

# JTL

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Journal  
of  
Turkish Literature

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Bilkent University Center for Turkish Literature  
Issue 1 (2004)  
Ankara

## Stepping Aside: Ottoman Literature in Modern Turkey<sup>1</sup>

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“Stepping Aside” introduces an unusual theoretical perspective on the literary and cultural history of Turkey and the Ottoman Empire derived from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. The major problem this radical change in perspective intends to address is, “How do we escape the rhetoric of binaries that has produced the present discourse of Turkish/Ottoman literary history and all of the obvious distortions it gives rise to?”. It is argued that there is nothing inevitable about commonly held views or about the generally accepted and seldom examined theoretical stance on which they are founded. Taking some key concepts from Deleuze and Guattari’s *Milles Plateaux* (A Thousand Plateaus)—for example, the inclusive “and”, “becoming”, and “signifying and post-signifying regimes”—the essay touches upon some features of our common understanding, suggesting that binaries such as “Turkish/Persian”, “East/West”, and “Ottoman/Turkish” are far more problematic than they seem and are, in fact, grounded in a perspective that serves the ends of particular distributions of power. Seen differently, the gaps or fissures that separate the terms of these binaries disappear and we are left with planes of consistency on which what we recognize as Turkish and Persian, for example, are no more than shifting nodes of coherence within a historical process of continual and mutual “becoming”. The essay goes on to more specific examples from recent Turkish poetry of the way in which the presumed gap between the Ottoman and Modern Turkey is, in practice, revealed as illusory and ends with a discussion of how the Ottoman and the Modern are constantly productive of each other.

There are many things I do not like about the discursive regime that dominates our scholarly conversation about Turkish and Ottoman literature. I have mentioned these in print in a number of places and have certainly not been alone among North American scholars in doing so. However, rather than expend many words on what I think is

wrong, I would like to concentrate on an experiment with a different perspective, a perspective that I believe can provide a positive, productive alternative to our usual habits of thought. Of course even the alternative perspective requires some characterization of what it is an alternative to, and so, briefly, a statement of one aspect of the problem.

The study of Ottoman literature, in fact, the whole conception of Ottoman culture is universally caught up in a rhetoric of dichotomies, for example: traditional/modern, Ottoman/Turk, Persian/Turkish, Asian/European, high-culture/low-culture, center/periphery, Kemalist/anti-Kemalist, empire/republic, religious/secular, orientalist/anti-orientalist, orientalist/oriental, and so on and so on. This rhetorical or discursive atmosphere causes all arguments about Ottoman and Turkish culture to condense around certain polarities, which in turn are often—and justifiably—understood solely as political stances and are assaulted or defended as such. Certainly, all arguments are inherently political—there is no such thing as a “purely academic” argument. Nonetheless, any argument from a stance within this polarizing and totalizing discourse cannot help but take on an oppositional character that is only reactive and reifies and reinforces a set of binaries and projects of binary thinking that I believe are ultimately unproductive.

And what then is the alternative? How does one “step aside”? And step aside into what? For Michel Serres there is a “third place”, a white river that runs between two banks, between the polarities of established concepts. For some, there can be a point in swimming the river when one neither clings to the security of the near shore nor lurches for the safety of the far bank. Poised in the middle, one comes to know the river as movement, a constant flow of becoming. Far from being only that which conjoins the two banks, the river is the active force that ever creates and recreates the shores (Serres 3-34). For Deleuze and Guattari, what I call “stepping aside” they call “getting out of it” (Deleuze and Parnet 1). For them, Serres’s “third space” is the place of AND, the “inclusive disjunction”. This AND is not merely conjunctive; it resists crystallization about one term or another of a binary, and never forms a synthesis which could become a term in another binary. As such it actively inhibits discourses based on arboreal (tree-like) structures focused on origins, continuous development, and organic unities. Instead it turns us away from talk of being and identity toward a discourse of difference, continuous becoming, and molecular multiplicities (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 3-25). For this essay I will limit myself to some observations on a notion of “becoming” derived from Deleuze and Guattari, which, I believe, reveal a

potential for productive experiments in re-conceptualizing the history of Turkish culture.<sup>2</sup>

For purposes of this experiment let us begin with a simple example. Historically we recognize an encounter between aggregates which we conceptualize as points, positions, territories, ideological universes, etc. and which we roughly identify as European and Ottoman or Turkish. From the perspective of identity we recognize a vast number of exchanges between these points: arrows, bullets, cannonballs, letters, ambassadors, money, goods, presents, people, intellectual property, ideas, and so on. The result of this is to ground a perception of the two fields as unary entities existing in a binary relation. From the perspective of AND (the middle, the inclusive disjunction), however, the focus changes from "exchange" to "becoming", the "becoming-European of the Turk" and the "becoming-Turkish of the European". This process of becoming is not something which has an end (a synthesis, for example, the production of a "Euro-Turk"), it is continuous and ultimately inclusive of all the things we learn to see as the real objects of exchange, from arrows to ideas.

We must be aware that Deleuze and Guattari's concepts are notoriously slippery. They redefine basic terms precisely and with great elaboration but for limited purposes and limited duration. They recoil from producing global systems, preferring rather to experiment pragmatically with systems that are contingent and temporary. So it is with their notion of becoming, which is most interesting for the ways in which it contrasts with our common idea of what becoming means. In the midst of a discussion of "becoming-animal" they argue the following:

A becoming is not a correspondence between relations. But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation, or, at the limit, an identification. The whole structuralist critique of the series seems irrefutable. To become is not to progress or regress along a series. Above all, becoming does not occur in the imagination, even when the imagination reaches the highest cosmic or dynamic level, as in Jung or Bachelard. Becomings-animal are neither dreams nor phantasies. They are perfectly real. But which reality is at issue here? For if becoming animal does not consist in playing animal or imitating an animal, it is clear that the human being does not "really" become an animal any more than the animal "really" becomes something else. Becoming produces nothing other than itself. We fall into a false alternative if we say that you either imitate or you are. What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes. (*A Thousand Plateaus* 237-38)

Deleuze and Guattari focus on striking examples of becoming that lead to wildness, wandering (nomadism), flights, or deterritorializations. They do not deny that tamer becomings occur; they are just not as interested in them. Because I wish to appropriate the notion of becoming to the tasks of a literary historical perspective—and this kind of

appropriation (even, to a certain extent, mis-appropriation) seems to have been encouraged by Deleuze and Guattari themselves—I would like to give a graphic but apparently domesticated example of becomings. Let us consider the mundane and concrete case of a dairy farm. It is rather easy to see how the domestication of dairy cattle can be seen as a process of “becoming-human” for the cow. The cow takes on characteristics that are obviously human. It becomes bound to a territory, it acquires a home, its nourishment becomes dependent on a human technological apparatus, it becomes a participant in human forms of nourishment, it has a job, a schedule, and so on. It is less obvious to us how the dairy farm also involves the “becoming-cow” of human beings. Yet the farmer’s life adapts to the rhythms of the cow’s milk production. He, along with human technological society, becomes part of the consumption and digestive system of the cow; in common breeding practices, the farmer and the scientific community become connected to the cow’s reproductive system; a large number of human beings take on the role of “calf” and are nourished, albeit in alienated ways, at the udder of the cow which is vastly extended by mechanisms of distribution.

What is created is a field of difference populated by a vast number of unrelated particles—people, machines, animals, territories, shelters, technologies, medical practices, money, capital, transportation, and so on—which interact on a plane of becoming-cow. The relations here do not reduce to some organizing principle of filiation or descent or identification or imitation. Neither are they subordinate to some series nor reducible to a story of origins. The assemblage always remains a multiplicity.

It must also be kept in mind that the perspective of becoming is a minoritarian perspective and implies a minority discourse in minor language. This is to say that it asks of us that we turn our attention away from the established and unitary concepts that constitute and order the dominant regime of thought—and these include the grammar, the lexicon, the formal rhetoric, the institution(s), the public good, model(s) of development or growth from origins. The history of the state (the dominating regime) and its institutions is always a history of origins, because origins affirm the inevitability of the state and its control. Origins and domination are always linked. Consider, for example, the conjunction of Europe’s colonial expansion and the Age of Exploration with its strange searches for origins—from Indo-European philology to a spate of explorers seeking the origin of the Nile, as though a river will have a single origin in one out of a myriad of rivers, streams, springs, seeps...

What is difficult is to get away from the majoritarian perspective, which rests firmly on the recognized institutional tools for rational thought. What is difficult is to see and talk about a place where Ottoman *divan* poetry, for example, escapes both its

easily recognizable capture in the vertical hierarchy of beloved-ruler-God and the crystallization of that hierarchy in the frozen tropes of the tradition (moth-candle, nightingale-rose, etc.), where it escapes into a more frenzied, crazy, obsessive, uncontrollable space, a space shunned (or distorted) by the controlling forces of commentary and interpretation. Commentary and interpretation are majoritarian projects; they can only rewrite that which transgresses the law of domination or represent it in pejorative terms. The minoritarian project, in contrast, affirms that which is different without attempting to negate its difference: the dervish's ecstatic nonsense, the babbling of drunks and lovers, disorder, rebellion, unsanctioned movement, crimes against "the community", against "the language", crimes of *disorder*—all of which inhabit an area of pure movement without goals, without even an enemy or object, a minoritarian space, a minoritarian speech.

Returning to the "becoming-European/becoming-Turk" machine, there has been a lot of attention paid to the becoming-European of the Turks (the majoritarian perspective) and virtually none to the inevitable becoming-Turk of Europeans, to the extent that there is little or no possibility of telling the story of this relation from the middle. In fact, the vast weight of stories about the Turks and Ottomans repress the crucial mutuality and multiplicity of all significant becomings in favor of stories-of-origin that represent Turkish becomings as reactive responses to fundamental lacks or deficiencies on the part of Turks that are compensated by imitating or borrowing from the plenitude of some other group. Thus we focus on the becoming-Persian of Turkic culture in the Ottoman period, for example, without ever seriously looking at the corresponding becoming-Turkic of Persian culture. And even when we admit to some Turkish influences, we tend to avoid looking at the Persian-becoming-Turkish as if it were fully as extensive, transforming, and significant to Persian culture as its complement was to Turkish culture. The same repression of mutuality is true in many such areas including, for example, becoming-Muslim and becoming-European. Of course the reason for this is, in large part, that we—unproductively, I believe—imagine unary identities with traceable origins that can be defined as "Turkish" or "Persian" or "European".

As a result the story of lack has become a central part of the naturalized and even internalized history of Turks and Turkey. There is no history and no psychological grounding for the history of a fully competent Turkish cultural plenitude—a fully adequate language, literature, spirituality, etc.—in mutual symbiosis (or relations of becoming) with other cultures in a field of difference. This assertion is a crucial component of my argument and bears directly on the reasons why I believe that it is so

important to understand the relations in which “the Ottoman”, as a multiplicity of cultural, physical, psychological, political, and social artifacts, participates in the present.

Lack is a constituting component of a continuous history that involves the making up of deficiencies: a becoming fully “Islamic”, which aligns, for example, with increasing military prowess and the re-territorialization of Eastern Europe, followed sequentially by a becoming-European which makes up for deficiencies in the Islamic, usually expressed as deficiencies in democracy, science, technology, progress, freedom, and so on. It is important to emphasize that these are *not* Deleuzo-Guattarian becomings. They are movements from one identity (one state of being) to another, a process by which difference is swallowed up, or captured in the service of powers that benefit by the creation of unitary identities.

In contrast, history, in my reading of Deleuze and Guattari’s reading of Foucault, is not continuous at all. The Turkish presence in the Near East and the creation of powerful Turkish states are events which bring two (and certainly more) cultural aggregates into contact and initiate a profound transformation (a process of mutual becoming) in both (and all). This to the point where neither retains an essential character, where both are fundamentally detached from previous conceptualizations and reformed on new patterns with a new vocabulary (or an old vocabulary with profoundly altered referents). Nonetheless, the field of difference remains always active, there is no merging into a new unit, no integration into an organic whole. The farmer never actually becomes a cow.

Jumping ahead in time, the most immediate similar event or cataclysmic discontinuity in our experience is the dissolution of the Ottoman state and the subsequent encounter of Turkish culture or of the field Turkish-culture-becoming-Persian-becoming-European (which compound is to be read circularly and all at once without pause) with the culture of European modernism. Keeping in mind that I am here reducing irreducible multiplicities to manageable singularities for purposes of making a limited point, I would say that this event introduces a field of difference between an area of Turkish-culture-becoming-European-becoming-modern—for simplicity’s sake, we can call it “modern Turkish culture”—and the whole area of Ottoman culture and its becomings. This produces an area of inclusive disjunction in which there exists a dynamic field something like modern-Turkey-becoming-Ottoman/Ottoman-becoming-modern-Turkey. It is crucial to my argument that we understand that the Ottoman in this case is not an artifact of some organic, arboreal development. It is not a root or the detritus of modern Turkey’s somehow having been Ottoman in the past; it is distinguished from modern Turkey by difference not

genealogy. The becoming-Ottoman I speak of here is not a process of reversion to some past state or even accommodation of some past state. It is instead a dynamic relation of difference that exists wholly in the present.<sup>4</sup>

Within this generalized field of difference there exist large numbers of molecular relations that together generate the present reality. For example, among those relations that are captured in commonly recognized representations are the Ottoman as the other of the modern, the Ottoman as artifact, the Ottoman as the object of study and interpretation, and the Ottoman as antidote to the lacks of the present. In a capitalist system, which contemporary Turkey inevitably is, such molecular assemblages as “the Ottoman” are constantly being de-territorialized and re-territorialized as part of the flow of wealth toward ever-changing investments. This is a point that demands some expansion before we move on to the next stage of my argument.

In the case of a despotic order such as obtained in the Ottoman state, local investments of libidinal and economic energy are forcibly transferred to the transcendent figure of the despot. For instance, the peasant’s land ceases to exist within the cycle of investment and production of a single family or clan or village; the nomad’s territory ceases to be a field of wandering without possession. They are de-territorialized and re-territorialized as possessions of the ruler. That is, libidinal investment is no longer made directly in the land but in the land through the ruler who skims the excess from local production to create a culture of lack. At the same time, local codes (e.g., spiritual/religious representations, representations of value, love, plenitude, and lack) are over-coded in favor of the ruler. In the case of Ottoman society, for example, the figures of ruler and religious leader are combined in the sultan-caliph, and there exists a consistent pattern of representation linking the beloved, the ruler, and the Divine. The transcendent figure of the ruler/Divine becomes the center which grounds all interpretation, and the plenitude which crystallizes all libidinal energy/desire production in the form of relative lacks or needs focused on the ruler.<sup>5</sup> Deleuze and Guattari characterize this type of regime as “signifying” because it is centered or grounded in the ruler/Divine and thus promises a fullness of meaning at the end of interpretation.<sup>6</sup> All signs point to the ruler and all roads lead to the capital.

In a capitalist regime, what Deleuze and Guattari call a “post-signifying regime”, there is only a constant flux of de-territorialization and re-territorialization which follows the investment, dis-investment, and re-investment of capital. Because there is no center by which to measure the validity of an interpretation or against which to measure relative lack, both meaning and need are “subjectivized”. This is to say that interpretation forever spins vocation-less in the void of subjective interpretation

(through mass-media advertising, for example) in the form of personal, subjective deficits that direct and redirect the investment of libidinal energy without relation to a transcendental center or signifier.

Deleuze and Guattari's experiment with a universal history makes visible the differences in regimes while also retaining those differences as a dynamic force in the economy of libidinal energy production. In the despotic (signifying) regime there are always forces that favor de-territorialization, de-centering, and the dissolution (deconstruction) of key bonds between signifier and signified, and a great deal of energy is expended in suppressing them or re-territorializing them on the center. In a capitalist (post-signifying) regime, absolute de-territorialization and subjectivation constantly interact with a longing for centered meaning, for a transcendental, communal, global grounding of an ethical and spiritual life.

From the perspective of academia it is difficult to see how engagements with the Ottoman, and especially the engagements of foreign scholars, alienated as they are from the primary site of engagement, participate in the dynamic field of becoming existing between the Ottoman and the contemporary in today's Turkey. Nonetheless, scholars are clearly active participants in constructing and segmenting the field of becoming-Ottoman. However, it seems also that the primary issues inherent in re-thinking the Ottoman are most vividly displayed, not in academic studies at all, but by various more or less recent attempts to capture or reconstruct the Ottoman in art.

In the case, for example, of English literature, apparent continuities of language, writing system, and a continuous history of culture (seen as relatively unaffected by revolutionary social and political changes) allow us the illusion that our re-inventions of cultural icons—e.g., Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton—do in fact bring some essential meaning across the boundaries separating discursive universes. This is far more difficult to believe in Turkey where the monuments and artifacts of bygone culture are inscribed with a variety of languages in unreadable scripts. I would argue that for most Turks the sense of distance and/or loss with regard to past culture is far more acute than in the cultures of major Western languages. How this distance is felt varies over a rather wide range. From the perspective of a history of lack which values the Republican present over a deficient or outmoded Ottoman past, this loss may be perceived as good riddance and repressed without serious consequence. From a perspective that dwells upon the lack of the present—primarily the above-mentioned lack of centered, grounded, and stable meaning—the loss may be experienced as immediate, poignant, and painful. Within this range, the field of difference between the Ottoman (past) and the Republican (present) generates a variety of emotional, social, and economic states

that to a significant degree constitute the Turkish present. For purposes of this essay I will examine a few exemplary cases as they are represented in contemporary Turkish poetry.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the most straightforward case is that of spiritual revivalism—a case that I would argue is not at all as straightforward and uncomplicated as it seems. Simply put, the revivalist position can be expressed as follows: in the transition to modernity, capitalism, and westernism something of transcendent spiritual value was lost. Therefore the present is morally and spiritually deficient in relation to a past whose spiritual completeness could possibly be revived and restored. Consider this poem by Sezai Karakoç, a poem which has the name and form of an Ottoman elite culture *gazel*.

### Gazel

Rüzgâr ışıdı titredi çiğ gül düştü  
Tutunduğu dalı tutuşturup bülbül düştü

Gün doğumundan gün batımına kızardı bahçe  
Bir bir leylâk nergis lâle ve sümbül düştü

Ne çam dayandı ne kestane ne kavak ne nar  
Bin yıllık çınar gürül gürül düştü

Geçti mi ki yeşilin sonsuzluk yüklü çağı  
Kader yanardağından kızıl kara kül düştü

Vakit görmemişti böyle bir kıyameti  
Akıl sarardı karardı ruh gönül düştü (*Şiirler VII: ateş dansı* 19)

### Gazel

The wind glowed, dew trembled, the rose fell  
The nightingale set aflame the branch to which he clung and fell

From the rise of sun to sunset the garden grew red  
One by one lilac, tulip, hyacinth, narcissus fell

Neither pine resisted nor chestnut, poplar, pomegranate  
A thousand-year-old plane tree with a great roar fell

Is it passed, the age of green with its weight of eternity?  
Red, black ash from the volcano of destiny fell

Time had never seen a tumult such as this  
The mind paled, spirit quailed and the heart fell<sup>8</sup>

As I have pointed out over and over again, Ottoman poets consistently use the garden as a trope for Ottoman society. Karakoç, who is himself an insightful student and interpreter of Ottoman poetry, picks up easily and naturally on this, distantly echoing a favorite line of mine from İzzet Molla (1786-1829).

Bir mevsim-i bahârına geldik ki 'âlemiñ  
Bülbül hamûş havz tehî gül-sitân harâb

We have reached a luckless spring  
in this sad world  
When the nightingale is silent, the pool is empty,  
and the rose-garden is in ruins

(Andrews, Kalpaklı, and Black, *Ottoman Lyric Poetry* 305, 157)

The destruction of the garden (and nightingale and rose) is and has been a potent symbol for the loss of the unifying force of Ottoman society. What strikes me most forcibly in Karakoç's poem, however, is contained in the last two couplets. The phrase "the age of green with its weight of eternity" (*yeşilin sonsuzluk yüklü çağı*) is a precise and evocative expression of what he perceives as having been lost. Gone is the "age of green" which must be read as both the age of the garden, verdant with life and complete in its totalizing semiotic unity, and the age of the Prophet (green being the Prophet's color) with its promise of resurrection (troped by the endless re-greening of the garden). Gone too is the "weight of eternity" or the belief in a transcendent, unchanging center that can be the ground of an ultimate truth. What has separated humankind from this is the "tumult" (*kıyamet*) of the cataclysmic event that de-territorialized Ottoman culture and allowed it to re-territorialize on the post-signifying regime of Republican Turkey. The consequences of this re-direction and loss are for some a liberating freedom of thought and action and for others, such as Karakoç, a confusion of mind, a spiritual void, and general disillusionment.

For Karakoç the essence of Ottoman culture and the highest aim of art is the expression of a metaphysical center. In an essay entitled "Fizikötesi ve Sanatçı" (Metaphysics and the Artist), first published as part of a collection of essays in 1982, he concludes with the following ringing cry: "And one day, if a re-birth and revitalization of the Civilization of Truth is ever brought to fulfillment, the new reign of a metaphysical poetry and literature will surely emerge with all its brilliance into the light of day" (*edebiyat yazıları* I 26).

“The Civilization of Truth”—what a powerful and positive image of the centered, signifying regime this conjures up. Ottoman literature is definitively characterized as “metaphysical”, eliding the sexuality, drunkenness, nonsense in favor of a consistently spiritual interpretation. The Ottoman is reconceived on the basis of an eternal, authenticating, essential truth offered as antidote to the rootlessness of the present. All else—the tyranny, bloodshed, subjugation, all the aspects of the Ottoman that have defined the other in the narrative of Turkish modernity—are brushed aside as accidental, trivial, and ultimately forgettable. As part of the same process, the present Turkey of the Republic is re-imagined as the site of innumerable signs pointing toward the metaphysical stability and promise of the past. Consider another of Karakoç’s poems, his “İstanbul’un Hazan Gazeli” (Istanbul’s Autumn *Gazel*):

Ne yapacaksın plaj yerlerini  
Gidelim Kâğıthaneye Sâdabat harabelerine

Şâd etmek için Nedim’in ruhunu  
Ağzımızı dayayalım kurumuş çeşmelerine

“Sinemaya gidiyorum” de annene  
Cuma namazına gidelim onun yerine

Bakalım hayranlıkla Süleymaniye’ye  
Sultanahmed kubbe ve minarelerine

Sahaflarda kitapların sonbaharında  
Erelim geçmiş baharların menekşelerine

İstanbul’un kaybolan geçmiş tarihini tabiatını  
Son kez tadalım başlamadan ahiret seferine

Dünyadan daha dünya ahiretten ahiret  
Bir kent ki benzer divan şairi kasidelerine (*Sürler VII: ateş dansı 22*)

So what are you going to do with beaches?  
Let’s go to Kağıthane and the ruins of Sadabad

Let’s put our mouths to his dried-up fountains  
That we might make the soul of Nedim glad

Tell your mother: “I’m going out to the movies”  
And let us go to Friday prayers instead

Let us gaze in wonder at the mosque of Süleyman  
At Sultan Ahmet’s dome and minarets

In Sahaflar in the autumn-age of books  
Let us reach to the violets of bygone springs

Let us taste Istanbul's vanished history and sense  
One last time before setting out for the hereafter

More world than the world, than the hereafter more hereafter  
A city like the Ottoman poets' songs of praise

The poem opens with a clever and tongue-in-cheek reference to Nedim's "Sâdabad Şarkısı". Compare Nedim's "İzn alıp cum'a namazına diyü maderden // Bir gün uğrılıyalım çerh-i sitem-perverden" (Let's get your mother's leave, say we're going to Friday prayers // Let's steal a day from destiny's despotic wheel) to Karakoç's third couplet. The reversal here initiates a call, a call seemingly directed toward a younger generation summoning them to a reassessment of desire, a redefinition of pleasure, and the rediscovery of Istanbul. The program suggested is an "internal tourism" through which the local population would discover the secret of a lost unity or spiritual wholeness immanent to the artifacts of the past. This is a tourism that recreates an Ottoman past *for the present*.<sup>9</sup>

The intensity and scope of Karakoç's project are foregrounded by his defiantly using, as a symbol of an essentially spiritual, metaphysical Ottoman consciousness, the poet Nedim, who is perhaps the least metaphysical of major Ottoman poets and, in recent times, the most often imagined as ancestral to the modern and secular. It would seem that even the worldly and fleshy pleasures of the centered past, represented by Nedim and the pleasure park of Sadabad with its mundane erotic associations, are preferable to today's amusements (the beaches). In some sense the past is perceived as *intrinsically* good.

The project needs no explanation. It is compelling in its directness and its appeal to commonly recognized needs: for love, compassion, mercy, truth. However, according to my version of Deleuze and Guattari's argument, in the world of capitalism, power is permanently deterritorialized as the flow of abstract wealth, represented by money which accumulates as capital. There is no earthly power or center to which a "transcendence machine" can be connected. There is no external, totalizing leverage for mercy or compassion, only a relentless and directionless flow given meaning and purpose (or mercy and compassion) by local initiatives. In order to accept Karakoç's stated premises and engage in the project of reconstructing an Ottoman metaphysical sensibility in the present, one would also need to believe that the centered, organic unity of the Ottoman spiritual universe could exist apart from the whole apparatus of the

discourse of centered unity that constituted, supported, and perpetuated a despotic regime. In fact, it is difficult to see how the regime of centered meaning could be instituted on earth without the centered and despotic state.

Becoming-Ottoman for other poets is complicated by this very suspicion—that the metaphysical centered-ness of Ottoman art and Ottoman society in general cannot be detached from the practices of Ottoman despotism. For example, in the case of Attilâ İlhan, the presence of Ottoman artifacts, in his case, poems and music more than mosques and minarets, generates nostalgia for another reading of the garden in which the metaphysical interpretation is submerged beneath the actuality of a party marked by the company of dear friends, music, conversation, and an underlying and pervasive eroticism. İlhan responds to much the same unease about the present that we see in Karakoç's indictment, the same sense of loss of communal purpose, of spiritual emptiness, and disillusionment under the regime of an unjust and merciless economic system. Nonetheless, the substance of his response is not at all the same.

Because I have dealt with this response elsewhere in some detail, I will only mention a few of its major points here.<sup>10</sup> Instead of seeking relief from the despotisms of the present by reviving the spiritual grounding of a despotic past, Attilâ İlhan more often seeks solidarity with past lives caught in the toils of a despotic regime. He sees in their struggles to emerge, to escape, to be assuaged, to take pleasure in life, a counterpart to his own desires. Yet for him all forms of nostalgia with regard to the Ottoman past seem ever to be tempered by an awareness of the vast cruelties required to enforce the regime of centered meaning, the "Civilization of Truth". Accompanying this is a fascination with the chaos of transitional periods, especially the period of massive deterritorializations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that crystallized as the Turkish Republic. In the tumult and chaos he appears to discern a bubbling brew of possibilities, not the least among which is the possibility of revolutionary change. As an example of İlhan's complex and conflicted relation to the Ottoman past, consider the following poem:

**harem-i hümayun**

birer sırça kadehtir  
     soframızda yıldızlar  
             büyülü bir rakıyla dolar  
 pancurlar kırılır  
     mehtabın ağırlığından  
     odalar  
             o mâhûr şarkıyla dolar

uzanmış lâhûr şal üstüne  
çubuk sefasına dalmış  
siyah perçemleri belâ  
elâ gözleri âfet  
bir nevcivan ki / gönül  
kanrevan  
aşkıyla dolar  
mülkün her ucu başka felaket  
rumeli'den bozgun haberleri  
anadolu'da isyan  
arabistan'da veba  
kazan kaldırmış yeniçeri  
mehter vurur / payitaht  
kılıç şavkıyla dolar

gizemli saray aynalarında  
görünür kaybolurlar  
yaşmaklı sultan çehreleri  
gözleri kahııyla dolar  
boğdurulmuş şehzadelerin  
körpe zambak boyunlarında  
kaypak bir yılan yağlı ilmik  
samurdan duvarlarına harem'in  
çarpa çarpa uzar  
sonsuz kadar çığlıkları  
kubbeler  
canhıraş bir yankıyla dolar (*elde var hüçün* 72-73)

### the imperial harem

each a crystal goblet  
the stars on our table  
are filled with enchanted *rakı*  
shutters broken down  
by the weight of moonlight  
the rooms  
are filled with that song in *mahur* mode  
stretched out on a lahore shawl  
lost in narghile pleasures  
his black locks are trouble  
his hazel eyes catastrophe  
a young man filled  
with a bloody-  
hearted passion

from every end of the country another disaster  
 news of defeats in europe  
     rebellion in anatolia  
             plague in the arab lands  
 the janissaries have mutinied  
     the military band plays / the capital  
       is filled with the flash of swords

in mystical palace mirrors  
 appear and disappear  
     the veiled faces of princesses  
 their eyes filled with anguish  
     about the tender lily-necks  
 of strangled princes  
     the oiled noose a slippery serpent  
             from the sable walls of the harem  
 their wails reach out  
     to the endless  
         and the domes  
             are filled with a bitter echo

Attilâ İlhan's Ottoman themes are all present here: the drinking party, eroticism, music, the turmoil of collapse, the mystery, danger, cruelty, and sorrow of absolute despotism. The thematic content is obvious. Less obvious perhaps are the two allusions that frame the poem. The first is to Yahya Kemal Beyatlı (1884-1958), an icon of nostalgic idealism, and his Ottoman-esque poem entitled "Mâhurdan Gazel" (*Gazel* in the *Mahur* Mode) which begins with the couplet:

Gördüm ol meh düşuna bir şâl atup lâhûrdan  
 Gül yanaklar üstüne yaşmak tutunmuş nûrdan (*Eski Şiirin Rüzgârıyla* 53)

I saw that moon  
 A shawl from Lahore  
 Tossed over her (his) shoulder  
 And over cheeks of rose  
     (S)he wore  
         A veil of light<sup>11</sup>

The final and ironic allusion is to a famous and oft-quoted couplet by the sixteenth-century master-poet Bâkî:

Âvâzeyi bu 'âleme Dâvûd gibi sal  
Bâkî kalan bu kubbede bir hûş sadâ imiş (*Bâkî Divânı* 234)

Let fly your voice into this world like the psalmist David  
For all that remains in this dome, they say, Bâkî, is a pleasant echo

For Attilâ İlhan, the Bâkîs, the Ottoman poets, even the nostalgic idealists may leave a pleasant echo, but so also do the cries of the oppressed, from princess to peasant, reverberate down through time, discordant and bitter.

Of the three poets I am using as examples, Hilmi Yavuz presents the most difficulties. His poetry is vastly and intentionally ambiguous—in a way that resembles Ottoman practices and in a way that allows me, rather too easily, to relate some of his views on the Ottomans to my own. His poetry seems to demonstrate the ability of language to be meaningful—and, in fact, constitutive of reality—while, at the same time, he rebels against centered meaning. Ambiguity privileges multiplicity over unity. It is antithetical to centered, signifying regimes, but antithetical in an indirect, non-confrontational way. Ottoman poetry is a poetry of “glances”, Hilmi Yavuz said quite early in his career:

Kuş sananlar yanıldılar  
Bir bakıştır dedi kimi  
Belki de bir bakış kuşu (*Gülün Ustası Yoktur* 54)

Those who thought it a bird were wrong  
It's just a glance some said  
Perhaps even a glance bird

Major things in Ottoman poetry, like its eroticism and its rebelliousness, are done in indirections, the indirection of a sideward look of eyes from behind a veil. What is writ large, large to the limits of hyperbole, is a profound sorrow, a melancholy that ultimately de-centers everything, including the self. In this we have what I have come to see as two pillars of Ottoman artistic mysticism: the power of language, through ambiguity, to defy the despotic center of meaning, and the power of intense, overmastering emotion to liberate the spirit from that which binds flesh to the regimes of this world, the power to produce nonsense. Hilmi Yavuz's poetry searches beneath the surface of Ottoman poetry where the old poets sing a rather straightforward love centered on the ruler, in a language wherein mastery often appears as mere trickery and hyperbole as affectation. Beneath this surface, Yavuz finds, in the manner of an

archaeologist, true passions, yearnings, and mountainous emotions, and there also he finds the reality of the Ottoman poets; for example:

**kazı**

sarı yaz! kat kat şafaklar  
gördün dizelerde, sevdalar  
gördün göçük bir dağ  
gibi üstüste geldikçe  
ben şairim: bir yeraltıyım ben  
acıyım  
kazdıkça  
ve derine indikçe

siz kimbilir kaç gece  
bir gülün ölümünü andınız  
bir ipek simya sesi  
ve nice  
katmanlar aradınız  
ve dolaştım diye düşündünüz  
bir yaz gibi gülen çocuklar  
ve yollar gördükçe

şürler kazılmalı: o ince  
gurbetlerin gömdüğü  
söz başları kırmızı  
yazmayı gördüm sandınız  
kırgın kâğıtlar buldunuz  
hüznü donmuş, külü meşin  
ve birden  
acısı acınıza değdikçe (*Erguvan Sözler* 10-11)

**the dig**

yellow summer! layered dawns  
you saw them in the lines, passions  
you saw them as they came one after the other  
like a peak collapsed  
i am a poet: subterranean  
i am pain  
as you dig  
and descend into the depths



göğünse yavaş yavaş  
dökülüp ıssız bıraktığı sfer  
kati... kaskatı...

artık keder bile keder  
vermiyor; acı, acıyı unuttu;  
güneşle kandili ayırdedemez olduk  
-kanserli saatler!..  
sevinç, bulaşıcı bir sayrılık  
gibi tiksiniç; kapılar çürüyor  
durdukları yerde; açmanın anlamı yok,  
kapamanın da...  
-hiç... hiç... (Erguvan Sözler 156-57)

### poems to orpheus

1.  
all is cancer! from this diseased  
and barren city  
we couldn't even  
save the foul, filthy, polluted  
sorrows. they seemed too much.  
feelings knotted into lumps, in the heart there was  
corruption; we got around to the cancer of the word  
it was done up  
in harsh vocabulary and poems  
that come into the hand  
like stones, this city.  
ruin, its passion; collapse, its hope  
now implies;  
as for the sphere  
that the sky shedding slowly  
slowly left desolate  
it's harsh. oh so harsh.  
in the end even sorrow grants  
no sorrow; the bitter has forgotten bitterness;  
we've gotten to where we cannot tell  
sun from candle  
-cancerous hours!  
joy, like a contagious disease  
is nauseating; the doors are rotting  
where they stand, there's no sense in opening them  
or in closing them either.  
-none. none.

The way we are accustomed to look at the world (the majoritarian perspective), there is nothing beyond this degree of despair but hopelessness and an ultimate quietism. There is no hope, so why bother? This would certainly appear to be the case under a despotic regime where all power, wealth, control are gathered into the hands of one person—what could one person do in such a situation? Like Bedreddin, rebel futilely and die.<sup>12</sup> And what can one do now, when power, wealth, control have become so de-centered, so abstracted that there is nothing visible or tangible to rebel against, when “the word” has lost its power to create the universe? In Hilmi Yavuz’s poetry there is, however, a hint—recall the Ottomanism of hints and glances—a hint that beyond or beneath the overwhelming, inexorable collapse of the megalopolis and its regime there is a point or moment or milieu of personal contact, where “their pain touched your pain”. There are temporary alliances in which mystical, spiritual relations are formed—multiple, contingent, unattached to any totalizing program—yet resistant, rebellious, liberating.

**bâtuni**

herşey bâtnil göl  
kendi dibindeki batıktan  
başka nedir? acılar  
derin ve siyah bayraklarını  
tekneme çekeli beriymi:

herşey bâtnil benim  
kendini yurtsuyor birden:  
'ben kendimin  
teknesiyim ben...'

böyle dedi ve diyen  
öteki yolculardan biriymi:

herşey bâtnil gül  
goncalarda içkinken  
dil, güzü bekleyen kıyıda  
aşkın sözünü karşılıyor  
gibiymi...

herşey bâtnil ve hüznün  
hüznün  
en büyük muhalefettir şimdi (*Erguvan Sözler* 64-65)

## esoteric

everything is esoteric! what  
 is a lake but what has sunk  
 to its bottom? it's been  
 since agonies hoisted their profound black  
 banners over my ship:

everything is esoteric! my flesh  
 is suddenly homesick for itself  
 'I am the ship

of my self...'

or so he said and the speaker  
 was one of the other passengers

everything is esoteric! the rose  
 while immanent in the bud  
 language on the expectant verge of autumn  
 seemed to be greeting  
 words of love...

everything is esoteric! and sorrow

sorrow

is now the best opposition

I see in this a very sophisticated reading of Ottoman mystical poetry, a reading in which spirituality defies its own systematization, in which it resists location in a mosque or church or synagogue or temple of idols. There is a scent of the same longing for spiritual revival here that we saw in Sezai Karakoç, but with the suggestion that there is the possibility of a de-centered spirituality that exists in a constant state of rebellion against the forces that would bind it to a single, despotic source of meaning. It might even be possible to characterize Hilmi Yavuz's poetry as the practice of an archaeology of the spirit. He is continually urging us to probe beneath the surface and what we seem to find when we probe is *LANGUAGE* (which I purposely write large to emphasize its transcendence). He thinks of himself as a latter-day nominalist, linking himself, for example, with the medieval nominalist Peter Abelard in the poem "bursa ve Zaman" (*Erguvan Sözler* 104-05). For him the world is constituted for us by words; it is given form and substance through language, and in such a universe poetry has important work to do. Poetry is where the creative power of language is most manifest, where the subterranean connections between words are brought to the surface. And Hilmi Yavuz consistently connects his nominalist notions to the practice of Ottoman poets by referencing some of their favorite tropes—e.g., the mirror, the rose. Implicit

in this is a reading of Ottoman poets in which their preoccupation with words and the connections, mutations, and irresolvable ambiguities of words reveals an implicit nominalism at the spiritual center of the material world.

This kind of connection moves us toward a final point in the examination of the (cultural) becomings-Ottoman of contemporary Turkey, a point that will be far too briefly touched upon here. We must remember that any “becoming” is mutual, that a Deleuzo-Guattarian compound such as Turkish-becoming-Ottoman implies no dominant subject or predicate position and must be read simultaneously as Ottoman-becoming-Turkish. This means that as we, poets and scholars both, go about the business of understanding Ottoman artifacts, we are, at once, becoming Ottoman ourselves and recreating the Ottoman as a contemporary object. The Ottoman becomes what we make of it. In scholarly writing as elsewhere, it becomes the sign for the regime of an underlying spiritual reality and moral consensus; it becomes the sign for social cohesion and cultural synthesis; it becomes the sign of a de-centered, secularized, and rebellious mysticism. Over time it also loses its direct connection with the cruelties and failures of Ottoman despotism. Within this field of becoming lie powerful potentials for stepping aside or getting out of it. In its radical difference from the present, the Ottoman creates possibilities for experiments in escape or flight from the regimes of thought that dominate our age. This is apparent from even this cursory sketch of poems by a few contemporary Turkish poets. But, as Deleuze and Guattari are careful to point out, there is also a danger in dissolving the apparent unity of seemingly organic assemblages. What has been set free can spin off into madness and death or be recaptured in still more despotic formulations.<sup>13</sup>

It is important that we be aware that our dissatisfactions with the present are quite easily reconceived as a sense of loss with respect to the past. This sense of loss in turn recreates the past (exemplified by the Ottoman) as the site of the lost (and valuable) thing.<sup>14</sup> When the “past” or “Ottoman” is seen as an entity with a truth that is accessible to us (as we tend to do in scholarly circles, often unwittingly or for heuristic purposes), then it can seem that we might be able to recuperate our loss by bringing back—and enforcing—some particularized and reified mode of organization from the past. A point of departure can easily reconstitute itself as a necessary point of return; and despotism is never that distant from our desires for order, belonging, and meaning.

What I am trying to demonstrate here is that there is more complexity to thinking about the Ottomans and their cultural artifacts than binary thinking allows us to perceive. From the perspective of Deleuze and Guattari, what appear to us as binaries—past/present, Ottoman/modern, scholarship/poetry, scholarship/politics,

spiritual/material, for example—are always connected by the inclusive disjunction, the AND that both divides, by resisting synthesis and resolution into a single term, and includes, by resisting notions of opposition and embracing difference. From the perspective of the middle or the AND, we reveal possibilities for stepping aside from the limits of the discourse that constructs our present concepts of the Ottoman and we open ourselves to new experiments in thought that make our engagements with the past lively and beneficial.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Portions of this essay were first presented as part of a panel entitled “Turkish Culture between Ottomans and Turks” held at the 1998 meeting of the Middle East Studies Association of North America.

<sup>2</sup> The most complete exposition of “becoming” is found in chapter 10 of *A Thousand Plateaus*, which is entitled “1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible”. However, there is also a less explicit contextualization of “becoming” found in Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*.

<sup>3</sup> On the issue of “deterritorialization” which runs throughout Deleuze and Guattari’s work, see Eugene W. Holland.

<sup>4</sup> If this seems unclear, I would point out that the moment it becomes possible to think notions such as “Turkish” or “Republican” in contrast to “Ottoman”, the “Ottoman” (as noun, adjective, and adverb) becomes part of a new assemblage with no evolutionary relation to the “Ottoman” of the past (which never participated in such “becomings”).

<sup>5</sup> The characterization here represents a “Deleuzo-Guattarian” reading of the exposition found in my own work, *Poetry’s Voice Society’s Song*.

<sup>6</sup> For discussions of the “regimes of signs”, see Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 111-48 and Bogue 136-45.

<sup>7</sup> This essay articulates very closely with another essay of mine entitled “Contested Mysteries and Mingled Dreams”, in *Cultural Horizons: A Festschrift in Honor of Talat S. Halman*.

<sup>8</sup> All translations in this essay are my own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>9</sup> For an illuminating and well-theorized discussion of the role of internal tourism in constituting a national image, see Marilyn Ivy, especially Chapter 2.

<sup>10</sup> Atılâ İlhan’s poetry is briefly analyzed in this regard in Andrews and Kalpaklı 1996. A more detailed analysis of his poetry and its relation to the Ottoman is found in an unpublished article by Walter G. Andrews entitled “Time Warps”.

<sup>11</sup> The full translation of this poem appears in Kemal Silay 295.

<sup>12</sup> Editor’s note: Şeyh Bedreddin (1358-1416), a distinguished Ottoman jurist and mystic, was hanged for his participation in a major rebellion against the regime of Sultan Mehmed I.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of this danger, see Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 265-72 and especially 270.

<sup>14</sup> Of course this sense of loss is not limited to the Ottoman. It has been and is equally applied to the loss of connection to “folk” culture and/or to a “Turkic” pre-Islamic and Central Asian past.

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