Evoking my Moroccan childhood is a fairly familiar exercise for me. I began doing it early on and have hardly stopped. It is as if my memory wanted to ensure that it never missed a chance to call up this curious period of my life. Of course, I knew that childhood memories are all too often skewed, sometimes even completely reconstructed in order to paint ordinary people, things, and places in an ideal light, to give them more or less mythical proportions. But I had persuaded myself that my memory, however selective or partial it might be for certain things, remained unassailable when it came to my youth. Unlike other peoples’ ever-changing childhoods, my own was unfailingly consistent; the traces it left are not easily erased. Certain impressions, sensations, emotions, and beliefs were inscribed in me with such detail and precision that they influenced many of the choices I made as an adult. It is precisely these traces that are worth calling up here. It would be impossible, in these few pages, to paint a vast fresco in which each episode of my life would find its rightful place.¹ To do so would be “to try to fit the entire ocean in a carafe,” to quote Flaubert.² But it is not without a pang of regret that I have decided to forego here a lengthy description of the seductive powers of the unparalleled landscapes, the striking colors, the exotic delicacy of tastes and smells. . . .


². Author’s note: Flaubert is quoted as saying this in the Goncourt brothers’ Journal (Feb 11, 1863).
From my birth in 1939 until my departure for Paris in 1956, I lived in Morocco, where French colonial domination took the form of a “protectorate”—with the highly differentiated and hierarchical social structure that came along with it.\(^3\) I was born in Meknes, the city where my family had always lived. My childhood lasted until I was at least thirteen—the age of adulthood in religious terms,

\(^3\) Author’s note: Morocco became independent in March 1956.
celebrated by the solemn rite of the bar mitzvah—and in those thirteen years I believe it is possible to identify three principal stages, each of which contributed in its own way to the forging of a different aspect of my identity.

The first of these stages covers the very first years of my life, during which I slowly and progressively discovered the little world that constituted my immediate surroundings: my parents (who, in their forties, were considered relatively old); my three big brothers; my three big sisters (I was the seventh child in a family of eight); the family house that was too small to hold us; the neighbors’ houses filled with children my age who would, along with a few of my cousins, become my inseparable playmates; and, finally, the neighborhood, the “the new mellah,” entirely inhabited by Jews, as the name suggests.4

Inside this tiny little world—which was, for me, the world—daily life was utterly subordinated to the rhythms imposed by the Jewish calendar. First and foremost was the strict distinction between ordinary days and Saturday: every Friday I would watch as my mother struggled to get through the thousands of cooking and house cleaning tasks that were essential to the Shabbat celebration. Then it was the well-organized cycle of high holidays, which gave each year its unshakeable structure. I quickly understood that every holiday had its own particular form of celebration. Both at home and at the synagogue, each holiday had a particular atmosphere: grave and solemn for Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) or Yom Kippur; relaxed and joyful for Purim or Hanukkah. Each had a specific, delicious menu, the ingredients for which had to be procured in advance, occasionally with some difficulty. But most of all, every holiday had its own prayers written in old and precious books that my father only took out of the cabinet on these occasions: this is certainly why I was convinced, early in life, that there existed an intimate link between the book and the sacred, between reading and praying.

I should admit that, at this particular point in my life, I was especially sensitive to a few very concrete details that I found both odd and exciting: the apple dipped in honey at Rosh Hashanah that guaranteed a year full of sweetness; on Yom Kippur, the final flailing of the many chickens (one for each member of the family), whose throats were slit by a rabbi right before our eyes, in accordance with traditional ritual, and whose deaths were supposed to carry away our sins; the week of Sukkot, during which our meals were to be eaten in a hut covered with reeds set up at the back of our yard; the masks worn by all of the children of the neighborhood on Purim; and the large copper plate bearing symbolic foods that my father held up over our heads on Passover. I could go on and on, but I must move on to the second stage. This one is linked to the early years of my education, which took place in two utterly different realms: one French, the other Hebraic.

4. Author’s note: In Moroccan cities, “mellah” was the name of the Jewish quarter. At the beginning of the 1920s, in Meknes, a brand-new neighborhood bearing the name “new mellah” was constructed right next to the old mellah, which dated from the end of the seventeenth century and the reign of Moulay Ismaël.
In October 1945, I began school at the Alliance, where I spent five years. I have to insist here on the seductive effect that the place had on me, right from the start. From the vast, verdant, almost always sun-dappled playground full of pepper trees, to the classrooms: the dais with the wooden teacher’s desk; the inkwells full of deep violet ink; the boxes of colored chalk; the damp rag gliding over the chalkboard; the huge, brightly colored maps that hung on the walls; and the etchings that recounted the major events in the history of France. My first days as a pupil were not easy, but my older sister, who was a teacher, helped me immensely, and I made fast progress, particularly in French, a field in which I was found to be unusually gifted. I did it all well: dictation, grammar, essays... but what I loved most of all was that with each passing school year I entered more deeply into a universe that I discovered through reading, a universe that was as strange as it was fascinating. As soon as I could get a hold of that special textbook made up of selected readings, I would go straight to the last section of the book, the part made up of short tales and stories, only a few pages each. This was my first encounter with fiction, and it gave me delicious shivers I had never known before, sensations so intense that, sometimes, I would take up the stories and rewrite them in my own way.

At the same moment in time, I had a very different relationship with the Talmud Torah, the rabbinic school that I had to attend during the summer months and where I felt very ill at ease. Nothing about the school inspired me: not the place itself (a squat building stuffed to the gills with students); not the teachers (bearded old rabbis whose teaching techniques were fairly archaic); and not my fellow students (most of whom were already teenagers with whom I had little in common). Notwithstanding all of this, my compulsory education at this institution had a few positive effects: it allowed me to complete my religious training so that I could have a bar mitzvah, and to work on my Hebrew, which I had started learning with my mother. It was at this point that my intense interest in language and language games began to manifest. I had access to three different idioms: French, which came in first; dialectal Arabic, which we still used fairly frequently; and Hebrew. But I discovered rather quickly that, in our way of talking, all three could be combined together in ways more or less complex to form a kind of “sub-language.” We were careful to adapt our “sub-language” to our interlocutors, and each one had its own proper lexicon, syntax, and pronunciation. These linguistic gymnastics were both fun and intellectually stimulating.

This exercise carried over into the final stage, the phase of my secondary education. Shortly after we moved into a beautiful new house, big enough to comfortably hold our entire family, I began junior high—a decisive moment in my childhood.

5. Author's note: The Alliance is the abbreviated name of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, a French institution created in the nineteenth century and which developed a vast network of schools for Jewish children in various countries of the Mediterranean.
For the first time, as an eleven-year-old student at the Poeymirau High School, an institution in the “new city,” I found myself outside the almost exclusively Jewish cocoon in which I’d grown up. To get to school, I had to walk through the medina, an area I hardly knew. At high school, I discovered new teachers and new classmates: Christians, who made up the majority, and Muslims (although only a few), with whom relations were sometimes strained. But I also had access to new knowledge. Wearing the mantle of “good student” that I’d had since the end of primary school, I devoured all learning with an insatiable appetite. I was pleased to learn new languages—English, and especially Latin. The summer before I started junior high, one of my sisters had decided to teach me the basics of Latin grammar, which she had very cleverly presented as a game. A fun game based on rigorous logic: I loved it right away. The seed that would lead me to later specialize in the study of Roman civilization was planted then and there.

But this apparently beneficial and decisive turn didn’t come without a few bumps in the road. I had to learn to conform to new rules and values without forgetting the old ones. In other words, I had to accept to live every day in two more or less discordant realms, to lead a double life. With schooling, the gap between the two grew larger every year: I learned a history that had no link with my people’s past and a geography that did not correspond whatsoever to the actual environment in which I lived. Slowly but surely, everything I had known lost all value, and this fostered a permanent feeling of nostalgia and frustration, and a childhood that ended with all of the symptoms of what we might now call an identity crisis. But this, of course, is another chapter of my story . . .

—Translated by Lia Brozgal

6. Author’s note: The term “ville nouvelle” (new city) was used to designate the European part of the city, built at the start of the Protectorate and distinctly separated from the “medina,” or the Arab quarter.