparalleled immensity, while private collections are less rich and more difficult to access.¹⁰ Indeed, Ottoman history remains focused on the study of institutions (*teşkilât*). An important historian of the mid-20th century, İ. H. Uzunçarşılı, devoted detailed

⁵ Josh Carney, “Re-Creating History and Recreating Publics: The Success and Failure of Recent Ottoman Costume Dramas in Turkish Media,” *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 19 (2014): 1–21; Murat Ergin and Yağmur Karakaya, “Between Neo-Ottomanism and Ottomania: Navigating State-Led and Popular Cultural Representations of the Past,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 56, no. 4 (2017): 33–59; Ayşe Bozkurt, “Frames of Erdoğanism: The Past's Future of ‘Payitaht: Abdülhamid,’” *Futures Past of the Ottomans Conference*, 12 October 2023, Université Paris Cité, Paris.

⁶ Burak Özçetin, “Tarihin Kötüye Kullanımları: Popülizm, Nostalji ve Yeni Türkiye'nin Tarihi Dizileri,” *Toplumsal Tarih* 306 (2019): 36–42. See also Josh Carney, “Resur(e)cting a Spectacular Hero: Diriliş Ertuğrul, Necropolitics, and Popular Culture in Turkey,” *Review of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 1 (2018): 93–114.

⁷ Leslie Peirce, *Empress of the East: How a European Slave Girl Became Queen of the Ottoman Empire* (London: Icon, 2018), 342.

⁸ She returns to the methodology of biography in Leslie Peirce, “Writing Biography with Limited Sources and Few Models: The Case of Hürrem Sultan,” in *Ottoman War and Peace: Studies in Honor of Virginia H. Aksan*, ed. Frank Castiglione, Ethan Menchinger, and Veysel Şimşek (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 283–90.

⁹ Daniel Mendelsohn, *An Odyssey: A Father, a Son, and an Epic* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017); Daniel Mendelsohn, *Three Rings: A Tale of Exile, Narrative, and Fate* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2020); Dana Polan, *Pulp Fiction* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 28, 35, 37; Elisa Pezzotta, *The Prison of Time: Stanley Kubrick, Adrian Lyne, Michael Bay and Quentin Tarantino* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2022), 167–94.

¹⁰ Imber, “Review,” 116.

works to the main palace services and the organization of the servants of the Sublime Porte.¹¹ He offered a summary study of a family of high dignitaries.¹² But neither he nor any of his colleagues has attempted to write a complete statesman's biography.¹³

Today, we have thousands of articles and an even greater number of entries in encyclopedias and dictionaries about the men (more than the women) who have shaped Ottoman history. However, books dedicated to narrating their life stories are far less numerous. Note that most of them focus on the last period of the empire.¹⁴ We need not look far for an explanation: it was in the 19th century that biography became "a modest champion of Ottoman-Turkish Literature."¹⁵ Prior to this, chronicles and biographical compendia quoted considerable numbers of individuals, but often provided partial and not always reliable information about them.¹⁶ In their personal accounts, Ottomans rarely opened "their hearts and minds."¹⁷ And when they did, it was usually from the angle of fiction rather than biography.¹⁸ Despite this, several colleagues have managed to approach the intellectual imagination and social environment of the Ottomans of their time.¹⁹ Miscellaneous manuscripts and biographical dictionaries have been studied as sources of life-writing.²⁰ Collections of memoirs, personal papers, and diaries have been exploited.²¹ Visual representations of the self

¹¹ İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Devleti Teşkilâtından Kapukulu Ocakları* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1943–44); *Osmanlı Devletinin Saray Teşkilâtı* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1945); *Osmanlı Devletinin Merkez ve Bahriye Teşkilâtı* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1948); *Osmanlı Devletinin İlmiye Teşkilâtı* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1965).

¹² İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı, *Çandarlı Vezir Ailesi* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1974).

¹³ Roderic H. Davison, *Nineteenth Century Ottoman Diplomacy and Reforms* (Istanbul: Isis, 1999), 119–41. See for instance Mithat Sertoğlu, *IV: Murad* (Ankara: Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, 1987).

¹⁴ In addition to the studies mentioned in the rest of this article, here are a few examples from the last ten years: Benjamin Fortna, *The Circassian: A Life of Esref Bey, Late Ottoman Insurgent and Special Agent* (London: C. Hurst, 2016); Hans-Lukas Kieser, *Talaat Pasha: Father of Modern Turkey, Architect of Genocide* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); Erdal Kaynar, *L'Héroïsme de la Vie Moderne. Ahmed Rıza (1858-1930) en son temps* (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2021); Christine Philliou, *Turkey: A Past against History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2021). For the premodern period, see Muzaffer Özgüleş, *The Women Who Built the Ottoman World: Female Patronage and the Architectural Legacy of Gülnuş Sultan* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017); and Peirce, *Empress*.

¹⁵ Günül Özlem Ayaydin Cebe, "Biography: Modest Champion of Ottoman-Turkish Literature," in *Selected Studies on Genre in Middle Eastern Literatures: From Epics to Novels*, ed. Petr Kučera and Hülya Çelik (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2023), 264–306. See also Aksan, "Question," 196.

¹⁶ Bekir Kütükoğlu, *Vekayi'nüvis. Makaleler* (Istanbul: İstanbul Fetih Cemiyeti, 1994), 211–16; Feridun Emecen, "Osmanlı Kronikleri ve Biyografi," *İslam Araştırmaları Dergisi* 3 (1999): 83–90; Akyıldız, "İnsanı Yazmak," 226–28.

¹⁷ Robert Dankoff, *The Intimate Life of an Ottoman Statesman: Melek Ahmed Pasha (1588-1662) as Portrayed in Evliya Çelebi's Book of Travels* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 7, 16.

¹⁸ Cemal Kafadar, "Self and Others: The Diary of a Dervish in Seventeenth Century Istanbul and First-Person Narratives in Ottoman Literature," *Studia Islamica* 6 (1989): 121–50; Jan Schmidt, *The Joys of Philology: Studies in Ottoman Literature, History and Orientalism (1500-1923)*, vol. 1 (Istanbul: Isis, 2002), 155–63, 165–286.

¹⁹ M. Şükrü Hanioğlu, *Ataturk: An Intellectual Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Dana Sadji, *The Barber of Damascus: Nouveau Literacy in the Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Levant* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 38–76; Kaya Şahin, *Empire and Power in the Reign of Süleyman: Narrating the Sixteenth-Century Ottoman World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Menchinger, *First*.

²⁰ Hatice Aynur, "Autobiographical Elements in Aşık Çelebi's Dictionary of Poets," in *Many Ways of Speaking About the Self: Middle Eastern Ego-Documents in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish (14th-20th Century)*, ed. Ralf Elger and Yavuz Köse (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 17–26; Jan Schmidt, "First-Person Narratives in Ottoman Miscellaneous Manuscripts," in Elger and Köse, *Many Ways of Speaking*, 159–70; Aslı Niyazioğlu, *Dreams and Lives in Ottoman Istanbul: A Seventeenth-Century Biographer's Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2016), 2–3.

²¹ Ali Akyıldız, *Mümin ve Müsrif Bir Padişah Kızı Refia Sultan* (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2001); Derin Terzioğlu, "Man in the Image of God in the Image of the Times: Sufi Self-Narratives and the Diary of Niyâzi-i Mişri (1618–94)," *Studia Islamica* 94 (2002): 139–65; Howard Crane and Esra Akin, eds., *Sinan's Autobiographies: Five Sixteenth-Century Texts; Introductory Notes, Critical Editions, and Translations* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Michael Nizri, "The Memoirs of Şeyhülislam Feyzullah Efendi (1638–1703): Self, Family and Household," in Elger and Köse, *Many Ways of Speaking*, 37–46; *Un Ottoman en Orient: Osman Hamdi Bey en Irak (1869-1871)*, ed. Edhem Eldem (Paris: Actes Sud, 2010); *Kitâbü'l-menâmât. Sultan III. Murad'ın Rüya Mektupları*, ed. Özgen Felek (Istanbul: Türk Tarih Vakfı, 2012); Edhem Eldem, *V: Murad'ın Oğlu Selahaddin Efendi'nin Evrak ve Yazıları*, 2 vols. (Istanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2019, 2021).

(photographs, paintings, genealogies) have been studied as ego documents.²² The biographical value of legal (probate inventories, endowment deeds) and administrative (*mühimme defterleri*) sources has been highlighted.²³ The emergence of a neo-Ottoman fashion at the turn of this century and the opening of a flourishing publishing market since then have encouraged several colleagues to offer well-documented biographies on sultans to the general public.²⁴ I note that these works share three features.

Chronology, Official Life, Truncated Life

First, the reconstructions are chronological. The story begins with the individual's origins and early years. It ends with the end of his career or life. This same format has been used since Ottoman history became an academic discipline.²⁵ Why do historians continue to recount the life of a man or woman as they did in the previous century? I mean, by following the main character over the years. Let us put ourselves in the reader's shoes. Endless pages on the trajectory of the individual, a reduced number of illustrations, a few maps: what pleasure do they find in reading the book? It is not enough for a story to be true for it to be told. It has to work as a narrative discourse (i.e., how the story is told). What is more, readers know that years do not have the same density, that periods of equal length are experienced as more or less long. They also know that a life is not built solely in the present, but that it obeys projections into the future and is anchored in the memory and imagination of the past. Why, then, are historians slow to draw inspiration from novelists and filmmakers who, for decades, have opted for nonlinear approaches?²⁶

Second, in studies devoted to statesmen, individuals are described through their careers, often to the point that the description of functions and offices takes precedence over the reconstruction of those who respectively lived and occupied them. When the investigation is serious and well-documented, the reader closes the book knowing far more about the

²² İsmail Erünsal and Heath Lowry, *The Evrenos Dynasty of Yenice-i Vardar: Notes and Documents* (Istanbul: Bahçeşehir University Press, 2010); Vazken Khatchig Davidian, "Portrait of an Ottoman Armenian Artist of Constantinople: Rereading Teotig's Biography of Simon Hagopian," *Études Arméniennes Contemporaines* 4 (2014): 11–54; Edhem Eldem, "The Search for an Ottoman Vernacular Photography," in *The Indigenous Lens? Early Photography in the Near and Middle East*, ed. Markus Ritter and Staci G. Scheiwiller (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 29–56; Olivier Bouquet, "Imperial Genealogies and Ottoman Nobility in Republican Turkey: Reassessing the Distinction Between Public and Private Archives," *Turkish Historical Review* 13 (2022): 289–305.

²³ Gülru Necipoğlu, *The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire* (London: Reaktion, 2005), 23; Betül İpşirli Argit, *Rabia Gülnuş Emetullah Sultan (1640–1717)* (Istanbul: Kitap Yayınevi, 2014), 211–35; Hedda Reindl-Kiel, "The Must-Haves of a Grand Vizier: Merzifonlu Kara Mustafa Pasha's Luxury Assets," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 106 (2016): 179–221; Olivier Bouquet, "Un grand vizir dans sa maison. Édition de trois inventaires après décès (1785)," *Turcica: Revue d'études turques* 47 (2016): 187–236; Özgüleş, *Women*; Christine Isom-Verhaaren, "Tracing the Life of Hüsam Bey: Career Paths in the Sixteenth-Century Ottoman Navy," in Castiglione et al., *Ottoman War and Peace*, 291–314, 300–2.

²⁴ Fikret Sarıcaoğlu, *Kendi Kaleminde Bir Padişahın Portresi: I. Abdülhamid (1774–1789)* (Istanbul: TATAV, 2001); Feridun M. Emecen, *Zamanın İskenderi Şarkın Fatih Yavuz Sultan Selim* (Istanbul: Yitik Hazine Yayınları, 2010); Abdülkadir Özcan, *IV. Murad: Şarkın Sultanı* (Istanbul: Kronik Yayıncılık, 2016); Feridun M. Emecen; *Kanuni Sultan Süleyman ve Zamanı* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2022).

²⁵ As a counterexample, Hans-Lukas Kieser chose to open his biography of Talaat Pasha at the most important moment in his career and in the history of his time: the start of the Armenian deportations in April 1915 (Kieser, *Talaat*, 1–6).

²⁶ On nonlinear subjective temporalities in novels, suffice it to mention Marcel Proust, James Joyce, or Virginia Woolf. On "complex narratives" or "modular narratives" in "puzzle films," see David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006); Janet Staiger, "Complex Narratives, An Introduction," *Film Criticism* 31, no. 1/2 (2006): 2–4; Allan Cameron, *Modular Narratives in Contemporary Cinema* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Warren Buckland, ed., *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2009); Jan Simons, "Complex Narratives," in *Hollywood Puzzle Films*, ed. Warren Buckland (London: Routledge, 2014). On the "90s narrative revolution," see Peter F. Parshall, *Altman and After* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 4–5.

individual concerned than before opening it.²⁷ We know what to take away from his career and achievements.²⁸ But what have we learned about the world of his daily life, about his joys and sorrows, about what, outside his career, made his life worth living? A vizier also is a man made of flesh; he rises and falls, eats and drinks, sits and moves, works and rests.²⁹ His life is made up of events and repetitions, pleasures and annoyances. Historical series tell the story better than our books. Let us take *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* again. The series depicts life at the palace and the intrigues of the harem. The prime minister of the time, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, took offense at the treatment given to the sentimental life of Sultan Suleiman.³⁰ Not so the Turkish public, who avidly followed the series in great numbers for four seasons.

Finally, the further back we go in someone's life, the less information we have about the individual.³¹ Once again, this is the effect of sources: documents mention employees only from the moment they are registered in the payroll records or after they become a department head. In their memoirs, individuals hardly dwell on the story of their childhood. As for the chroniclers, they primarily seek to find in a scholar or bureaucrat what foreshadowed future successes or, conversely, failures and disappointments. What interests them is what happens after a career starts and the recruitment of a protégé by a patron. It is as if life before government service is not worth talking about. Why, then, do we insist so much, and rightly so, on the impact of the *devşirme* ("collection," whereby the sultans levied the slaves from among their own Christian subjects) on the formation of Ottoman political society?³² Why read into it a specificity of the formation of imperial elites if, in the end, nothing very precise can be told of the trauma of removal from families, the modalities of conversion, name change, or language training "with the Turks?"³³ The argument of insufficient sources continues to be used as justification.

How can we remedy these three situations? I will make two proposals: using the prosopographical method and drawing inspiration from narrative techniques designed for literature and film. I will return to the previous three points.

Pimp Your Biography I: Story Arcs

Is it possible to build a biography on nonlinear storytelling? Yes, by designing story arcs. The author divides the individual's life into periods, each of which corresponds to an arc. Then, he composes the narrative by a series of shifts of timeline. This technique has been used extensively in films in recent years.³⁴ For example, take Christopher Nolan's recent biopic of J. Robert Oppenheimer (*Oppenheimer*, 2023). The film is built around three arcs: the four-week security hearing Oppenheimer was subjected to in 1954; the Manhattan

²⁷ See, for instance, Theoharis Stavrides, *The Sultan of Viziers: The Life and Times of the Ottoman Grand Vizir Mahmud Pasha Angelović 1453-1474* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Şefaattin Deniz, *Safranbolulu İzzet Mehmed Paşa Ve Dönemi: Bir Osmanlı Paşasının 69 Yıllık Serencamı* (Istanbul: Bilge Kültür Sanat, 2016); Mehmet Yılmaz Akbulut, *Hekimoğlu Ali Paşa. Paşalar Çağının Şeyhülvişerasi* (Istanbul: Timaş, 2022).

²⁸ As an example of a biography focusing on the subject's political career, see Kieser, *Talaat*.

²⁹ Cornell Fleischer, *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire: The Historian Mustafa Ali (1541-1600)* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 4.

³⁰ Ergin and Karakaya, "Between," 42.

³¹ Şahin, *Empire and Power*, 15-23; Menchingor, *First*, 13-27; Kieser, *Talaat*, 41-44.

³² Claude Cahen, "Note sur l'esclavage musulman et le *devşirme* ottoman," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 13, no. 2 (1970), 211-18; Vassilis Demetriades, "Some Thoughts on the Origins of the *Devşirme*," in *The Ottoman Emirate, 1300-1389*, ed. Elizabeth Zachariadou (Rethymnon, Crete: Crete University Press, 1993), 23-31; Colin Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300-1650* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 134-42.

³³ Gilles Veinstein, *Les esclaves du Sultan chez les Ottomans. Des mamelouks aux janissaires (XIVe-XVIIe siècles)* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2020), 241-46.

³⁴ Julia Eckel, "Twisted Times: Non-linearity and Temporal Disorientation in Contemporary Cinema," in *(Dis) Orienting Media and Narrative Mazes*, ed. Julia Eckel et al. (Bielefeld, Germany: transcript, 2012), 274-91, 281-85.

Project, for which he was scientific director in 1943–45; and his life between his student years in Europe from 1925 and the entry of the United States into the war in 1941.

My book on Halil Hamid Pasha also followed three plot lines. The first story arc covered the period when Halil Hamid led the Sublime Porte (December 30, 1782 to March 31, 1785). Why such an arc? Because the pasha has remained in history as a great vizier who left his mark on his era and as one of the pioneers of the modernization of the imperial state. I wanted to understand what it was that earned him such a posterity. I also was keen not to mislead the reader, who would not have understood that a book devoted to a grand vizier did not focus primarily on the period he spent at the head of the Sublime Porte.

The second arc related to the pasha's career between his recruitment (at the age of 13 or 14) and his elevation to the position of grand vizier (at the age of 48). Why this arc? Because the career progression of a state employee was a subject both very present in the sources (administrative registers, chronicles, miscellaneous) and well-treated by historiography. But also because Halil Hamid offered the particular case of having spent almost his entire career at the Porte. I set out to determine the reasons for this longevity.

Finally, a third arc focused on the period (just one month) between the dismissal and the execution of the vizier. And why this arc? Because Halil Hamid has gone down in history as *maktul* (executed). Because his dismissal astonished the witnesses of the time, and his execution caused a scandal. Because the first event gave his life a dramatic intensity, and the second a tragic end. I wanted to convey the significance this period must have had for the pasha. But more than that, I wanted to use my study of the pasha to bring together a history of emotions and a history of political violence.

This third arc is the most dramatic of the three. Logically, it opens and closes the book. The revocation is the subject of the introduction, the execution is that of the conclusion. In both cases, the decision of Sultan Abdülhamid I (r. 1774–91) was sudden and unexpected. I therefore chose to tighten the narrative, devoting just four pages to the evocation of each event. I opted for a concise style and tried to elicit the dramatic character of the event. Having been dismissed, the pasha is awakened in the middle of the night without having been warned; he must leave on the spot without knowing what will become of him. As for the execution, it took place in the greatest secrecy, before being made public, in a way that is spectacular for us, but was relatively common at the time. I imagine a palace employee passing through the middle gate (*orta kapı*) of the Topkapı Palace, before discovering, on the left as he enters the second courtyard, the pasha's head displayed on a silver platter. I describe the scene in the manner of a sequence shot in cinema, to craft a more impactful ending for the reader.

Between the introduction and the conclusion, the book comprised ten chapters. None of them consisted of a single-story arc. As in a chapter in Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), the linear flow of an arc was sometimes disrupted by the insertion of another arc.³⁵ For example, in chapter 9, in which I discussed the confiscation of the pasha's goods and property (*müsadere*) in the weeks following his dismissal (arc 3), I narrated how he built up his fortune within the framework of the pious foundation (*vakf*) established under his government (arc 1), but also during his previous functions (arc 2).

Pimp Your Biography 2: Ring Composition

The design of several story arcs makes it possible to follow a technique known as "ring composition." It consists of interlocking several episodes of varying length, which are responsible for illuminating each other; it unwinds narrative spirals up to events produced before the main narrative or after its conclusion. Daniel Mendelsohn drew on his reading of Homer to apply the ring composition to one of his books, *An Odyssey*: "the narrator will start to tell a

³⁵ Charles Ramírez Berg, "A Taxonomy of Alternative Plots in Recent Films: Classifying the 'Tarantino Effect,'" *Film Criticism* 31, no. 1/2 (2006): 5–61; Pezzotta, *Prison of Time*, 167–94.

story only to pause and loop back to some earlier moment that helps explain an aspect of the story he's telling—a bit of personal or family history, say—and afterward might even loop back to some earlier moment or object or incident that will help account for that slightly less early moment, then gradually winding his way back to the present, the moment in the narrative that he left in order to provide all this background."³⁶

In my account of the last month of Halil Hamid's life (arc 3), I paused to return to what he experienced, either when he was grand vizier (arc 1), or before he became grand vizier (arc 2). Chapter 7, for example, examined the main subject of the plot and reconstructed the causal chain of the inaugural event described in the introduction: why was Halil Hamid Pasha dismissed? It followed a "backward plot" and initiated a shift in perspective.³⁷ To understand the reasons for the dismissal was to place oneself "in the shoes" of the man who decided it. The first subchapter was entitled "Inside the Head of Sultan Abdülhamid I"; the sovereign became the main character, and the plot revolved around the relationship between the two men. The causal examination concluded with a summary of the answers to the following question, the title of chapter 7: "Who Wants the Head of the Grand Vizier?" The backward plot then came to an end; chapter 8 returned to arc 3 (the last month of Halil Hamid's life). The narrative picked up the main character where it had left him at the end of the introduction: the just-dismissed pasha goes into exile and leaves Istanbul.

Let us insist here on the intersection between the narrative operation and the work of the historian, within a common system of tackling time, space, and causality. Of course, the ring composition method organizes the succession of story arcs. But above all, the shifting of timelines is designed to insert the results of prosopographical research. Sometimes the narration runs backward: I examine Halil Hamid's disgrace by referring to that of his predecessors. Sometimes it runs forward: I occasionally refer to what happens next to the pasha's widow, children, and son-in-law, İzzet Mehmed, grand vizier nine years after Halil Hamid (r. 1794–98), even though the latter is still very much alive and I am reconstructing his journey through Thrace.

Biography of Empire: The Whole Man

When one knows little about a man, it is best to describe his life's environment and place him in the world that surrounded him: in his palace or in his house, in his study or in his harem, on his horse or on his couch.³⁸ As in a film, the subject matter must be made visible for the reader to see, sometimes sitting alone on a fine brocade cushion, in the comfort of winter, near the fire; other times, amid his men, when he goes out in procession or embarks on a military campaign. Miniatures provide a precise description of how viziers were dressed. Probate inventories provide a wealth of information on the weapons they used and the harnesses of the horses they rode. Succession lists in *cadi* registers detail the furs and jewels they wore or gifted to their children. The biography is no longer simply the tracking of a trajectory within an institution. It becomes the portrait of a man.

Describing the materials (cotton, silk, wool, leather, and fur) used to make clothes, and inventorying the materials (wood, metal, ivory, and precious stones) used to make firearms, is a direct approach to the work of weavers, seamstresses, and shoemakers, and to the activities of blacksmiths, gunsmiths, and engravers. A biography is more than just the story of one man: it is an account of an economy and a society. Similarly, describing the details of the stores, mosques, and schools placed in trust by the pasha is to offer the elements

³⁶ Mendelsohn, *Odyssey*, 31–32; see also Mendelsohn, *Three Rings*, 20–22, for example of ring composition in book 19 of *The Odyssey* in which the hero is recognized by his old nurse Eurycleia; Sara Watson, "Conversion in Daniel Mendelsohn's *An Odyssey: Reworking the American Memoir*," in *Daniel Mendelsohn's Memoir-Writing: Rings of Memory*, ed. Sophie Vallas (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2021), 109–20.

³⁷ Berg, "Taxonomy," 27.

³⁸ See Alain Corbin, *The Life of an Unknown: The Rediscovered World of a Clog Maker in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

of an urban history. Finally, to reconstruct his travels, to follow him through the stages of his exile, to imagine the routes he took, the landscapes he traversed, the caravansaries where he stopped, the meals he was served, is to sketch out a historical geography of the empire. In other words, if the portrait takes on the means of restoring the sultan's domains in all their richness and color, the book can aspire to become a "biography of empire."³⁹

This requires a large number of illustrations. When, in 1968, Richard Chambers defended his PhD dissertation on the "formative years" of Ahmed Cevdet Pasha (1822–95), he had only a typescript text to trace the journey of the young native of Lofça (Lovech, in north central Bulgaria) to the halls of the Istanbul madrasa and then to the offices of the Sublime Porte.⁴⁰ Today, modern technology makes it possible to print four-color illustrations at low cost: my publisher allowed me to insert no less than 382 illustrations in the body of the text. This was a stroke of luck: very often, an engraving says more than the most meticulous written description. In the book, museum collections were used to walk through the rooms of the grand vizier's house. Maps were used to follow him, step by step, along the Thracian roads he took during his exile. Photographs and watercolors were used to situate him in his country of birth (Isparta and Burdur, in central Anatolia) and the districts of Istanbul (where he spent his adolescence and most of his life).

Prosopography: A Lifetime

When I read biographical studies, I am always surprised at how little they involve comparisons.⁴¹ Yet, like a child's growth curve, an individual trajectory can only be analyzed insofar as it is related to others. I therefore chose to follow that of Halil Hamid by comparing it with the institutional careers of the thirty grand viziers who preceded him over the course of half a century (1731–82). I summarized the careers of each of them in a glossary at the end of the book. I referred to them regularly in the following way: Halil Hamid "is not one of those pages trained at the Imperial Palace, who became head doorkeeper and/or sword-bearer (*silahdar*, n° 1, 2, 8, 11, 13, 19, 23)," each number referring to one of the thirty grand viziers.⁴² The biographical approach was illuminated by quantitative analysis. The main stages of the career (recruitment to the Imperial Divan, promotion to the rank of chief office, or *hacegân*, sequence of appointments and dismissals) were analyzed in the light of calculations drawn from the corpus of the thirty grand viziers: age at appointment, length of time in office, number of posts held, etc.

Whether we have a corpus of 30 or 300 individuals at our disposal does not change the following fact: the biographical data to be exploited are meager in information. Including those of the grand viziers, notes historian Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall: "short and arid, they give us only an imperfect knowledge of them."⁴³ I would add that the identity of relatives and close friends often remains undetermined. Taken together, however, the biographies not only shed light on each other, but also help identify overarching patterns. For example, I show that many grand viziers continued to be trained at the Imperial Palace. Above all, they help to refine the still rudimentary sociology of the offices of the Sublime Porte. The results of the inquiry challenge the portrait of what often has been described as an Ottoman meritocracy. For its highest office, the central administration recruited

³⁹ Christine Philliou, *Biography of an Empire: Governing Ottomans in an Age of Revolution* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010).

⁴⁰ Richard L. Chambers, "Ahmed Cevdet Paşa: The Formative Years of an Ottoman Transitional" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1968).

⁴¹ Virginia H. Aksan, *An Ottoman Statesman in War and Peace: Ahmed Resmi Efendi, 1700–1783* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 15; Jane Hathaway, *Beshir Agha: Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Imperial Harem* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2005), 7–15; Philliou, *Biography*.

⁴² Bouquet, *Vie et mort*, 118.

⁴³ Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, *Histoire de l'Empire ottoman depuis son origine jusqu'à nos jours* (Istanbul: Isis, 1992–2000), vol. 14, 152.

from among its own ranks. Nearly half of all grand viziers were sons of high dignitaries, and a significant portion of the rest came from the upper echelons of Ottoman society. However, the post of grand vizier created few dynasties; the cases of the Çandarlı (five grand viziers, 1363/1365–1499) and the Köprülü (six grand viziers, 1656–1710) remained exceptions in the six centuries of imperial history.

Finally, the intersection of biography and prosopography is the best way to determine whether an event concerning an individual corresponds to a normal or exceptional occurrence. In general, the method not only enables us to determine the advancements and stumbling blocks in an individual's career, but also reveals operational rules of the administration that were previously unknown or obscure to us. Here are some of the conclusions I have reached: (a) passing through the provincial administration was a factor in career advancement; (b) the number of grand viziers who spent their entire career in Istanbul was virtually nil; and (c) the glass ceiling of the scribal service (*kalemiye*) was the rank of *hacegân*; in the 19th century, the equivalent would have been the title of pasha. It is worth noting that enriching biographies through prosopography helps overcome the compartmentalization by centuries that prevails in the field of Ottoman studies.

A Great Balancing Act: Three Propositions

Here, then, is how I propose to conceive and compose a biography of a pasha. This, I believe, will hold the book together, interest the reader and solve the three problems identified above. I would now like to demonstrate that we can take a deeper and more comprehensive approach to biography, both by delving into it further and by surpassing its traditional boundaries. In this regard, I will put forth three propositions:

1. It is possible to get inside the pasha's mind and imagine how he experienced the events, even though no traces of it remain in the sources.
2. It is useful to narrate what he might have lived through, even if he did not.
3. A biography can be enriched by including other biographies, not only of the individual's descendants (up to the present day), but also of the researcher who is interested in it.

Inside the Head of a Vizier

We can imagine that Halil Hamid was surprised by the news of his dismissal, that he was disturbed by the intrusion into his room during the night, of servants carrying the *firman* of dismissal; or that, on the contrary, he reacted with composure, and that once he had recovered from the shock of a painful awakening he calmly prepared to set off on the road. We do not know; there are no eyewitness accounts. I dare, however, to propose a reading of the event. Surprising as it may seem for a subject that concerns emotions, this reading is also based on the prosopographic method. Why do I think Halil Hamid was disturbed by the announcement of his dismissal, but by no means surprised? Because vizier dismissals were a regular occurrence, after serving a few months to two or three years at most. If I calculate the length of time spent in office by the thirty predecessors, I get an average of seventeen months. The pasha did not do so badly: he ruled for two years and three months. Every day he was in power was a day closer to the end of his governance. And he knew it.

Similarly, on March 27, 1785, was Halil Hamid surprised to see Kara Kethüdazâde `Ali, doorkeeper (*kapıcı*) at the Imperial Palace, disembark on the island of Bozcaada, where he was in exile, to hand him the *firman* deciding his execution? Not completely. He knew that a dismissed grand vizier ran the risk of being put to death, even more so when he has not been appointed to the post that was intended for him. In the 18th century, out of six grand viziers executed following their dismissal, five were executed on an island. The

secrets surrounding an execution decision were less likely to leak there than elsewhere. Halil Hamid may not have had these figures in mind, but he certainly knew that from the moment he was taken to Bozcaada he had something to worry about. For someone like me who does not possess the intimate knowledge that Halil Hamid had of administrative realities, not only are these figures useful but their analysis also demonstrates that the history of mentalities can be supported by quantitative history, and the biographical genre benefits from employing the prosopographical method.

What Could Have Been

After his dismissal, Halil Hamid was taken from the Rami barracks, west of Istanbul, to the port of Gallipoli, on the shores of the Dardanelles Strait. He stayed there for a few days. Then he learned that he had been appointed governor of Jeddah. Finally, he was ordered to the island of Bozcaada. In studying his trajectory, I distinguished between what the pasha did and what he could have done. Using maps, travel reports and chronicles, I reconstructed the stages of his journey through Thrace, then the circumstances of his crossing between the middle of the Dardanelles Strait and the northern Aegean Sea. I reflected on the conditions of his care by the local authorities. I distinguished between what I knew for certain from reliable sources and what I imagined based on the exploration of hypotheses supported by the cross-referencing of sources. This was the real biography of the pasha. This was what happened. I enriched it with a biography of what could have been.⁴⁴ As Christine Isom-Verhaaren puts it, “even if an account has gaps, a partial tale is better than no tale at all.”⁴⁵

At each stage of his journey, I indicated what else he might have done, for example, had he been appointed to a different post (it often happened that a pasha was informed of a change of assignment on the way, or that a dignitary on his way to the Balkans had to turn back and head for Anatolia). I recounted in detail how Halil Hamid would have traveled if he had had to go to Jeddah (which he did not), what overland route he would have taken to Suez and what type of ship he would have boarded in the Red Sea. I could only imagine the difficulties he would have encountered on such a long and arduous journey; in those days, you could not get to the Hijaz from the Aegean Sea as quickly as you can today.

Let us be clear: I am not making anything up. I am not a novelist. I am saying what could have happened. And I do so by drawing on what I know of the viziers who were dismissed before being appointed elsewhere, but also of the pashas who, for decades, moved from one general governorate to another. Once again, biographical writing is the result of the intersection of multiple biographies. We learn more about a man by learning about other men. We understand what he experienced in the light of what he did not experience and what others experienced.⁴⁶

Autobiography and Family Biography

Halil Hamid’s biography was as much about the imperial society of which he was the pinnacle as it was about today’s world, in which he retains a place, both public and private. Let me explain. My interest in Halil Hamid Pasha began with a close study of a genealogy produced by the pious foundation set up by the grand vizier in 1783 for the benefit of his children, and later their descendants (*evlad*). In 2010, I met the children of the foundation’s last administrator, Erol Bükey (1926–2002). They entrusted me with a wealth of documentation

⁴⁴ Quentin Deluermoz and Pierre Singaravélou, *A Past of Possibilities: A History of What Could Have Been*, trans. Stephen W. Sawyer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).

⁴⁵ Isom-Verhaaren, “Tracing,” 297. Also see Şahin, *Empire and Power*, 15; and Peirce, *Empress*, 8–9.

⁴⁶ For analogies between prosopography and “modal biography” (i.e., “the biography is not that of a singular person, but rather that of an individual who concentrates all the characteristics of a group”; my translation), see Giovanni Levi, “Les Usages de la biographie,” *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 44, no. 6 (1989): 1325–36.

(correspondence with the Directorate General of Foundations, genealogies, the administrator's records, photographs, etc.). Using it helped me to include in the biography the study of the *vakf* between the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 21st century. It enabled me to inventory the funerary epitaphs of some forty descendants preserved in an Istanbul cemetery.⁴⁷ It prompted me to open the individual study to that of the direct descendants of the founder of the *vakf*.⁴⁸ It led me to carry out three joint operations: refining the individual biography, extending it over time to the present day, and transforming it into a family biography.

As I noted earlier, most biographies overlook the origins and early life of statesmen. The little I know about Halil Hamid's childhood was gathered during fieldwork I carried out in his native Isparta and Burdur regions. Failing to find direct traces of his first steps, I reconstructed the geography of his country (*memleket*) and imagined the activities of his neighborhood. I also identified the first properties (*emlak*) attached to his *vakf*, some of which still exist: a fountain, a school, and a library. I studied the fate of these establishments from the end of the 18th century to the present day. I measured the posterity of the grand vizier in Isparta and Burdur. In the book, I reported on the steps taken with the administration (prefecture, municipality, library) to find out more about the current and past management of the grand vizier's foundations. I precisely narrated the adventures of his statue, erected in 2000 among other statues of "great men of Isparta," then stored away in a warehouse, and finally, installed quite recently, in November 2018, in front of the library that still bears his name.

Since Halil Hamid's story was interwoven with the material memories of his posterity and the results of my fieldwork, I thought it would be useful to give an account of the stages of the research. I intersected biography and autobiography, connecting the events he experienced to what happened to me when I set out on his trail. This narrative link works when there is a unity of place. In chapter 5, I recounted the visits I made to the Sublime Porte district to reconstruct the vizier's journey through the city on the morning of his dismissal 230 years earlier. I described what I saw around me as I inventoried the buildings he created or renovated as part of his pious foundation, the main theme of the chapter. Similarly, in the final chapter, I moved from the pasha's arrival in Bozcaada in April 1785 to my own visit to the island in May 2014. The aim was to offer different points of view and create loops of narrative and shifts of tone and image. For example, I did not directly inform the reader that Halil Hamid was put to death in Bozcaada. Instead, I revealed this in a roundabout way when I described my visit to the courtyard of the mosque where the pasha's remains lie.

Without my having initially decided to do so, a fourth story arc took shape in the narrative: it began with the first interviews conducted with the vizier's descendants in 2010; it followed the evolution of the *vakf*'s status until its nationalization in 2019; and it continues today, beyond the book's publication. I continue to exploit the documentation that the family entrusted to me and maintain personal contacts with them, on the occasion of the births of some and the disappearances of others. In short, the book is not only the biography of a historical figure, but also the first milestone in a work in process on a family studied between the last decades of the empire and the first century of the Turkish Republic.

Walked into a Bar. . .

What I have just written is unpublished. In the book, I told the story of a man and his time. At no point did I explain what I wanted to do or how to do it. No preface or afterword was

⁴⁷ Olivier Bouquet, "Lire entre les tombes: Une grande famille de morts, les Halil Hamid Pacha-zâde (1785–1918)," *Turcica: Revue d'études turques* 43 (2011): 483–540; Olivier Bouquet, "Le vieil homme et les tombes: Références ancestrales et mémoire lignagère dans un cimetière de famille ottoman," *Oriens* 39, no. 2 (2011): 331–65.

⁴⁸ For an example of tracking a family over several centuries, see Heath Lowry, *The Evrenos Family and the City of Selânik (Thessaloniki): Who Built the Hamza Beğ Câmi'i and Why* (Istanbul: Bahçeşehir University Press, 2010).

inserted that would have served as the equivalent of a filmmaking backstory. What is more, the book remains to be translated into English. Yet I felt it was important to use the language most widely used by Ottomanists to deal with a subject that many of my colleagues are interested in, but few of them practice: biography. It is a very difficult genre. The author must not confine himself to recounting a career but paint a portrait of a man. He must go beyond the story of a life. He has to describe Ottoman society as a whole, which is what “empire biography” is all about.⁴⁹

How can this be done? My answer is: by adapting literary or cinematographic techniques to the historian’s method. Acclimatizing the reader to “achronological narrative structures.”⁵⁰ Using a prosopographical tool according to the story arc covered or over the course of a ring composition. Doubling an actual biography with a biography of what could have been. Interweaving biography and autobiography narratively and methodologically. And extending an individual biography into a family biography. Unless I am mistaken, the combination of these different operations in a single book has never before been proposed in the field of Ottoman studies.

Specialists have written extensively about the limitations of their sources, the development of new issues, and the exhaustion of old paradigms. They have given little thought to how one could construct a history book that offers the reader what a film typically seeks to convey to the viewer: a “real story.”⁵¹ They have rarely emphasized that a good biography should primarily be based on “overarching narrative coherence.”⁵² They have not really imagined that one could draw inspiration from what is done in novels and films, in TV series as well as in comic books. I hope this will be more the case in the future. I hope that we will more often ask the following question: What is the best way to tell a story?

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⁴⁹ I would like to extend the remarks of Marc Aymes in his review of Christine Philliou, *Biography of an Empire*, in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44, no. 2 (2012): 347–50.

⁵⁰ Allan Cameron, *Modular Narratives in Contemporary Cinema* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 1.

⁵¹ Bordwell, *The Way*, 19.

⁵² Aymes, review of Philliou, 348.

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