

SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY OTTOMAN TURKISH LITERATURE
AND THE *SEYAHATNÂME**

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The *Seyahatnâme* is an interesting work not only for its contents but also for its literary quality and for its discovery and early scholarly reception.

When Evliya Çelebi, who set out on the haj pilgrimage from Istanbul in 1671, was making his tours through the Arab lands, was he unable to return to Istanbul and so forced to write his work in Egypt? At that time did he just happen to have with him the notes he had made on his earlier journeys? Or when he set out from Istanbul in 1671 for the last time had he already decided not to return but to complete his magnum opus in Egypt? If so, did he perhaps take all his notes with him expressly in order to write his work in an unconstrained environment far from the capital?

When we read the *Seyahatnâme* with these unanswerable questions in mind we first of all see Evliya as a man devoted to travel. But to what extent can we separate Evliya the traveller from Evliya the writer? Evliya Çelebi indulged his urge to travel throughout his life; but why did he write his book? In the course of his travels he had enjoyed the favour and patronage of some of the great statesmen of the age. Did he now have an expectation of further patronage? Or was the *Seyahatnâme* a token of gratitude for the favours he had received? Or was it a “gift” (*tuhfe*) written for the sake of God? Evliya, weary of travel, and despite old age, now turned his journeys – piece together from his “scattered” (*evrâk-ı perişân*) notes and from what remained in his memory, along with what he had gained from his reading – into a huge ten-volume work with an overall plan and systematic structure. Such an effort cannot be abstracted from his literary talent which went beyond his expectation of reward and his devotion to the Ottoman state and Ottoman culture.

At that time “literature” meant poetry. The only way people expressed themselves literarily was through poetry, and it was poetry that possessed a clear aesthetic form. With this conception of literature, what place was there for the literary talent of Evliya Çelebi, the court-educated companion of the sultan (*musâhib*)? And what is the place of the *Seyahatnâme* in this

*Translated by Robert Dankoff.

literary world? Before attempting to answer this question let us first examine the early critical reception of the work in modern times.

In an article entitled “Merkwürdiger Fund einer türkischen Reisebeschreibung” (Remarkable Discovery of a Turkish Travel Account)¹ published on 7 January 1814, the Viennese court interpreter and state counsellor Joseph von Hammer Purgstall (1856) presented the *Seyahatnâme* to the scholarly world. He wrote that his researches in Istanbul had continued unabated over many years; that finally in the year 1804 “by a fortunate accident” he had discovered the fourth and final volume of a large Turkish travelogue entitled *Târîh-i Seyyâh Evliyâ Efendi*; and that he had purchased this manuscript for one hundred piasters. Hammer’s concentrated search for Ottoman historical sources had led him to haunt the book dealers and libraries during the time he was in Istanbul, and after returning to Austria he had followed this up at a distance by seeking out books of history and geography. He states that he possessed the largest collection of Ottoman historical sources in Europe, and emphasizes that the Orientals produced few works on geography and that the Turks had written no important work on this subject except for Hacı Halîfe’s *Cihânnümâ*. But he goes on to say that the discovery of the *Seyahatnâme* had changed his view of Ottoman literature and that because its contents was of such extraordinary interest he had conceived the desire of tracing the missing three volumes. After returning to Vienna he corresponded with friends in Istanbul and requested them to find the first three volumes and send them to him. Meanwhile he learned from his Turkish friend İshak Bey that this very valuable work was extremely rare, existing only in the inaccessible palace library but not to be found in any of the public libraries of Istanbul. He writes that he attained his wish only after pressing his requests over a period of ten years:

The only manuscript of this work in Europe – a work that is very rare in the Orient – is now in Vienna in the hands of the writer of these lines. Of all the Oriental works on geography known to this writer, who has thoroughly researched the field, it is the most interesting and the richest. For this reason the author of these lines considers it his duty to announce this fortunate discovery, to give a brief account of the work’s contents, and to draw attention to it by means of a translation of several sections.²

Hammer considered the fourth volume – the one that came into his hands first – to be the final volume of the work. When he got hold of the first

¹ Von Hammer Purgstall, Joseph, “Merkwürdiger Fund einer türkischen Reisebeschreibung”, *Intelligenzblatt zur Wiener Allgemeinen Literaturezeitung*, II (1814): pp. 9-15.

² *Ibid.*: pp. 9-10.

three volumes he thought he was in possession of the entire work and judged, based on volume four, that Evliya's travels lasted twenty-five years; that he had toured the Asian, African and European lands of the Ottoman empire; and that his travels ended in Iran. He looked for a notice about Evliya in the works containing the biographies of scholars but found no trace of him. He considered this an indication of the extreme rarity of the work, suggesting that the Ottoman literati — who filled their biographical books with authors of banal collections of verse, pedantic grammars, and theological nonsense — did not deem it necessary to even mention the author of such a rich work on topography, and that this was a further indication of the wrong direction they took. That the *Seyahatnâme* has remained unknown until now, and is such a rare work, Hammer thought, is due to the fact that the Ottomans unjustifiably put a much greater value on other historical and literary works.³

Hammer goes on to compare Evliya's work with a much shorter travelogue, that of Seydi Âlî Reis, an admiral from the period of Süleyman the Magnificent (1520-1566) who journeyed via the Red Sea to India and returned overland via Bukhara to Istanbul. This work, although it contains far less information than Evliya's treasure-trove of topography, ethnography, history and philology, was far better known. Hammer attributes this fact to Seydi Âlî Reis's work having been written in verse.⁴

The criticism that Hammer directed toward those who paid scant attention to Evliya's work at the start of the nineteenth century essentially obtains for today as well. Most histories of literature speak of the *Seyahatnâme* as a work in which the author recounts the places he has visited and gives information about them. No room is given to the work's literary status and no effort is made to evaluate it from this point of view. The reason is that most researchers, considering Ottoman literature from today's perspective, still only take into account the traditional aesthetic understanding. And so they have fallen into a vicious circle in which a work like the *Seyahatnâme* provides no criteria by which it can be evaluated.

The fact is, however, that the seventeenth century saw a transformation in Ottoman Turkish literature. When we look at the spectrum of writers and poets during this period we see such names as Nefî, Yahyâ, Bahâyî, Atâyî, Nailî, Nâbî; Veysî, Nergisî, Kâtîb Çelebi, Evliyâ Çelebi; İsmail Ankaravî, Sarı Abdullah, and Koçî Bey. While some of these figures continued the traditional poetry, in rivalry with Persian literature, others penned their works in a spirit of rebellion against Persian poetry. This rebellion manifests itself in those writers who defended the expressive

³*Ibid.*: p. 11.

⁴*Ibid.*

power, even the superiority, of Turkish poetry vis-à-vis Persian: in the case of Nef'î (1635), with regard to lyrical poetry (*gazel* and *kasîde*); in the case of Atâyî (1636), with regard to narrative poetry (*mesnevi*).⁵ Nef'î played down the ghazals of Hâqânî (1199) and Muhtaşam (1587), while Atâyî criticized Nizâmî (1209).

Tunca Kortantamer has dwelt on this subject in his book *Nev'î-zâde Atâyî ve Hamse'si* (1997). According to Kortantamer, Atâyî, in the introduction to his *Sâkînâme* (1617), opposed the romantic subjects of such works as *Husrav u Şîrîn* and *Laylâ va Macnûn*, and also spoke harshly about such epical works as the *Şâhnâme* and the *Iskandarnâme*. He expressed the belief that people were sick of the old topics and that one must say something new and different. He consciously proposed that the poets should write on new topics should rival the Persian *mesnevi* writers.⁶ In the “reason for composition” (*sebeb-i telif*) section of Atâyî's *Sâkînâme*, as summarized by Kortantamer, the author compares the poets of Turkey and Iran. He states that the Turkish poets have outstripped the Iranians in the *gazel*, but in the *mesnevi* the Iranians have maintained their predominance. Thus in order to surpass them the Turks should write fine *mesnevis* on topics other than the old legends.⁷ In the other *mesnevis* comprising his *Hamse* Atâyî aims to surpass Nizâmî and the other Iranian masters. He expresses opposition to the translating and imitating of the Persian *mesnevis* and emphasizes that one ought to write something original.⁸

This change of attitude toward *mesnevi* does not come to the surface in the literary histories where the dominant genre is lyrical poetry, i.e., *gazel* and *kaside*. Nevertheless, the new understanding of *mesnevi* signals a transformation in Turkish literature, as opposed to Persian. It is a transformation that inserts the Turkish social self into the aesthetic understanding that had been generally adopted and asserts itself over against Persian literature.

Although during this century the *gazel* and *kaside* continued on their traditional course, changes did occur: in the realm of imagery with the introduction of the “Indian style” (*sebk-i hindî*); in the return to moral standards, as applied to problems of social life, with the introduction of the “philosophical style” (*hikemî tarz*); and, more subtly, with the new prominence given to the spoken language, the natural and social environment in which the poet lived, and proverbial and idiomatic usages.

⁵ Kortantamer, Tunca, *Nev'î-zâde Atâyî ve Hamse'si* (Bornova, İzmir: Ege Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi, 1997): pp. 9-10.

⁶*Ibid.*: p. 163.

⁷*Ibid.*: p. 167.

⁸*Ibid.*: pp. 177, 201, 231.

This literary turn, within clichéd expression, toward one's own Ottoman Turkish identity also manifests itself on the level of patronage. In this century palace culture is no longer oriented toward Iranian poets and their works but toward Turkish poets. Leading representatives of such folk genres as the minstrel-tale (*hikâye*), ballad (*destan*), folk-song (*türkü*), shadow-puppets (*karagöz*) and open-air theatricals (*ortaoyunu*) are even accepted into the palace. There is a parallel development in *mesnevi* with the introduction of events from contemporary history, depictions of daily life and local types, and occasionally also the spoken language.⁹ This transformation in Ottoman Turkish literature, which goes under the rubric of “localisation” (*mahallileşme*) — i.e., bringing the city of Istanbul into the picture — is in one sense a turn to literary realism. In other words, directing the attention of literature toward the world inhabited by human beings rather than, as before, carrying the reader toward a completely different world in terms of space, time and action. Now Veysî (1627) writes his *Hâbnâme* in *kaside* form, not to praise the sultan but to tell about realities of the age in which he lived. And Nâbî (1712) in his *Hayriyye* (1701) transforms the “mirror-for-princes” (*siyasetnâme*) genre by focussing on the common man rather than the sultan. In this work, written as advice to his son, instead of asking how a good sultan ought to behave, as is commonly the question posed in mirrors-for-princes, he asks rather how a good man ought to behave, thus posing the question in terms of the common man and applying the measure of the social conditions of his own day.

Another notable development in the seventeenth century is the growing number of literary works in prose. Thus Nergisî writes a *Hamse* consisting of five prose works; in his *Meşakku'l-Uşşâk* he narrates ten events that befell him; and in the *Kânûnu 'r-reşâd* he includes historical events. We also know that in this century verse *mesnevis* were rewritten in prose. This seems to indicate that people, who were now oriented toward actual life, realized that verse was no longer adequate in order to fully express themselves.

At the same time there was a change in hagiographical literature. Rather than writing stories of the prophets and the saints in order to convey a “lesson” (*ibret*) and to give advice, the writers are more concerned with narrating what happened to these individuals. This suggests a growing realization that human beings and human lives are too multifaceted to be poured into the clichéd mold of the romantic *mesnevi*.

⁹In the sections of his book entitled “The View of the Ottoman Empire at the End of the Sixteenth Century and the First Half of the Seventeenth Century according to the *Hamse* of Atâyî” (pp. 17-93) and “Reflection of the Literary World of the Period in the *Hamse* of Atâyî” (pp. 93-100) Kortantamer shows how social life is reflected in a literary text; and in the sections devoted to Atâyî's individual *mesnevis* he gives examples of local types and their ways of speaking.

All of these novelties imply, consciously or unconsciously, the deliverance of human beings and human reality from unrealistic clichés; and, along with this, the undeniable significance of travel. It is in this context that we must take a new look at the place of Evliya Çelebi's *Seyahatnâme* in literature.

In this century – specifically in the years 1679-80, roughly the same years when Evliya Çelebi was writing his *Seyahatnâme* – another travel account was composed with no awareness of Evliya's and in a completely different place. This is Nâbî's *Tuhfetü'l-Harameyn*, written in Istanbul and recounting the author's haj pilgrimage journey. Nâbî's *Tuhfetü'l-Harameyn* was dedicated to the sultan; there are many manuscripts of the work in the Istanbul libraries and it was read by many people. Evliya Çelebi's *Seyahatnâme*, in contrast, was unknown in the capital; and when the work was brought to Istanbul in the middle of the eighteenth century it was deposited in the palace library where very few people had any inkling about it; thus, neither in the period when it was written, nor in the subsequent period, did it attract the attention of literary circles. And while Nâbî's work is judged in histories of literature to be the most "literary" (*edebî*) of the haj travelogues, Evliya's is considered simply as the record of the places the writer visited. Sometimes it has been viewed as an autobiography or as reportage.¹⁰ Sometimes, based on the narrative discontinuities and the spelling mistakes (which actually are usually committed deliberately), the author has been judged to be an ignoramus. This has been followed by such appraisals as "borrowing," "stealing," "making things up," "exaggeration" and "purveying false information" – based simply on the application of objective criteria without taking the literary character of the work into consideration.

What then is the real place and value of this work which, in spite of all said above, we cannot dispense with, nor can we dismiss our doubts about it, nor situate it comfortably within the confines of its own period or of our own?

These two works – one of a poet, the other of a court-educated companion of the sultan (*musâhib*) – provide important clues about the conception of literature in that period and the limitations of the judgments based on that conception. One of them remains tied to the traditional criteria of its day as to what constitutes "the literary". It was written at the acme of literary style – with strings of Persianate constructions, lavish use of similes, long sentences couched in rhymed prose, and adorned with Persian and Turkish couplets – and it was presented to the sultan. Nâbî's work is not based on his

¹⁰Menderes, Coşkun, *Manzum ve Mensur Osmanlı Hac Seyahatnâmeleri ve Nâbî'nin Tuhfetü'l-Harameyn'i* (Ankara: T.C. kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları, 2002): p. 37. Also Menderes undertakes a general evaluation of the *Seyahatnâme* based on Book 9; see *Ibid.*: pp. 34-41.

observations or experience but rather offers a one-dimensional portrait of things he wishes to show, and does not go beyond that.

Evliya's work, on the other hand, was written with the aim of conveying his observations, his personal experiences and the life around him. In order to do this, neither the clichés of traditional literature were sufficient, nor the prose language that was at the service of those clichés. While Nâbî's work is faithful to the aesthetic conception of its age, that of Evliya, despite its use of clichéd expressions, is couched in a narrative form that breaks the cliché mold.

This characteristic, which can be generalized to include Evliya's power of description and his lively narrative style, is a narrational ability that goes beyond the cliché-ridden traditional structuring of narrative aimed at providing advice for its own age or a generally serviceable moral value. It is a type of narration that combines lived experience with what is fantasized or imagined – and this is the power to create fiction, the power to transform reality into fiction.

And so we have a ten-volume work that proceeds in a well-organized and consistent fashion and in which all things are coiled together: observations; the most naturalistic and striking descriptions couched in realistic terms and [at times] in unreadable detail; relations of cause and effect amidst a variety of detail and contradiction and clash of events; natural coincidences and amazing surprises; human reality with the author himself inserted into the flow of events; value judgments of the society.

In the most general evaluation the *Seyahatnâme* consists of two strata: the town monographs, and the personal experiences whether lived or imagined. These come together in the first-person autobiographical accounts which cannot be abstracted from the travel narrative. The work contains a good deal of information based on observation, but it also contains Evliya's lived experience which intersects with the people and society that he is describing. It is a work in which objective knowledge and fiction are spiralled together. When judgments based on scholarly criteria directed toward the objective stratum are accepted as judgments directed toward the work as a whole, the fictional stratum is lost from view. In that case, even in fictions created out of his quotations from other texts, he is accused of plagiarism; and when recounting his lived experiences, his fictionizing is judged as "making things up".

In fact he himself was aware of this. Evliya Çelebi, who was unable to draw a strict line between objective knowledge and fiction, perhaps tried to justify himself by asserting that he was "unhypocritical" (*bî-riyâ*). Because in his own age fiction was not a concern of the literati – i.e., the poets. Indeed, being an epigone of Persian literature, transferring that into Turkish, rivalling what the earlier masters had written – none of this had led to the development of an interest in writing fiction. Of course, this was

simply the conception of art at that period. We should not view that conception from our present standpoint and hold that age's poets responsible. But we also should not ignore the reality of the many things that those who went beyond this conception transmitted to us from that day to today.

In a literature where only poets are considered authors, fiction does not become a literary concern and human reality is conveyed through clichés. But in actual life there were events and people that simply did not fit into clichés. What clichés could express lived experience? In what language could it be told? How were reality and verisimilitude to be expressed in writing? How was a fiction to materialize which treated reality and verisimilitude in all their dimensions?

Evliya Çelebi well understood the traditional conception of literary art. By combining objective knowledge with lived experience through fiction, he allowed clichéd expression and lived experience to embrace. And by spiralling together written and spoken language in his narrative style, he turned "the three languages" (*elsine-i selâse* – i.e., Arabic, Persian and Turkish) into a single language.¹¹ In this way he went beyond cliché and gained for Ottoman Turkish a true narrative expressive power. That is to say, he made use of the written language that was in the service of art and developed it in order to narrate lived experience.

Evliya Çelebi frequently notes the transience of life, the need to derive satisfaction from this fleeting world (*fânî cihândan sehil kâm alma*), and the difficulties suffered in order to gain a living (*bir nân pâre için hâl-i diğêr-gün*); and in the flow of events he brings to the fore displays of human weaknesses and human emotions. In his portrayal of interpersonal and intersocietal conflicts; in his unrestrained recounting of what he saw and felt; in his describing things that were different – in all these we witness a literary talent that goes beyond that of his age. Two hundred years later, in the nineteenth century, Turkish literature would consciously follow this path. Evliya Çelebi was able to accomplish this already in the seventeenth century because of the experience he had gained while serving as companion of the sultan; because of the self-confidence and broad perspective on life that he gained through his travels; and, no doubt, because of his matchless talent as a writer. The *Seyahatnâme* is perhaps the first node in the development of Turkish literature where the writer and the poet diverged.

¹¹Dankoff, Robert, *Evliya Çelebi Seyahatnâmesi Okuma Sözlüğü* (Istanbul: Haziran, 2004): pp. 28-38. In these pages Dankoff discusses the peculiar characteristics of Evliya Çelebi's use of language. He shows with many examples how Evliya formed new words from Turkish using Arabic morphology or Persian suffixes, and how he used the three languages in intimacy with one another.