Between Languages: Translative Acts in Sabahattin Ali’s *Comprehensive Germanistan Travelogue*

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Renown for his works focusing on the social reality of his time, Sabahattin Ali’s care for language often takes a second position to his political engagement in the scholarship. He was nonetheless concerned with intricacies of language, which he knew to be an indispensable device for creating the literary reality he has been praised for. One can find traces of this care throughout his life: his service as a German language teacher, involvement in the First Turkish Publishing Congress (Birinci Neşriyat Kongresi) of 1939, as well as in Hasan Ali Yücel’s Translation Bureau (Tercüme Bürosu).

This article focuses on the translative acts in Ali’s best-selling novel *Madonna in a Fur Coat* (*Kürk Mantolu Madonna*), and posthumously published private letter entitled “Comprehensive Germanistan Travelogue” (“Mufassal Cermenistan Seyahatnamesi”) to comprehend his stance toward language and national identity in the wake of the Turkish language reform. While thinking of translation as a means to cultural transfer across modes of intelligibility, this approach complicates binary attributes, such as old-new and local-foreign, thereby posing Ali’s engagement with language and interlinguality as a way to tackle Ottoman literary past as well as concepts such as humanism and worldliness that dominated the political discourse of the time.
In *Madonna in a Fur Coat* (*Kürk Mantolu Madonna,* published in 1943, henceforth *Madonna*), Sabahattin Ali introduces his protagonist Raif Efendi as follows:

He was not exceptional by any means. He was, rather, one of those men without any particularity of whom we see hundreds and pass by every day without looking. There surely is nothing worth one’s curiosity in the apparent and hidden parts of their lives.¹

Yet, Ali would go on to tell Raif’s life story as if peeling the layers of an onion, painstakingly revealing a life story that is nothing short of extraordinary. His early life in Germany, his talent for painting, and his passionate love affair with Maria Puder, all discovered through an unauthorized reading of his private journal by the impudent yet sympathetic narrator, stand in dramatic contrast with how the old Raif appears to his immediate entourage, and with the tiresome mediocrity of his unappreciative family.

Raif Efendi is a character (the protagonist of the novel no less) who comes into prominence through his apparent ordinariness, in what he hides rather than what he reveals. No wonder that the original title Ali had intended for his novel was *Lüzumsuz Adam* (unnecessary man) (Gürses 2013: 405). Noting the tentative title that never materialized, Sabri Gürses observes that it reflects Ali’s anxiety in the face of “the Western world, foreign languages and the act of translation” (Gürses 2013: 408). According to Gürses, for Ali, the fear of winding up “the unnecessary man” would mean becoming as invisible as Raif Efendi, and remaining a provincial young boy who would never be taken seriously and whose work would never be translated into other languages. Building on Gürses’s observation, I argue that it is indeed no coincidence Raif Efendi is a translator, and that this choice on the part of the author hints at a general observation on the act of translation, just as much as it channels a personal frustration, one that engages the intensive policy implementations at this time surrounding issues of language, translation, and culture by the young Turkish state.

Raif’s invisibility as a translator echoes Lawrence Venuti’s milestone monograph, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation,* where he criticizes the transparency inflicted upon the act of translation, which equates “successful translation” with “the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities [thus] giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer’s personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text” (Venuti 1995: 4).² Objecting to Norman Shapiro’s


² Venuti remarks, “[t]here is even a group of pejorative neologisms designed to criticize translations that lack fluency, but also used, more generally, to signify badly written prose: ‘translatese,’ ‘translatorsese,’ ‘translationese.’” (Venuti 1995: 4)
perception of an ideal translation as “a pane of glass,” only noticed “when there are little imperfections—scratches, bubbles,” Venuti argues that such idealized transparency dangerously conceals

“the violence that resides in the very purpose and activity of translation: the reconstitution of the foreign text in accordance with values, beliefs and representations that preexist it in the target language, always configured in hierarchies of dominance and marginality, always determining the production, circulation, and reception of texts” (Venuti 1995: 18).

This concealment is by no means inconsequential. The initial impression Raif the translator makes as a blatant failure is symbolic of this error in judgment, which the entire rest of the novel works very hard to undo. Similarly, translation as an act of intercultural transfer maintains the right to such recognition, as Ali hints at through Raif’s remarkably rich life story. The narrator gently warns us, even at the very beginning, of the deceptiveness of external appearances: “[…] we only look at the exteriority of these men we judge and never take into consideration that they too have a head and a mind inside of it, one that works even when they don’t want it to, and, as a result of all this, an internal world.” And he adds, “if we were to become curious about this world […] and look into those that it does not easily give away, we would perhaps see things we did not hope for, to encounter a kind of wealth we did not expect.”

For those who move past appearances, the act of translation reveals the hidden worlds of both languages involved. It does so through the sense of estrangement it creates when one looks at one’s own language (or a language with which one is familiar) rendered in another language and realizes just how strange it looks now. It is in the safekeeping of differences while attempting interlingual transfer that translation reveals the odd in the familiar. As such, the impact of translation is not just in transferring one language into another and thus rendering the content intelligible in the target language, but also in the alienating effect of hearing the well-known in the foreign. To explain this phenomenon, Venuti argues that

[the translator is the secret master of the difference of languages, a difference he is not out to abolish, but rather one he puts to use as he brings violent or subtle changes to bear on his own language, thus awakening within it the presence of that which is at origin different in the original (Venuti 1995: 307).]

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5 The original reads: “Fakat bunu düşünürken yalnız o adamların dışlarına bakarız; onların da birer kafaları, bunun içinde, isteseler de istemeseler de işlemeye mahkûm birer dimâğları bulunduğu, bunun neticesi olarak kendilerine göre bir iç âlemli olacağını hiç aklımıza getirmeziz. Bu âlemin tezahürlerini dışarı vermediklerine bakıp onların manen yaşamlarını hükümedecek yerde, en basit bir beşer técessüsü ile, bu meşhur âlemi merak etsek, belki hiç ummadığımız şeyler görmemiz, béklememiziz zenginliklerle karşılashmanız mümkün olur.” (Ali 2004: 11)
By thus unveiling the structural violence embedded in the act itself, translation invites attentive readers to look for differences while reflecting on the reasons why these differences exist and what they can make of them in order to understand what they had previously thought to be their very own.

Looking at Sabahattin Ali’s life through the lens of translation reveals remarkable similarities with that of his protagonist Raif Efendi. They both spend some time in Germany in their early youth (Ali in Potsdam and Raif Efendi in Berlin), learn the German language, and work as translators back home. More interesting, however, is the fact that Raif’s invisibility is matched by a lack of emphasis in the scholarship on the ‘translational’ aspect of Ali’s work, which is instead referred to as a strong example of the social realist movement in Turkey. Yet, Ali’s entire career is immersed in a period of intensive linguistic engineering orchestrated by the young Turkish nation-state of the 1920s and 30s, the most dramatic being the swift Alphabet Reform of 1928, which sought to craft a new communicative medium for the new republic and distance its cultural trajectory from its Ottoman predecessor. Having returned from Germany in the wake of the reform, Ali took an active part in this process. He participated in the First Turkish Publishing Congress (Birinci Neşriyat Kongresi) of 1939 and became one of the seven founding members of the newly-founded Translation Bureau (Tercüme Bürösü), where he both translated literary works and wrote theoretical pieces on translation for the Bureau’s periodical, Tercüme⁴.

During his stay in Potsdam to learn the German language on a government fellowship in 1928-9, Ali had already begun to reflect on how translation can be a useful tool to grasp the centrality of language as a site of conflict between opposing interests, particularly during periods of fast-paced transformation. One example of this is a private letter he sent from Potsdam to Pertev Naili Boratav and a number of his close friends, including Orhan Şaiq Gökyay, Ekrem Reşit Rey, and Nihal Atsız.⁵ Entitled Mufassal Cermenistan Seyahatnamesi (Comprehensive Germanistan Travelogue, henceforth Seyahatname), and written less than a year after the Alphabet Reform of 1928, this letter is a strangely humorous amalgam of the traditional seyahatname (travelogue) form with its old-fashioned expressive spectrum, and the ‘indecent’ content Ali provides, depicting an alcohol-ridden New Year’s party in Potsdam. This provocative mismatch invites the reader to pay attention to the connections between language / form and content.

Through a close reading of this letter, I propose that Ali’s trip to Germany and engagement with the German language and culture were vital to this reflection on language and translation, one that ultimately sheds light both on the significance of the act of translation (thus making it ‘visible again’) and on the linguistic reforms

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4 Other members were Nurullah Atac (chairman), Saffet Pala (secretary general), Sabahattin Eyüboğlu, Bedrettin Tuncel, Enver Ziya Karal and Nusret Hızır (Tahir Güręçaglar 2008: 70).
5 The letter was never published until 1979 when it appeared in Sabahattin Ali (edited by Filiz Ali Laslo and Atilla Özkırımlı).
currently underway in his home country, thus emphasizing the connection between language and politics. The effect of estrangement created by translation parallels and reinforces the physical displacement of the author, his move away from home in order to be able to look at it with a fresh set of eyes. To use Emily Apter’s term, remaining in a “translation zone” (Apter 2006) where more than one language factors in the fulfillment of his quotidian needs enables him to establish different and conflicting ways of perceiving the outside world.

In making this argument, I embrace a more inclusive definition of the term ‘translation,’ one to which Walter G. Andrews draws attention when he confesses that the more he translates, the more confused he gets on what translation really means: “The result—quite strangely—has been that I am no longer confident that I know what it means to translate,” he ponders, “or more accurately, where translation ends and something else begins” (Andrews 2002: 15). Translation is then best described as a spectrum of activities which serves the general purpose of rendering a set of ideas or information from one to another system of intelligibility. In a similar vein, Even-Zohar defines translation as the movement of meaning between cultural repertoires, which are by no means “generated by our genes, but need to be made, learned and adopted by people, that is, members of the group” (Even-Zohar 1997: 378). This looser and larger definition does justice to the centrality of the act to everyone’s daily operations and also, as Emily Apter argues, renders “self-knowledge foreign to itself,” and thus serves as “a way of denaturalizing citizens, taking them out of the comfort zone of national space, daily ritual, and pre-given domestic arrangements” (Apter 2006: 6). Ali’s Seyahatname, a letter of humorous self-mockery addressed to a close group of friends, engages with issues of estrangement, foreignness and denaturalization through translation, right at the historical juncture between the Ottoman Empire and the young Turkish Republic, and seeks to make translation visible anew during a period in which it is so central, it cannot afford to be overlooked.

Toward an Alternative History of Translation

Secondary scholarship on the translation bureau has largely treated the systematized form of publishing it supported as an instance of culture planning, defined as the “deliberate intervention,” either by power holders or by ‘free agents,’ “into an extant or a crystallizing repertoire” (Even-Zohar 2008: 278). In her analysis of private publishing efforts in the 1940s and 50s, Şehnaz Tahir Gürçağlar emphasizes the need to view translation efforts of this time period not simply as processes shaped by pre-determined norms, but also as the result of individual decision-making (Tahir-Gürçağlar 2008: 24-25). In doing so, she takes a step back from the institutional framework of the bureau to show how private publishers and translators formed an important counterforce that “resisted the norms offered by the dominant discourse of the planners” (Tahir-Gürçağlar 2008: 31). Building on this argument, I ask further: to what extent did voices coming from within the
bureau resist dominant translation discourses and norms? As an author who critically engaged with the shortcomings of modernity, and the conception of modernity as a monolithic or Western discourse, Sabahattin Ali is a case in point.

Sabri Gürses situates Ali within a larger cultural search for a delineated program of translation in the early Republic; as such, Gürses views Ali as central to the formation of an intellectual discourse that utilized translation—understood as a form of cultural transfer (kültür aktarımı)—as a means for constructing a national Turkish culture (Gürses 2013: 414). This discourse was dependent on the rhetoric of smooth translatability, which posited a stable category of Western European ideals and values that could be easily transferred to the Turkish context. I argue, on the contrary, that we must read Ali’s participation in the larger translation movement as a counterpoint to the concepts of cultural transfer and smooth translatability that emerged in the immediate wake of the translation bureau’s founding. While Ali enthusiastically supported the translation of Western European literatures, his writing also reveals a more ambivalent view of the ‘West’ than dominant translation discourse of the time. By pointing time and again to the contradictions and inconsistencies of Western modernity, his work both complicated the very possibility of translation as a form of frictionless transfer and constituted an important countervoice to the kind of Europhilia endorsed at the time.

An Oddity of Language: Ali’s Seyahatname

In this text intended as a private letter, Ali narrates his trip from Istanbul to Potsdam and his first days as a visiting student there. Written in riq’a (a prominent handwriting style for personal correspondence) the year following the Alphabet Reform, when the utilization of the Arabic script was prohibited in all public documents and generally stigmatized, the letter plays with the notion of translation on two complementary levels in order to reveal what its author seeks to accomplish: first, there is the intralingual and diachronic play with language in which Ali uses the seventeenth-century Ottoman language of the seyahatname genre to talk about a New Year’s party in 1929, when this communicative system is quickly becoming unintelligible to native speakers of Turkish; second, there is the interlingual and synchronic play with language in which Ali speaks of a celebration taking place in Germany, far outside the geographic realm of the language he is using, and of rituals that are not readily intelligible to those who have not traveled west of the new nation-state’s borders. In other words, this letter displays three important cultural-linguistic elements; Ottoman Turkish, the main means of communication; German, the main supplier of content (i. e. the tradition of New Year’s parties); and modern Turkish, a language under construction at the time, and the supposed means of communication between the writer and his readers, which is present in its unexpected absence.
As I show below, Ali creates an estrangement effect through two major techniques. First, he shows how language has a direct impact on the nature of the given message, or how when the language itself changes, the content changes, even when the same person talks about the same subject, inviting readers to reflect on how their own native tongue plays an active role in their perception of the world. Second, he treats German proper nouns as if they were made of Turkish subparts, equating signifiers of one language with those of another (unrelated) one.

An “Ottoman man” in Potsdam: Ali’s Encounter with Exotic Germany

As mentioned earlier, by adopting a certain set of lexical preferences that are deemed ‘old-fashioned’ and, thus, ‘foreign’ to the contemporary language, Ali demonstrates how a linguistic shift to express ideas transforms those very ideas. This becomes manifest through a comparison of descriptions of the German urban landscape in Seyabatname and Madonna; while Raif Efendi’s Berlin is not so different from any other big city, Sabahattin Ali’s Potsdam is nothing but strange and alien. Raif Efendi observes, “[u]ltimately, this was just another city. A city with wider streets—much cleaner, and with blonder people. But there was nothing about it that would make a person swoon with awe.” This stands in stark contrast with Ali’s description of his personal experience in Potsdam.

Following the church bells, all stores opened their doors and the intoxicated inhabitants of this grand town - both men and women - went out half-naked, sporting peculiar outfits. This humble servant soon joined the crowd and began to wander along the long string of shops, with the noble intention of acquainting himself with European manners and advancing his knowledge of the subject. What a scenery it was, akin to Judgment Day...And yet the girls walking around would make one think it were Paradise instead...

Lusting after two beautiful girls he met in the crowd, and clearly enjoying the party where young people are dancing and celebrating the new year, Ali nonetheless chooses not to betray the stylistic framework of his letter and legitimizes his be-

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friending the German girls in terms of a Muslim’s duty to show them ‘the right path.’ He narrates,

[t]his spectacle offended my Islamic zeal; I wanted to help make the hearts of these girls as pure and illuminated (enlightened) as their beautiful faces, filling them with Islamic wisdom and moral values. I was just searching for an appropriate candidate for this mission when I heard a nightingale-like voice call forth something that implied ‘Blessed New Year!’ on my left side.\(^8\)

One can trace this narrative style, illustrating, with humorous irony, the connection between form and content, and between language and meaning, all the way to the end of his little story when he ends up kissing one of the girls and setting up a date with them for the following day in a Catholic Church, of all places.

The deliberate mismatch between his language-discourse and his acts (therefore, between the narrative style and content) becomes even stronger when the Ali walks into the church the next day. Unable to find the girls and guessing that he has been stood up, Ali nevertheless remains in the church and fully participates in the religious ceremony, crossing himself, kneeling down and praying to Jesus, and singing along with the crowd. “I felt very pleased thinking that I was doing all this to lead these blasphemers into the path of true religion,” he explains, and his joy is not diminished even when he confirms that the girls are not there: “my gaza, which consisted of waiting in the cold and being involved in a few blasphemous acts, was nothing compared to that of others, who have displayed acts of heroism and given their lives in the name of jihad and the true religion of Islam.”\(^9\)

The seyahatname form adopted in this letter is certainly a central element in the production of estrangement, in that it freezes the narrative time somewhere in or around the seventeenth century, while the content clearly belongs to another era. It precludes any other way of accounting for the events other than that which the form allows, and determines the way the author grasps the world around him. The rules of the narrative were set at the very beginning, when Ali describes his journey through the Balkans in a mocking, yet nostalgic tribute to the newly deceased empire, the antagonist par excellence of the republic: “as the train moved forward,” he writes, “places like Plovdiv that used to be filled with Muslims made us remember the old empire, the antagonist par excellence of the republic.”

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\(^8\) The original reads: “Bu manzara hamiyyet-i islamiyyeme dokunup bu duhterlerin vech-i dilberleri gibi kalbelerini de pak, münevver eylemek, hikmet-i islamiyye, faza’il-i ahlakrye ile memlu kalmak isteyip irşada muvafik kimesne taharri eylemekte idim ki carib-i yesarında anbellil misal bir sedann sene-i cedide mübarek ola! me’alinde bir cümle sarf ettigimi guş eyledim.” (Ali 1979: 353)

nisse about the old Ottoman state with longing.” As his current-day experiences are translated into historical narrative, the equivalence between the absent modern text and the present pre-modern one is deliberately distorted to make the reader aware of the historical gap between the real time of experience and the ‘fake’ time of narration. In other words, the ‘translation’ of his experiences into a historical genre in Ottoman Turkish exposes and challenges the ‘function’ of translation, defined as “the potentiality of the translated text to release diverse effects, beginning with the communication of information and the production of a response comparable to the one produced by the foreign text in its own culture” (Venuti 2004: 5). Of course, here, Ali aims for the opposite effect, and uses the texts to show how he perceives and reflects events differently, merely because he operates in a different historical register of the same language.

This deliberate play with the act of translation as a means to reveal the often concealed centrality of language in the perception of reality is in line with how translation was perceived in Ali’s own time, the first decades of the twentieth century. Rooted in German Romanticism, hermeneutics and existential phenomenology, translation theorists and practitioners thought of language as constitutive of reality and translation as reconstituting the reality of the original text in the target language. In “The Task of the Translator” (1923), for example, Walter Benjamin speaks of the “afterlife” (Überleben) of the foreign text in the target language, a new life informed by how the text is perceived in the translated version, or, in other words, as part of a different system of intelligibility (Benjamin 2004: 16). Similarly, in the 1930s, José Ortega y Gasset argues that translation is “a literary genre apart, with its own norms and its own ends” (Ortega y Gasset 1992: 109). As a result, translators engaged in meta-translative acts, such as translation through literalisms, aiming to render translated text foreign to its target language, in order to emphasize both the act itself and the qualities of the original language (Venuti 2004: 11). In fact, the second way in which Ali creates linguistic estrangement in Seyahatname has to do with a play on literalism, defining a German proper noun in Ottoman Turkish.

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11 Venuti explains, “Equivalence has been understood as “accuracy,” “adequacy,” “correctness,” “correspondence,” “fidelity,” or “identity”; it is a variable notion of how the translation is connected to the foreign text. Function has been understood as the potentiality of the translated text to release diverse effects, beginning with the communication of information and the production of a response comparable to the one produced by the foreign text in its own culture” (Venuti 2004: 5).
12 In the subject of intralingual translation, Jakobson points out, for example, that “synonymy, as a rule, is not complete equivalence: for example, every celibate is a bachelor, but not every bachelor is a celibate” (Jakobson 2004: 114). This is certainly more marked in the difference between the dia-chronic versions of the same language.
Potsdam or “O Mother Mary, hide the idols!”: Ali’s Play on Words

Ali prefaces his first descriptions of Germany and German people with the definition of the word ‘Potsdam’ where he was to stay for the upcoming months; he explains that the word is made up of three separate words (in Ottoman Turkish): “put,” “sedd,” and “üm,” the first meaning “images and idols Christians (infidels) worship,” the second, “to conceal, to hide,” and the third, “mother.” He concludes, “All together, by means of cubism, it means: ‘O Mother Mary, cover the idols!’ This meaningful wish is indeed granted, as the eternal God covers the aforementioned city with a coat of white snow, concealing all statues in public parks and gardens.”

Taken to the extreme, this phonocentric literalism causes the interlingual transfer to end in absurdity, again rendering the act more visible than it would have been otherwise.

Remarking on the preservation of original spelling for foreign proper nouns in modern (latinized) Turkish, translation scholar Şehnaz Tahir Gürçağlar argues that the alienating effect of this decision “is a strictly ‘foreignizing’ strategy, interfering with the text’s fluency, […] inviting the reader to ponder it as a mediated work, i. e. translation” (Tahir Gürçağlar 2008: 204). Such moves indeed carried remarkable strategic weight during this period of intense linguistic transformation, as the new Turkish state needed to firmly (re)define what was considered ‘foreign’ in order to understand what ‘national’ meant. During the early 1930s, right on the wake of Ali’s return from Germany, the level of linguistic experimentation seems to have reached an all-time high; on July 12, 1932, Mustafa Kemal founded the Society for the Study of Turkish Language (Türk Dili Tetkik Cemiyeti; later, Türk Dil Kurumu, henceforth TDK), an establishment that intensively engaged in creating neologisms in ensuing years in an attempt to ‘clean’ the Turkish language of foreign (particularly Arabic, Persian and French) influence.

Native speakers of the language expectedly joined in this process of recreation, albeit in unofficial terms, sometimes to take the initiative to judge the effectiveness of the new words, and other times to mock some of the official decisions. In The Turkish Language Reform: A Catastrophic Success, Geoffrey Lewis comments on public engagement during reformative moments and points out how it has, at times, been a disruptive force against the nation-building project, since people cared more about the utility of words than their historicity:

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Although people with a feeling for language may not have liked the new words, they soon found themselves obliged to use at any rate some of them if they wished to communicate. But [...] few knew or cared anything about the origins of the words they used, which is why one hears bölgevî for ‘regional’ and önemiyyet for ‘importance’, both being Öztürkçe [pure-Turkish] words with Arabic suffixes (Lewis 2002: 144).

This tendency continued well into the later years of the republic; for example, during the 1960s, TDK had to issue a disclaimer for some of the humorous public coinages, among which were “gök konuksal avrat” (sky guest-ish dame) for “uçak hostesi” (air hostess), “öz itirimli götürgeç” (self-propulsional carry-thing) for “otomobil” (automobile), and “ulusal düttürü” (clannish ditty) for “milli marş” (national anthem) (Lewis 2002: 160).

The disclaimer suggests that those witty public suggestions were taken to be official by some, pointing to the experimental nature of the process. Lewis comments that “[t]he reason why unsophisticated people thought these were genuine TDK products is that they found them no different in kind from some of the Society’s own creations; how can one tell that a grotesque parody is a parody when the original is itself grotesque?” (Lewis 2002: 160) The early 1930s constitute a peak time for this type of neological activity, in an attempt to quickly, yet effectively engineer a new language that would reflect the spirit of the new republic. As many cultural historians of the early republic point out, the discourse on the linguistic reform emphasized an essential, yet dormant national core that needed to be rediscovered as it was to be an indispensable element of the emergent nation-state. Yet, despite the emphasis on the archaeological nature of the reform, this linguistic project was very much a feat of engineering to create an epistemological revolution, one to which Ali humorously draws attention as he ‘disguises’ himself as an Ottoman man through his play with linguistic conventions in flux.

If, in the words of Walter Andrews, “it is actually impossible to translate, transmit, or disseminate between epistemic domains until words and meanings can be assumed to exist in the target language, which embody the ‘unthought’ assumptions of the source language,” Ali’s letter manages to expose the contemporary epistemological shift by staging an awkward turn in narrative style, from 1930s informal language to seventeenth century Ottoman travel writing (Andrews 2002: 27). Like the neologisms that did not stick, his linguistic choices sound comical because they do not reflect the conventions of the time; yet they also create the effect of alienation that jolts the reader into the realization of the historicity of the moment in which they live.
Turkey in the 1930s: Debates on Humanism and the Birth of Comparative Literature

Why should anyone care about a personal letter, one might ask, especially considering that it was not in any way intended for publication to begin with? Though unpublished until the late 1970s, Ali’s humorous *Seyahatname* speaks to an important issue of the era, one that fuels the foundation of the TDK in 1932 and of Hasan Ali Yücel’s Translation Bureau (*Tercüme Bürosu*) in the early 1940s, the preparation of various dictionaries, grammar books, attempts at vocabulary collection from various registers of the language, and so on: the question of, ‘Who are we, really?’ This question was central to the first few years of the new republic; in fact, in the first issue of the magazine *İnsan* (*Human*) published in 1938, editor-in-chief Hilmi Ziya Ülken conceived of the entire idea of a ‘Turkish Renaissance’ around it. Ülken argued that “[t]oday, we are engaged in a Renaissance in the truest sense: We are joining the world anew. Western methods will guide us in re-discovering ourselves” (Tahir Gürçağlar 2008: 64).

Here, as in the state policy in general, “re-discovering ourselves” implied a path towards self-discovery (or, the discovery of the national identity) through westernization. Seemingly counter-intuitive, this stance was nonetheless in line with the attempts to become a part of the European civilization by way of discovering a sense of common humanity through works of art, and, thereby, to override what they perceived as the casting of the European as the civilizational ‘Other’. In the words of Hasan Ali Yücel speaking in the late 1930s, “one nation’s repetition of other nations’ literature in its own language, in other words, in its own understanding means raising, reviving and recreating its intelligence and ability to understand accordingly” (Berk 2004: 154). Therein stood the gist of the linguistic reforms that highly emphasized the act of translation. Not surprisingly, Hilmi Ziya Ülken stated in 1935 that “he expected translation activity to lead to westernization,” and İsmail Habib Sevük, that “the way to become ‘fully European’ went, not through learning foreign languages, but through translation.” To Sevük, translation was “a great ideal, the mission of all missions, our greatest flag” (Tahir Gürçağlar 2008: 101).

It follows from this deliberate emphasis placed on translation, that translators were the very agents shaping the Turkish language anew. This, of course, is not an exclusively modern phenomenon. Writing about premodern literary traditions in Turkish, Zehra Toska calls attention to how “[t]ranslating scientific and literary works from such sophisticated languages as Arabic and Persian, using patterns of expression in oral Turkish literature, was evidently difficult,” and that thus “[t]he translators were at the same time the creators of the language of Turkish literature” (Toska 2002: 62). A twentieth century instance of the same phenomenon is manifest in the words of Ali’s contemporary and colleague Azra Erhat, who notes that “this was a period when Turkish had not yet been established properly,” and that she did not have any problem understanding the notes she was given in German;
the major problem to her was translating them into Turkish, with the appropriate terms still non-existent (Berk 2004: 142).

At this historical juncture, Ali’s *Seyahatname* becomes all the more important in that it provokes one to reflect on where Ottoman literary language stands in relation to the process of linguistic reengineering. In an attempt to create a *Kultursprache* that would reflect the expressional habits of the majority of its speakers and that would thus be an essential part of this *self-rediscovery*, the pre-republican literary language (in all its temporal and stylistic variations) was cast as a *lingua non grata*, an artificial, imitative and inauthentic entity that had been hiding a dormant essence. As a result, most of the Ottoman literary heritage (including most recent texts) was left ‘untranslated.’ But it also meant that the system of education had to go through a dramatic process of ‘translation’ from the old into the new Turkish. Ali’s generation, as the young adults of the Alphabet Reform, was particularly caught in the middle of this transition. The perils of this forced linguistic change were foreseen by some dissident voices, such as Hüseyin Cahit Yalçın, who advocated allowing the language to follow its own natural dynamics, or Refi’ Cevad Ulunay, who argued that eastern classics, which influenced Ottoman literary culture, should also be translated into Turkish (Tahir Gürçağlar 2008: 58, 120).

During the 1930s, the questions ‘Who are we?’ and ‘Which texts would help us find ourselves?’ were by no means particular to the young Turkish state. As Kader Konuk extensively elaborates in her book *East West Mimesis: Auerbach in Turkey*, prominent Jewish scholars escaping the Nazi regime, including Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer, took refuge in Turkey, forming sizable communities in its major urban centers.14 Interestingly, Turkey served as a space for them where values of western humanism could be salvaged from a war-torn Europe and constructed anew. As Apter observes,

>[a] fascinating two-way collision occurred in Istanbul between a new nation’s ideology dedicated to constructing a modern Turkish identity with the latest European pedagogies, and an ideology of European culture dedicated to preserving ideals of Western humanism against the ravages of nationalism (Apter 2006: 50).

Swiss pedagogue Albert Malche introduced a supplementary course on comparative literary studies into the university curriculum to encourage the establishment of humanistic thinking, Spitzer wrote an article on “Learning Turkish” in 1934, complicating the paradigms of linguistic (and thus literary) comparison and illustrating “how linguistic estrangement becomes a way of negotiating the experience of deportation, of emigration, and of the foreignness of adoptive cultures,” (Spitzer 2011: 765) and Auerbach, a Romanist by training, wrote *Mimesis: The Repre-

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14 Some of the other scholars situated in Turkey at the time were mythographer Georges Dumézil, Leon Trotsky, Romanist Traugott Fuchs, philosopher Hans Reichenbach, philologist Georg Rohde, Carl Ebert, and Henri Prost (Apter 2006: 51).
sentation of Reality in Western Literature (1946), a founding text of comparative literature. In fact, as many have pointed out, Auerbach and Spitzer have come to be seen as the founding fathers of this field, in no small part due to the work they produced and their émigré experiences in Turkey.

What Spitzer, Auerbach and Ali had in common was that they were located in a ‘translation zone,’ in-between languages and (thus) epistemological spheres, allowing them to question the operative principles of the world they lived in: while Auerbach and Spitzer had to escape their native Europe to recreate, ironically, the values of western humanism within the borders of a budding nation-state, Ali traveled to Germany to receive education in a European language and culture with an aim, at least on the part of the financing institutions, to help the nation-building project. All parties had, albeit reluctantly at first, a chance to position themselves in-between, to learn a different language, to become estranged from their home cultures and to reevaluate it ‘from the outside.’ Self-discovery through comparison lies at the heart of their experiences, as it does at the center of comparative literature. As Apter states, “[i]n naming a transnational process constitutive of its disciplinary nomination comparative literature breaks the isomorphic fit between the name of a nation and the name of a language” (Apter 2006: 243). An existence in the ‘translation zone’ is certainly more likely when one is ‘in exile,’ that is, physically separated from one’s native tongue.

Conclusion: Translation’s Successes, Failures, and the Tragic Ending to Raif’s Love Story

The impact of translation as a cross-epistemological act is larger than it immediately seems, incorporating the relationship not only between Turkish and western languages but also between old and new registers of the same language, as expresional possibilities radically differed among the last two as well. The act of translation entails a re-arranging of the target language to create the necessary epistemic domains that provide a destination for ‘foreign’ notions. In Seyahatname, Ali illustrates that this process is not smooth by any means, and possibly requires physical and temporal displacement on the part of the translator outside of and away from her/himself. A number of scholars have already pointed to both the difficulty and the potential of transcending boundaries and moving into other linguistic spaces, among whom are Emily Apter, who argues that “[t]ranslation failure demarcates intersubjective limits, even as it highlights that ‘eureka’ spot where consciousness crosses over to a rough zone of equivalency,” (Apter 2006: 6) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who states that “[t]he translator who attaches himself closely to his original more or less abandons the originality of his nation, and so a third comes into existence, and the taste of the multitude must first be shaped towards it” (cited in Venuti 1995: 99). The act of translation as interlingual movement is thus also an agent that works even, at times, against the nation and the national language. As Benedict Anderson observes, “seen as both a historical fatality and as
a community imagined through language, the nation presents itself as simultaneously open and closed,” since “language is not an instrument of exclusion: in principle, anyone can learn any language” (Anderson 1991: 134, 146).

Despite the central role of translation as a cognitive agent that builds communities while, at the same time, constituting the amount of intercommunal porosity that they allow, some of the best translations are often deemed to be among the most invisible. Nothing could be further from the truth; processes of translation thus need to be exposed, and Ali suggests this precisely that in both Seyahatname and Madonna. In that respect, one should see these as texts of meta-translation, illuminating how languages are, despite their kinship, historically embedded in their particularities, and how this historicity can only be discovered in comparing them, both synchronically, as in the case of Turkish and German, and diachronically, as in the case of pre-republican and republican Turkish. This realization, in turn, allows one to understand the real impact of the sudden changes inflicted onto languages by political authorities, without necessarily isolating these events as the only times when the linguistic and the political converge. The fate of Raif and Maria’s love affair in Ali’s best-selling novel arguably presents an instance of this impact: One could speculate that one of the reasons why Raif was never informed of Maria’s sudden death and of the fact that they had a baby together was that the final letters Maria sent to Raif never reached their recipient, as the envelopes Raif had prepared in advance for Maria were inscribed with Raif’s address in Arabic script, banned shortly after Raif’s return to his home country. While there is no evidence in the storyline that would positively confirm this scenario, it nonetheless remains a possibility that would indeed make the Alphabet Reform, in the words of Geoffrey Lewis, “a tragic success.”

**Works Cited**


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