

Edouard Roditi and the Istanbul Avant-Garde

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My introduction to Edouard Roditi and his work occurred in the form of “The Vampires of Istanbul: A Study in Modern Communications Methods,” as reprinted in *Méditerranéennes 10: Istanbul, un monde pluriel*. Originally published in 1972, this wicked and surreally funny satire consists of news stories, editorials, and letters to the editor from the fictional newspaper *Yeni Aksham*, all related to the shocking discovery of a case of vampirism in Fener, “an ancient and impoverished district of the Golden Horn.” The documents date from February to September 1960; the letters issue from an array of correspondents including professors of history and psychiatry, the president of the Pan-Turanian Association of Shamanistic Vampires, and a belly dancer professionally disadvantaged by a swollen buttock. Among the hapless targets are Turkish journalists, political pundits, pseudo-scientists and, not to leave anyone out, American imperialists. The brilliant command of local detail bespoke an easy familiarity with the city and its not infrequently volatile inhabitants on the part of the author. Who was he, and how had he come by his knowledge?

I learned that Roditi was born in Paris in 1910 and was something of a child prodigy, publishing surrealistic prose poems in *transition* at the age of eighteen and appearing thereafter in *Blues*, *Tambour*, *Pagany*, and other little magazines of the place and time. Both Léon-Paul Fargue and T. S. Eliot smiled on his youthful work—an unusual phenomenon indeed—and he was enlisted, along with Samuel Beckett, to help translate James Joyce into French. He was an early friend and benefactor of American authors Charles Henri Ford and Paul Bowles, his fellow contributors to *transition*.¹ In the 1930s a brief residence as a student in Nazi Germany raised his consciousness of his Jewish roots and led him to write poetry of a more traditional turn, some of which was published as *Three Hebrew Elegies* in 1941. In the late 1930s he continued his studies in Chicago and Berkeley and, when World War II broke out, he moved to New York. There he worked the French desk at the Voice of America studios while also aiding Jews trapped in occupied France. At the same time he contributed to

View, *VVV*, and other outlets of the avant-garde, many of whose European practitioners had taken refuge in New York because of the war. His translations of André Breton and Alfred Jarry, commissioned by *View*, were the first in English. His book on Oscar Wilde appeared in 1947 and another collection of poetry—*Poems, 1928–1948*—in 1949. In all this work there appeared little, really, to do with Turkey.

Yet in 1961 the Turkish novelist Yashar Kemal's *Memed, My Hawk* was published in English, with Edouard Roditi as the translator of record. What was the connection? A simple question on the face of it, one that I had no idea would lead so deeply into the byways of mid-century Turkish art and culture. But then Roditi seems always to have been a man of surprises.

As good a place as any to begin is with the artist Aliye Berger (1903–1974), whose studio on the upper floor of the gently decaying Narmanlı Han was a gathering place for Istanbul writers and artists in the 1950s and 1960s. The *han*, a massive edifice surrounding a tree-shaded courtyard, gave onto what was once the Grande Rue de Pera, the central boulevard of the city's European quarter. Built in 1831, it had housed the imperial Russian Embassy for most of the nineteenth century. But now the Grande Rue was İstiklal Caddesi, Pera was Beyoğlu, and the *han* had for a long while been home to artists and writers such as Berger, the painter and poet Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, and the novelist Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, author of *The Time Regulation Institute* and path-breaker for future Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk. Aliye was the youngest child of a legendary Ottoman family that included scholars, artists, and pashas, even a grand vizier. Her parties were famous and her Narmanlı Han address, equally art studio and literary salon, was communications central for the city's Westernizing avant-garde.² It was a place where knowledgeable foreign visitors could catch up on the latest developments in what was then called Istanbul's "bohemian world."

In the winter of 1956–1957 the English writer Derek Patmore was in town to research a book on Turkey and to scout out examples of modern Turkish painting for an exhibition at the Eleventh Edinburgh Festival, to be held the following August. Patmore, great-grandson of the Victorian poet Coventry ("Angel in the House") Patmore, was an old Turkey hand. He first passed through Istanbul on his way to Romania in 1938, then came back the next year. When World War II broke out he wrangled a job as Balkans war correspondent with the *Daily Mail* of London and was posted to Bucharest. Events compelled him, not unwillingly, to shift to Istanbul. There in 1941 he met the assortment of painters and poets known collectively as the "d Group" or "Group D."³ This seminal alliance was formed in 1933 by six artists: Abidin Dino, Nurullah Berk, Zeki İzer, Elif Naci, Cemal Tollu, and Zühtü Müridoğlu. They held their first exhibition in the Mimoza Hat Shop at the Narmanlı Han in the same year. By 1941

they had added four more artists to the group, including Aliye Berger's neighbor Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu and Aliye's sister Fahrelnissa Zeyd, and were on their ninth exhibition. It was to this show, held in "a small old-fashioned building" near Beyazıt Square, that Patmore was taken by Nejad Melih Devrim, Fahrelnissa's son and a painter himself. Rather to everyone's surprise—it was not common in those cash-poor days for artists to make a sale—Patmore bought a few of the works on display, and thus began a long association with the Turkish art scene⁴ (Patmore, *Pages from a Turkish Journal*, 204–7).

In addition to painting, Patmore took an interest in the new literature and music emerging from a self-consciously modernizing Turkey. In 1945 he arranged the publication of a chapbook of Turkish poetry in translation. *The Star and the Crescent* marked the first appearance in English by poets such as Yahya Kemal, Orhan Veli Kanık, and Oktay Rifat, who fifty years later would enjoy canonical status.⁵ Patmore asserted that his selection "reflected the spirit of the modern Turkish Republic," but admitted that he could not include Nazım Hikmet—arguably the most important of the moderns—"for reasons beyond my control" (*Star and Crescent* 1, 9). Hikmet had been sentenced in 1938 to twenty-eight years in prison for "attempting to convert young officers to his own political views," those views being openly Marxist. The young officers, it seems, had been reading Hikmet's poetry in the barracks.⁶

Now, more than a decade later, Patmore was at Aliye's chatting with the journalist and fiction writer Yashar Kemal. Kemal's novel *Ince Memed*, after long serialization in the newspaper *Cumhuriyet*, had been published in 1955 in book form to critical and popular acclaim. Patmore said, "Your novel must be wonderful. Why don't you send it to me?" Kemal went down the street to a bookstore, bought a copy, signed it, and gave it to Patmore. When the two met again in London a few months later Patmore delivered the news that he had not only found an English publisher for the novel (Collins and Harvill), but also a translator: Edouard Roditi. What he didn't mention was that Roditi had accepted the commission on one condition: that he work with "a relative in Istanbul" who was fluent in both Turkish and English (personal interview, 17 February 2007, and Hızlan).

Patmore and Roditi had been friends since the early thirties. Roditi, as with Ford and Bowles, had introduced Patmore to Parisian café society and the art world, taking him, for instance, to the opening of Salvador Dalí's first Paris show, where Patmore was more taken with the young Christian Dior than with Dalí's surrealism. On another occasion—the night of February 6, 1934, to be precise—they were about to set out from Patmore's hotel when it was announced that the streets were full of rioters and that a mob had begun to loot the nearby Hotel Claridge. It was the Stavisky Affair reaching its climax. Serge Stavisky was a financier who

floated phony bonds on the French Bourse with, it had come to light, the connivance of high officials in the Third Republic. A number of political demonstrations ensued. The current disturbance seemed to be another in the series, and large. Roditi suggested they stay off the streets and head to Montmartre by Métro. Unfortunately, once in the Métro they discovered that the police had closed all the exits. Trapped underground, they crisscrossed Paris for hours before they were able finally to emerge, exhausted and distraught, in an obscure corner of the city. Later that night Patmore received a call from Roditi saying that during their underground travaux his brother had been shot by the police in the course of a protest at the Place de la Concorde. The bullet to Harold Roditi's spine would not only leave him paralyzed for life but would, in Edouard's words, help transform him into "a Fascist saint" (Patmore, *Private History*, 205–7).

As for the "relative in Istanbul," the fact was that the Roditis had an extensive background in the city. Edouard's father and grandfather had been born there. Indeed, popular belief held that the family had come to Constantinople "on the first sixteen ships"—a reference to the Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 and given refuge by Sultan Beyazit II. Possibly they dated from even earlier, Byzantine times: Roditi would describe himself to Gregory Corso as "of Italian and Greek Jewish origin, with part of my family coming from . . . the former Venetian concession in Istanbul"—that is, the Galata district of Pera, where the Venetians had secured a foothold in the tenth century (Corso Papers n.d.). It was said that one of the first printing presses of the Ottoman Empire, in sixteenth-century Smyrna, bore the Roditi name. Perhaps these stories were somewhat apocryphal, but indisputably Edouard's paternal grandfather, from whom his American citizenship descended, had flourished in Istanbul before emigrating to Boston around 1880 and then to Paris a few years later.

Edouard's father, Oscar, on completing his education in France, obtained a job with the Compagnie Internationale des Wagon-Lits et des Grands Express Européens—the company that ran the Orient Express. His duties often took him back to Istanbul, where he helped supervise the building of the Pera Palace hotel. On one of his trips, which happened to coincide with an outbreak of anti-Armenian riots in the 1890s, he helped the owner of the Tokatlian Hotel charter a ship that took some three hundred Armenians to safety in Egypt. Among the grateful refugees, Edouard noted years later in "My Father's Armenian File," was Calouste Gulbenkian, the future oil magnate and art collector (51–53).⁷ Apparently Oscar never returned to the city after marrying Edouard's mother, a French woman with British citizenship, in 1907.

But if the family abandoned Constantinople, the move failed to erase their Levantine roots. During his Parisian childhood Edouard's paternal grandmother had him read the Greek newspapers to her and taught him

Ladino, the archaic Spanish of the Istanbul Sephardim, while his father, in Edouard's words, never became Westernized so much as "dis-Oriented" ("Inventions and Imitations" 167). Certainly, while growing up in Paris the young Roditi would have had ample opportunity to imbibe his fair share of Constantinopolitan folklore, not only from his own family but from their close friends and distant relatives, the Camondo family.

The Camondos, known as "the Rothschilds of the East," were also of Italian Jewish origin, at least according to family history. The original patriarch had come to Constantinople in the late eighteenth century, settling in Fener (which was not then impoverished). In the nineteenth century the brothers Abraham Salomon and Isaac amassed one of the great fortunes of the Ottoman Empire, serving as moneylenders to a succession of sultans and then helping to found the state bank.⁸ If they were relative latecomers to the city, however, they made up for it in splendor. An 1881 city register shows them owning no less than ten *hans*, twenty-seven apartment buildings and houses, a theater, some fifty shops, and two *yalis*, or waterside mansions, on the Bosphorus (Şeni 666). Among the family monuments still standing are the old Camondo residence in Galata (known as the Camondo Han after it was converted to apartments and offices), Abraham Salomon Camondo's mausoleum in the Hasköy Jewish cemetery, and the Art Nouveau "Camondo Stairs," curving gracefully up from the financial district of Karaköy to residential Galata.

In 1869, the year of the opening of the Suez Canal (financed in large part by the Camondos), the bank shifted its main branch to Paris. There the counts Nissim and Abraham Behor Camondo—titled by a grateful king of Italy, whom they had financially assisted in the reunification campaign—contributed handsomely to the flavor of *la belle époque* with their mansions, grand balls, and great estates. Edouard's father Oscar was a familiar of the second generation of Paris Camondos, the counts Isaac and Moise, and was particularly close to Count Moise's son Nissim, who died in World War I. Oscar was a regular at Count Moise's weekend hunting parties, and after Nissim's death the Roditi family continued to pay ritual visits to the count at his Aumont chateau (Roditi, "Camondo's Way," 162).

As a child, one of Edouard's favorite treats was to be taken with his father and Count Moise to an Armenian restaurant where patrons enjoyed conversing in Ladino and Turkish ("My Father's Armenian File" 52). In his 1987 essay, "Camondo's Way," he reminisces about the vanished aristocratic way of life represented by the Camondos, and incidentally relates a family yarn about one of the Camondo great ladies and her encounter with the Constantinople rabble:

In my childhood my grandmother used to tell me how a near-riot had once occurred when, over a hundred years ago, a lady of the

Camondo family appeared one day in her carriage, by the [Galata] bridge, wearing a crinoline, the first native lady of the city's Jewish minority to be seen in public flaunting this garment that was generally worn there only by the wives of foreign diplomats or merchants and by a few rare tourists. (158)

The Proustian echo in "Camondo's Way" is meant as homage to the influence of the family in Roditi's own choice of a life dedicated to the arts: Count Moise sometimes took the young Edouard along on museum-inspecting and art-collecting expeditions, and saw to his aesthetic education when opportunity offered (162). But the allusion serves also to symbolize the way of life of the Sephardim, that is, the Jews of the Mediterranean and the Near East—such as the Camondos and the Roditis—as distinct from that of the Ashkenazim, the Jews of central Europe, whom he characterizes as belonging to Rothschild's Way (165–66). It was the Camondos, incidentally, who owned Proust's rue Hamelin apartment building. Proust wrote Moise a letter of condolence on his son Nissim's death (Şeni and Le Tarnec 247) and, according to Roditi, borrowed the name of his character Nissim Bernard in *Cities of the Plain* from the first Count Nissim (letter to Musée Nissim de Camondo, 12 December 1984). As for the fine Camondo lady, she might well be the figure behind "The Boulissa's Pilgrimage," Roditi's short narrative set in the waning days of the empire and published in English, French, and Spanish. The Boulissa, the narrator tells us, was

the dowager of the powerful Romaniot-Jewish Tazartis family, bankers for several generations to His Imperial Highness the Sultan "*de toutes les Turquies*," as the old lady's more Westernized grandson, Kalonymos (Shemtov) Tazartis, would say in his irreverent Parisian manner. (*Delights of Turkey* 32).

Or as Sidney Rosenfeld thinks, the Boulissa's original may be Roditi's great-grandmother from the Belinfante family, another of Istanbul's oldest and grandest (Rosenfeld 412–13). The point in either case is that the author has clearly anchored his fiction in his ancestral history.

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Roditi first visited Turkey in person in 1950, when he received a commission to interpret for a Mediterranean-wide conference of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, to be held in Ankara. As the congress dragged on, he found time to tour the country and meet his Istanbul relatives. One of these was his cousin Thilda Serrero. She had

literary interests, and he formed a warm relationship with her. This initial contact with Turkey was “quite favorable,” Roditi would later tell Richard Candida Smith. His fascination especially with the early Christian, Byzantine, and Islamic monuments he found there would lead him to return “very often” and “to develop an interest in Turkish history and Turkish art and Turkish literature” (*Inventions* 271).

He was soon writing on Turkish art and literature. In 1953 he reviewed *Splendeur de l'art turc*, an exhibition of traditional Turkish art at the Decorative Arts Museum in Paris, for *Preuves*. Criticizing Orientalist stereotypes, he pointed out that few European critics would be able to say what distinguishes the Taj Mahal, say, from a Sinan mosque, or Ottoman from Persian or Arabic art (“*Splendeur de l'art turc*” 2). Articles on modern Turkish art and artists appeared in *Coloquio*, *Art Voices*, *Art News and Review*, and *Jeune Afrique*, among others. These pieces tended to focus on a core group: Abidin Dino, Fahrelnissa Zeyd, her son Nejad Devrim, her sister Aliye Berger, their niece Füreya Koral, Fikret Mualla, Selim Turan, Avni Arbas, Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, and his wife Eren—the d Group and their circle, in short. These artists, who were more or less at home in both Istanbul and Paris, where most of them had studied and some now lived, generally considered themselves to have at least one foot in the contemporary “*École de Paris*.” Roditi, however, found an irreducibly “Turkish” quality in their work that led him to propose a complementary “*École d'Istanbul*” (on this point Patmore expressed similar views). In an interview with Fahrelnissa Zeyd, for instance, published in his 1960 *Dialogues on Art*, he traces her style to a Turkish tradition of mysticism dating to the Middle Ages while simultaneously comparing it to the action painting then fashionable in New York. Although she does not object to Roditi’s analysis, she also politely insists on her connection to the School of Paris (198). In the interview Roditi parenthetically reminds Zeyd that their families have known each other for three generations.

Zeyd’s work, as it happens, received its first public showing at the d Group exhibition that Patmore attended in 1941. Preceding that show by two years, though, was a more notorious event—the legendary “Harbor Exhibition”—mounted by the “Port Group,” who were mostly Abidin Dino and the d Group by another name. After preliminary organization at the nearby Camondo Han (home to a number of painters and poets), the exhibition went up at Tophane, an area of sailors’ dives and fishermen’s coffeehouses. A public scandal erupted when the artists openly preferred the critical opinions of stevedores to those of professors and critics, and compelled the minister of education and other dignitaries to wait while a fisherman in muddy boots opened the show by cutting a fishing net draped across the gallery entrance (Roditi, “Abidine,” 1). Although Zeyd did not participate in that show, she remarked to Roditi:

We were considered dangerous innovators and revolutionaries because we insisted on showing our work to the masses, not only to the educated elite as all painters of the past had done; besides, we attached as much importance to the critical remarks of illiterate workers as to opinions expressed by sophisticated intellectuals.

I believe that our D Group was thus the first group of modern Turkish painters to achieve any prestige in Istanbul. (*Dialogues* 196)

Roditi wrote occasionally on "Western" topics for Turkish readers. In addition to newspaper articles for a popular audience, he produced learned discussions of psychology and surrealism, for instance, for Şakır Eczacıbaşı's *Tıpta Yenilikler* (Innovations in Medicine), a journal of the medical profession. He was chiefly interested, however, in pushing Turkish culture.

"My mission," he declared to a reporter for the *Bayram Gazetesi*, "is to introduce Turkish civilization to the Western world. Turkey's 'human experience', especially in art and literature, can help the West" (Andak).

Accordingly, he collaborated enthusiastically with Patmore on the 1957 Edinburgh exhibition. His share of the work was to round up paintings from the Paris group of Turkish artists while Patmore dealt with the Istanbul group. It was a somewhat delicate business for both men. In Istanbul personal rivalry among the artists was intense. Patmore reports, for example, that the older painters tried to sabotage İbrahim Balaban, a "Turkish Douanier Rousseau," because he'd learned his art not at the academy but in prison with Nazım Hikmet⁹ (*Roads to Istanbul* 67ff.). Patmore included Balaban's work all the same, and Roditi singled it out for praise in his review. As for the Paris artists, the Turkish government, as co-sponsor of the exhibition, wanted to leave them out because of their left-wing sympathies (Roditi, "Report from Istanbul," 1). In the end, however, the show went up, earning favorable reviews as a successful introduction of Turkish art to Europe, and particular praise from Roditi in *Art News and Review* for what he called its "Turkish sense of space" ("Turkish Painting in Paris and Edinburgh" n.p.).

Roditi did not hesitate also to use his unfailing personal generosity to advance his "Turkish mission." The artist Yüksel Arslan, to take one instance, recalls that after Roditi saw one of his works on the wall of a private home in Istanbul (that of Mazhar Şevket İpşiroğlu, art historian and philosophy professor), he tried to track the artist down. Yashar Kemal suggested that he look into the Lefter *meyhane*, a Greek tavern in Beyoğlu. According to Arslan,

this tall handsome man came striding through the door and said, "I'm looking for Yüksel Arslan." So we invited him to sit down, and we talked. When he got back to Paris he told André Breton about me and

Breton invited me to participate in an exhibition of Surrealist work. This was 1959. I couldn't go because I couldn't get my work out of Turkey, but Edouard didn't give up. He got me invited again in 1961. I went with \$200 and my passport. He took me in, wrote about my work, and got me a gallery. *Il est ma tante et grande-frère*. (personal interview, 12 September 2009, and Yilmaz)

It is not unlikely that Roditi was in town in 1959 for work on the translation of Yashar Kemal's *Ince Memed*. Kemal does not recall precisely when they started work, but gleefully relates the story that when Roditi arrived he did not know that his cousin and collaborator Thilda Serrero had married the novel's author. Nor did Kemal know that his wife's "American cousin" was coming to town for more than a social visit. Sent to the airport to collect their guest, Kemal, like a good tour guide, held up a placard with Roditi's name on it. Roditi saw it, nodded, and they drove to town in silence, Kemal assuming that his guest was as devoid of Turkish as he himself was of English. At home, after the customary greetings, Edouard turned to Thilda and announced, "I'm told we're to translate a Turkish writer. This is his name," and produced a piece of paper on which was written "Yashar Kemal." His hosts cracked up. Roditi, miffed, said, "Why are you laughing? Don't tell me this is Turkey's worst writer!" When Thilda revealed the truth, Roditi replied in Turkish, "Why did you play this joke on me?"—whereupon Kemal realized that Thilda's joke was on him too (personal interview, 17 February 2007).

Although Roditi knew some Turkish—"lousy" by his own account and "middling to bad" by Kemal's—it was certainly not up to a solo translation of the rich, colloquial prose of *Ince Memed*. He told Candida-Smith that he and Thilda worked up a word-for-word version that he then rewrote in a style "probably influenced by Hemingway," whom he was reading at the time (*Inventions* 290). *Memed, My Hawk* was published in 1961 by Collins and Harvill in England and by Pantheon in America, and reprinted in 2008 as a New York Review Books "classic."

Thilda would translate seventeen more of her husband's books before her death in 2001. She and Roditi maintained a warm correspondence until the end of his life. In 1967 she is cheerfully passing along literary gossip: "Aliye had a fire in her flat and the famous throne and many other beloved relics were burnt [. . .] Jimmy Baldwin is like un poisson dans l'eau in Istanbul." In 1989 she writes, "Dear Edward, you can't imagine what Istanbul is like now. You'll get a shock . . . We're supposed to get used to all this new vulgarity. 'But I do not approve and I am not resigned.'" In 1990 she asks if he will come in 1992 "for the 500th anniversary to-do of the Sephardic Jews [. . .] The Pera Palace is still standing there, waiting for you [although] the Park Hotel, which I loved so much has long been pulled

down and is being replaced by some high-rise horror" (Edouard Roditi Papers). But Edouard did not come for the quincennial; he had made his last Istanbul journey. It was perhaps just as well: his Istanbul was rapidly retreating before a new and uglier one being born. The "high-rise horror" was never completed, and remains an eyesore on the Istanbul skyline.¹⁰ As if to add insult to injury, the adjacent Heavenly Tea Garden—cherished for its fine prospect of the "fire in the windows" on the Asian shore at sunset—was paved over for a parking lot in 1994, two years after Roditi's death.

Roditi's acquaintance with Thilda's husband Yashar grew into a long friendship as well. Despite their apparent dissimilarities—Roditi the world traveler and sophisticated Parisian, Kemal the Kurdish boy who first encountered electricity when he walked barefoot to the nearest town to start school—they belonged on the same end of the political spectrum. Both had experienced governmental repression. Roditi, a member of the American civil service since 1941 by virtue of his work for the War Office and then the Department of State (for which he interpreted at the Nuremberg trials and at the charter meeting of the United Nations), was discharged in 1950 as a "security risk," doubtless because of his homosexuality. It was the time of McCarthyism in America and of the "Algerian troubles" in France. Back in Paris he discovered that his phone was tapped—a distinction he shared with Sartre, Camus, and other leading French authors. In early 1958 matters grew worse: while in New York to visit his mother he received an expulsion order from France, again as a "security risk." It was unclear whether he was under suspicion this time of being a communist or an American spy, but the heart of the matter appeared to be a pattern of visits to his flat by guests of a darker hue. In 1960 the order was rescinded when a judge ruled that it was invalid, because how can you expel someone who's not, actually, in your country (Roditi, *Inventions*, 283)?

Yashar Kemal boasted a distinguished left-wing history of his own. To begin with, he owed much of his literary education to the happy (for him) chance that Abidin Dino and his brother Arif, a few years after meeting Patmore, were banished from Istanbul on a charge of being communist sympathizers. They were sent to Adana—the name both of the province in southern Turkey (where, ironically, their grandfather had once been governor) and its capital city, where a young Kemal Gökçeli was eking out a living by writing petitions for courthouse suppliants on an old typewriter when he wasn't out collecting oral poetry from local bards. Preceded by their reputation, the Dinos were met with open arms by the young man and his associates. Kemal introduced them to the region's literary folk traditions while Arif, a poet who knew every library in Istanbul, introduced Kemal to Dante, Cervantes, and Rimbaud (Tharaud 57–58). Abidin was called up for military service in 1946, and after martial law was lifted in 1949, was allowed to return to Istanbul. Because of his open support for

Nazım Hikmet, however, his work remained banned. In 1951 he left for Rome, the same year Hikmet made his dramatic escape to Moscow. In 1952 he and his wife Güzin joined the ranks of Turkish exiles in Paris. Güzin would become a professor at the Sorbonne, translate Turkish women's poetry into French, and collaborate with Roditi on a translation into English of the Sufi poet Yunus Emre. But the ceramics on which Abidin had been working back in Turkey would remain in the hands of the Istanbul police (Avcı, *World*, 23–24).

When the Dinos left Adana, Kemal Gökçeli remained behind. As an active member of the Turkish Workers Party throughout the 1940s, he was no stranger to arrest and periodical blacklisting. Occasionally he would travel to Istanbul, taking odd jobs there to support himself—one of them as a porter for Thomas Whittemore, the American Byzantinist who was bringing to light the mosaics of Hagia Sophia¹¹—but he always returned home. In 1950 he was arrested again and tortured. On his release he decided to move to Istanbul for good. There he found work, with Arif Dino's help, as "Anatolian correspondent" for the newspaper *Cumhuriyet*.¹² Abidin Dino advised him, in view of the political climate, to change his name if he wanted to keep his job. It was at this point that he adopted "Yashar Kemal" as his pen name—a move which enabled him to avoid police attention long enough to launch his writing career (Tharaud 78). In 1952 he and Thilda Serrero became Mr. and Mrs. Gökçeli (the official surname possibly helps explain Roditi's purported confusion over the identity of "Yashar Kemal").

In 1959 the journalist in Kemal could not resist the opportunity to interview the "visiting American author" Edouard Roditi for *Pazar Postası*, a Sunday newspaper supplement, on "La Question." "La Question" was both the name of a book by Henri Alleg and a synonym in France for the "Algerian problem." Alleg's manuscript, which had been smuggled out of the North African prison where he was held, graphically portrayed the French abuse and torture of Algerian political prisoners. It was published in a run of sixty thousand copies by Editions de Minuit in Paris. The government seized five thousand of these, but the rest passed into the hands of the public. *The London Observer*, available at Paris newsstands, ran excerpts in English. Nevertheless when Jean-Paul Sartre tried to publish a pamphlet on Alleg's book, the police smashed the press. In short, Roditi asserted in the interview, the Alleg affair exposed the Fourth Republic, under Charles de Gaulle, as a dictatorship. The result of it all was a *crise de conscience* among French intellectuals, who—perhaps rather like Americans under the Bush-Cheney regime nearly fifty years later—had preferred to overlook ill treatment by the police of people of Arabic appearance. Paris at the time, as Roditi noted, had a population of three hundred thousand Muslims—"more than any other European city except Istanbul"—and they alone were subject to curfew (Kemal, "La question," 12–13).

The group of Turkish exiles whom the Dinos joined in Paris were a convivial bunch who in many ways brought their Istanbul with them. The painters Avni Arbaş and Fikret Mualla, among others, had preceded the Dinos; Yüksel Arslan, with the help of Roditi, would come later. In 1957 Roditi collected art for the Edinburgh exhibition from Arbaş and Mualla as well as Abidin, Selim Turan, Nejad Devrim, and Fahrelnissa Zeyd, all of whom had working studios, if not permanent residence, in Paris. The Dinos' apartment on the fifth floor of 13, Quai Saint-Michel became a kind of extension of Istanbul: Güzin likened it to a "train station," there were so many people coming and going (1991, 196). Visitors of course included Yashar and Thilda from Istanbul and Nazım Hikmet from Moscow. A little poem by Nazım on the occasion of a dinner party at the Dinos' nicely reflects the collective *esprit*. He and his new wife Vera were visiting from Moscow in the late fall of 1962, and Abidin's old friend Şakır Eczacıbaşı honored the occasion with a gift of stuffed mussels (*midye dolma*)—a traditional element of a *meyhane* evening. Nazım paid tribute:

Sailing over the chimneys Dino's attic
 sets off on its voyage from the fifth floor
 of Port Saint-Michel. Here is the ship
 of immortal friendship: the sea
 of Antibes sparkling on the canvasses,
 and on the table the mussels from my Istanbul
 and on the wall the two eyes the two fountains of "Ah, me!"
 and my sister Güzin is an olive branch,
 my Verushka a corn tassel. Abidin,
 turn the wheel to the southeast—
 let's make for Emirgan!¹³

Emirgan, a plane-tree-shaded village on the Bosphorus, was a popular summertime swimming and picnicking spot. Nazım's yearning for his Istanbul and what it represented—women, love, family, fellowship—is a theme running through his work from the earliest prison poems to his deathbed utterances. He died in Moscow in 1963 without having laid eyes on his country since 1951. Dino never returned to Turkey to live, either, although he was able to visit with increasing frequency after 1969, when an exhibition of his work was held in Istanbul. It was after Roditi's visit to Turkey that he met the Paris Turks. As his acquaintance with them and with the Istanbul circle deepened he became a kind of go-between, ferrying messages, manuscripts, and packages between the two. At one point Nazım Hikmet approached him about translating his poems. Roditi declined, but told Hikmet that he did indeed need a single translator rather than the hodge-podge of amateurs he'd had thus far (*Inventions* 296).

Roditi's friend and co-editor of the postwar journal *Das Lot*, Alain Bosquet, described him as "a self-appointed ambassador of every possible culture to every possible other culture" (Applefield 65). True to form, as "cultural ambassador" Roditi made a number of introductions that were to have a significant ripple effect. One of these involved Şakir Eczacıbaşı, who had sent the mussels to Paris. Eczacıbaşı was not only a scion of Turkey's leading pharmaceutical family but also a photographer and filmmaker and a man destined to become, in the words of the architectural historian Godfrey Goodwin, "the heart of the culture of Istanbul" (142). Eczacıbaşı had met Roditi through Sabahattin Eyüboğlu. Sabahattin was the older brother of Bedri Rahmi and, in Güzin Dino's words, "one of the most influential personalities of his time" (1986, 271). A lecturer in the French Department and assistant to the émigré German scholar Eric Auerbach at Istanbul University,¹⁴ he was appointed by the Education Ministry as one of the first directors of the Translation Bureau, established in 1940. Under Eyüboğlu the bureau would by 1946 have translated five hundred literary classics into Turkish in a deliberate attempt to bring Western humanism to Turkish culture.¹⁵ Eyüboğlu produced fifty-nine translations for the bureau himself, including Shakespeare. He also translated Nazım Hikmet into French and spent time in prison after the 1971 coup on charges of disseminating communist propaganda.¹⁶ More to the current point, he made films as well; one of them, *The Hittite Sun*, remains a landmark. He and Eczacıbaşı had collaborated on several documentaries, and the two of them believed that Istanbul seriously needed a cinemathèque.

Eczacıbaşı bundled up five short films and flew to Paris, where he asked Roditi to introduce him to the director of the French cinemathèque, Henri Langlois. The enthusiastic Langlois arranged for Eczacıbaşı and associates to receive a brief education in the workings of a cinemathèque and in New Wave cinema. In 1965, with Langlois in attendance, the Turkish Cinemathèque Association opened in Istanbul. This turned out to be the inaugural event in a series that would change the cultural face of the city. For when the government shut down the association in the wake of the 1980 coup, Eczacıbaşı responded with a run of Istanbul Film Days. The event metamorphosed into the International Film Festival, which led in turn to festivals of jazz, classical music, theater, the Istanbul Biennial, and finally, in 2004, to the opening of the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art. To manage this cornucopia of events Eczacıbaşı set up an umbrella organization known as the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and the Arts (IKSV). Without the IKSV, the cultural life of the city as it is today would be unimaginable.

I don't mean to suggest of course that Roditi was singlehandedly responsible for this splendid cultural flowering. Nevertheless, in Eczacıbaşı's words, "Edouard introduced so many people to each other who were so important for the arts that without him Turkish culture

would be considerably poorer. He was learned," he added. "I could ask him for an article for my medical journal and get it back in two days. But he was also kind. You'd ask him why he was late for something and he might say, 'Oh, I was washing the dishes at Aliye's'" (personal interview).

Perhaps not all of Roditi's evenings were as sedate as that, however. To Gregory Corso he declared that when he and his "Turkish cousin" Yashar Kemal got sick of correcting pages of typescript, they would

take off on a spree and get drunk on *raki* and smoke hashish together, much to the horror of his dear wife who on such occasions expects us to land in a Turkish hoosegow together, though what actually happens is that I put him carefully in a *dolmush* cab and send him home, while I drift off to a *hamam* to sweat it out and hope for the best, which generally comes my way too as, in those moods, I'm not so very particular. The Orient is a kind of heaven in its way, if you arrive there with enough money and never have to work for a living there. (Corso Papers [1958?])

The account may well be embroidered for Corso's benefit, as Roditi had been trying to sell his correspondent on a visit to the eastern Mediterranean. In truth, despite being admired by the Beats—an admiration he was somewhat at a loss to account for—Roditi never really felt on the same wavelength with them. Certainly his Istanbul, informed as it was by family history and his deep interest in the imperial and classical past, was different from what theirs would have been.

But another factor was surely at work as well: although Roditi was forty when he first saw "the city of cities," as an idea it could hardly have failed to exercise his imagination from his youth. A surrealistic prose poem published when he was eighteen, for example, depicts an enigmatic city that, while imaginary, bears a discernible resemblance to old Constantinople:

. . . In an open space among rotting wooden shacks where cheese-pale hags watched the street fearfully from behind their cracked and filthy window-panes, a drunken invader from the truck-farming suburbs slowly dismounted from his donkey [. . .] and then solemnly pissed against the desecrated sarcophagus of a forgotten prince that stood on the sidewalk, tilted on its side, as if it had only just been tossed off a runaway hearse. . .

[. . .]

. . . The wear and tear of a thousand years has left the city as fragmentary as any atom-bomb's crater . . . ("The Pathos of History" 29)

The eye behind this vision is hardly that of the Baedeker-toting tourist or the Blue Mosque-visiting beatnik on the trail to Kathmandu.

* * *

When Roditi did finally set foot in the city one of the things he loved to do, like so many literary pilgrims before him, was simply to plunge into the streets and wander where his feet would take him. As his first encounters took place in the 1950s, before wholesale destruction in the name of modernization had seriously taken hold, the palimpsest of the past would have lain before him relatively undisturbed—in the crumbling Byzantine walls, the unmarked cisterns, the unpainted wooden houses, the emperor's sarcophagus housing a compressor unit in a mosque courtyard. How could such a montage not delight a surrealist on the *qui vive* for the *hazard objectif*? Surely one reward of these excursions was, in Can Kozanoğlu's happy expression, "to come across the unerased traces of the spirit of the city at unexpected moments" (239). Such traces are what we see flowering into narratives like "The Ghost with an American Passport," where, as the protagonist finds himself confronting an old wooden house in the Armenian neighborhood of Samatya, the compressed history of "My Father's Armenian File" unfolds into literary life. Or "Three Faiths, One God," wherein the first-person narrator wanders into a Greek church whose scars bear witness both to the 1453 conquest and the 1955 pogrom and where, standing before its sacred spring, priest, *imam*, and Jewish narrator experience a small epiphany "like the devastating touch of the finger of God in a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins" (*Delights* 161).

The city was obviously for Roditi a diverse source of creative energy. If it could provoke a play of irony and wit, as in "Vampires," or a surge of historical memory, as in "Ghost," it could also provide the setting for a profoundly personal poem such as "Experience of Death." The poem was composed, a head note tells us, at the Divan Pastanesi, a pastry shop near Taksim Square. It is dedicated to "Thilda and Yashar Kemal" and was published in *Thrice Chosen*, the 1981 collection that, according to the author, reflects his "awareness of being chosen in at least one of . . . three ways": his Jewishness, his choice of that Jewishness (he was not born into it, for his mother was a Catholic), and his epilepsy—an affliction often associated with the divinely touched fool (*Thrice Chosen* 15). Triggered by an epileptic seizure, "Experience of Death" constitutes an apocalyptic meditation on life, death, and nothingness—a kind of personal *Waste Land* replete with Dostoevskyan and Dantean allusions. It falls into two sections. The first, "The Idiot in a Tea-Room," contains these lines:

A sick man, fearing death
 I inspect my own face in a mirror
 And meet a stranger, no double.
 Who am I? Have I ever seen

Myself or any other man before?
I'm dead again. (ll. 65–70)

But is he really dead? Observing the empty rituals of the bourgeois clientele surrounding him, he has second thoughts. For if his epilepsy is a torment that causes him to wonder what he has done to be so cursed, it seems also to be somehow authenticating:

My poem and my fit
Are proof of my being live,
Spectator or lone mime, no puppet
In their plotless and meaningless play. (ll. 71–74)

Indeed, as the putative source of his creativity—a hypothesis Roditi advances in his early *The Disorderly Poet*—his so-called disability is precisely what sets him off from the dead souls around him; it offers an *entrée* to realms whose existence their circumscribed minds cannot dare to imagine. Hence it marks him as “chosen.” The second section, “The Idiot’s Diary,” continues:

Again two fits and three poems in a week. Dare an
angel complain of being afflicted with wings that
prevent him from wearing a raincoat? (ll. 73–75)

The poet refers to his seizure (“Last night this world was here, then gone / Then here again”), then segues into a litany in unexpected praise of his dark night (“Blessèd be my ill” / . . . / “Blessèd be my folly” / . . . / “Blessèd be my night” / . . . / “Blessèd be my anguish” / . . . / “blessèd / Be all my suffering”), and arrives finally at acceptance and resignation in a concluding paradox:

I've learned to know my poverty
Means untold riches; a precious good,
My ill; my folly and disease
Are my wisdom and health, both rare. (ll. 128–131)

We don't have a precise date for the poem, but it must have been composed before late 1959, when Roditi's epilepsy was at last properly diagnosed and he was prescribed drugs to eliminate the seizures (*Inventions* 285–86). More interesting than its date perhaps is the poem's genesis. Is it significant that it originated in Istanbul? By 1959 Roditi's acquaintance with the city had progressed dramatically since his introduction in 1950. He had spent a good deal of time there, had met and worked with many of its leading writers and artists. His Turkish was passable. He could navigate the seven hills

on his own. Had he reached a point of psychological equilibrium between the strange and the familiar that was conducive to creative activity? In *The Disorderly Poet* he associates a high incidence of epileptic seizures with periods of heightened creativity, though without asserting a causal relationship, or, if there is such a relationship, its direction (40). Given this correlation, may we view the tortuous soul-searching and cathartic resolution reflected in "Experience of Death" as a creative and psychological breakthrough? And if so, can we credit the city's logic-defying *bricolage* of the mundane and the miraculous, the tawdry and the timeless, with contributing to this state? After all, the city's grimy everyday surface is underlain by an invisible network of sources and conduits once considered sacred to more than one set of gods. Why not a second Hippocrene among them?

Roditi seems to have written nearly all of his Turkey-related poetry and prose fiction by the end of the 1960s, with the short prose collected in *The Delights of Turkey*. But if the decades of the fifties and sixties were a kind of golden age for his Turkish residencies, that does not mean that he retired from the scene when they were over. Although Patmore died in 1972, Sabahattin Eyüboğlu in 1973, and Aliye Berger and Bedri Rahmi in 1974, he continued to visit Istanbul until a final trip in 1985. Even then he did not cease his active support of Turkish literature, writing reviews, translating, and plugging Turkish writers for journals like *Sphinx*, *Core*, and *World Literature Today*. In 1986 he guest-edited a special issue of *Frank* that showcased thirty-five writers, painters, and filmmakers of the Turkish old and new guard. In 1987 the Yunus Emre translations on which he had worked for years with Güzin Dino were published in America, together with a learned essay on medieval Sufism and Christianity, "Western or Eastern Themes in the Poetry of Yunus Emre."

Western or Eastern, yes. In truth, the specter of this ambivalent dichotomy might be raised with regard to Roditi's own Turkish *oeuvre* and perspective on Constantinople/Istanbul. Was the storied city for him an exotic oriental destination, or was it a site of homecoming? He was of course not an exile, not an expatriate, not an American in New Rome; but in this case he was not merely an exceptionally literate traveler either. The Parisian Turkish refugees—if we may take them as a point of comparison—were there for primarily political reasons. Of course Paris was Paris and they made the best of it, but the theme of nostalgia and yearning for home—whether Istanbul or Anatolia—is a constant in their work and correspondence. Roditi's work, whether composed in Istanbul or New York or Paris, has none of this. Yet his encounter with Turkey and the creative ferment of Istanbul was a kind of rediscovery of his roots, familial and perhaps also spiritual, that vitalized him as poet and proselytizer both. Like Paris, the city offered a congenial ambiance, but with crucial differences: the otherness of Islamic culture and an antiquity almost beyond

reckoning. For someone as focused as Roditi on the Western avant-garde, this perspective must have come as a salutary shock.

What he gained in this exchange was creative inspiration and a network of enduring friendships that would loop back to Paris. What he gave in return was the fruit of his remarkable talents as author, translator, scholar, and facilitator. There may as yet be no doctoral dissertation entitled "The Influence of Edouard Roditi on Contemporary Turkish Letters," as Alain Bosquet once thought there should be; nevertheless his contribution to modern Turkish art and literature remains as real and tangible as the Turkish influence on his own work. The Roditi legacy persists, a bright singular strand in the warp and woof of *un monde pluriel*, Istanbul.

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NOTES

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1. Bowles, for example, writes in his autobiography *Without Stopping*: "Edouard Roditi was one of the poets to whom I had written the year before (i.e., 1930) in order to get material for *The Messenger*; he had not only sent poems, but had also written several letters subsequently, in which he had given me a list of people to see in Berlin . . ." (109).

2. For a description of the Han and Berger's studio, and something of the flavor of the times, see Roddy O'Connor's novel *Istanbul Gathering* (Istanbul: Çitlembik/ Nettleberry, 2007, 65ff.). Derek Patmore describes one of Aliye's parties in his unpublished *Roads to Istanbul*, 67–70.

3. Turan Erol asserts that the letter *D* was chosen because it is the first letter of the Turkish word *dördüncü*, meaning "fourth"; the artists were thus asserting that their group was the fourth such artistic organization to exist in Turkey. These groups all loosely shared the goal of contributing to the country's modernization project; Group *D*'s stated mission, e.g., was to "bring contemporary European artistic trends to Turkey without delay." This meant, according to Nurullah Berk, the group's chief spokesman, bringing to Turkish art the concepts of Cubism, Constructivism, and Expressionism. ("The Formation of Artistic Groups in the 1930s and the Group *D*," in S. M. I. Pınar, ed., *A History of Turkish Painting: Traditional Turkish Painting and the Beginning of Western Trends* (Istanbul: Satibat Yayınları, 2004, 63–64)). But Zeynep Yasa Zaman asserts that *d* was chosen because it was the fourth letter of the Latin alphabet (the fourth letter of the modern Turkish alphabet being *ç*) (in Elvan, 7, 16–17). In any case the number "four" is central.

4. One of these was apparently a large canvas by Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu called *Ha Café with Çorum Bride*, which he considered one of his most important works. In later years he tried to retrieve it, but it has evidently been lost (Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, *Aşk Mektupları, 1937–1950*, vol. 4, ed. Mehmet Hamdi Eyüboğlu (Istanbul: İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2006, 169, and footnote by Mehmet Hamdi Eyüboğlu).

5. In the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center's copy of *The Star and the Crescent* is a bookplate: "From the Library of Princess Marthe Bibesco." The flyleaf is inscribed as follows: "For Princess Marthe Bibesco, in friendship and in gratitude for the many happy times we spent together in her country. Derek Patmore, London, Mar. 27. 1947." Bibesco was Patmore's hostess in Romania; it was she who first encouraged him to visit the Balkans and supplied him with introductions in Greece and Turkey.

6. For the precise formal charges and political details of the case, see, e.g., Kemal Sülker, *Nazım Hikmet Dosyası* (Istanbul; May Yayınları, 1967). For a detailed account in English see Göksu and Timms, *Romantic Communist* (London: Hurst, 1999, 138–58).

7. See also Edhem Eldem, *In Search of the Gulbenkians/Gülbenkianların İzinde* (Istanbul: Sabancı University Sakıp Sabancı Müzesi, 2006).

8. For a history of the Camondo family in Istanbul and Paris, see Nora Şeni and Sophie Le Tarnec, *Les Camondo ou L'Éclipse D'une Fortune* (n.p.: Actes Sud/Hébraïca, 1997).

9. Hikmet's mother was an accomplished artist, and Hikmet himself was not without talent. Orhan Kemal describes Nazım and his mother sketching and painting one another during visiting hours at the Bursa prison (*In Jail With Nazım Hikmet*, trans. Bengisu Roman [London: Saqi, 2010, 134–37]) as well as Nazım and Balaban working together (147–48). Hikmet later gave the jail portrait that his mother made of him to Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu. The image was included in a booklet accompanying a 2011 CD of Hikmet reading his own poems. Bedri Rahmi made the original tape recording in Paris in 1961 and smuggled it into Turkey, where it lay hidden in his house for fifty years.

Hikmet advised Balaban and wrote poems on some of his pieces. Two of these—"On Ibrahim Balaban's Painting 'Spring'" and "On Ibrahim Balaban's Painting 'The Prison Gates'"—are translated by Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk in *Poems of Nazım Hikmet* (New York: Persea Books, 1994). From "Spring":

Here, eyes, see Balaban's art.
Here is dawn: the month is May.
Here is light:
smart, brave, fresh alive, pitiless. (124)

Balaban never forgot Hikmet. An Istanbul exhibition of his in 2011 at the Modernist Gallery, when he was eighty, included recent paintings with Hikmet as subject, one of them a commemoration of the poet's famous 1951 escape from Turkey via Romanian freighter.

10. The Park Hotel was Istanbul's Algonquin, a literary watering hole. The poet Yahya Kemal lived there, and it was the hotel of choice for visiting authors such as Patmore. Rumors persist that the "high-rise horror," whose construction was

halted because of its illegal dimensions, will be completed in closer conformity to the old Park. Seeing is believing.

11. Whittemore began uncovering the mosaics, which were plastered over in the conversion of the church to a mosque after the 1453 conquest, in 1933. He was on friendly terms with the d Group artists and, according to legend, on uncovering a particularly dazzling detail would rush to their nearby café under the plane trees at Beyazit Square and invite them in to have a look. The mosaics would influence the work of several Istanbul painters, particularly that of Nejad Devrim.

12. It is worth noting that, on his first assignment in eastern Anatolia, circumstances conspired to enable Kemal to rescue almost singlehandedly the tenth-century Armenian church of Ah'tamar (Akdamar) on Lake Van from state demolition. In 2009 it was restored and designated a national museum (personal interview, 7 July 2010).

13. The Turkish is:

Saint-Michel rıhtımında beşinci kattan çıkar yola
 Yüzer bacaların üstünde Dino'ların tavan arası
 Burası ölümsüz dostukların gemisi
 Tuallerde Antibes denizi cıvıl,
 Ve sofrada midye dolması İstanbul'umdan
 Ve duvarda 'Ah!'ın iki gözü iki çeşme
 Ve Güzin ablam zeytin dalıdır
 Veruşa'm püsküllü mısır
 Abidin dümeni Güneydoğuya kıvrır
 Varalım Emirgan'a. 30.12.1962 (Avcı, *A'dan Z'ye Abidin Dino*, 104)

14. For the importance of Auerbach to a generation of Turkish thinkers, see Kader Konuk, "Erich Auerbach and the Humanist Reform to the Turkish Education System," *Comparative Literature Studies* 45:1 (2008): 74–89. Güzin Dino was also one of Auerbach's assistants.

15. For Sabahattin Eyüboğlu's contribution to "Turkish humanism," see, e.g., Özlem Berk, *Translation and Westernization in Turkey from the 1840s to the 1980s* (Istanbul: Ege Yayınları, 2004): 153–61.

16. As an act of revenge he determined to translate Rabelais into Turkish, according to Hughette Eyuboğlu (personal interview, 25 February 2011).

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