

Translators' Introduction to *The Comprehensive Germanistan Travelogue*

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Sabahattin Ali's short stories and his first novel, *Kıyucaklı Yusuf* (1937) (*Yusuf of Kıyucak*), are widely recognized as pioneering texts for the genre of social realism in the early Turkish Republican period.¹ More recent scholarship has also acknowledged the central roles Ali's final two novels, *İçimizdeki Şeytan* (1940) (*The Devil Inside Us*) and *Kürk Mantolu Madonna* (1943) (*Madonna in a Fur Coat*), played in the development of literary modernism in Turkey. Our decision to translate Sabahattin Ali's little known *Mufassal Cermenistan Seyahatnamesi* (1929) (*The Comprehensive Germanistan Travelogue*) aims to shed light on another, largely under-researched aspect of Ali's literary career: his experimentation with and satirization of Ottoman literary forms. By making this text available to an English-speaking audience, we aim to further complicate our understanding of Ali's identity as a writer and his profoundly diverse contribution to the literary landscape of modern Turkish literature.

Ali composed the *Mufassal Cermenistan Seyahatnamesi* as a private letter during his stay in Potsdam, Germany between the fall of 1928 and spring of 1930, for his close friends Pertev Naili Boratav, Orhan Şaik Gökyay, Nihal Atsız, Ekrem Reşit Rey, and a few others who were active in the literary circles of the time. In it, Ali narrates his multi-day journey on a train through the Balkans and Eastern Europe into Berlin, and then Potsdam, his first impressions of these two cities, German culture in general, and an adventurous New Year's party he attended while in

¹ The early Republican period represents the single party period of the Turkish Republic and the first four years of the multi-party system (1923–50).

Potsdam. Originally composed in 1929, the letter remained unpublished until it appeared in 1979 in a collected volume of his oeuvre, entitled *Sabahattin Ali* and edited by Filiz Ali Laslo and Atilla Özkırımlı. Despite its publication in transliterated form, no scholarship to date has examined the significance of this text within the larger scope of Ali's life and work.

As a text steeped in the intricacies of language, Ali's *Mufasssal Cermenistan Seyahatnamesi* poses two major challenges for translation: (1) on the level of genre and its linguistic conventions, and (2) due to Ali's subversion of these conventions through word play. Firstly, the *seyahatname*, or book of travels, is a premodern literary form within the Perso-Ottoman literary tradition, making it not only a curious choice for Ali's purposes, but also difficult to render into English in both its historical and geographic specificity. Examples of the *seyahatname* form can be found throughout the Middle Ages within the Islamic world, yet the form crystallized in the late seventeenth century in Evliya Çelebi's (d. 1682) ten-volume work where he narrates his impressions of Anatolia, parts of Mesopotamia, Transylvania, Central Asia, North Africa and Eastern Europe.² Even though Evliya's text is a later example of the form and reflects the sensibilities of its time through a mixed use of the colloquial Turkish and ornate style (characterized by Perso-Arabic vocabulary and grammar), it has become the ur-*seyahatname*, the first (and often only) text that comes to mind at the mention of the form, following its 1848 publication by the Bulaq Press in Cairo.

Because of its take-all canonicity, Ali must have tried to mimic Evliya's text in particular. Indeed, Ali's distortion of facts for comic effect is one key way in which he plays off of the style of Evliya's work, which employs inventive fiction, hearsay and exaggeration to appeal to his readers. The irony in *Cermenistan Seyahatnamesi*, which Ali constructs through a mismatch between form and content, thus depends in large part on the reader's recognition of Evliya's text as much as of the *seyahatname* form in general, including the praise to God in the beginning, and the utilization of antiquated vocabulary and syntax. Because this reliance on the reader's particular cultural knowledge is impossible to replicate in English, we decided against translating the formalities of the Ottoman into another, also historically specific, form of old English.

At the same time, we have chosen to maintain historic place names, such as *Asitane*, *Der-i Sa'adet*, and *Der-i Aliyye*, which mean 'The Imperial Threshold,' 'The Gate of Prosperity,' and 'The Sublime Porte,' respectively. While these descriptive terms for the capital of the Ottoman Empire were not yet antiquated in 1929, they did serve as markers of the past following the establishment of the modern Republic of Turkey in 1923 and the establishment of Ankara as the new capital of the

² Parts of Evliya's *Seyahatname* were translated into various languages, including English. See, for example, the most recent translation by Robert Dankoff and Sooyong Kim, entitled *An Ottoman Traveller: Selections from the Book of Travels of Evliya Çelebi*, (2010), London.

nation state. Rather than provide descriptive translations, we have chosen to maintain these original place names precisely because they are not immediately recognizable to an English-speaking reader. As such, they resonate as a site of linguistic difference within the modern language of the English translation.

Ali also employs antiquated place names to refer to Germany throughout his letter. *Frengistan* (Frangistan), for example, was used in the Ottoman Empire as late as the 17th century to refer to western or Latin Europe. Literally meaning 'the land of the Franks,' it did not denote a specific geographic area, but was rather used to describe any land perceived as Christian. Ali's decision to refer to present-day Germany as *Frengistan* is central to the humor of his pseudo-historical travelogue, which describes the 'modern' celebration of New Year's Eve in Potsdam, Germany through recourse to outdated vocabulary and a genre rooted in the Ottoman literary past.

Ali's titular neologism, *Cermenistan*, offers a playful counterpart to the actual word *Frengistan*. Derived from *Cermen*, meaning Germanic, and the Persian suffix *-stan*, meaning 'land', Ali describes the present-day inhabitants of Potsdam through reference to the Germanic peoples who inhabited northern Europe from approximately the 3rd through the 9th century. This fictionalized name pokes fun at the essentialization of contemporary cultural identities through recourse to medieval historical predecessors. Our decision to translate this term through the neologism 'Germanistan' maintains the jarring usage of the *-stan* suffix to describe a Western European country. At the same time, our translation sacrifices the ironic historicity of the word *Cermen*. Rather than utilizing an older French word such as *Germain*, or the English term Germania, we have chosen to maintain a phonetic similarity to Ali's original title. In doing so, we engage in a form of phonetic translation that Ali himself later employs in his letter.

The most notable instance of phonetic translation in the *Cermenistan Seyahatnamesi* is Ali's phonetic reconstruction of the place name Potsdam as *Putseddüm*.

According to Hayrullah Molla Bey, a contemporary etymologist, the word Potsdam consists of the words *put*, *sedd*, and *üm*. *Put* as is known, is a shrine found in the churches of infidels in the form of Christian portraits and statues; *sedd* means to close, cover or conceal; *üm*, or mother, here means the Mother Mary. All together, by means of cubism, it means: "O Mother Mary, cover the idols!" This meaningful wish is indeed granted, as the eternal Allah covers the aforementioned city with a coat of white snow, concealing all statues in public parks and gardens.

To a certain extent, our English rendition of this passage replicates the processes of translation at work in the original. By maintaining the original Ottoman words *put*, *sedd*, and *üm*, we have nevertheless transformed instances of intralingual (Ottoman-Ottoman) translation into interlingual (Ottoman-English) ones. As a result, the translation of this passage downplays Ali's emphasis on Turkish as a language

in transition amidst large-scale linguistic and cultural reforms. The medium of English nevertheless calls attention to the interlingual translation of Potsdam into a collection of Ottoman words. In this way, the English reader finds herself 'learning' new Ottoman / Turkish words within a text that also thematizes Ali's own learning of German.

In a second instance of phonetic translation, Ali describes a group of young Germans engaged in a humorous 'dance' (*rakı*), which he terms "pat bi-naz." This word is a phonetic play on *patinaj*, the Ottoman term for ice skating, which is itself derived from the French word *patinage*. In Ali's comic rendition of this word, 'pat' serves as an onomatopoeic sound which expresses a thud or fall to the ground. Through use of the Persian preposition 'bi,' which is commonly used with a noun to produce a negative prepositional phrase, the term 'bi-naz' literally means without conceit. Together, the phrase "pat bi-naz" offers a comic description of inexperienced but unassuming ice skaters.

More than an instance of witty word play, Ali's neologism adds to the ironic tone of his letter. As a European form of entertainment, ice skating had become a sign of modernity and progress in turn-of-the-century Istanbul, in that it provided a new form of public social interaction between men and women. At the same time, the relative in/ability to skate served as a metaphor for one's adaptability to the 'modern' era.³ Ali's depiction of clumsy German skaters in 1929 turns this rhetoric on its head, raising the larger question of whether 'modern' values are necessarily engendered by Western Europe.

Our translation of "pat bi-naz" as "ease-skidding" maintains a phonetic play on words with ice-skating, and expresses a sense of clumsiness through the phonetic similarities of skate/ skid. This form of English-English wordplay nevertheless loses the additional reference to *patinaj* as a French loan word, which underscores the importation of ice skating to the late Ottoman Empire from Western Europe.

Together with instances of word play such as "pat bi-naz" and "Cermenistan," the historic specificity of Ali's travelogue has made its translation a difficult but also rewarding process. In this brief introduction, we have tried to outline the major issues at stake in translating Ali's *Cermenistan Seyahatnamesi* into English. For a more in-depth discussion of the text, please see Zeynep Seviner's article in this special issue, "Between Languages: Translative Acts in Sabahattin Ali's *Comprehensive Germanistan Travelogue*," which further situates the linguistic playfulness of Ali's letter within its specific historical context.

Despite the specificities of Ali's original text that do not carry over into English, the very act of translation serves to metaphorically extend the interlingual and intercultural play Ali had begun in the wake of significant linguistic and cultural transformations in Turkey. As such we hope that this translation will both bring

³ For an insightful discussion of ice skating in the late Ottoman Empire, see chapter VII of Palmira Brummett's *Image and Imperialism in the Ottoman Revolutionary Press, 1908-1911*, (2002), Albany, NY.

new attention to, and help scholars to 'unearth' a hitherto unexplored dimension of Ali's work, namely his literary engagement with Ottoman forms and conventions.