

Ethnic Fatigue

Başçılar's Poetry as a Metaphor for the Other "Other Literature"

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I have spoken of a voice telling me things. . . . It did not
use the words that Moran had used when he was little.

—Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*

Turkish Immigration to the United States and Literature Produced by Turks in the United States

Turkish immigration to the United States has a long history that is still largely untapped. Certain characteristics are nevertheless evident. During Ottoman times, it was sporadic and relatively negligible, with the percentage of "ethnic" Turks themselves among the "Turkish" immigrants being rather low. The usual pattern, moreover, was to eventually reintegrate into the homeland.¹ A society with a predominantly different culture, as well as another language and another set of mores, appeared too positioned in the ontological space of the Other for Turks to imagine forging an identity in it. On a more mundane level, lacking a *communitas* of their own, most felt *déclassé* in an "age of innocence" they could not penetrate. Although communication was not what it is nowadays, they still managed to maintain ties with the *heimat*, and some went back after 1923 to help build the newly formed Turkish Republic.² This event itself was a tremendous sociopolitical upheaval that sent members of the ancien régime abroad, and thus to the United States as well.

The immigrants who came later were not any more the polyethnic subjects of the *Sublime Porte* but the citizens of a "developing" country that later was to experience Marshall Plan aid. They came in admiration of Uncle Sam and in anticipation of striking gold and finding freedom. It is a bitter irony that Muzaffer Sherif, now known as one of the founders of American social psychology, had to leave Ankara University and Turkey during the 1940s because he was hounded there as a communist. Sherif may be categorized also as one of the precursors of the "brain drain" that has characterized recent Turkish immigration. Then, of course, Turkish-

Americans are part of those ethnic groups that benefited largely from the 1965 immigration law that stopped privileging the Europeans. Turkey, moreover, is on the “green-card lottery” that allots the so-called diversity-visa.

One dominant trait among Turkish-Americans seems to be the loss of diglossia starting with the second generation. Although the dramatic and unethical suppression of language is of course that performed by authorities, more widespread is always the one performed by mothers, those well-meaning women who wish their offspring to “succeed,” and who speak English with their children, regardless of whether they themselves are in good command of it or not. That is what seems to be the trend among Turkish-American families.

Turkish has been used formally among Turkish-Americans in periodicals they publish, most of which have had short life spans.³ Certain Turkic Americans also use Turkish for their publications, such as the Crimean Tatar Americans’ *Kırım Türkleri Amerikan Birliği Yayın Organı*.⁴ Whether Turkish or Turkic, such publications are mainly for communicative purposes within the community.

The discussion of Turkish-language writing, for ends other than journalism, presents at once many difficulties, largely because it is totally unknown and unrecognized. Much literary archeology still needs to be done to get a true picture of this particular genre. In earlier times, certain Turks who wrote in Turkish during their temporary stays in the United States, such as Halide Edib Adıvar (1882–1964), who lived in the United States during the 1930s, published their writings that had Turkish themes and preoccupations in Turkish in Turkey, while at the same time penning texts in English. Today poets such as Talat Sait Halman, Seyfettin Başçılar, and Mustafa Ziyalan and authors such as İlhan Arsel and İlhan Başgöz write in Turkish on United States soil and get published in Turkey. At the same time, Halman and Ziyalan write poetry in English, and Başgöz and again Halman, as academicians affiliated with United States universities (Indiana University at Bloomington and New York University, respectively), also write and publish in English.

When they write in Turkish, these poets and authors do not interpellate the American mainstream, or multicultural America; nor do they interpellate the Turkish reader from their position as Americans. That is their most salient feature, and one that makes Turkish-language writing on United States soil problematic.

In fact, believing that in Rome one must do as Romans do, and taking for granted the superiority of English, the medium of communication of the global superpower, Turks who have migrated to the United States have usually decided that Turkish had no place in their public lives and expressed themselves in English, and their preoccupations became more American than Turkish. Such is the case of Güneli Gün, who wrote her novel *On the Road to Bagdad* (1991) in English.⁵ Although it takes place in Ottoman lands during Ottoman times, within a stereotypical Orientalist framework, the novel is very much a critique of the American way of life with such features as take-out food, the pursuit of happiness through individualism, and the freedom the pursuit connotes, chased so relentlessly at the expense of all else.

Educated Turkish-Americans, who have been broken into American academic discourse, have written in English also partly because they have lost their Turkish,

having been schooled out of it. Such is the case with Shirin Devrim, who wrote her autobiography, *A Turkish Tapestry: The Shakirs of Istanbul* (1994), in English.⁶ It presents a notable case of double audience because she subsequently rewrote it, taking out chunks that described Turkey to Americans that would be redundant to a Turkish readership, and had it published in Turkey, rendered into Turkish by a translator, Semra Karamürsel, as *Şakir Paşa Ailesi: Harika Çılgınlar* (The Shakir Pasha family: Those marvellous madcaps, 1996).⁷ Much as Devrim herself did the rearranging of the text, the mediation of the translator prevents us from considering it a work in Turkish composed on United States soil. However, it is very much a Turkish work in essence, capturing the spirit of an İstanbul that is timeless and (the Ottoman-Levantine one) gone forever at the same time; it also depicts a pre-Saddam Iraq. It falls into the tradition of American autobiographical writing: this first-generation Moslem woman immigrant, descended from the Ottoman *haute noblesse* and the step first cousin of King Faysal, Iraq's last monarch, finds her Israel in the New World, cultivating corn on her Harvard-graduate, WASP husband's Long Island farm.

Thus, writing in Turkish, the Turkish-American appears to remain Turkish; writing in English, she or he adopts the attitude of the consensual American. The putative juncture at which the two dialectical selves of Turkish-Americans meet posits the parameters of the problem. The Turkish-Americans' position within American society is itself sufficiently ambiguous. On the one hand, because they are white Caucasians, Turkish-Americans are regarded as being "too good" to be eligible for affirmative action and the like, and easily pass in many instances for the Eurocentric establishment white. On the other hand, as migrants to the culture, to the land, and to the ideology, they see themselves not perhaps at the bottom of the pit, as Günter Wallraff declares Turks are in Germany, but nevertheless as barred, in societal and existential terms, from participating or integrating: they are not versed in, nor cognizant of, a certain Western *Weltanschauung*, and find themselves apprehensive of a Judeo-Christian tradition they have been conditioned to perceive as inimical.

To this ambiguity is juxtaposed the further complicating issue of the Turkish sense of exceptionalism, "imagined"—whatever the historical facts may be—from 1923 onward by the founding fathers of the Republic, and drummed since, in Jacobean fashion, into every schoolchild of Kemalist Turkey. This has created a sense of belonging that far transcends blood as well as geographical location. To illustrate, what is an occasion for celebration in many ethnic groups in America, the acquisition of United States citizenship, is usually a source not of pride but of shame among Turkish-Americans, who feel the need to explain it away apologetically as due to professional obligations.⁸

This is then further complicated by the sense of "megaethnicity"⁹ that pan-Turkists entertain and that is in the process of being reinvented, since the fall of the Soviet Union, through discussions centering around the concept of *turcité*. The Euro-Turks, as they have fashioned themselves in Germany and other EU states, who wish to integrate but not assimilate are accepted into the *turcité*. Whether the American Turks should also or could also be included has not been debated yet.

The ongoing fragmentation in the United States that may give way to a greater ethnic consciousness among Turkish Americans may raise such an issue in the future. *Turcité* is of import within the American context as it rejoins the Americans of various Turkic descent (Tatars, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, etc.). In effect, Alexandre Bennigsen remarks that Polish Tatars in the United States, although they may maintain a Polish identity insofar as, for instance, they will retain Polish cuisine, do not mix socially with Polish Americans but with other Tatars (Crimean, Volga).¹⁰

Of course, these are broadly outlined general trends, and individual cases do show variations. To illustrate the interplay of the issues I have presented above, I will discuss the Turkish-language poetry of the Turkish-American poet Seyfettin Başçillar, a United States citizen who has been living in the United States since 1966. I will then contextualize Başçillar's poetry within the wider spectrum of American studies. I will argue that the sense of "weariness" that is a salient feature of his poetics is a widespread syndrome, which I term "ethnic fatigue," that finds expression today in the surfacing of literatures in languages other than English.

Seyfettin Başçillar's Turkish-Language Poetry

Seyfettin Başçillar (1930–) was born in Kilis, in southeast Anatolia, and went to Ankara to study, graduating as a veterinarian. In fact, it is as a veterinarian that he works in the United States. He has been in meat inspection for the past thirty years, and now holds the position of Meat Poultry Circuit Supervisor for Northern New Jersey.

Başçillar is what one may call a born poet. He wrote his first poem in elementary school, at the instigation of a teacher, for the school paper. While in high school, he won a poetry award in 1949 with his poem "Umut" (Hope). During his university years in Ankara he met other aspiring poets and authors (some of whom have since become prominent poets and authors), attended poetry "evenings," and made the acquaintance of well-known poets of the day then living in Ankara. In 1952, while still a university student, he had a poem, "Saat On Buçuk Treni" (The ten-thirty train), published for the first time. His first collection of poems, *Önce Bulut Vardı* (First there was the cloud), which he now considers to be juvenilia, came out in 1959. This was followed by *Altın Çağı Ölümün* (The golden age of death) in 1961.¹¹

His subsequent collections of poems, after his move to America, comprise poems he composed while living in the United States: *Çiçek ve Silah* (Arms and the flower), published in 1969; *Sokak Şarkıları* (Songs of the street), published in 1973; *Unutulmasın* (Lest we forget) published in 1989; and *Kıyısızlık* (Landlocked), published in 1993.¹² Another collection, "Gül Sesleri" (The sounds of the rose), is awaiting publication. These books were all published in Turkey.

The back cover of *Unutulmasın* indicates that Başçillar has been living in the United States since the 1960s, but the fact has not been explicitly publicized. Unlike the 1993 Turkish translation of Gün's *On the Road to Bagdad*, advertised with much fanfare, with Gün hailed as the Turkish woman author who wrote in English

and got published in America (and then butted against a reactionary wall of silence by the critics, who did not share her concern with American issues), Başçılar's books are not acknowledged as coming from abroad, as being written on foreign soil. So he is accepted as another Turkish poet, enjoying the succès d'estime with which most poets have to contend.

It must be said that much Turkish literature was composed outside what are now the boundaries of the present Republic of Turkey (for instance, *Manas*, said to be the longest epic in world literature, originating from what is now the post-Soviet republic of Kirghizistan). The very recent example of Turkish literature coming from Germany (not to be confused with German literature by Turkish authors such as Akif Pirinççi) itself makes Başçılar's "American" poetry unproblematically Turkish.

Said to be influenced by the poetry of Max Jacob,¹³ and written in free verse as well as in rhyme, Başçılar's poetry exhibits a continuity in both form and content that makes it possible at first to overlook his immigration to America. The content appears almost conventional: nature, love, death, the beauty of İstanbul, the celebration of his native (Anatolian) Southeast, and the rendering of legends, such as that of "İnce Memed" (Memed my hawk),¹⁴ the Robin Hood-like outlaw, which the novelist Yaşar Kemal also transposed in the novel of the same name. Transpiring through the verses and inextricably intertwined are such compelling themes as loneliness, exile (*sürgün*), migration (*göç*), and *hüzün*, that untranslatable word connoting sadness and melancholy, a sort of *tristezza*, which, looked at from one angle, are all traditional motifs in Turkish poetics.

Göç has always been a major theme in Turkish literature. It is more than the modus vivendi of a nomadic people, as tradition has it that the Turks have been. There is probably no Turk whose family has not been touched by *göç* in one way or another, and Turkish literature reflects it, not only in ancient epics that are "still very much alive in the oral tradition in Turkey and in the Turkic republics"¹⁵ but also in the body of literature called *gurbetçi* (a neologism literally meaning the "migrationist") that grew out of the Gastarbeiter experience in Europe. Perhaps Nazım Hikmet best epitomized the feelings of the exile-emigré with his "Gurbetlik zor zanaat kardeşim" (Being away from one's land is no easy art, my friend).

Turks are a nation of immigrants. Turks migrated to Anatolia from Central Asia, and then to the Balkans, to the Arabian peninsula or to Africa as these were conquered, whether as settlers, as "colonial" administrators, or as exiles, deported as political "malefactors." Before long, the migration had been reversed, from Bosnia and the Peloponnese, from the islands in the Aegean, as the empire was no more and the *patria* shriveled. *Göç* also denotes internal migration, from the rural areas to urban centers, as Başçılar himself experienced it. Thus, looked at from a purely Turkish angle, the *göç* in his poems can be shrunk in significance to the age-old migration of the Turks, and to his own migration from his native Kilis to metropolitan Ankara, and then abroad.

However, his poetry does not record his personal history. There is especially no explicit mention of Başçılar's move to America, which must have made an even greater impact on him than his progress to Ankara, all the more since it was triggered by his realization that his leftist leanings would impede his career in

Turkey. Thus, Başçılar's poetry is different from that of Aras Ören, writing in Germany, in his *Berlin Üçlemesi* (Berlin trilogy), immediately propelling the protagonist of the book-length poem to Naunynstrasse, Cafe Bauer, Hotel Adlon, and Bayerische Zelt, deliberately hurling the average Turkish reader into an alien universe.¹⁶ It is also different from that of Atilla İlhan, who announces in the third person that he is departing for France with "the last passenger to board was called Atilla İlhan / . . . / he got on board carrying his typewriter," and then goes on to describe almost every single itinerary of his days in Paris, enumerating every street he crossed, every café he sat in.¹⁷ Başçılar, on the other hand, appears almost ashamed of his move to America, with a shame that connotes more shyness than guilt.

Instead, "all the world's a stage" Başçılar seems to be saying, with his allusions to many countries and metropolises around the world. This is especially evident with the first "American" book, *Çiçek ve Silah*. Mentioning Casablanca along with San Francisco and İstanbul in the same poem as in "Bir Adam" (A man),¹⁸ he blurs the tracks to obliterate the fact that the "man" writes from the United States. "Akdeniz" (The Mediterranean) transports the reader across ages, far away from the Turkish scene as well as from the American one, with the mention of the Acropolis, Athens, Naples, Rome, Carthage, Italy, France, Spain, Egypt, and Africa.¹⁹ "Uzak Doğu" (Far East) mentions Japan and China, and contains the verse "Kırık Moğol bir gece" (A broken Mongolian night).²⁰ That is to say, the moment the setting is not purely Turkish, it apparently becomes cosmopolitan, and he gives the impression of wanting to arrive at a universal truth transcending time and territory. Mentioning Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed in the same poem, "Akdeniz,"²¹ a trend he repeats in poems in other books, as in "Gazeller" (*Gazels*) in *Unutulmasın*,²² he seems to want to arrive at a synthesis of all three faiths. From that point of view, he gives the impression of a much-traveled man who has seen it all, of a sage, recalling the *aşık*, the Anatolian troubadour, or the wandering scop, so to speak.

The comparison with the scop is not idle. It must be said that, coming from "the provinces," Başçılar is a country man, possessing a poetic language that is at once limpid, and denuded very much in the vein of Old English poetry, unencumbered by the Ottomanisms (words of Arabic or Persian origin) that more urbane contemporary Turkish poets such as İlhan or Halman cannot help utilizing. "It is a mother tongue which has at its source the poetic language of Karacaoğlu and Dadaloğlu [Anatolian folk poets of the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, respectively]," he wrote to me, in answer to my naive question as to how he had been able to retain Turkish so (the way Yale-educated Devrim was unable to do).²³

The poet Cemal Süreya, a friend from his Ankara days, relates that already in his early twenties, Başçılar had been exposed to a deep poetic culture and was very much versed in Turkish poetry.²⁴ It is the strength of that culture, as well as the security it has provided, that has sustained Başçılar, the mainstream inspector, as a Turkish poet, enabling him to write poetry in Turkish, within the framework of a poetics based on Turkish folk poetry. Yet he is also the mainstream man, the immigrant who was able to achieve his American Dream. "I have been successful in

my profession [as a veterinarian] and have received many awards,” he also wrote in the same letter, apparently seeing no contradiction between the two facets of his life.

And sure enough, overlooking the medium of expression and viewing Başçılar’s poetry as that of an American immigrant at once yields a different picture, one that remained somewhat concealed as part of the cosmopolitan setting, amid the so much more familiar Turkish elements.

A poem in the first book of his American period, *Çiçek ve Silah*, is entitled “Köle Kadının Türküsü” (The ballad of the slave woman):

Oğlum içerde kırbaçlanırken
Çok yaşa kiralım marşı çalınır.
Ben de aynı şeyi söylerim içten
Çünkü başka şarkımız kalmamıştır.

Kocam meydanlarda kurşunlanırken
Armağanlar gider kraliçeye.
Ben de yüreğimi yollarım o en
Tatlı kinlerimle sana ey ece!²⁵

While they’re whipping my son in there
The band is playing long live the king.
I chant the same tune by myself
As they usurped the songs that we sing.

While they’re shooting my husband in the square
Gifts are being carried to the queen.
I have a present as well for her:
My heart, full of rancor and of spleen.

The king and queen in the poem, ostensibly leading the reader away from the American scene, should not detract us; the slave woman’s woes reflect a very American drama. A passage in the same vein is also found in a poem in *Unutulmasın*, entitled “El Tropicana”:

Beyaz adam uyur
Serin gölgelerde
Uyur elbette,
Bu gemiler kimin
Beyaz adamın,
Bu silahlar kimin
Beyaz adamın,
Bu asker, bu polis
Beyaz adamın,
Bu zincir, bu kırbaç
Beyaz adamın.
Beyaz adam avcı,
Beyaz adam papaz,
Beyaz adam tüccar,
Beyaz adam gelmiş,
Gitmek bilmiyor.²⁶

The white man sleeps
 In cool shades
 He can indeed sleep,
 Whose ships are these
 The white man's,
 Whose weapons are these
 The white man's,
 This soldier and this cop
 The white man's,
 This chain, this whip
 The white man's.
 The white man is a hunter,
 The white man is a priest,
 The white man is a tradesman,
 The white man has come,
 He just doesn't know how to leave.

The search for American elements thus yields many allusions in *Çiçek ve Silah* to life in America, with even the word “flower” in English,²⁷ to Vietnam and to the whole atmosphere of violence that is often considered typically American. *Sokak fiarkıları* contains poems with specifically American titles, such as “Niagara.”²⁸ That book, the second American collection of poems, has three sections. The second starts with:

Hüzün köprüleri kurdum
 Tuna nehri üstüne²⁹
 I erected bridges of sadness
 Across the river Danube

The third section announces his coming to terms with his new life:

Umut köprüleri kurdum
 Mississippi üstüne³⁰
 I erected bridges of hope
 Across the Mississippi

And in the third book, *Unutulmasın*, he finds himself a new man, in “Öğret Bana” (Teach me):

Yeni dillenmiş bir çocuk gibiyim
 Adımı öğret bana³¹
 I am like a child who just learned to speak
 Teach me my name.

He makes out the balance sheet of his life in “Elli Yaş” (Fifty years old), registering that he has a wife and kids now, and asking:

Umduklarım neydi?
 Nedir bulduklarım?³²

What did I expect?
What did I find?

It is finally in that book, in “Mektup” (Letter), that he is able to acknowledge having left Turkey.³³

The *hüzün*, the sadness/melancholy of the transplant, is also openly acknowledged in “Zorlu” (Difficult to bear):

Otuz yıl oldu, unuttum çoktan
Duruşunu, saçlarını, yüzünü
.....
Anımsamak ve yeniden unutmak
Zorlu zor ayrılmanın hüznü.³⁴

It has been thirty years, and I have long since forgotten
Her bearing, her face, her hair

.....
To remember and then having to forget again.
I didn’t know separation would be this difficult to bear.

What “wife of youth,” outgrown or left behind, has come to haunt him?

Even the title of a poem such as “Yalnızlığı Çalan Saat” (The clock that strikes loneliness) is telling.³⁵ In another poem, “Şehirler Anası” (City mother), he says:

... içim dışım çorak
.....
Daha hızlı yaşamak ... daha
Unutkan ... herkesin isteği bu
Dolduramıyor zaman içimizdeki boşluğu.³⁶
... I am barren inside out
.....
Live faster ... more
Forgetful ... that’s all people want
Yet time cannot fill the void in us.

In “Artık Gel” (Well now, come) in *Kıyısızlık*, the fourth and most recent book, he tells an imaginary woman that

... unutuyor
Kilis Kilisliğini
.....
İmkansız bir hüzün gibi
.....
Yalnızlığın kumaşı yırtılıyor birden³⁷
Kilis forgets its Kilisness
.....
As a sadness become impossible
.....
Loneliness is being suddenly torn apart

and then he entreats her to make him wait no longer:

Artık gel
Büyük aşkı, erişilmez olanı getir!³⁸

Well now, come
Bring along a love, the unattainable!

“Kilis forgets its Kilisness.” The smalltown boy has learned that “you can’t go home again.” In fact, the poet himself realizes that deracination in the United States is complete when he finds that “the ten-thirty train,” which presumably took him to his native Kilis in Anatolia, doesn’t leave at ten-thirty any more (“*Artık on buçukta tren kalkmıyor*”) in the poem that he entitles “Saat On Buçuk Şiiri 2” (The ten-thirty poem 2).³⁹ Finally, in “Saat On Buçuk Şiiri 3” (The ten-thirty poem 3), he explains that he ran after it, but could not catch it. “That train I missed never passed again”:

Koştum koştum yetişemedim
Saat on buçuk trenine.
Ve hiç geçmedi o kaçan tren⁴⁰

Başçılar uses the conventional framework of the göç theme in Turkish poetics, which has become depersonalized through timeless use, and the just as traditional and worn-out theme of *hüzün*, poignant yet impersonal, to describe a personal drama. Their imbrication functions as a smokescreen obscuring the process of deracination of the first-generation immigrant that is accompanied inevitably by a regret for what he has been in the company of loved ones, defaced but not erased from memory. The transplant with awards in town and wife and kids at home, whose public success in mainstream America is a personal failure, has reached the other end of the rainbow, and found, as Ernest Hemingway would put it, “*nada y nada y nada*.” In this age, still very much one of middle-class romance, his soul is yearning for the impossible, searching for a love that is unattainable, for more than just an Annabel Lee. This is also a dream, perhaps another American Dream, that of transcending the boundaries of the American predicament. The Turkish language and the seemingly prevailing Turkish character of the poetry help to mask the very American tension.

This is not a poetry of anger, or of frustration, even if the plight of the blacks or the Indians is mentioned in some poems. Perhaps it is not in vain that Başçılar, the mainstream inspector, was unable to write in English of what had no place in his life in English. Neither is his poetry the condemnation of the American Dream, as *The Rise of David Levinsky* may be said to be. This is the hidden side of the American Dream, the cost in spiritual terms of achieving it. It is as if the poetry were reflecting a sort of postcoital sadness.

Başçılar’s poetry is the expression of the loneliness that assails one, the nostalgia that surfaces in unguarded moments. Forced to “live fast,” the transplant is too busy to prove to himself and to others that it has been worth the while. The sadness is a mere “moment,” triggered in the following poem by the occasion of the New Year’s Eve, entitled “Bir Yılbaşı Gecesi” (A New Year’s Eve) in *Unutulmasın*:

Şarkım yanık dudakları arıyor
dinle!

Biraz Antep,
 biraz İzmir,
 biraz Erzurum,

Çal çalgıcı, bu yılbaşı gecesinde
 Yurdumdan uzak ve yorgunum.

Dışarda kar mı yağıyor ne,
 Nedir bu içki, bu kahır?
 Ben bu kenti sevmiyorum bu gece
 Benim gönlüm şimdi uzaklardadır.

Bir ev, çocukların altın saçları
 Savrulur zaman salıncağında,
 Ve anneler ince, ürkek, uçar
 Gençliğinin en güzel çağında.

Nereye gitti onlar şimdi nerde,
 Nerde güneşi bol bahçeler?
 Biz değil miydik yaşayan o günlerde?
 Hepsi geçti, gelecekler de geçer.

Zaman savruluyor, içelim onu,
 İçelim bir daha akmiyacak bu çeşmeden,
 Bir yaprak gibi mevsim sonu
 Yorgun başımız yastığa düşmeden

fiarkım eski dudakları buluyor
 dinle!

Biraz Kilis,
 biraz Ankara,
 biraz Erzurum.

Çal çalgıcı,
 Çal ki bu yılbaşı gecesinde
 Yurdumdan uzak ve yorgunum.⁴¹

My song is searching burning lips,
 listen!

A bit of Antep,
 a bit of İzmir,
 a bit of Erzurum,

Play musician, on this new year's eve
 I am far away from my country and feeling weary.

Looks like it is snowing outside,
 What is this drink, this ordeal?
 I do not love this city tonight
 My heart is now faraway.

A house, children with golden hair,
 Blown away in the cradle of time

And mothers delicate, frightened, wanton
In the prime of their youth.

Where did they go now, where,
Where are the gardens abounding in the sun?
Were we not the ones living those very days?
They're all gone now, the future ones will also pass.

Time dissipates, let us drink it,
Drink from this fountain that will not flow again,
Before our weary heads fall on the pillow
As a leaf at the end of the season.

My song is finding old lips
listen!
A bit of Kilis,
a bit of Ankara,
a bit of Erzurum.

Play on musician,
Play on this new year's eve
When I am faraway from my homeland and feeling weary.

What is this sense of “weariness” that emerges from the sadness, the *tristessa* of the transplant, articulated with such melancholy during a moment of *défaillance* by a persona of poetry that seems to encompass the whole of the poetry, as one big cry in the desert? What does it symbolize/signify? I suggest that this “ethnic fatigue,” as I would like to term it, is a syndrome, perhaps long in the making, now surfacing more compellingly than ever, that is an apt metaphor for the other “other American literature,” the non-Anglophone one. In the remainder of the essay, I attempt to contextualize the significance of “ethnic fatigue” within the field of American studies.

Ethnic Fatigue

The correlation(s) among language, literary expression, and ethnicity, even in the absence of nationhood and/or nation-statehood, or especially in the absence of nationhood and/or nation-statehood, have been much written about. What is to be noted is that this other “other literature” is being foregrounded at a historical moment that, for the time being, can best be called the post–Cold War period. The historical juncture at which it is surfacing is as important as the fact that it is.

The worldwide consensus has it that the Cold War was won by the United States and lost by the Soviet Union. The spoils were an ever-growing search inward in the United States itself. Americanists, “observers,” and decision makers at all levels started to scrutinize, examine, feel the pulse of the victor, the other partner in that grandiose chess game, on the lookout for the likelihood of the existence of phenomena similar to that which had afflicted *homo sovieticus*. Indeed, the United States had not come out unscathed, making people wonder whether it was not the secret

loser. The unspeakable, hidden, taboo fear and question, whether the fate of the United States would resemble that of the Soviet Union, took shape apprehensively in most minds, and could not be dismissed, although neatly “bracketed,” as a perfect example of the Husserlian epoché.

And indeed, American exceptionalism has begun to be questioned; it dawned suddenly that the myth and symbol school had long been over; and that *homo americanus* was not what he or she had seemed to be. At best, he or she was Janus-faced, and it is the other physiognomy, which had been revealed already for a long period of time for anyone who wished or was forced to see it, that could not be ignored any more. On the contrary, it had been crystallized over the years, with the impressive body of scholarship and criticism that had been amassed. To give but one example, Jean Fagan Yellin dispelled any remnants of “received opinion” of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet A. Jacobs “as a false slave narrative” or “an antislavery novel that [its original white editor L. Maria] Child had written.”⁴² This new aspect almost gained the upper hand, requiring a new symbology and a new mythography, relegating Plymouth Rock as well as Ellis Island to a vacuous past, and tending to privilege the experience of Richard Rodriguez over that of Cotton Mather.

It is now held to be self-evident truths that the land on which the United States was established was no *virgo intacta*; that Jefferson was himself a slaveowner; that the Declaration of Independence does not mention “nation” but “people,” and that the democracy, equality, and social justice it foresaw was for the white male only; and that Crèvecoeur did not remain an “American farmer” all his life, and moreover ended his days in his native France. It has just been revealed that the French sent Lafayette to America merely as a way of weakening the British.⁴³ Paradoxes and ironies like these steer the definition of Americanness to a renegotiation.

It has become equally evident, because not emphatically refuted, that America is an “imperium”;⁴⁴ but that it lost its “imperial” character the day it became indebted to Japan;⁴⁵ and that, thus, it may not be totally incongruous to project the fate of other empires onto that of the United States.

Mainstream intellectuals were quick to seize the occasion to both be on the vanguard and supply their mea culpa. To give an example out of many, Shelley Fisher Fishkin wrote in *Was Huck Black?*:

This book suggests that we need to revise our understanding of the nature of the mainstream American literary tradition. The voice we have come to accept as the vernacular voice in American literature—the voice with which Twain captured our national imagination in *Huckleberry Finn*, and that empowered Hemingway, Faulkner, and countless other writers in the twentieth century—is in large measure a voice that is black.⁴⁶

Of course, Bakhtin had already explained to us the dialogic character of voice, and students of American literature had known for long that Huck’s idiom was Negro talk. What is interesting, within the context of American studies, is not what Fishkin is saying but how she is expressing it. She is not discussing “canon” or “restructuring” but the nature of mainstream literature itself, which, she simply says, was influenced by black folk. This is not exactly what W. E. B. Du Bois had

in mind. It is nevertheless representative of a holistic view of American literature, very much prevalent, which takes for granted a literature of English expression, governed by a unified code derived from English literature, whatever “black” elements may transpire from its content. In this academic conundrum, “English” and “white” are synonymous, and Başçillar’s cry in the desert, reflecting an American drama, is expelled, problematizing his “ethnic fatigue.”

Fishkin reduces the societal makeup of the United States into a hue-blind, simplistic binary opposition between blackness and whiteness, which she conceptualizes unproblematically as a homogenous, monolithic construct—while at the same time denying entry to Spider Woman, Ultima, and the rest.

Even Arthur Schlesinger does better, when he uses the epithet “Anglo” in his mea culpa that “the smelting-pot . . . had, unmistakably and inescapably, an Anglo-centric flavor. . . . This tradition provided the standard to which other immigrant nationalities were expected to conform, the matrix into which they would be assimilated.”⁴⁷

Against a totalizing matrix of Anglo-whiteness, non-Anglo white immigrants, such as Başçillar, proved loyal conformists. For them to protest that they were different would have been self-immolation, a fall from the pedestal construed so zealously by the founding fathers. It would have led to self-banishment from a community they stood so much to gain by joining and had already lost so much to in the process of integration and assimilation. Yet as “whiteness” itself was being questioned, and bilingualism demanded clamorously by a Latino community that regards the English language as a Foucauldian prison, they have realized that they are “weary,” atavistically weary of expressing themselves in English. Like Samuel Beckett’s Moran, they are very much aware that the language of power does not “use the words that Moran had used when he was little.”⁴⁸

In a society said to be multicultural, ethnic fatigue is the manifestation of the outcome of the enforced biculturalism that so many Americans, whether white or nonwhite, whether willingly or unwillingly, experienced while adhering to Anglo-centricism as the *mode d’emploi* of Americanization. For, although societies can be multicultural, individuals cannot. At best they can be cosmopolitan and polyglot. The *lebenswelt* of the Americans, when it is not monocultural, is inherently bicultural, not multicultural. It is now the “other” cultures, the egos that are literally *alter*, hidden for so long, refusing to remain mere palimpsests any more, that are surfacing through their literatures.

It cannot be a coincidence that, during the same period, the English (of Great Britain) have decided to appropriate American literature of English expression as part of their own culture and heritage. Penguin Books published *American Literature* (1988) as the ninth volume of its New Pelican Guide to English Literature series.⁴⁹ This occurred just when the efforts covering almost a century of so many scholars (to whom Americanists should pay the greatest tribute) had seemed at last to have given fruit irreversibly, and American literature was seen as a national literature distinct from the English one. Pelican Books, by considering and reclaiming American Literature as part of “English Literature,” has clarified matters, put things in perspective. American literature of English expression is only a British

postcolonial literature, albeit the most illustrious one. Literature in English in the United States is part of English literature. It cannot claim any status of unicity in America.

The atavistic “ethnic fatigue” that cannot be suppressed any longer seems poised to lead to no less than a paradigm shift, the parameters of which will have to be “imagined,” “invented,” for a long time to come. It may be that this will force open the still-taboo question concerning the future of the United States. Alternatively, the resultant variegation may paradoxically reinforce the commonality of American-ness, its basic core, rather than the other way around. It may, either way, lead to, and be paralleled by, a renewed interest in national identity, as opposed to culture and ethnicity, which have replaced it, gradually but firmly, since the end of World War II. Then, American literature may certainly acquire a new face, calling for reconceptualization, and relegating perhaps literature of English expression by non-Anglos to the status of sub-postcolonial literature.

And of course it will mean much uphill work. Just as Eric Sundquist found that overcoming a “fundamental conception of ‘American’ literature” remained difficult,⁵⁰ “consent” for non-Anglophone “American” literature, that will inevitably entail the cognizance of a plethora of other literary traditions, may prove to be a bigger hurdle. While the new paradigm may not be far from signaling the end, in the long run, of the English department as traditionally conceived in the United States, its main task will have to be to address with renewed urgency the question Werner Sollors posed in *The Invention of Ethnicity*: “What is the active contribution literature makes . . . ?”⁵¹

In this era said to be postnationalistic, Turkish-American poet Seyfettin Başçılar’s Turkish poetry, published in Turkey yet concerned with an American drama, betrays an ethnic “fatigue” that finds no readily visible echo within the range of mainstream American literature. As such, this cry in the desert emerges as a metaphor for non-Anglophone American writing, the intentional monoglossia that is surfacing at present. It is evident that now that the genie is out of the bottle, work to unearth more and more texts will continue. Years ago Elias Lönnrot painstakingly assembled the fragments that would combine into *Kalevala*, and thus virtually created Finland. It remains to be seen if the pieces of the puzzle to be gathered in the United States will fuse to create a polyphonic, polyglossic American epic, that will be both very old and very new at the same time.

NOTES

1. Talat Sait Halman, “Turks,” *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. Stephan Thernstrom (Cambridge: London: Harvard University Press, The Belknap Press, 1980), p. 993.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p. 995.

4. Alexandre Bennigsen, “Tatars,” *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, p. 989.

5. Güneli Gün, *On the Road to Bagdad: A Picaresque Novel of Magical Adventures, Begged, Borrowed, and Stolen from the Thousand and One Nights* (Claremont, Calif.: Hunter House, 1991).
6. Şirin Devrim, *A Turkish Tapestry: The Shakirs of Istanbul* (London: Quartet Books, 1994).
7. Şirin Devrim, *Şakir Paşa Ailesi: Harika Çılgınlar* (İstanbul: A.D. Yayıncılık Anonim Şirketi, 1996).
8. See Halman, p. 995.
9. See Renat Taziev, Ronald Hatto, and François Zdanowicz, "La Turcophonie: naissance d'un nouveau monde?" *Dire* (Volume 5, Numéro 2, Hiver 1996), pp. 26–27.
10. Bennigsen, p. 990.
11. Seyfettin Başçılar, *Önce Bulut Vardı* (İstanbul: Yeditepe, 1959); *Altın Çağı Ölümün* (İstanbul: Yeditepe, 1961).
12. Seyfettin Başçılar, *Çiçek ve Silah* (İstanbul: Yeditepe, 1969); *Sokak Şarkıları* (İstanbul, Yeditepe, 1973); *Unutulmasın* (İstanbul: Cem Yayınevi, 1989); *Kıyısızlık* (İstanbul: Broy, 1993).
13. Cemal Süreya, introduction to *Unutulmasın*, p. 5.
14. *Unutulmasın*, p. 47.
15. Warren Walker, "Triple-Tiered Migration in The Book of Dede Korkut," in *The Literature of Emigration and Exile*, ed. James Whitlark and Wendell Aycock (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1992), p. 25.
16. Aras Ören, *Berlin Üçlemesi* (İstanbul: Remzi Kitabevi, 1980), pp. 15–19.
17. My translation of "son yolcunun adı attıla ilhandı . . . yazı makinasıyla binmişti," from "tatyos'un kahrı" (tatyos's distress), *Sisler Bulvarı* (Boulevard of fogs) (Ankara: Dost Yayınları, 1960), p. 124.
18. *Çiçek ve Silah*, p. 12.
19. Ibid., pp. 72–74.
20. Ibid., pp. 19–20. All translations of Başçılar's poems are mine.
21. Ibid., p. 74.
22. *Unutulmasın*, p. 147.
23. Private letter, 25 May 1996.
24. Introduction to *Unutulmasın*, p. 5.
25. *Çiçek ve Silah*, p. 7.
26. *Unutulmasın*, p. 13.
27. *Çiçek ve Silah*, pp. 68–69.
28. *Sokak Şarkıları*, p. 24.
29. Ibid., p. 25.
30. Ibid., p. 47.
31. *Unutulmasın*, p. 20.
32. Ibid., p. 38.
33. Ibid., p. 51.
34. Ibid., pp. 56–57.
35. Ibid., p. 77.
36. Ibid., p. 83, 86.
37. *Kıyısızlık*, p. 22.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., p. 81.
40. Ibid., p. 84.

41. *Unutulmasın*, pp. 103–104.
42. Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. vii, xxv.
43. See Gilles Perrault, *La Revanche Américaine* (Paris: Fayard, 1996).
44. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage Books, 1993), p. 7; see also, *inter alia*, Sacvan Bercovich, “Introduction: The Music of America,” *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 1–28.
45. As maintained by Gore Vidal, quoted in *National Identities and Postamericanist Narratives*, ed. Donald E. Pease (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 225.
46. Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Was Huck Black?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 4.
47. Arthur Schlesinger, *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: Norton, 1992), p. 28.
48. Samuel Beckett, *The Beckett Trilogy*: “Molloy,” “Malone Dies,” “The Unnamable,” trans. the author, with *Molloy* translated in collaboration with Patrick Bowles (London: Picador, 1976), p. 62.
49. *American Literature*, vol. 9 of *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, ed. Boris Ford, 9 vols. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982–1988).
50. Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 7.
51. Werner Sollors, “Introduction: The Invention of Ethnicity,” *The Invention of Ethnicity*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. xiv.