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## Ottoman Dreams, Balkan Identities

IN APRIL OF 1505, AFTER BEING COMMISSIONED by Pope Julius II to build a grandiose papal tomb in the middle of Saint Peter's Basilica, Michelangelo Buonarroti traveled to Carrara to gather enough marble to complete what would soon become an exasperating project. When the sculptor finally returned to Rome in January 1506, he found that the "warlike, authoritarian" Pope had refused to pay for the marble; after making several appeals, Michelangelo was expelled from the Vatican and departed Rome for the safety of his native Florence.

Around this time, Michelangelo received a letter from Bayezid II, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, asking him to design a bridge that would span the Golden Horn, an inlet of the Bosphorus that separates historic Constantinople from Pera to the north. Not only would the sultan pay handsomely, he had already rejected a proposal made by Leonardo da Vinci, giving Michelangelo the chance to surpass his chief rival, who was a full twenty years older. Though already renowned for *David*, an irrefutable instant classic, Michelangelo hungered for certain artistic immortality, and the Pope's unexpected rebuke had assuredly dented his pride.

And yet, despite likely temptation, Michelangelo declined the sultan's offer, electing to stay at home and wait for a papal apology. Recently, within the Ottoman archives, scholars discovered a sketch entitled "Project for a Bridge for the Golden Horn" and attributed it to the great Florentine; any amateur art historian can't help but wonder what would have occurred had he set sail for Constantinople, that mythic city that stands astride two continents.

Thanks to Mathias Énard—who is certainly no amateur, and whose fiction consistently traverses nations, regions, and epochs—we now have an idea of what Michelangelo's journey might have been like. *Tell Them of Battles, Kings, and Elephants*,<sup>1</sup> Énard's latest novel to appear in English (it was published in France in 2010), is a compact yet mesmeric volume, a work that uses fragments of historical evidence to concoct a story that is almost entirely imaginary. Like his Prix Goncourt-winning novel *Compass*, which, through the meandering thoughts and memories of an insomniac musicologist, transported readers to locales like Aleppo,

<sup>1</sup> TELL THEM OF BATTLES, KINGS, AND ELEPHANTS, by Mathias Énard, trans. by Charlotte Mandell. New Directions. \$19.95.

Tehran, and Damascus, *Tell Them* delights as an incandescent depiction of a place forever lost to time: sixteenth-century Constantinople.

Énard opens the novel with Michelangelo's arrival in the city's port, well aware that the splendor of the ancient capital is likely as unfamiliar to his readers as it would have been to the young master himself:

[P]assing the headland of the [sultan's] palace, the artist glimpsed Santa Sophia, the basilica, a broad-shouldered giant, an Atlas bearing its cupola to the summits of the known world; during the landing maneuvers, he observed the activity of the port; he watched the unloading of oil from Mytilene, soap from Tripoli, rice from Egypt, dried figs from Smyrna . . . he ran his eyes over the hills of the city, glimpsed the ancient seraglio, the minarets of a large mosque taller than the top of the hill.

From the moment he disembarks, Michelangelo looks upon Constantinople with both wonder and revulsion. The sheer diversity of the city—populated by Turks, Greeks, Jews, Latins, and Moors (not to mention Venetians, Florentines, and countless peoples from around the world)—leaves him stunned, and despite receiving numerous invitations, he spends his early days holed up in his room drawing.

To Énard, Michelangelo's reclusive behavior pertains to his piousness (it is indeed likely that a fear of betraying his Christian faith kept him from actually travelling to the heart of the Islamic Ottoman Empire). But eventually—at least within this alternate world constructed by Énard—he succumbs to his curiosity and begins exploring. Momentarily setting aside “his fear and distaste for all things Muslim,” he enters Hagia Sophia and immediately devours this visual feast: “Such an impression of lightness despite the mass . . . the levitation almost, of the inner space, the balance of proportions in the magical simplicity of the square design in which the circle of the dome fits perfectly, it nearly brings tears to the sculptor's eyes.”

Galvanized, Michelangelo asks his servant, a Greek dragoman, to read him Turkish and Persian stories from Bayezid's overflowing library; he gambols about town with Mesihi, a Kosovar Muslim and renowned poet with a penchant for wine- and opium-fueled benders; he realizes, that, when it comes to Constantinople, his “curiosity is boundless. Everything interests him.” The bustling activity of the city's markets, the play of light on the perfectly proportioned buildings: through this gifted artist, with his expertly trained eye, we are treated to a tour of a bygone Constantinople that no guidebook could ever provide.

So despite the series of “intrigues” that engulf Michelangelo during his time in the sultan's court, it is Énard's prodigious act of historical recreation that makes *Tell Them of Battles, Kings, and Elephants* a novel well worthy of our engagement. Even an amorous dalliance thrills less for its contribution to the plot than for the unreal clues it provides about

Michelangelo's creative output (his bedmate is an androgynous dancer with a body straight out of a Mannerist painting). This would-be lover—a Muslim banished from Granada during the Spanish Inquisition—demonstrates the kind of cultural interchange that Michelangelo might have experienced had he accepted the sultan's commission. The following morning, the artist races home to execute his final design: "a bridge . . . has risen up out of the night, molded from the material of the city" itself.

In September of 1509, just as Michelangelo was beginning work on the Sistine Chapel, a massive earthquake ravaged Constantinople. Thousands of buildings were destroyed, and it was deemed unsafe to stay inside: the sultan was driven out into his palace garden, where a temporary shelter had to be hastily erected. Though Hagia Sophia survived almost wholly unscathed, the plaster that the Ottomans had used to conceal original Byzantine mosaics crumbled off, miraculously exposing scenes of the Passion and the Annunciation. Any bridge that Michelangelo might have begun constructing would have surely collapsed, leaving Asia and Europe hovering like "two extended fingers that don't touch each other."

Over the centuries, as the Ottoman Empire continued to expand, engulfing the Balkans and stretching as far as the Horn of Africa, cracks eventually emerged in its seemingly lustrous façade, revealing the disparate peoples, cultures, and customs that it had tried to cobble together, if not plaster over. In Ismail Kadare's *The Traitor's Niche*,<sup>2</sup> which details Ali Pasha of Ionnina's rebellion against the sultan in the early 1820s, we are granted a sort of perverse fairy tale about a declining empire mired in a state of paranoia. Published in Albania in 1978, the novel is the second in a loosely linked, decidedly allegorical trilogy about life in Kadare's homeland under Ottoman rule. While *The Three-Arched Bridge* and *The Palace of Dreams* have long since been translated into English, *The Traitor's Niche* just received the treatment this year.

Kadare opens in a central square in the capital city—by now called Istanbul—where a lone guard watches over the titular niche, in which the sultan displays the severed heads of his adversaries as a warning to any future dissidents. A character unto itself, the niche hungers for new victims to the extent that "the square seemed perplexed, confused, distracted" when no head is on display.

Quite quickly, the action pans from this desolate, almost featureless square to "the cursed frontier of the empire," which is, of course, Albania. We follow the nighttime ride of royal courier Tundj Hata, sent to retrieve the head of Ali Pasha, whose campaign for Albanian independence is gaining momentum. Both figures, whether they realize it or not, are victims of the empire's bloat: to Ali Pasha, a wealthy government official for whom "Albania had been an estate," rebellion is a lark, an effort to transform a petty dispute with the sultan into an heroic act of martyrdom; Tundj Hata is an imperial shill high on bloodlust,

<sup>2</sup> THE TRAITOR'S NICHE, by Ismail Kadare, trans. by John Hodgson. Counterpoint Press. \$25.00.

travelling through remote territories of the empire and illicitly presenting traitorous heads to villagers for a handsome price.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the people in these impoverished communities are far more engrossed by Tundj Hata's ghastly sideshows than they are by Ali Pasha's demands for Albanian autonomy. Thanks to the efforts of the sultan's Central Archive, these territories have "been stripped of their nationality" to the point that their citizens "no longer had their own languages, customs, colors, weddings, scripts or calendars." Instead, Tundj Hata's macabre nightclub act has become their favored pastime, nudging aside "stale ballads, neglected heroic songs, long-forgotten wars."

It makes sense then, that Kadare fashioned *The Traitor's Niche* as a folk tale seemingly untouched by time. Despite the efforts of the Central Archive to reduce language "to a kind of mush" in order to ensure that it "lost its ability to give birth to stories and legends," the events of the novel unfurl like those in a primordial tale recited by a village bard, subtly affirming the viable continuity of Albanian history.

Of course, Kadare knows from experience that prolonged stability has hardly been part of his country's story. Kadare came of age under the Communist regime of Enver Hoxha and quickly realized that a novelist can get caught between opposition, collaboration, and commitment to humanist ideals when living in such a fraught environment. On the surface, his 1972 novel, *The Great Winter*, was an homage to the dictator, but while it did grant him some protection—by then the increasingly paranoid government was jailing, torturing, and executing any dissenters—it was laced with implicit critiques of Communist modernization. In *The Traitor's Niche*, Kadare's descriptions of Istanbul—whether of its main square or of the Central Archive—don't evoke Istanbul at all, and instead read as thinly veiled portraits of the Soviet architecture that overtook Hoxha's Tirana.

So while *The Traitor's Niche* was clever enough to escape government censors, its language and staging are too wooden for it to execute properly the delicate magic act of true allegory. Kadare has positioned the novel as an ageless legend that could help the oft-suppressed Albanian people reconnect with their ancient past, but it is the final entry to his Ottoman trilogy, *The Palace of Dreams*, that actually achieves such lofty heights. Promptly banned upon its publication in 1981, it described a ministry in a modernized version of the Ottoman Empire where dreams are analyzed for signs of political discord; its protagonist, an up-and-coming Palace employee and descendant of a prominent family, is caught between the assimilation of his forebears and his own private quest for ethnic identity. Trapped in an updated version of Kafka's castle, he obsesses over ancient bardic songs played on the single-stringed Albanian *lahuta* and realizes that this instrument "was the breast containing the soul of the nation to which he belonged."

In the Balkans, where layers of history jostle for positioning, the quest for an identity does not always include such musical accompaniment and is certainly never straightforward. For Ivo Andrić, the Nobel

Prize-winning novelist from the former Yugoslavia, self-conception was a willful balancing act, an effort that mirrored the tenuous unification of ethnic peoples within his native province. Andrić was born to Catholic Croat parents in Travnik during Austria's occupation of Bosnia but was raised by his aunt and uncle in Višegrad, a small town predominantly populated by Serbs and Bosniak Muslims.

The events of Andrić's life moved him all over the European continent: for university alone he studied in Zagreb, Vienna, and Krakow; his involvement with an anti-Austrian Serbo-Croat youth group led to his imprisonment after the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, during which he was shuttled about Croatia and Bosnia; in the interwar period he became a diplomat and was positioned in numerous cities, including Belgrade, Trieste, Marseilles, Paris, and Madrid. Controversy again came knocking at the outbreak of the Second World War: serving as Yugoslavia's ambassador to Germany, he retired from diplomatic service after Prime Minister Dragiša Cvetković signed the Tripartite Act, proclaiming loyalty to Italy and Germany. Spared jail by the Nazis, Andrić spent three years confined to a friend's apartment in Belgrade, where he wrote furiously.

Despite his countless peregrinations, Andrić's relatively placid boyhood days in multiethnic Višegrad came back to him during this period of obligatory creativity. *The Bridge on the Drina*, his resulting masterpiece, is set in Višegrad, where an Ottoman-era bridge watches over the town and its people as the world changes over the centuries. Completed in 1577, the bridge was proposed by the sultan's Grand Vizier, a former Christian from a nearby village who had been kidnapped as a child; privately haunted by his disconnection from his mother, he has ordered the construction of the bridge in the exact spot where they were separated.

The title character of Andrić's recently republished final novel *Omer Pasha Latas: Marshal to the Sultan*<sup>3</sup> is a similarly contradictory figure whose life story also bridges the metaphorical territories of East and West: a Christian Serb from the Balkans, he escapes to Turkey following his father's financial disgrace and, after converting to Islam, quickly ascends the ranks of the sultan's army, eventually being appointed seraskier (or commander-in-chief). Ruthless, ambitious, and seemingly untouchable, Omer Pasha is a mythic character surprisingly reminiscent of Faulkner's Thomas Sutpen; indeed, just as Yoknapatawpha County became the stage on which Faulkner could play out the paradoxes of his birthplace, the Bosnia of Andrić's fiction is host to violence, confusion, and ethnic strife. But Andrić's writing is also colored by a tranquil melancholy that tempers the severity of his subject matter, and *Omer Pasha Latas*—though technically incomplete at the time of Andrić's death—excels as a series of interconnected vignettes centered around its titular shape-shifting seraskier.

<sup>3</sup> OMER PASHA LATAS: Marshal to the Sultan, by Ivo Andrić, trans. by Celia Hawkesworth. NYRB Classics. \$16.95p.

The novel opens as Omer Pasha and his unit arrive in Sarajevo, tasked with hemming in the city's feudal lords and landowners. The seraskier's men, "for the most part Hungarian and Polish fugitives, converts like himself," are quickly dubbed the "traitors' unit" by the increasingly uncomfortable citizens of Sarajevo. To the city's Bosniak Muslims, these men are "Christian spies, who, under the disguise of Islam" have come to disrupt the relative stability of "true believers"; to expatriate Germans and Hungarians, who have tried desperately to assimilate, they are defectors whose presence is exceedingly awkward; and to Sarajevo's Christians and Jews, who "pretended not to notice" these unfortunate dramas, the arrival of the Ottoman army is no less destabilizing.

As the seraskier and his unit make themselves at home, seizing property, harassing women, and drinking profusely, Andrić begins to reveal details about Omer Pasha's identity. A figure straight out of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, the commander has crafted a mask informed entirely by Western maxims about the Near East; to him, becoming a "true Turk" entails "being naturally hard, haughty, basically cold and unyielding." Even the timbre of his voice is drawn from "his deeply buried memories of the speech of . . . Bosnians he had listened to at fairs in his childhood." In order to round out this thorny character study, Andrić cleverly subjects numerous figures in Omer Pasha's orbit to the same level of scrutiny, fashioning an enduring tableau of a city in flux.

In an especially transportive sequence, Andrić recounts the story of Karas, a Croatian painter who has been invited to Sarajevo to execute a portrait of the famous seraskier. For Karas, painting is an hallucinatory experience; as he works, "the established, firm relations that divide people from one another would disappear." Though Omer Pasha tries to position himself in a manner that feels true to his elaborately constructed persona, he becomes increasingly uncomfortable as the sitting drags on, and his imagination begins to wander as he and Karas face each other, "swaying, each lost in his own trance."

Karas' position as the novel's chief observer makes him a proxy for Andrić himself, and his munificent interest in supporting characters dovetails with the author's similarly wide-roving eye. While painting Omer Pasha's daughter, Karas becomes infatuated with the seraskier's wife, Saida Hanuma, an Austrian whose transition to Ottoman life has been even more turbulent than her husband's. Saida feels that her plight has been abetted by Bosnia itself, and in a conversation with Karas, she exclaims, "What kind of country is this that will devour us all?"

By the time that Omer Pasha and his men prepare to leave Bosnia, Saida's declaration echoes like an unheeded warning bell. The delicate balance of late Ottoman Bosnian society—with its four religions and citizens of countless nationalities—has been entirely disrupted; scores of dignitaries and nobles have been imprisoned, "doing unpaid labor in their best clothes," while everyone else is left to watch helplessly. Surely

Andrić was thinking of how this war-torn period prefigured Yugoslavia's plight during World War II, when it was forced to choose between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia in a futile attempt to avoid invasion.

In retrospect, Andrić's fantasy of a unified Yugoslavia seems like a utopian vision. In the buildup to the Bosnian War, as nationalism mounted, the Croatian and Bosniak literary establishments distanced themselves from Andrić's legacy, citing his choice to write in the Serbian Ekavian dialect. In 1992, with violence underway, a Bosniak nationalist destroyed a bust of Andrić in Višegrad; months later, over two hundred Bosniak civilians were killed on the bridge that Andrić had immortalized, their bodies callously dumped into the Drina.

While this event goes unmentioned in Daša Drndić's poignant novel *EEG*,<sup>4</sup> it is the sort of episode that she would readily latch onto. Drndić, who died last June, was born in Zagreb but studied in Belgrade; the bulk of her fiction investigates how the feverish nationalism of the early 1990s was prefigured by a collective failure to remember the events of the Second World War, especially those of the Holocaust. An inexhaustible researcher, Drndić exhumes the stories of countless individuals silenced by history: *Trieste*, in which her protagonist notes, "I have dug up all the graves of imagination and longing," features a list of 9,000 Jews deported from or killed in Italy between 1943 and 1945. Additionally, with Drndić's passing, we have lost one of the most electrifying prose writers of our time. Despite the exigency (and the near impossibility) of her project, her sentences thrill as often as they castigate, and this unflinching vigor contributes to the refreshingly non-linear nature of her novels.

*EEG* is ostensibly "written" by the former writer, academic, and psychologist Andreas Ban, who also provided the voice that propelled Drndić's previous novel, *Belladonna*. Forced into retirement because of his outspoken ways, Andreas blanches at the "New Croatia" he has lived in for twenty-plus years, ever since being forced to flee Belgrade during the breakup of Yugoslavia. Mired in a country "basking in a swamp of historical revisionism," where "a logorrheic emptiness prevails," Andreas spends his days mining the depths of his own memory, recounting the lives of long-dead family members and sifting through the files of his former patients.

An avid collector of facts, Andreas—like Drndić herself—is a biographer for the masses, hell-bent on vanquishing historical amnesia. But Andreas' discursive mind helps him to avoid rigid didacticism, and despite the disquieting nature of his research, it is difficult to resist the hallucinatory enthusiasm with which he relays cascades of information. A reflection about playing chess with his sister yields to a register of the countless chess masters hospitalized or done in by mental instability, which then gives way to an even longer catalog of masters who either played for or were killed by the Nazis. "Lists, particularly when they are read aloud, become salvos, each name a shot, the air trembles and

<sup>4</sup> *EEG*, by Daša Drndić, trans. by Celia Hawkesworth. New Directions. \$18.95p.

shakes with the gunfire,” Andreas observes in the middle of this passage. Drndić has made the tangent a central facet of her fictional undertaking, and this associative approach allows her to incorporate as many life stories into her work as possible.

It seems that for Drndić, Andreas is not only a plausible surrogate, but a vehicle for discovery and radical empathy. “Perhaps I am not Andreas Ban, perhaps I am a woman from my previous or future or existing life, or perhaps I am a man whom I have not yet met,” our narrator recounts. “Perhaps various people squat inside me.” Yet while Andreas often provides lodging for the subjective histories of strangers, the past experiences of his friends and family members regularly enter his flights of memory and are often just as difficult for him to make sense of or round out.

After receiving a letter from a past lover—Leila, a Latvian ballerina—Andreas recalls travelling to her family’s house in the Bavarian forest, where, in the middle of the night he discovered a swastika-adorned S.S. medal attributed to her father. For reasons not initially clear, this episode transports him to Paris in July of 1939, when—a month before the war began and less than a year before Hitler invaded—his parents, Marisa and Rudolf, first met. Marisa, only seventeen at the time, was travelling with her older brother Karlo, who fell in love with a young violinist, a Latvian Jew named Frida Landsberg. As the situation in Paris worsened, Rudolf resumed his studies in Belgrade, Marisa and Karlo went back to Split, and Frida returned to Riga, where Karlo briefly joined her, begging her to leave with him.

Convinced that Leila’s father had something to do with Frida Landsberg’s eventual disappearance, Andreas launches into a vivid reanimation of Latvia’s “Year of Terror,” a period demarcated by Soviet occupation in June of 1940 and the consequent Nazi invasion the following summer. Mere months after her father’s shoe factory was nationalized by the Soviets, Frida was forcibly moved—along with the rest of her family—to the newly constructed Riga ghetto, a fact that Andreas gleans from a letter of hers that somehow made it to Karlo. Maddeningly, Andreas has more luck finding information about the Latvians who joined the S.S. than about the approximately seventy thousand Latvian Jews who disappeared during the Holocaust. Armed with “a heap of photographs” and bundles of clippings about these men, but without a single photograph of Frida herself, he proffers meticulously assembled biographies of numerous collaborators, none of whom were prosecuted by the Latvian government when the war concluded.

Though Andreas knows that none of this will give Frida Landsberg her life back, he vows that her story “is not finished,” that “it draws into itself other stories, contemporary stories with deep roots.” By letting this life squat inside his mind, Andreas has assumed some fraction of the terror that Frida experienced and, in an act of expansive empathy, let it coalesce with the many other truncated lives that he has brought to our



attention. When, one night, he dreams of Frida Landsberg, embracing her before she suddenly bursts into flames, he could be dreaming of one of the many Bosniak Muslims killed by Serbian nationalists, or of Daniil Kharms, the Russian absurdist poet who starved to death under the watch of the Soviet secret police, or of his wife, Elvira, who died prematurely, when their son Leo was just a boy. Thanks to Daša Drndić, who has blessed us with a narrator unafraid to merge global traumas with personal ones, we have before us a novel that answers the demands of history with equal parts tenacity and generosity. It will be difficult to forget a sensibility so expansive, so capable of forging ahead while keeping the past constantly at hand.