

# *TRAVELOGUE*

MIRABILE, Paul

Pilgrimage to Tūrkestan over the Three Seas  
and Central Asian Steppes



*'Les hommes marchent par des chemins divers, qui les suit et les compare verra naître les étranges figures.'*

*Novalis*

*'My dreams grow long, atop Burak, en route to the bazaar,  
The world bazaar into which the tormented servant rides;  
My head weary, my life oozing, my blood thin,  
My name is Ahmet, my country, Tūrkestan.'*

*Hodja Ahmet Yesevî*

Pilgrimage may strike some readers as an odd word, especially nowadays in our brave new modern world of rapid communications, lightning transfers of money, arms and other miscellaneous toys, giant

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screens and speed reading courses. To undertake a pilgrimage assumes a voyage of some divine destination, of some sacred site of a religious nature. It assumes a long voyage! And in fact, the etymon 'voiaig' in Old French meant 'pilgrimage'...

For me, thus, pilgrimage and voyage are inseparable: a bi-unity that traces the Road to one's destination, be it sacred, divine or religious. One may or may not reach this destination, but this unfulfilled desire should not be subject to scorn or to grief : it is the effort of the pilgrim more than the result that the Creator considers ; and this consideration ranks much loftier than any prize or privilege accorded by committees, boards or panels to someone for his or her 'achievements'. I reached Timbuktoo...Phuktal...but failed in Northern Laos. I must happily acclaim that my fourth pilgrimage, a forty-five day voyage over three seas and three countries to Tūrkestan, to the *turbeh* of Hodja Ahmet Yesevî, was accomplished far beyond what I ever imagined ; that is, far beyond my expectations ! Not only did I reach the holy site, but did so in the slowest and longest and most inspiring fashion. I meditated upon the strophes of the Sufi sage's *hikmets*, or strophic wisdom, ruminated and assimilated them as the Road bore me over the sparkling Black Sea, into Georgian mediaeval churches and monasteries, over the oily black Caspian, the steppes of Kazakhstan, the arid sands of the Aral Sea, then into the marvelous mausoleum of the Sufi sage. For it was these bezels of wisdom, these strophes of sagacity that enlightened my mind, kindled my creative imagination, in short, that inspired me to undertake the pilgrimage to the Hodja's final resting home in Kazakhstan.

Who is Hodja Ahmet Yesevî, *au juste*? Also called Pir-i Tūrkestan, the sage of Tūrkestan, he is the founder of Turkic Sufism. Hodja Ahmet of Yese, the former name of the small town of today's Tūrkestan in Eastern Kazakhstan, is the Sheikh, the Master Sufi of all the Turkic branches of Sufism from Central Asia to India, to Anatolia and throughout North Africa. His disciples number in the hundreds: Shams i-Tabrazi, Mevlana, Hacı Bektaş, Yunus Emre, Pir Sultan Abdal, etc. His *hikmets*, or as I coin them, strophes of sagacity, are read by millions of Muslims throughout the world, both Shia and Sunna. As I relate my voyage to the holy site, I shall present Ahmet Yesevî to my readers so that you may partake, too, of this nourishing repast, savoured both in his poetry and legends connected to his life. A repast that carried me theophanically to his *turbeh*, whilst boats, buses, trains and at times my legs, bore me there physically. This bi-unity is indeed what constitutes a pilgrimage, a voyage in all its etymological, historical and spiritual dimensions...

The theophanic region is as vast as the mundane one: fasting (*oruç*), Koranic interpretation (*tafsîr*), dancing and spiritual auditions (*samâ*), silence (*süküt*) and reclusion (*halet*) all form part of the Sufi's mental make-up; it is the 'tassavuf yolu' 'the Sufi Road'. It became mine, momentarily, because Hodja Ahmet Yesevî became my Road Companion, ever since I had begun working in Istanbul...

My pilgrimage required a spirit of resistance, given the fact that the pilgrim in question was over sixty years of age; fit in mind and body, more or less, but nevertheless, over sixty years of age! I make no pretense to virtue, but a pilgrimage is accomplished on one's own, and this in spite of what Chaucer would have thought of that principle! For the Road also becomes one's Companion; it is the pilgrim's intermediary between the Creator and Hodja Ahmet. The Road is the pilgrim's Friend, etymologically from the Old

English verbal form *freond*, which meant 'to love'! In the Hodja's strophes 'friend', 'Dost' in Turkic, is our Creator...He is our Friend in love and thus our interlocutor as we dialogue with Him...His love is unflinching, unflagging...unlike many of our mundane friendships based on common interests, whose commonness may fail and flag, and thus transform into enmity or indifference...that scrouge of the mediocre...

Now my readers may query whether that Creator be the Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist or Hindu one! Ahmet Yesevî was a Sunna Muslim. And the pilgrim? He is Christian. This discrepancy poses unfathomable questions, and at times sweeps in on me like so many sands of doubt in the desert of Self-Accomplishment. Am I like Odysseus who visited many a city and came to know many a different people? Or the rougish denizen of the world who will tell you a golden tale for a copper? Perhaps I am the Eternal Pilgrim, tramping from one holy site to another, disregardless of religion or creed, quenching my inexhaustible (*intarissable* is better!) thirst from the fountains of all and sundry? I here must assure my readers that never have I been subjected to any spiritual crisis : no galvanic conversion at the fourth pillar of Notre Dame of Paris, no mystical charge of light at fifty-eight ; to have explored and lived Christianity (in many of its denominations), Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism especially Sivaism, has never stirred hidden emotions that may trigger a conversion, however exotic these religions may appear to some, whatever esoteric delights their recesses may contain. The Creator is that One for everyone: His form appears different to the Hindu Sivaite and to the Sufi Muslim, yet It is His form that He imagines by means of the pilgrim's Imagination. This is the Creative Imagination, Ibn Arabî's method of communion.

These pilgrimage-voyages have borne witness to my Self-Accomplishing: a commingling of adolescent enthusiasm, existential nourishment and ontic imperativeness towards identities to which I can respond cheerfully, acknowledge confidently, but not necessarily to which I will abide! All religions are founded on Faith in a Creator or a Creation ; a Being whose supremacy obliges us, His bondsmen and companions, to seek Him out wherever Faith is most intensive ; to seek Him out means to emulate Him. And this emulation has its most drawing powers at the holy sites of mankind's traces and vestiges of His deeds, or the deeds of those for whom He interceded : prophets, saints, *veli*, *wali*...*erenler*...No doubt there is empathy on my part, I have no qualms against this. However, there can be no ontic identification with the Pir-i Türkistan, or if one wishes a more technical word, intropathy, on which the pilgrim projects his or her desires (imagination?) upon his or her hero, if he or she does not take that 'ontic leap'! For the pilgrim emulates not the holy seer, but his deeds, in the same way that the Orthodox Christian penetrates, by way of his or her Creative Imagination, the ikon of Christ or of the Virgin Mary and not the paint and its wooden support.

My translation of Ahmet Yesevî's *hikmets* were done en route to his *turbeh*. They follow a line of ontic conduct, and at times intercede in my account to attenuate the gravity of my interior monologue concerning daily activities or very unpleasant worldly events. They also provided a refreshing distraction for a few of my fellow travellers who were tired of reading the rather staid information written in their Lonely Planet guide books or other such literature that cyclists or foot travellers tend to carry with them on such long journeys. I shall print out the original *hikmets* in an annex from my edition.<sup>1</sup> As to the Hodja's

<sup>1</sup> *Ahmed-i Yesevî Divânı, Hikmet'ten Seçmeler*, Professor Dr. Kemal Erastan, Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı Yayınları, İstanbul 1983.

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life, or what is known of it, my stories have been gleaned from that same edition of his *hikmets*, and from the Atatürk Revue, *Erdem*.<sup>2</sup> These were my two reading companions, plus the Second Testament or the Evangiles if you please, where I reread Paul's Letters, not due to any geographic conjunction, but rather from his steadfast movement from one town and country to another, an extraordinary élan motivated and generated by Faith. Besides these three books, I read no other during my forty-five day pilgrimage. The languages that I needed to communicate with in these countries, in the order of their daily usage, were: Turkish, Russian, English and French.

I have always adhered to the belief of or in parallel worlds, of or in the multiple existences within one's lifetime upon our Earth. This belief lies not in fantasy, but in Reality. Since childhood, no one has yet deterred me from this belief. And there are many, too, who evolve within these parallel worlds; I have met quite a few, and several on this fourth pilgrimage. I failed to note our lively conversations, indeed failed to keep any daily record of my adventure on paper at all. I set off with five kilos of clothes, those aforesaid books and a German map of Central Asia all stuffed in my backpack. But no travelogue! My translation of the Hodja's *hikmets* was written out on the photocopied edition of that sagacity, consequently, all my meetings with travellers, pilgrims, shopkeepers, hostel-owners, restaurant workers, street-cleaners, railroad and bus civil servants, sailors, etc, etc, have been taken from memory ; none, however, is fictitious...And yet, is it not fiction that opens the wide horizons of Reality ? Hodja Ahmet's *hikmets* and life lie at the threshold of these two realms, *entre chien et loup*...at those parallel worlds of which I spoke and will speak again so praisingly...

Thirteen years in Turkey, the majority of which spent in teaching, have taught me that at the university, at high schools or translating at the Inkilap publishing house of Istanbul, History in this country, in this city is never an object of the Past but a subject of and for the Present! Those who study History must contemplate the Present circumstances: the Past will never be partially understood without a firm grip of the Present, without the philologists' eye for detecting the variantes in order to unite analogically the commonalities into one flexible dynamic Whole. The Philologist-Historian wanders in the shades of the twilight hour, *entre chien et loup*, in which the Present and the Past slide and glide inseparably, silently within one another, shift from one to the other like the sinking sun over Aya Sophia and the Blue Mosque.

The Hodja also slides and glides within the framework of Present and Past, within the contours of History and Legend, for History is an ensemble of striking and coincidental contrasts. Antagonistic contrasts, sable colours that brighten one's Path, flamboyant colours that darken it, too. The discovery of Hodja Ahmet Yesevî painted itself into those stark and subtle colours, out of whose flow the obsession of my pilgrimage took an undulating but affirmed shape. A slow but steady flux which had begun with the study and translation of the *Book of Dede Korkut*, with the readings of Yunus Emre, Mevlana, Eşrefoğlu Rumi, Pir Sultan Abdal, Hacı Bektaş, the Sheikh Bedreddîn, Evliya Çelebi, and of course the Master of all those aforesaid Masters, Hodja Ahmet Yesevî.

Hodja Ahmet Yesevî, or Ahmet of Yese (the suffix -vî being the locative in Old Turkic, the modern suffix being -ile), was born in 1150 in modern Kazakhstan, in today's Tūrkestan, called in medieaval times, Yese.

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<sup>2</sup> N° 21, Nov. Ankara 1995.

Others put that date at 1093. His Sufi Master was Arslan Baba, under whom he studied in Bukhara. He left that pious city and returned to Tūrkestan where he effected his 'earthly' death at the age of 63, Muhammad's age of death, by digging an underground cell where he lived until 1200. But this date is conjective; some doughty historians put his death age (earthly or divinely) at 120! Be that as it may, Kocka Axmet Яcayy in Kazak, Хорка Ахмега Яcави in Russian or Hodja Ahmet Yasawi in Latin letters is the Dawn of all Sufi lights that enlumine the shades of our most arcane nooks and crannies. It is his life and writings that fortify our Faith in mankind, that shape a defense against fanatical Wahabism and Salafism, that sharpen our wits and deepen our religious Faith against those zealots who have deliberately discontinued Islamic growth, have ignominiously suspended Islamic beauty, theology, philosophy and law, framing Islam into a golden age of the immaculate commencement, which has been sullied and fouled by the deceit and duperie of Shia heretics, by Jewish and Christian Islamophobes, and worst of all, by zandaqa atheists !.. It is Islamic Sufism that will challenge and defeat the tyrannical bigots of Saudia Arabia and Pakistan, and their vassalized henchmen round the world, and that challenge will emerge from Central Asia, from the Turkic countries of Central Asia, from the flourishing universities and schools of thought that defend the universal message of Hodja Ahmet Yesevî, his high places of sainthood (ziyade), his very much present geneology of disciples (ocak) or (silâla), that Sheikh-chain of heritage. I believe in this Sufi revival, and for this belief I ventured to his tomb (mazar) at Tūrkestan, out of which these timeless strophes of sagacity slide and glide between the spaces of the crepuscular:

*'Hey friends, lend an ear to what I say,  
Why ever at sixty-three did I enter the earth?  
Fair Mustafa upon his ascension saw my spirit  
For that reason at sixty-three did I enter the earth.*

*Fair Mustafa asked of Gabriel  
How can this spirit find God without entering the body?  
With tearful eyes the circle was cleft, the crescent neck bent;  
For this reason at sixty-three did I enter the earth.*

*Gabriel said: "the Umma is the just one for you;  
Take lessons from the angels that descend from the firmament;  
The seven layers of the firmament with groaning groans,  
For that reason at sixty-three did I enter the earth.*

Indeed at Mohammad the Prophet's age of death Hodja Ahmet, too, left this earthly world to dwell in *barzakh* -the isthmus- in the intermediary world between God and the human, a subterranean world that wafted his body, soul and intelligence to the Highest Heavens, *Arş* ! His burial rite, seemingly his own, was ordained and accompanied by the Creator. Likewise his ascension, perhaps some sixty years later at the age of 120, the age of Abraham, the Father of all Jews, Christians and Muslims...

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Accompanied by these strophes of sagacity, the *hikmets*, I resolved to voyage as slowly as possible, as passively as possible, exposing my Self to the hazards of the wide Road and to whatever the encounter or obstacle be, find a suitable solution, be it visas, transport, disagreeable or unhealthy encounters with fellow travellers or the indigenous, health reasons...And I must confess now that none of those aforesaid hazards of the Road brought me ill-fortune, quite the converse occurred : my passive persistence and full acceptance to my surrounding circumstances of exposure favoured a florilege of delightful events ; the very first being a marvelous sea-crossing on the Black Sea from Istanbul and Varna to Poti...

My ship this time was the Bulgarian freight carrier Героите на Севастопол 'Geroite na Sevastopol', built in Norway in 1979. It cruised at 19 knots when fully loaded with train cars, lorries and passenger cars. Once loaded after a day and a half of patient waiting, the Geroite na Sebastopol left port after noon, and slid gently out of the Belaslava channel into the Black Sea. To our left, the beaches of the sea-side resort where I had spent most of my time, the sand being soft, the sun hot, the water refreshing and clean, the food, especially the prawns and salads, excellent and rather cheap. At the bow I observed the sailors gesticulating to their wives and children who were aligned on the banks as our ship left the calm waters of the channel behind and penetrated those more agitated ones of the Black Sea. The wind suddenly picked up and the movement of the ship with it...

Yes, with cargo ships one must practice the art of Patience. Patience is that principal catalyser of a Voyage. Indeed, even before you board your ship you become immersed within the intense flux that bears you towards that patiently awaiting sea-companion. The port personal, the bustling crew, the colourful cargo loaded or unloaded, the engines dormant or churning, the smoke abellowing or wafting from the twin stacks in thin wisps of curly white ; the meals and of course the sea, either in port or during navigation. These events or should I say, this poetry, act as a series of successive links on a chain: the anticipation and the actual crossing; the rolling and pitch, the conversations and the salty silence. The seagulls on the wing or in gaggles on the rotting moles, the sparrows romping about the bow, the dolphins at play, scratching their backs on the hull of the ship on the high seas! The sun, then the moon and the stars...The azures of a sky that merge into the blueness of the placid waters: the hues of this scene exhilarate the spirit, stimulate the imagination, they remind the pilgrim that whatever the delay, Nature soothes and redeems any regrets or misgivings...There is nothing more elating than leaning on the ship-rail, inhaling and exhaling the briny and robust air of the open sea, inhaling and exhaling the tension of our creative élan...

The Geroite na Sebastapol's daily menu: bread, butter, jam, boloney or salami, eggs and tea for breakfast. Sausages, boloney or salami, mackerel soup, potatoes, carrots and tea for lunch. Vegetable soup, sausages, salades, pork or beef for supper...but no tea, and never any coffee! Odd really. Perhaps because the Bulgarians drink only 'Turkish coffee'...A very undietetic menu, I must admit, but Eastern Europeans, Soviet-orientated or not, have never been fervent admirers of the 'new cuisine'. The sailors were all overweight, much too much ruddy-cheeked. Too much red meat, cold cuts and potatoes. Too much bread. Every dish lay smothered under layers of salt, that burner of body cells! Now and then apples, pears and oranges were carefully placed at the left of our plates; a refreshing alternative to the rubbery salami and boloney. But these are mere observations, not complaints!

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Four days and nights of drifting upon the still waters of the first sea to be crossed. Conversations were rythmed by the droning of the engines, measured by the activity of the crew or the inactivity of the seven passengers: Armenians, Azeri, Bulgarians and French...On the fifth morning of the crossing the port of Poti rose slowly into sight. We glided in as smoothly as we glided out of the Bosphorous Straights in Istanbul and the channel of Belaslava near Varna. The Getroite na Sebastpol was moored to the wharf round noon...

Georgia is a country of republics, now independant, now annexed to the capital Tblissi; some severed completely, others unshakeable in their adherence to the Mother City. The Christian Orthodox and Islamic problematic has torn this country apart since the arrival of the Seldjuks in the XII century.

It is also a land of endless nationalities: Jason's Greek argonauts crossed the Bosphorous (the Clashing Rocks?), ploughed the Black Seas and arrived at the tenebrous shores of the Colchis in pursuit of the Golden Fleece, which they shamelessly stole from Medea's father. The roguish Greeks payed dearly for that shameful theft, but some of the crew must have stayed on because Greek is still spoken in Abkhazia, presently a new region in Putin's ever-expanding Federation. This break-away republic in the North-West of Georgia is today prohibited to Georgians! But not to tourists, especially Russians! As to the former Republic of Adjaria, of which Batum is the capital and largest port, it was ruled by a Muslim dictator until 2004 who has since fled and is currently *en cavale*. The population of 400.000 has suffered many a Persian, Turkic, Russian or Soviet invader...

Upon arrival at Tblissi, I secured my bedding in a non-descript private home transformed into a guesthouse when the fine woman owner needed extra money, located in the back lanes of Old Tblissi. Once unpacked and settled, I set out immediately to deal with my visa formalities, no easy task when one must enter Azerbaijan without an invitation...In fact, I needed only a few days in Baku to get a cargo out to the port of Kazakhstan, Aktau...Would they oblige me to procure this ridiculous invitation ?..

Indeed, during the day, when I was not running between the Kazakh and Azerbaijan embassies, I would read or meditate in the charming, peaceful garden at the Metekhi Church, perched high on a hill overlooking the Mtkvari River and the Maidan. The cool shade, excellent drinking water from the fountains, the beautiful cross-cupola mediaeval church (although at that time its façade was under restoration), built by King Demitrius in the XIII century, whose habitués came and went quietly, either alone or in small groups, and the quaint wooden café at the back entrance of the garden, granted me hours of tranquillity. I especially became attached to three different sized campellas hanging from a wooden portico at the front of the gardens, which overlooked the modern section of the city. To look through them out into the blueness of the Tblissi sky gave me the impression of an indefinite suspension of Time and Space. At night, seated in the alleyway in front of my little room, I would listen to my neighbour play Chopin and Bartok on her untuned piano, or squabble politics and economics with Sergo, the owner's cantankerous, university-graduated son.

One bright, blue-skied morning I took the metro at Independent Square to Didube Station, and there at the huge minibus terminal for two *lari* caught a *mashruka* to the mediaeval capital of the kingdom of Georgia, Mtskheta, about 15 or 20 kilometres from Tblissi. There is no doubt that Mtskheta emits a Sense of the Past : the prodigious Cathedral of Svetitskhoveli is a mediaeval gem, true, surrounded by western-styled cafés and souvenir shops, as could be unfortunately expected, but nevertheless, lovely to behold, enclosed like a ruby in its bezel, within its restored mediaeval walls. To penetrate the hollowness of the cathedral, shoulders must not be bare, nor should the visitor wear shorts. A woman's hair must be covered, although the priest at the door, a dwarf, did not implement this last breach of decorum. The stone basilica foundation dates back to the fifth century: the actual cathedral today was built in the eleventh by King George the First. The legend narrates that King Mirian, the first Christian king of Georgia, had a stone church built on recommendation of Saint Nino in 360 (incertum) because it was on that very spot that a woman named Sidonia had been supposedly interred along with Christ's robe, bought by her Jewish brother from a Romain guard at Golgotha and given to her. Another legend reports that a Lebanese tree was cut down to make room for the basilica from which seven pillars were hewn to support the awe-inspiring structure, and whose biggest pillar was endowed with divine properties due to Saint Nino's ardent prayers; it emitted a special light and heavenly aroma, and when bathed in this divine light or when touched, cured many maladies. This became Sveti Tskhoveli; that is, the 'Pillar of Life', the name then adopted for the holiest of churches. Then I turned my efforts to explore the Jvari Monastery some fifteen kilometres from Mtskheta, but which can be seen clearly from the cathedral...

The approach to the hilltop monastery is an awe-inspiring experience: No wonder this monastery, and the Svetitskhoveli Cathedral nestled below it, have always been the sacred heart of Georgia: mediaeval and modern...I read out these dullcient strophes to commemorate my arrival:

*'At sixteen all the spirits answered:  
"May you be blessed" said Adam arriving;  
"My son!" he said; he hugged my neck and enveloped my heart,  
At seventeen, thus, I found myself in Türkestan.*

*'At eighteen I drank water with the Forty,  
I invoked God, I pierced my bosom, stopped and made ready;  
Sought my fate, strolled through Paradise, hugged the houris,  
Thus I saw the beautiful face of Mohammad the Just?'*

Another bright morning, after I had secured my visas for Azerbaijan (a five-day transit visa) and Kazakhstan (a full month), I hitch-hiked to King David's Lavra Monastery, a forty-five minute ride from Tblissi to Sarejevo. From there, a sixty kilometre road, twenty of which being a mélange of broken, pot-holed asphalt and earth-packed one, winding round and over barren hills and ochre-coloured fields leads you to the monastery. The landscape reminded me of the veld-lands of South Africa. I would never have imagined that the mountainous and forest infested Georgia possessed such a solitary, desert-like countryside. Indeed, this extraordinary monastery is located on the Azerbaijan border in the middle of a desolate landscape where neither tree nor plant grows, where the rudeness of the monastery surrounding

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walls, towers, stairways, chapels, gates and cells blended so nicely into the surrounding barrenness of the wasteland. It is said that the majority of the Georgian monasteries were founded in this southern region during the VI century, then restored or rebuilt during the IX century because the monks desired absolute solitude, far away from the marketplace of daily life. Hearty souls those maiden preachers, and only the tears of the praying King David, which transformed the rocky bed of a low-lying depression into a brook for the monks to drink from, offered solace to them...

I have always approached holy lieus either by circling them first, then slowly penetrating their sacred walls, or from above if the relief of the landscape allowed such a panoramic approach. Afterwards I descend into the vortex of mediaeval sensations...What are these sensations? The Sense of the Past? An escape from it? An exercise in empathy? A parenthetical dive into one's awareness of his or hers utter mediocre existence and the nostalgic thrill that may be therein wrenched and disgressively savoured? To touch and to be touched: that is a genuine sensation wrought from empathy, wrought from a Voyage of Penetration into the vortex of mediaeval sensations. For are we not all sentient beings?..

My last three days in Tblissi were spent visiting the Catholic and Orthodox churches, the synagogue, and the mosque with its adjoining hamam and gardens. I bought my ticket, too, for Baku at the bus terminal in order to secure a place in the *mashruka* that would deposit us in a small village near the border before hopping on the bigger bus for the Azeri capital. And so when I finally sped off to the Azerbaijan border, I felt rather melancholic at the sight of the churches, bridges, art gallery and parks and gardens that slid by my glazed window. I had grown used to Tblissi. I had found it to be a refuge from the car-riddled and horde-infested hell of Istanbul, of all those formless or deformed populated metropolises of the Orient that twenty or thirty years ago had been livable and enjoyable cities. True, certain sections of Tblissi pampered to mass tourism, and have suffered the gross setbacks of feigned façades of cosmetic face-lifting and rouged window dresssing. Yet, Tblissi breathes a certain charm, a certain continuity of poetic prowess, be it mediaeval or modern...

I arrived in Baku at one o'clock in the morning and slept in the bus terminal. At the crack of dawn, I went in search of the port from which I would catch my boat to Kazakhstan. I was not in Azerbaijan for more than five days, for indeed if the tourist overstayed his five-day visa he or she was fined five-hundred dollars...

There are two ports of the oil-rich city of Baku: a large, bright, modern one and the small, dilapidated and archaic one that lay a kilometre or two from the first. That's where I presently bent my steps...I galloped across a lovely park which hugged the Caspian coast, then darted into a narrow lane or alley where rusting railroad tracks littered with cans and rotten food and out of whose fissures moss and lichen grew wildly, led me directly into a small square. Two hangers, both made of metal, stood silent in the cool air of the white dawning. There was no one in sight! Just then a guard shot out from his diminutive guardhouse and pointed a finger to the hanger to my left, knowing perfectly well why I had stumbled into that square at six o'clock in the morning. I pushed open the creaking metal door and found myself in a vast, warehouse of some sort. The cement walls were naked and the cement floor without carpet or kilim. In the far left hand corner of this ghastly hole an elderly woman was hunched over a hackney metal table,

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alone. I mechanically shuffled over to her across the void; she hardly lifted her head from an open logbook in which she was penning something down. When I began to speak to her very politely in Turkish, her head suddenly bobbed up like an apple in a water-filled barrel. Thrilled that I spoke Turkish, she informed me that the *Shah Dagh* was now in port and about to leave. My ticket secured, I raced to the port a half kilometre down the road, alongside the railway tracks. Alas, the customs officials would not let me through since my visa for Kazakhstan was to begin in two days...I would thus have to wait for another boat. The kind policeman, noting my anguish at this idea, pointed to a strip of embrowned trees and told me I could procure a bed there instead of walking back into the centre of Baku, some three or four kilometres from the port. This is exactly what I did...

The long narrow strip of huts and shacks lay between the railway tracks at the foot of the moles. It was divided into plots or enclosures of more or less five or six metal- or wood-made huts, all connected to one another by a earth-packed track. Withering trees and shrubs provided some shade from the blazing sun, whilst parasols, too, had been placed over broken picnic tables, stools and ripped upholstery armchairs or canopes that lined the dirt track. Some proprietors had built bowers and arbours which arched over their own enclosures, and there they sat in conversation, or in reverie of a better world. I dipped into the first enclosure where the woman owner said that no bed was vacant. She pointed to the second enclosure, two or three metres away to my right. There the woman, who spoke excellent Turkish, agreed to give me a bed with three other men if I gave her seven *manats* : I agreed and she showed me my bed : a squeaking iron-framed thing with a lumpy mattress whose sheets and pillow-cases dissimulated not hardened yellow stains and numerous holes, girt with frayed, brown edges, probably made from cigarettes. Two men were sleeping soundly; the other bed, identical to mine, lay empty. The air in the shack was sultry, neither ventilator nor fan to clear it out. -What would the night herald with its clouds of mosquitoes?- I wondered, mirthlessly.

And mirthlessly I sweated it out for two days with the Azeri refugees from the Karabagh war and with the immigrant workers from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Finally, on my second night, informed by the old woman in the hanger, I boarded the *Karabagh* at two o'clock in the morning...not a sailor in sight! It was a huge ship, and I felt as if I were atop some skyscraper. At the prow, however, a small, bright light guided me along the upper deck. To my right, the Flaming Towers of Baku burned away glibly like two midnight lamps amidst a hollowed, black, humid void...I stepped into the pilot's cabin without ceremony, where three sailors were eating olives and bread, drinking large cups of tea.

«Selamaylekum» I bellowed. They all shot me a surprised look, and responded accordingly. One of them, short and pudgy, offered me a seat and olives. Another poured me a cup of tea. The third, an unshaven middle-aged man with jet black hair and eyes asked for my ticket, all crumbled up in my vest pocket. They hadn't expected a passenger aboard before dawn. Nevertheless, the second in command, the short, pudgy one, asked me to follow him to his cabin where he wrote down my name in a log-book, then showed me my cabin. Before leaving me, he sullenly explained that meals were included on board, and told me the hours. I would be shown the dining hall in the morning at breakfast time. I had a stroke of luck, many Caspian crossings require the traveller to bring aboard his or her own food; I had a few sandwiches and some fruit...

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The *Karabagh* left port about three o'clock in the afternoon. It steered a North-eastern course amongst the dozens and dozens of oil-platforms that pecked the placid, nacreous waters, rising high in overweening pride. My cabinmate, a Dutchman named Gustav, was en route to Indonesia on bicycle. Aboard, too, was a young German couple hitch-hiking to India. We took our meals together in the canteen and discussed travelling in general. On our second day out at sea something quite odd occurred: In the middle of the Caspian, more or less, on a northerly route where no oil-platforms could be seen, the crew had opened the valves at the bow and Caspian Sea water was rushing onto the deck, there forming a huge swimming pool! Several of the crew members were already knee-deep in the swirling, clean waters, titillating with excitement, either in their underwear or bare-chested, trousers sagging low round their loins. They were soaping themselves up in front of the valves where powerful gushes of water proffered a wonderful massage, whilst rinsing off the sweaty skin. I stripped down to my shalvar, climbed down the few rungs of the ladder into the swishing currents: the second-in-command threw me some soap. This proved an excellent occasion to wash and bathe, for at the port of Baku there was no shower, and the one in our cabin reeked of a powerful stench much too strong for my nostrils; I dared not step barefoot onto the rust filled, grimy floor of the shower, nor touch the walls, thick with slime and muck. The captain jumped into the rising waters in his underwear; he waved to me to fetch the other passengers. I climbed out, darted to my cabin where Gustav was fast asleep; he had forgotten to remove his boots! He opened a sleepy eye and shook his head at my beckoning...I then found the young German couple, who tentatively followed me, but when they inspected the 'swimming pool' (I think they believed that the ship actually possessed a real swimming pool), their faces became fraught with that conundrum expression that wed's the wary with the awe ! They smiled perfunctorily and simply watched us, although at one point the boy ventured in, trousing up his trousers to the knees. But when the crew mischievously began to splash him with water, which they had been doing to me, he climbed out...

As the sun sank, setting the skies and the sea ablaze, at the ship's railing I explained to Gustav that to the North of us lies the Volga River Delta before it transforms into the Caspian Sea, and that it was by way of the Volga and the Delta that the XV century Russian merchant from Tver, Afanasya Nikitin, had voyaged to Persia and then on to India. His four year voyage *Over the Three Seas*, recounts his Oriental encounters, at times garnished with minute detail, and his probable conversion to Islam whilst sojourning in Western India. His ships upon the Caspian had been pursued by the Tartars of Saray (Astrakhan), and were accosted by them, who attacked the Russian crew with arrows. Then his smaller boat was pillaged, but our adventurer managed to escape thanks to a small bark, sailing quickly out of the mouth of the Delta into the Caspian, or the Siroan as it was called in the Middle Ages. Alas, the bigger boat, too, was accosted, and the Tartars made the crew land near a wooden barrage. As soon as the Tartars released the two smaller boats, Afanasya and his crew steered for Derbent. Again misfortune befell the luckless Tver merchant: a storm broke out and smashed the smaller of the two boats into splinters on the shores of Daghestan. After much hardship and irksome negotiations, Afanasya reached Derbent where he arranged for supplies and means of transport to continue his voyage to Baku, and there set sail for Persia...

At the outset of Afanasya's voyage, his account lacks geographic, ethnic and even factual precision. But once in Persia and in India his journal thickens with vivid details and savoury anecdotes. This little known

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voyageur appealed to my instincts for the ontic and existential movement that transforms the voyageur as he or she travels on the Road of Life. For this reason I dedicated my pilgrimage to him...

The second-in-charge touched my shoulder and pointed East; there lay Aktau, the Caspian port of Kazakhstan. We would moor in two or three hours if a pier was available. It wasn't...

For six or seven hours we waited on the open sea. The fine yellow line of the shore stretched out before us. The only relief was Aktau proper and the tiny port. Aktau means 'white mountain' in Kazakh, and it was the Soviets who transformed it into a thriving port which linked the oil-filled Azerbaijan, the caviare canning factories of Astrakhan and the petrol refineries at Krasnovodsk (*kızıl su* 'red water') in Turkmenistan, today, however, called *Türkmenbaşy* the 'Grand Turk', which apparently refers to the actual dictator, Niyazov.

Indeed, Aktau holds no magical interest for the visitor, even one with a strong imagination. Its housing and buildings are very Soviet in appearance, besides the centre of the town, more transparent than opaque! The streets are very straight and clean. Even in the older districts, near the market, nothing 'ancient' or 'hoary' transpires from the dull frontages. I was not disappointed, mind you. In fact, I expected nothing since I had not read one line about this port town. The 'old' mosque was indeed older than the bright new one, which I had entered to pray and give thanks on two occasions since no church seemed to exist at Aktau, albeit I never really investigated. On the other hand, one day I left the main avenue in the centre of the town, swung left towards the Caspian and happily discovered a promenade with cafés and small restaurants, and most of all, beautiful sandy beaches which were free of charge. Many Kazakhs and Russians strolled on the boardwalks or drank beer or soft drinks at the make-shift cafés. The breeze off the Caspian lowered the temperature, and the colours of the unruffled sea dazzled bright. Loafing about the promenade, I worked my way back inland, and at the centre found an agency that sold train tickets. No ticket for Aral'sk was procurable for the following day, nor for the next four of five days. What was I to do in this boring port town: loiter about the impeccably clean streets for five or six days? The woman noted my anguish and proposed that I buy a ticket for Oktjabr'sk, in Northern Kazakhstan, then three hours later, catch the train from Aktjubinsk to Alma-Ata.

These formalities terminated, my last night in Aktau was quite a sleepless one, smashing the myriad mosquitoes upon the blood-splattered plasterboard walls of my room at the Kiremet Hotel. Groggy-eyed the next morning, I left for the railway station, ten kilometres from the Kiremet, caught my train, passed a relatively pleasant day and night on it with some very delightful passengers, then caught the second train to Aral'sk town, and again as luck will have it, slept in a couchette and conversed with passengers and the woman in charge of the car the whole day, and half the night...

The heat was already on the rise when I stepped out of the train and walked the twenty minutes necessary to reach the tiny centre of Aral'sk, where the only hotel in town, the unimaginative Aral Hotel, stood on the edge of the once shimmering waters of the Aral Sea. The woman at the reception (there always seemed to be women at reception desks), pulled a sour face when she noticed my presence in the dank and damp hall so early in the morning. The large hall bore that mass Soviet demean about it, and yet something heavier, more oppressive (is that possible?) seemed to bear witness to other ideological or

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ethnic strata; it might have once been a classy hotel for the Alma-Ata or Moscow officials in the heydays of Aral'sk; that is, when fisherman and factories combined to enrich this town in the 1920s, 30s and 40s. To this effect, there is an interesting fresco at the Aral'sk train station cafeteria which depicts Lenin saluting and thanking the fisherman of Aral'sk who are brawnily and cheerfully casting their loop nets and lines into the bright, fish-jumping waters. Lenin's arm extends to those bare-armed, barrel-chested men in comradely gratitude...

Today, the sea lies practically empty besides a few large stretches of lake-like waters, huge puddles and sinewy rivelets that creep languidly into welters of reeds and groves of Willows. Rusty cranes and dilapidated canneries hang limply off the eroded and barren banks where I stood. To walk upon the muddy soil and examine the few trawlers stuck in the mire, bows upright, instills a sort of fear or awe as if one were awaiting an ineluctable disaster, or a survivor of a world catastrophe... Within the lush green gardens that sloped into the sandy sea there was a museum which boasted a perfectly intact trawler that had been left stranded in the drying sea, and which the authorities have since transformed into a showpiece. To reach the top deck, I climbed a ladder in the interior of the museum, and once at the top found myself just under the pilot cabin, high enough to be able to gaze out far over the forsaken sea. The sight, although tragic, triggered a rush of energy: had I not gained the third sea? Had I not equaled those three seas of Afanasya? Had I not bent my step over his, more or less? Transfixed to the marooned boat, from afar, apparitions emerged amongst the groves of Willows, muddy marshes and hillocks. What were they? Real figures romping about the swamplands...or mirages? The oppressive air bleached the sky a blinding white; a train whistle screamed. This sea no longer could be called a sea, but a graveyard of iron dinosaurs and bashed economic systems that ruined an industry and the lives of thousands. Who will pay for this ecologic and human crime?

I spent two days in Aral'sk, then on a slow train arrived to Tūrkestan in the very early morning of the 44th day of my pilgrimage. I walked briskly the few kilometres that separated me from the holy site, ignoring the cars that offered, for a meagre price, to drop me off there; as I've always said holy sites must be gained on foot...and only on foot! And there it was in all its majestic glory as I ran along the campus ground of the Ahmet Yesevî University and past the very expensive and modern university hotel...

A huge weedy lot separated me from the crown; a crown that outshines all others in Central Asia. A spectacle to behold, even from behind, because indeed I attained the *turbeh* from behind. Even the Soviet atheists were subdued by its stunning beauty! *Quelle merveille! Quelle merveille!* I cried out: «Labayk! Labayk! Labayk!», that Mansur al-Hallaj cry as he penetrated town and pilgrimage site, prohibited to ordinary Muslims because pronounced only by Mohammad, the last prophet. I was not a Muslim...so...»Labayak! Labayak! Labayak!» wafted my cry into the azure which girt the ever approaching *turbeh*. *Labayak*, by the way, means 'Here I am!' I personally prefer the French translation: *Me voilà*. Whatever be the better translation, there I was...finally, overwhelmed by joy and fatigue, by awe, delight and relief...Truly, the gleam of the double-domed *turbeh* filled my eyes with tears, my mind with wild confusion. I think I had gone a bit hysterical for a few moments; my dusty sandals and frayed trousers cut a poor sight, methinks, because passing pilgrims glanced at me oddly. I shouted out the Hodja's name two or three times to them. I touched the walls when I reached the *turbeh*, raced to the majestic front

entrance, and there stood in ecstasy at the portal, presently uncluttered by clumps of tourists or pilgrims, yet teeming with religious fury: *furor poeticus*? Was it the portal or me? I rationalized not at such inept solipsismes, and progressively penetrated the space of the holy...The façade, constructed of fired bricks mixed with mortar and clay, soars skywards from a square base which acts as that ante-chamber, that narthex or jamatoun, before one penetrates a sacred lieu. The depth of the entrance itself, from the front court to the threshold of the wooden portal studded with huge iron nailheads measures no less than twelve metres. It would have been an admirable spot to scrutinize the slithering ochre forms which delimited the façade laterally, coiling up in swirls of geometric relief in guise of pillars, if it hadn't been for the hundreds of pigeons perched on rotting beams jutting out from the mud brickwork, cooingly besouling the entrance with their mindless droppings, the rancid odour of which pressed the most perseverant pilgrim to enter or exit! The oblong protruding beams gave the impression that Timur's inspired labourers had forgotten to dismantle their scaffolding. Six buttresses on each side of the *turbeh* bolster the inlaid Persian blue and vermilion glazed tiles, which depicted vegetal motifs and geometric patterns. Girdling the uppermost part of the ribbed dome were Kufic inscriptions, grand and glossy. The back entrance that led into the Hodja's chamber of eternal rest was shut. One must step back a few metres from the *turbeh* to encompass wholly the immense central dome made of brick, which crowns the main hall. It measures eighteen metres in diameter and is the largest in Central Asia. The smaller ribbed dome which bedecks the prayer room where the Hodja's sarcophagus lies, is resplendent with golden and apple green enameled tiles, whilst the larger dome scintillates lapis-lazuli and turquoise ones...

I stepped into the saint of saints, the sacrophagus of the Pious One over whom the enjewelled ribbed dome rose in glorious triumph! Pilgrims prayed in union, whispered confidences to the Imam; both men and women had covered their hair, men with skullcaps, women with scarves. I quickly covered mine with the hood of my soiled jacket. I took a seat, ever so self-conscious of my ungainly weeds, pulled out my *tesbih* -rosary beads- and murmured:

*Here lies the Amânah, the divine Deposit,  
the sacred Heart that bridges Light and Darkness.*

*Here lies the hidden Treasure of the Ocean depths,  
lieu of the myriad Epiphanies.*

*Here lies the Summit of the Mountain,  
where all Ways converge, and none dare proclaim the highest.  
Here lies the untainted, the unruined, the untarnished  
Mirror that reflects the Face of God.*

*Here lies the Heart of the Universe...*

When I had finished, I stepped outside into the blazing white of the front courtyard. The Imam of the Hodja's chamber stopped me, and for a while we chatted in Turkish. He had studied at the Ahmet Yesevî

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University. He invited me to break the fast *-iftar-* that night with him, his best friend Ahmet, who also graduated from the Yesevî University, and other guests at his home if I so desired. I agreed without hesitation, and we made a rendez-vous at the *turbeh* portal in the late afternoon.

Thus, I was met by the Imam and his friend, Ahmet, at the portal before sunset. We crossed the front gardens of the enormous park that girt the *turbeh*, exiting through a gate of the enclosure walls, very recently rebuilt, and lit by a series of multi-coloured spotlights. We carried on for quite some time, passing the street where my hotel was located, then into a maze of side-streets until reaching a courtyard. On the verandah of a rather large one-storey house, we removed our shoes and penetrated the imam's home, lieu of the *iftar* on that particular night. I was immediately ushered into a huge room, flanked by Ahmet and the Imam, who presented me to the forty or fifty guests, the majority of whom were men, seated upon cushions on both sides of a very long *sofra* -low table-, set with a bright white tablecloth upon whose sheen bowls of fruit and fried dishes had been lain. The few women present, all gathered at the far end of the table near the kitchen, and the two or three screaming children, the Imam's, I presumed, greeted me with smiles, whilst the men welcomed me with ceremonial formulae. After the formal presentation, I was seated opposite Ahmet, and alongside another Imam, who only spoke Kazakh. Ahmet thus acted as my official translator. At the head of the table was the chief Imam of Tūrkestan; he was tugging at a tangled beard as he listened to the men gathered around him. Another Imam was sprawled out on a divan just to the right of the long table. I noticed that there was not one chair in the room...

The ladies of the home swarmed out of the adjacent kitchen, bearing vessels of fresh fritters, steaming hot. As they lay the vessels at different points of the table, I took cursory glances at the walls : completely bare, save a clock with Arabic writing (those that are sold cheaply at the Mecca!) and which read : 'Allah be praised.', a formula written on all clocks from Istanbul to Saudi Arabia...To my left, propped against a wall whose paper was neglectingly peeling, a long bookcase overflowed with books, pamphlets, photo albums, from which dangled Persian-blue enamelled evil eyes to ward off either illiterary or coyish djinns, and a small, square, thread-bare carpet depicting the Ka'ba. There was absolutely nothing else. Suddenly a silence befell the guests; the tall, sinewy Imam, host of the house, rushed into the hall to announce that the bell had been sounded, breaking the fast for that day...

Now *iftar* in Turkey and in Kazakhstan, as I was soon to learn, are very distinct. Restive fingers plunged into the fruit bowls and vessels of honeyed fritters. Bowls of soup followed abundantly. Then a sudden silence froze everyone in their gestures, and one by one the munching or slurping guests filed out of the hall into a corridor, methinks, to the left of the house entrance. Ahmet motioned for me to remain seated whilst they all went to pray. Indeed they practiced a genuine *iftar*: after nibbling fritters or fruit, slurping soup, all Muslims must go to pray before indulging in the eating of meat. In Turkey, this custom is hardly respected, the families gobble down their meals, either praying afterwards or not at all! Only in the villages and smaller towns is the traditional *iftar* respected...When the prayers returned, steaming mutton, vegetables and salads were heaped upon the table, followed a half hour later by tea and kumiss ! Two hours later, fingers and mouths dripping with mutton fat, nothing remained...The Imam and Ahmet offered to drive me to my hotel; I thanked the assembly, slipped out with my friends and they drove me back to the Sabina Hotel; I would see them every day for my remaining days in Tūrkestan...

Every morning for five days at the call of the prayer, I would briskly walk to the *turbeh*, and with my *hikmets* opened, recite seven strophes as I turned slowly seven times round the Hodja's eternal dwelling place. I recited the same strophe every morning and evening until I had memorized them:

*'At fifty-seven, my life has passed as the wind,  
hey friends, deedless am I, my head in a spin ;  
May Allah be praised, the Guide of Love held my hand,  
By my Oneness and Existence, am I to see His Face?'*

*'I reached fifty-eight, without news am I,  
My soul accomplished the sixth degree, my Rabb al-Qahhaar;  
By your zeal, I strike my inauspicious soul with a battle-axe,  
By my Oneness and Existence, am I to see His Face?'*

*'I attained fifty-nine, help and lamentation,  
When I gave my soul I remembered not;  
I remain humble before Your Face, you free me from world constraint,  
By my Oneness and Existence, am I to see His Face?'*

Like the planets circle the sun so too does the pilgrim circle the lieu of sacredness. Like the earth spins on its axis, so too does the pilgrim spin on his uprightness. Like the dervish turns and turns round the *samâ*, so too does the pilgrim turn and turn round his Self. All circular movements, all circuitous courses, all mental and spiritual convolution lead the pilgrim back to the same point of non-commencement ; the mystery of the womb ; that point in time and space when and where the ontic vertical and the existential transversal unite in transient harmony, in communal awareness. Be it circumnavigating our World or circumambulating our Heart, the pilgrim circles, spins and turns in order to circumscribe his circumstances, and in doing so, situate him or herself on the long and narrow Road of Self-Accomplishment, the sole Road of and for the pilgrim, the Voyageur of the World and the Heart, without circumlocution or circumvention...

And every day for five days I would pray with the Imam in front of the sacrophagus, would meet him and Ahmet in the gardens where we chatted about this and that. Through my prayers and our conversations I came to regard Hodja Ahmet Yesevî as one of the *Rabi el-Alamîne* -le Maître des Mondes-, second only to Christ, our Saviour. This is blasphemous in the ears of Muslims, but not in mine. The Hodja is certainly not a prophet, yet he is a seer, a sage, a wise man who has come to earth to deliver us...all or us...whatever be his or her creed or religion...like the Christ, albeit the Hodja's mission was an earthly one and not divine...Yet, both were men of peace who never brandished the sword...

Hodja Ahmet Yesevî's place in our World and in our Hearts can be gauged by tracing his teachings, writings and influence to the other Shiekhs of the Sufi Path that were his direct disciples, or those who

form part of the Sufi Chain of Transmission. The effects in words and deeds of his *hikmets* have spread eastwardly and westwardly, have offered insights and perspicacious analyses of Koranic interpretation and of the hadiths, have softened the stringent demands of an oftentimes intolerant Sunnism. The Art of the *samâ*, of dancing and chanting, is one inspired by Ahmet Yesevî's *hikmets*. The Sufi's daily communion with his Rabb is the Hodja's daily communion with us all. The sage is he who obeys both God and men, who willingly bears upon his shoulders the load of Humanity, the toil and hardships of paving a Way for all and sundry to God, again, disregardless of religion and creed.

On one occasion I asked Ahmet and the Imam whether the Hodja had contemplated the Face of God. My question aroused them out of the tedious routine of small talk. The imam answered without demur: «No one contemplates His Face whilst in this life; it is we who are the objects of God's vision.» This answer brooked no further inquiry or immediate contrariety...

*'Bondsman Hace Ahmet, I rejected the self, I rejected the self,  
Then I sought and found My Self;  
Before death I suffered for not giving my Self,  
By my Oneness and Existence, am I to see His Face?'*

asks the Hodja at the threshold of Selfhood ; namely, the Accomplishing of the Self with God as one's Companion. Every prophet and sage followed this Road or Path, be they Jew, Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist. The multiple and chaotic existences of this earthly life gradually rose into the lofty summit of the awareness of the ontic Self, that one embued with the divine light of God's refreshing void. Yes, void ! The velvety solace of the very Instant, that very *Augenblink* when the sleeper awakens after having striven and toiled, after having experienced a myriad of existences, after so many dreams and arcane desires have fashioned those existences...The awakening into the sounds of Selfhood is the end of the Voyage, of transversal labouring...of the futile, unremitting alterations of masks or rôles...So many blinks of the eyes until the eyes finally **see**...So many descents of the Rabb until that One Face is **seen** ! Bountiful is the Void...

*'Şibli danced the dance of Love and saw the Light,  
He readied himself, asked a question and saw Mohammad;  
He closed his eyes, abandoning the other world,  
Friends, chant and danse such as servants do.'*

*'Şibli said, crying with Love: «Hey, Prophet,  
I am exhausted, if I dance I shall grieve;  
The Prophet said: «Hopefully He will accept your action.»  
He longed for permission to chant and dance, friends.'*

Awake! Awake! Into the Light of Reality, awake! Every existence has been a dreaming until the ontic Self bursts upon the scene, tears away the curtains and reveals He who does not applaud or hoot!

*'Those who habituate themselves to the poverty of this world,  
Who find consolation in torment;  
Who render service to good; servant Hodja Ahmet,  
Such people will be sultans on the Day of Judgement.'*

The Companions of Torment : the Bedreddîns, Börklüces, Torlaks, Mansur al-Hallajs and Sohrawardis ; the Saints Paul and Peter, the Etiennes and Sebastians, Blandines and Joans of Arc ; the Giordanni Brunos and Wycliffs and Rabbi Akibas and Eti Hilsoms, and the other six million... They attained Selfhood and now rest in peace. Their toilsome Voyage upon the face of our Earth provided them the requisite to behold His Face. They became what Humanity harbours deep within its Heart: the quintessential Being. Are not the Hodja's *hikmets* those theosophic strophes that he composed and recited so as to understand his link, his bond, his vassality to God? To grasp the cause of his Being and Existence begot by Him who caused all things? The wisdom of the Hodja lies in this quest, in this forging of a Way to Him, the Mover of all that moves...

Around the *turbeh*, the World, the Heart, I turned and spun and danced the Cosmic Dance, murmuring prayers for those mighty heroic Companions, those noble souls of the long and rocky Road of Self-Accomplishment ; they who have divested the cloak of mortality, clad only in the shroud of purity : the joyous reascent... Their pilgrimages ended now in joyful tears now in abominable abjection.

And here, seated behind the locked door of the Hodja's chamber of rest, reading aloud his bezels of sagacity, my pilgrimage, too, has come to an end yet, neither in joyful tears nor in abominable abjection, but rather in a state of expectancy of further calls that will conduct me ever nearer towards the lofty whorling summit of Selfhood...

Yes...the unveiling of arcane things and the actualizing of thoughts that deform not their essentiality through the independant comprehension of outer circumstances has entralled and lured this pilgrim to

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such formidable delights that not once has the veracity of the Road ever been overshadowed by inane pettifoggery or notorious acclaim...

*'Ô day, rise! The atoms dance,  
Souls, lost in ecstasy, dance,  
In your ear I shall tell you where the dance leads,  
All the atoms in the air and in the desert,  
Heed well, are swirling in madness,  
Each atom, sad or happy,  
Is amorous of the sun whose essence brooks no degree.'*

Mevlanâ

Hommage à Afanasya Nikitin

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The unabridged version of this travelogue is published as a supplement. – *Ed. Journal of Eurasian Studies.*

