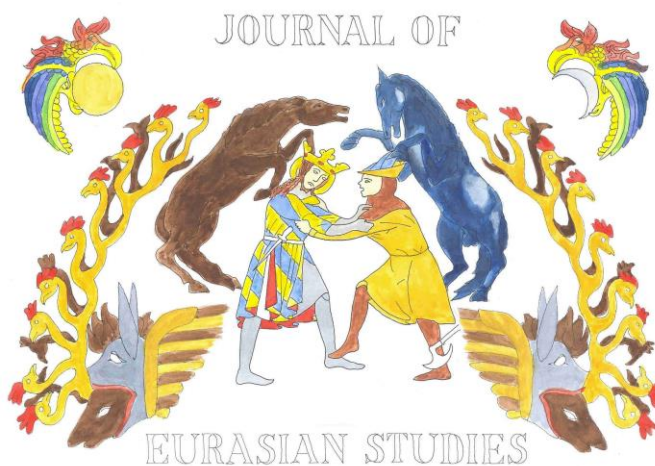


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Pilgrimage to T rkestan
over the Three Seas
and Central Asian Steppes



Paul Mirabile

2012

Introduction

Hodja Ahmet Yesevî

'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 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 'voiage' 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 Timbucktoo...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 (*sükût*) 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...

There are many Road Companions that one stumbles over either in the theophanic or mundane regions: Les Fous de Dieu, dervishes, retired army officers, Imams, crewmen on ships, pilgrims, intellectual mavericks, drunks and rowdies, cyclists; in sum, travellers of all sorts, of all religions and regions, these two worlds (*alêm*) may intertwine at certain points : the lush rose and jasmin gardens of Rûzbehân suddenly emerge at the edge of the sandy Aral Sea, the turquoise-domed *turbehs* of Hazret-i Burhk or Shah Nakışbend, so brilliant and lofty in travellers' memoirs, appear before one's eyes at Tūrkestan, Bukhara or Samarkand! The theophanic and mundane worlds are very real, and their intertwinings forge no 'coincidence': the points of encounter or cross-roads enlighten the pilgrim on the inseparability of both...

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 unfailing, 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 roughish 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 inexhaustable (*intarissable* is better!) thirst from the fonts 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; one to which I fully adhere. To each his own Way of Self-Accomplishment, of wending towards that Unique Oneness, and as Marie-Madelaine Davy admonished: «L'important est d'éviter la confusion des voies.» Well put indeed...

My pilgrimages and 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, introthy, 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.¹ As to the Hodja's 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*.² 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; that is, Turkish with serveral Georgians, the Azeri and the occasional Turk met en route; Russian with Ukrainians, many Georgians, who in spite of the five day war spoke Russian to me with considerable pleasure (unlike the Bulgarians!), Armenians whom I met, the Kazakh, and with several Russian tourists with whom I spoke in hostels, or who gave me a lift when hitch-hiking from place to place ; English with a few Georgians who spoke it excellently, and of course with the European travellers I met, especially a Dutchman, Gustav, on the ship crossing the Caspian; and French only with the one or two travellers whom I met, Claude, in particular, on our ship across the Black Sea, in Georgia at Sergo's mother's guest house and in Kazakhstan. There leaves no doubt in my mind that from Istanbul to Tūrkestan, Turkish and Russian are the lingua franca, whilst English may aid the monoglot in certain very globalized tourist areas.

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 conservations, 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...

1 *Ahmed-i Yesevî Dîvân, Hikmet'ten Seçmeler*, Professor Dr. Kemal Erastan, Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı Yayınları, İstanbul 1983.

2 N° 21, Nov. Ankara 1995.

«Legend is to History as Wisdom is to Philosophy; the first is ontic, the second existential. Both are fundamentally necessary to accomplish the Way towards Divinehood.»

Entre Chien et Loup

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 as depicted in Ivan Aivazouski's painting, a work of art that the Armenian painter effected, not through any asinine penchant for Orientalism, but through the love of the sea and those monuments that are mirrored upon her ruffled or placid surface! This pictorial analogy is no metaphor in my mouth: it is an arrested moment which paints the uniqueness, the invariable variant of historical Istanbul or Turkey in general...



Ivan Aivazouski, the Armenian Painter of the Seas and of Twilights

I have lived for thirteen years within these twilight seasons. And it was within these bright gloomy moments that I discovered Islamic Sufism, both Sunna and Shia, and its abundant literature, in particular, Hodja Ahmet Yesevî or the Pir-i Tûrkestan.

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 Bektaşî, the Sheikh Bedreddîn, Evliya Çelebi, and of course the Master of all those aforesaid Masters, Hodja Ahmet Yesevî.

The story of his life plunges us deep into the legendary rather than into the historical, but only arid and unimaginative historians continue still to deride the legendary, indispensable, however, to the understanding of human nature, and consequently, of History. For History and Legend are likened to the human's soul or spirit, and contrariwise, legend without History can be likened to a religion without reason, an ontic creature without existence...

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 Tûrkestan, called in medieaval times, Yese. 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 Tûrkestan 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, Xorka Axmeга 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 (*silsila*), that Sheikh-chain of heritage. I believe in this Sufi revival, and for this belief I ventured to his tomb (*mazar*) at Tūrkestan.

The Dawning lights of the Hodja lay open the path to his final earthly abode; it is a poetic one like all pilgrimage paths...Hark to these timeless, strophic wonders:

*'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 without entering the body find God?
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.*

*«Know that I am Tenderness»! He came with a cry,
«Invoke your Rabb'' he said, my insides trembled,
my spirit entered my bones ''Allah'' he said,
For this reason at sixty-three did I enter the earth.*

*Four hundred years later the Umma will emerge and be;
Many a year will the Dervish Way be shown and tread;
One hundred and fourteen thousand pilgrims will be of service to the earth,
For this reason at sixty-three did I enter the earth.*

*In nine months and nine days I descended upon the earth;
For nine hours without respite I flew through the heavens;
The degrees of the two Highest Heavens I reached and embraced,
For this reason at sixty-three did I enter the earth.*

*Upon the Highest Heaven I prostrated in prayer,
I looked upon the True One, recounted my pains and poured out my tears;
I spoke ill of all, believing love false and piousless,
For this reason at sixty-three I did enter the earth.*

*Without extinction all those who say "hû! hû!" are liars;
Those who question dishonesty will remain upon the road;
Unknown to themselves and to their works, they seek out the True One;
For this 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...

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...

The Black Sea Crossing: La Mer Etale

*'If I were to invoke my great Rabb
My tongue would be sweet like tasty honey;
Poor am I, submittingly have I become unworthy,
My spirit is like a bird that flies and beats its wings'*

Hodja Ahmet Yesevî

The voyageur has ample routes to choose from when sailing upon the Black Sea to Georgia, Russia, Bulgaria, Rumania or Turkey. *Sea-lines* carries passengers and vehicles from Istanbul to Ilyichevsk, the cargo port of Odessa; it takes two nights, the first of which is spent slowly navigating up the Bosphorus which is indeed a splendid spectacle, the two bridges alit in blue, the flickering lights from the *yali* -the splendid wooden homes on the Bosphorus banks-. The slim, long ship, which can carry up to two hundred vehicles, mostly lorries, leaves the Haydarpasha port of Istanbul every Wednesday and Saturday night and from Ilyichevsk every Friday and Monday night. However, it seems that the Istanbul port authorities no longer permit foot passengers aboard for reasons that only those Turkish authorities wish to make known and exercise! *En revanche*, the *Griefswald Line* offers multiple possibilities to reach the major Black Sea ports: Varna in Bulgaria, Poti and Batum in Georgia, Sochi in Russia and Istanbul. In the 1980s, Turkish passenger ships ran crossings between Istanbul and Trabzon with stop-overs at Sinop, Samsun and Ordu; these crossings no longer exist, having suffered commercial pressure from *Türk Hava Yolları* to put an end to this long and useless means of travel on the grounds that domestic immigration had ceased from the Black Sea area, and that those past immigrants have accumulated enough wealth to visit their Black Sea families by the cleaner, faster and more modern aeroplane, dressed not in their colourful, folkloric raiment, but in the more cleaner and modern suits and ties for men, and the more modern skirts and /or trousers for women!

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. I waited aboard her about a day after spending six hours at the small, deserted port whilst the sailors secured the vehicles to one of the three-layer decks of the massive ship after parking them in their appropriate spaces. The most interesting manoeuvre was the small cab driven by a sailor which sped back and forth on the uppermost deck on the rails of the ship, retrieving the train-wagons from the port and tugging them to their spaces, a manoeuvre which necessitated a precise distribution of vehicles on both sides of the deck to ensure weight balance. This task was accomplished in the most efficient manner, after which the vehicles were clamped securely to the decks with chains and cables.



The Geroite na Sevastopol in port...

Sailors thumped back and forth on the companionways from deck to deck, and there were six of them to thump up and down. The cook and several others brought on the necessary food for the four day voyage, lifted aboard on a small skit lowered and lifted by a small crane pulley to and from the mole far below, where two men loaded the goods on to it from their lorry.

The port as I said was small and deserted; in fact a better word would be desolate! A port which once thrived during the Soviet period, so a young man with whom I spoke, as I sat out those six hours on a bench or in strolling about the ruins, with up to two thousand men working day and night. Today only six or seven workers control the vehicles or drive them to the ships. There was no drinking water, only a coffee machine at the entrance gate and at the Navisped office, but off limits to the unauthorized! Hardly any ships ported there, in spite of so many berths. The lack of financial support from Sophia accounted for the forlorn atmosphere at Belaslava, the port of Varna. Nothing to drink. Nothing to eat, for the port cantine or café lay in rusty ruins, partially embrowned by dead or dying trees, shrubs and weeds. The gardens in front of the Navisped Navigation building, a nondescript edifice that had seen better days, albeit a meek face lift up to the second floor did rejunvenate it to a certain extent, were more or less watered and cared for, judging by the violets and reds of their flower-beds. Luckily the young man who kept me company offered me drinking water. As to food, happily the formalities were accomplished speedily, the customs building hardly large enough to contain the seven Armenian, two Azeri, two Bulgarian and two French passengers (the other being a young back-packing Frenchwoman, Claude), for we were monitored to the ship's lower deck by the kind manager of Navisped then handed over to one of the welcoming sailors, who after

having shown us all our cabins, rushed us to a long-awaited hot meal. It was Bulgarian food: sausages and sauerkraut. And in fact for those four days we ate sausages, boloney, salami and liverwurst at all meals, plus mackerel, chicken or lentil soup, and fruit for desert. Coffee was never served, only tea...

The Geroite na Sebastopol left port after noon, and slid gently out of the Belaslava channel into the Black Sea. Some of the sailors waved to their families who were aligned on the banks of the channel to see their husbands off. The majority of the sailors were from Varna. 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.

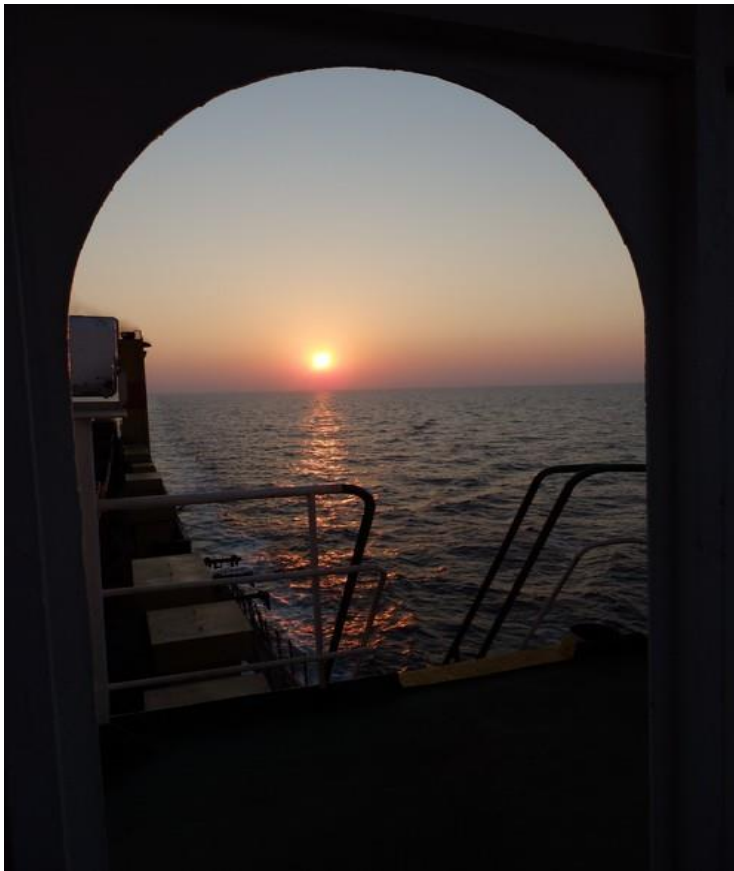
As on all cargoes the passengers had the run of the ship, save the upper deck, where the pilot's cabin was located. A chain across the companionway to this upper deck made this intention very clear, a prohibition that the cargoes on the Caspian Sea did not impose. So at the bow I observed the sailors gesticulating to their wives and children 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...

Movement arouses the creative élan that kindles the imagination; yet it does not make it run amok. Imagination when stirred by the movement of Voyage, then seeks out Figures to design or paint scenes of one's destiny to be accomplished; it is one's *amor fati* that is being traced aboard that vessel, bound for unknown ports of call over placid or rough waters. Figures

aroused from our Creative Imagination set to work by the very Movement of the vessel, the wind and current guiding it. This Movement once fashioned into Figures has told tales that have been told, written or played out upon the théâtre of the world...This Movement is a natural one, we are cradled by the unpredictable, cantankerous undulations and rolls, for the sea weilds terrible powers or grants suave navigation. Her moods become ours, and moods are, as you know, the Movement of the heart!

To be in harmony or in tune to these movements is to sound or fathom the depths of our hearts, too.



To be in harmony to these movements...

As the days move on our metabolism, our inner body movements slowly join those of the sea's; Time becomes a natural combination of the currents, sheen or choppiness of her mien, the wind's forces, the crew's and ours. Time no longer obeys mechanical devices, nor does it abide by technological demands that wrench it from its natural sheath. Henceforth, a subtle, sympathetic blend of the sea's movements and ours overwhelms us through the osmotic reaction of our body's reactions to the open seas', the crews', to the Voyage's as a means of

ontological transformation *because* biological! We have Time to inhale and exhale fresh, briny air. Time to move about the ship, leisurely, sluggishly, even briskly if one so desires: up and down, back and forth, to and thro...exulting the body to respond more fully to the Movement of the Voyage, now that it no longer suffers from security-tight claustrophobic uniformized aeroport terminals, the starchy smiles of hostesses or stewards who serve equally starchy food, the grave, American-emulated voice of the pilot who settles passengers' wiry nerves with that manly vocal assurance. But enough of this mediocrity, for my aging vessel is presently docking at Ilyichevsk, the port of Odessa in the Ukraine, where Russia has since acquired, by referendum, the Crimea, and is on the verge of annexing Donetsk and Lougansk by popular revolt, thus consensus. It appears that the Russian population of Eastern Ukraine prefer Putin's expanding Federation rather than Ukraine's Western satalite status, manipulated within by the anti-Semite Nazi-affiliated Swaboda milices, and from without by the hysterical rhetoric broadcasts of NATO leaders. Remember the comic film 'The Russians are Coming' with Allen Arkin and Jonathan Winters? Today it is less of a joke than it was during the Cold War; Western newspapers emit slogans such as the Russian barbarian versus the 'all options are on the table' champions of democracy! NATO needs some valid reason to exist after the dismantlement of her arch rival, and so is presently in the process of renewing her utility by fomenting a new Cold War.

Putin has a vision of the world and Russia's place in it; a vision that lacks in the bleak and blank minds of Western leaders and their 'advisors'. As I see it, Putin seeks to create a grand Russian Federation where the Russian language will serve as the lingua franca (and not the contract-signing, symposium-vulgate English), and where Christianity will play the rôle of a deterrent element in the spread of fanatical Sunna Islam in countries such as Ossetia, Abkhazia, Armenian and Georgia. He is realising this project by financing the rebuilding and building of Orthodox churches and monasteries as Orthodoxy spreads and flourishes in Russia after seventy years of religious dearth. Putin needs allies, and he wants Christian allies, ones that will afford him and them a 'Christian visibility', similar to what Sunna Islam, especially in Iraq, Syria and Turkey, is tirumphantly achieving today, be it through the more modern forms of *jihad* or democratically fraudulent. Putin, of course, has no such nostalgic fantasies as do the fanatics of ISIS or Erdoğan ; he has fully understood what neither Obama nor European leaders have nor are ready to understand : the only road to counter an aggressive Sunna Islam is by expanding Christianity in all its forms : be Orthodox Russian, Greek, Armenian or Georgian. The popes' visits to Istanbul over the years are as strategic as they are diplomatic, not so much as regards the Muslims, for indeed nothing has really changed in the past thirty years between Christains and Muslims in Turkey, or in the Near and Middle East, but certainly between the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches, which Russian since the rise to power of Putin, has been observing, waiting for an opportunity to apply this new-found understanding as a tacticle persuasive measure against the Muslim world, especially the Sunna Muslim world...

Orthodoxy or the Russian language in the Ukraine provide Russia a security belt against both bellicose Sunnism and invective NATO, the two scrouges that Russia has had to contend with since the beginnings of her existence as a State: between the Teutonic knights ravaging Western Russia and the Turko-Mongol hordes the East, Russians have learned to battle both, and these obstinate enemies have spawned strategies and tactics of a very refined nature that completely escape Western imagination today. To call Russians Nazis, as ignorant and ill-willed Western journalists do, bespeaks a lack of geo-political perspicacity and historical training; bespeaks, too, an unhealthy conviction of Western supremacy that the same ill-willed lackies never tire of reminding the world, accompanied by the customary scorn and contempt of anything other than this monolithic supremacy, which dates from the hay-days of colonialism, and which still lingers malignly above the crisis-stricken skies of Europe. If the Eastern Ukrainians, who are currently revolting in favour of a language and higher salaries are labelled as rebels or scum by the West, why are those of Syria aided psychologically and militarily by the same? Both are fighting for democracy, or so they aver. But as we all know, the West assists rebels in their 'democratic' struggle when its interests are at stake: Saudi Arabia, Azerbaijan, Pakistan and Qatar are those strategic partners who know where their bread is buttered, and will never bite the hand that feeds them.

Putin's Orthodox security-belt also offers the population a pole of ontological attraction when the economic and political landscapes fail to provide basic needs, or when they cease to appeal to him or her due to disinterest, rejection, objection or refusal. Besides, Ukraine's economy has never been what the West wished it be to, partly because after the ridiculous Orange Revolution, Western funds were hardly adequate to rebuild an economy that basically depended on Russia's, so much more so that millions of Ukrainians work in Russia and are paid in roubles, especially those of the 'Orthodox East'. It is not enough to send a bunch of young Evangelists to spread the 'good news', or green-horn student researchers to propagate the tremendous benefits of imposed liberalism! They all strike a sad figure of cultural and intellectual impoverishment...Indeed, the hatred of Russia, that enemy of puissant Westerdome, has astounded me; it is one wrought from envy and jealousy, from that sickening optimism to which Stephan Zweig had so dejectedly succumbed on the eve of World War One. Putin is not an optimist; he is a realistic, practical man who when slandered as a Nazi merely tells everyone to go to hell and acts according to the needs of his country under the fire of Muslim Sunna fanaticism and NATO's thirst for vengeance...

We left Ukraine the following day en route for Poti, Georgia. The country of the Rose Revolution, remember? All those colours and perfumed flowers dissimulate a malodorous stench of hypocrisy and arrogance. But of this later.



The setting sun upon the broad main...

Where did my love of ship sailing begin? After having read *Moby Dick*? No, before that...Perhaps the large wooden boats I used to build in the backyard of our property that sloped into a sump filled with rain and sewage water at the age of eleven or twelve; one boat actually did float for a while...until it sank to the bottom of that slimy slump. I had even laid a rug on the 'lower deck'! Yes, I had built two 'decks', so to speak. I stole the wood from the numerous construction sites round my parents' home and cut the wood myself with my father's brand new tools, which he never used! Nails, screws, putty, tacks and other necessary materials he had stored in large quantities in his tool shed for reasons I never understood, because he never built or repaired anything...That was my wooden boat period...

Jules Verne and other novels of exploration and voyage of the 1800s certainly played a large rôle in the psychological expansion of my sea-faring mind; I cultivated a phantasy of joining the Merchant Marines, phantasy which would have become true if I hadn't failed the entrance examination: I got all my knots mixed up, not to mention the poor score in Mathematics. Plainly, I wasn't set out for the Merchant Marines...

Indeed crossing seas and oceans and rivers and lakes corresponds to my philosophy of the Voyage: slow, long, meditative, intense, sensual (but not romantic or sentimental!) and moving...Truly, the love of the sea is the love of adventure: to venture into the unknown, slowly

and deliberately, upon the moody wide waters of the world, into large and ever-receding horizons. For the Voyage is to venture forth into the Unknown without a return trip ticket, and to voyage on a cargo, passenger or mail ships, prepares the adventurer for that Unknown, that psychological and physical Otherness which awaits him or her. The slowest ship and the longest route, that is the most passionate love of sea-faring. It steadies one's metabolism, concentrates it on the simplicity of Life, her marvels: *la mer étale!* A mirror of one's Self drifting, erring in nomadic fashion towards that designed Otherness. To eat and sleep, rocked by the toss and pitch of Nature. To think and meditate under sunny or cloudy skies, starry or bleak nocturnal vaults. The unconsummated life because lived without that frightening after thought of efficiency, of the *à la mode*, of 'not missing the boat' (what a paradoxal phrasing!) Terrible indeed, to miss the boat means to have embraced the frantic modes of our modern technological nightmare, that without respite, brutally imposes its manufacturing, consumering programmed rhythm. I must confess that I missed that particular boat at the age of thirteen, but have taken dozens of others since then, all of which have borne me to the Other, in spite of the fashion and fanfare of the day, political, economic or technological...My life has been one of 'disconnection'! I scoff not at technology: it is at my service, and nothing more. It responds to my punctual needs, it neither guides nor waylays me on my Road, neither calculates nor imposes its vision upon mine. I hardly believe in mass domestication, another word for democracy, facilitated today by the uniformity of computer and other technological devices, a uniformity totally devoid of any human or humane guidance! How the bold words of Roland Barthes ring in my ears, even today:

«Tout à coup, il m'est devenu indifférent de ne pas être moderne»

At thirteen I became indifferent to being modern, now at sixty-two the word itself has a foul taste in my mouth whenever I pronounce it, which is quite seldom, a disgusting ring in my ears whenever it is pronounced, alas much too often...And the clear ringing of Hodja Ahmet Yesevî's sagacity?

*'At one He gave me a share of Life,
At two He came and saw the prophets;
At three the Forty came to inquire about my state,
For this reason at sixty-three I passed into the soil of the Earth.*

*'At four Mohammad the Just gave me a date.
I was shown the Road, how confused was I to tread upon it;
Wherever I might go, Khezr Baba my Road Companion would be there,
For this reason at sixty-three I passed into the soil of the Earth.*

*'At five I became a serf and devotee,
Prosterning in reverence and accustomed to fasting;
Day and night I invoked in peace,
For this reason at sixty-three I passed into the soil of the Earth.*

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!

The sitting arrangements were ethnically orientated, as could be expected: the Armenians sat together at one large rectangular table, the two Azeri at one table for four, the two Bulgarians at another, and Claude and I at a four place table in the far corner. Each table spoke its language, although Russian was the lingua franca amongst passengers, and passengers the crew. I spoke to the Armenians, to the Bulgarians and to the crew in Russian, to the Azeri in Turkish, and with Claude in French, of course. It proved quite trying for Claude because one must admit that the overall atmosphere was very masculine, and she not knowing Russian or Turkish, much more was insinuated between her and the passengers and crew, than what was indeed said! The two Azeri lorry-drivers harassed the poor woman with vulgar suggestions; she blithely brushed them off with a wave of her tiny hand and a sunny, sarcastic smile.

Claude was en route for India, Auroville to be more precise, where she had been living and working for eight years. She chose the Eastern overland road through Central Asia, then southwards to China, Tibet and Nepal. A wonderful way, thus a wonderful adventure. A hearty, solid woman, albeit small and thin, Claude had that enthusiasm and ardour which distinguishes the poets from the hackers, the industrious from the docile, the living from the dead. She had abandoned the mainstream run-of-the-mill for the more heroic path of the luminous...

Over meals and whilst pacing the sun-bathed decks we spoke of Auroville and Pondicherry where, incidentally, I had lived and taught for five years. We spoke of the future, not particularly ours, but the future: horizonless like the sea. It was the Present that counted for us with the precious aid of the Past, and again not particularly ours. And presently we were

travelling over the distant Past... To voyage plunges one into the primeval Past: he or she must obey and abide by the Movement of the transforming body and mind, namely, their vital transformation, according to the paramount Laws of Nature *hic et nunc*. It is a vocation, a trade, a *métier*, for it is a genuine mission, ontologically befitting for our Self, existentially exact for our corporal capacities. To voyage encompasses all types of labour so that the traveller may continue on his or her course. These labours of love imply indifference to one's self, for its own self. Its implies an ontological and existential relationship wrought from one's own harsh demands upon the Self, and one's aspirations to expand the multiple paths offered to one's Self in contrast with the circumstances that create relationships. To divest one's Self of parental projections, school indoctrination is to tread the Way of Self-Accomplishment, a flexible, pliable Way open to the horizonless Self ; a Way that Claude had been treading for over eight years after abandoning her self-full profession in France, and taking up residence at Auroville. The Self must be emptied of the self before Selfhood can be cultivated and gleaned...



The Self must be emptied of the self before Selfhood...

To voyage is a risk one must take in order to uncover the limits of one's Self, and this requires real discipline, not an imposed gregarious herd discipline, but a Self-discipline which does not separate the intestines from the brain, the heart from the mind, the intellect from the soul. Hydrotherapy decongests, drains and cleanses as much the brain as it does the intestines. Constant fasting soothes as much the body as it does the spirit! Yoga unites all the bodily organs with God or His Creation...To breathe in respiratory rhythm harmonizes the Self to our hieing steps. Discipline demands risk, both of body and mind. For this reason there are few voyageurs. It demands simplicity, and simplicity abhors nervous tension because it nourishes an energy generated by the disciplined body. Energy roused, stirred and motivated by the Self's robust and expansive health, adapted to and identified with Nature's Movements because harnessed to the Self's sound Movements. The fusion of Self and Nature's Movements defines the Accomplishing Self...For they are parallel Movements... osmotic...Once this adaptation and identification have been assumed and experimented as a daily habitude, one begins to comprehend how the Voyage has drawn him or her out of the maddening confusion of nervous trepidation and into one's indifferent Self to it, only then to throw, to project this Self outwards into a world that has been altered and transformed by this novel Self-awareness. This voyageur comes to grasp that a Voyage is not a jaunt or a holiday, an escape or a punctual achievement: it is a Project of Life because forged on the Labours of Love, not of the Self, but of the indifference of the Self for that petty self...one without the Other...True Selfhood can only prevail with the Other...There are no short-cuts here...

The lives of Evliya Çelebi, Benjamin of Tudel, Alexandre Csoma of Körös, Sir Richard Burton, Alexandre David-Néel and of so many others whom I have not read or met, and of mine, if I may add my name to this gallery of the privileged, had been (and mine still is!) one of the Voyage as that very Project of Selfhood, that very energy or *élan vital* of Movement, whatever the materiality of the Way had been, wherever that Way led, whatever the scriptures or artistic forms that gave rise to their respective Projects...These thoughts were spawned during our meals together and our jaunts upon the sun-drenched decks of the slow moving vessel...

Such a placid sea, neither white-crested waves nor massive rolls. At times the cargo stopped, as abruptly as that, and there we floated and waited, a corkscrew tossed in the still waters. Only one chimney bellowed smoke whilst the other lay in repose. Thus the aging vessel rested. But not the crew who scrubbed, painted, cooked, piloted or swam in the small pool on the third deck, reserved for them in the afternoons and open to the passengers in the mornings! A refreshing surprise which washed away the moisture of the air, the veiled heat of the white sun.

The wind had dropped at sunset. A strange, eerie light spread over the sky, illumined the sea, traced ruffles which girt the whiteness. Claude took many photos with a very sophisticated

looking camera; mine had no sophistication at all, nor was I apt to comprehend much less operate such sophistication...The air grew more and more balmy, almost tropical. I had noticed that my cabin reeked of humidity, of unexercised or meagre cleanings or tidying, although clean sheets, toilet paper and towels were provided, and a porthole afforded sea air to circulate in the cabin, expunging the dingy-smelling dampness. As a matter of fact, the cabin turned out to be comfortable: a writing table and a small canopy, albeit whose decrepid upholstery welcomed no pleasant sit, affected an atmosphere of congeniality. Yellowing photos of ikons and Orthodox churches embellished the walls. Across from my cabin and aside Claude's were the toilet and shower. Each unit contained two cabins and a toilet; cabins could be singles, as were ours, or doubles and triples as were the Armenians' and the Azeris'.

I spoke to the Armenians on several occasions and once or twice to the two Azeri lorry drivers, en route to Baku. They offered Claude a ride to Baku which she refused; she had no visa. The Azeri lorry-drivers never offered me a ride. I wondered why the Armenians, who were travelling with their own vehicles, did not simply drive across Turkey; a day's journey between Istanbul and Batum suffices! They explained that if your car had been bought in Europe -which theirs was-, the Turks ask for too much tax money at the border for it! They chose to reach Erivan by boat, and the 220 dollar ticket turned out much less than the astronomical sum of money custom officials extort at the Turkish border. How much a car or a lorry costs on board our vessel I cannot say; I have never owned a car because I never learned to drive one...

The moon veiled by the moist air offered little light upon the inkiness of the waters. Such stillness. Such silence, besides the vibration and droning of the single motor. I slept so soundly during those four days; after the noise and hectic rush of Istanbul, the calmness of the sea makes one aware that her briny waters allay the spirit and soul. The rhythmic sound of her flux appeases, her undertone draws us inwards and outwards. She awakens and sets in motion the myriad possibilities of the Routes of Life...

Man has been created, I believe, to dream and imagine a myriad possibilities of Life. But man must be imaginative and flexible. He has not been created to work only for a living, enjoying periodical pleasures or repose. Human possibilities are endless, but they have been thwarted and restricted by unimaginative and inflexible cliques that have exploited the myth of the hard-working, labourous animal or comrade who strains and sweats pathetically for consumer success or patriotic glory. This programmed indoctrination, carefully prepared by Authority, may suit the majority of humanity; it has neither excited nor convinced me, theoretically or practically, of its ripened and reaped benefits.

And although it may seem odd, it has been sailing the high and low seas of the world that has taught me this ontological and existential lesson...

Dolphins rode the waves or traced graceful arcs through or above them. They romped and gamboled about the hull in playful leaps and bounds. Six sparrows fluttered about on board, gathering inside a large cage which had been hung at the bow, perhaps for their benefit...

Claude joined me at the cage: she had relinquished success and glory in order to lead a full, healthy life as an individual amongst members of a community: is that at all possible? Claude seemed to think so. A self-exiled. In India, I had worked with Auroville Press for three or four years; they had printed three of my books. Serge, the director of the printing press at that time, and a very good friend, had died of cancer, so Claude sadly informed me. He was much younger than me. He refused any hospitalisation or medication: I experienced a surge of respect for him and prayed that his soul lay in eternal peace...

The port of Poti in 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 Sebastopol* was moored to the wharf round noon...

Georgia

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^o century.

Georgia is a country 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 Adjara, of which Batumi 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...

The Adjars were forcefully converted to Islam by the Ottomans during the XVII century after the Turks had defeated the Russians. In 1878, Russia annexed the province and it remained under Russian administration, then under Soviet rule until 1991.

In 1991, seventy-five percent of the Adjars were Muslim. In 2004 the percentage had been completely inversed, the seventy-five percent pouring into the Christian Orthodox camp. This converse situation, incredible so it appears, may have two reasons: Since the heroic times of King Mirian the Third in 337, Queen Tamar, King David the Builder and George the Brilliant, Georgians have been Orthodox Christians. Georgia became the second Christian State, following in the wake of Armenia. This cultural heritage has anchored the Georgian people solidly within a religious collective identity that no superficial conversion; that is, forceful conversion under the threat of death, has deterred. It is a Faith that has never balked, one that has defeated Muslim Arabs, Seldjuks, Mongols and Ottomans...and I may add, Erdoğan's Sunna Republic...

After the flight of the Muslim tyrant, Georgia turned to their ontological and existential religion, which brings us to our second and more contemporary reason: the Turks have had their envious and lustful eyes on this rich region that hugs the Eastern Black Sea regions of Turkey. Turkish tourism has invaded Adjaria, and many Turks are now wheeling and dealing there in connivance with Georgians. To oppose Muslim penetration, to affirm their Orthodox Christianity, the Adjars are making great display that this is indeed their region, attached to Tblissi, the Orthodox Mother City, which consequently reminds the Turks that they are attached to their Republican (?) Father City, Ankara! And all the trade and immigration between the region and the country will not deter this politico-religious historical given...

So much for Adjaria, a lovely mountainous region dotted with vineyards as we made our way over the very well-paved road of 385 kilometres to Tblissi in a *mashruka*. Vineyards that produce an excellent white wine which is exported to many of Georgia's neighbours (unofficially to Turkey, where bottles are hidden in duffle bags at the borders). As to the great Northern neighbour Russia, due to the 2008 spat between the two countries, the wine-producers turning their commercial eyes to Armenia or to the Ukraine.

The voyage from Poti to Tblissi was long and boring, in spite of the vineyards and the well-paved road. However, I did discover that Russian was indeed the language of communication amongst those who did not speak Georgian, and this in defiance of the five-day war, and the ongoing tension between Russia and Georgia over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The elderly and the middle-aged spoke Russian very well, whilst the younger generations, naturally Americanized, which meant anti-Russian, preferred English, but knew enough Russian to

engage in conversations. As to the Muslim inhabitants of these Western Georgian regions, they spoke Georgian, their dialects and Turkish.

I arrived at Ortachala, the international bus terminal, at one o'clock in the morning. I noted that the many people who still milled about the station at that hour of the night spoke Turkish; they directed me to small hotel above a restaurant owned by a Turk from Rize, as I would learn the following morning. A narrow iron stairway led to the somber reception where a couple were standing behind a counter as if they had expected me...perhaps they had. They both spoke very good Turkish, and promptly gave me a bed for 25 *lari*. The bed sheets were immaculate, the mattress comfortable, and down the corridor a hot shower and a sparkling toilet bowl! I had noticed that on the other bed in my room, although unmade, clothes and a small bag had been thrown atop it. The moment I lay down in mine the darkness of night evolved gradually into one of sleep. The next morning, Sunday, that unmade bed remained unmade with the same small bag and clothes thrown atop it. I packed, had breakfast of yoghurt and tea in the restaurant below, whose Turkish owner charged immoderate prices for a banal bus terminal, then caught a *mashruka* into the city centre.

Dropped off in what seemed to me the city centre (which turned out to be the Maidan Square), I made myself as conspicuous as possible to attract the attention of those individuals who are constantly on the look out for helpless foreigners in dire need of cheap accommodations: none appeared, nor did those who were shuffling about the streets so early on a Sunday morning even bother to glance at me...So I checked all the colourful signboards that indicated hostels or guesthouses that had been nailed on trees or telephone poles, and began to climb a long and winding road where to my left a synagogue and church stood quietly in the early morning sunshine, and to my right a restored area, allayed with bars and cafés. Suddenly a woman slipped out of a doorway and in good Russian, harkened for me to follow her. I immediately obeyed and found myself in a small lane two or three streets off this long and winding road (Leselize Street which led to Freedom Square as I would discover later on in the afternoon). She turned left, and there we stood in an alleyway: to my right a naked brick wall and to my left three doors. A tall woman of mild manners and pallor face greeted me at one of the doors and asked me to step in...which I did without hesitation. Here in this small, scantily furnished and tidy room I would take up my residence in Tblissi for fifteen days whilst waiting for my Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan visas.

Yes, this comfortable room in Old Tblissi enchanted me, whose outer door opened on to an enclosed alleyway or courtyard, which led to a wooden gate and a quiet outside lane. As to the guesthouses' services: there were none! My inside door opened to a corridor where the bathroom and kitchen were at my disposal day or night. Both the outer and inner doors offered me fifteen days of observation and insight of and into the simple lives of the guesthouse owners

and their neighbours. The old woman and her daughter who lived next door to me were always outside; we spoke on many occasions.

Every evening the daughter would play Bartok and Chopin on an imperfectly tuned piano; and although the girl's playing was somewhat rusty, how those notes lifted my spirits. Off I voyaged into a very distant past when radio and television existed not; when in the early 1900s Tblissi bursted on the artistic scene with music and art. When the Young Turks had not as yet pacted with the Germans, when many Georgians had not enrolled in Tmara I and II in connivence with the Wehrmacht. When the Stalins and the Berias had not yet been appointed supreme rulers of the Soviet Union...Thus every evening as I sat peacefully in the alleyway, I would listen to those melancholic, wistful scores, wafting past the wooden gate into the outside lane (the French *venelle* would be a better word!), borne away by the evening breeze. That first night I met Sergo, the owner's only son, a stout university lad of about twenty-seven who had mastered Russian and English. More about the cantankerous Sergo later...Whilst seated in the alleyway cooling off after a hot, humid day galavanting about the town, the daughter, after finishing her repertoire would kiss her mother and dash by me; I commended her good playing. She would smile and without a word fly out of the wooden gate...Then I would turn my attention to the Hodja's own scores:

*'At six I ceaselessly fled from mankind,
I took lessons from the angels high in the heavens;
Severing all my acquaintaintances, ties and bonds,
For this reason at sixty-three I passed into the soil of the Earth.*

*'At seven my Arslan Baba sought and found me,
Every mystery that he saw was veiled in shrouds by a veil;
"May Allah be praised, I saw" he said, and kissed his Traces,
For this reason at sixty-three I passed into the soil of Earth.*

*'At eight the Road lay wide open,
"Wisdom speak!" was said, my head showered with light;
To Allah's praise the Guide of the Way drank wine,
For this reason at sixty-three I passed into the soil of the Earth'*

*'At nine I wandered not upon the right Road,
From land to land I walked, reciting and muttering blessings;
I believed not those words and fled to the desert,
For this reason at sixty-three I passed into the soil of the Earth.*

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 Demetrius 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. These mental errings and their lingering impressions would have never materialised if that sinister figure, Lavrenti Beria had carried out his plans to demolish the church during the purge years. He shamelessly proposed to the Georgian writer, Dimitri Shevardnadze, that he become the curator of an historical museum of mediaeval relics of Georgia. Shevardnadze, scandalized by Beria's *culot*, obviously refused. He was thrown into prison, tortured and executed. Returning to the happy present, those bells, which were never rung once during my long hours in the gardens, seemed to beckon me by their soundless chimes to the horizonless lands of Central Asia. A summons that motivated me to drag myself to the Azerbaijan and Kazakh embassies, knowing perfectly well that to obtain a visa for Azerbaijan the applicant required an invitation. I had none! Neither was I ready to spend a fortune for a phony hotel invitation purchased over the Internet; I had no bank or credit card, and had no intentions of acquiring one! To tell the truth, Azerbaijan held no special interest to me except the port of Baku where I would board a cargo to Kazakhstan...the Flaming Towers, about which the Azeri raved and foamed at the mouth, the myriad oil platforms that polluted the Caspian, the 'Nafti Promenade' along those polluted banks, the artificial island that was being built off shore, financed with those petrol dollars whilst the majority of the population laboured like animals, stirred not my imagination. This being said, I needed at least a three-day visa to board the ship. My readers may ask why I just didn't hop on an aeroplane and fly straight to Aktau or even to Alma-Ata or Astana. It would have made matters much more simple, *n'est-pas*? Yes, but to 'hop on or off planes' signifies tourism and not a Voyage, and as I have repeated on sundry occasions, a Voyage means pilgrimage. A pilgrimage is effected on foot, overland. If it is not, it is not a pilgrimage. I would rather not go at all if it were not overland: why not just stay at home and watch National Geographic on T.V.!

So filled with brazen indifference, I took the metro to Rustavelli and walked the two or three kilometres to the Azerbaijan Embassy. Outside many people queued up, mostly Turks. They told me to go to an office on the corner some 50 metres down the road where a very pretty woman would take care of the visa formalities in a very efficient manner. And indeed, at the doorway of the busy office a smiling woman met me, who after listening to my request,

immediately informed me that I could obtain a five-day transit visa for twenty dollars, provided that I first obtain my visa for Kazakhstan. This news encouraged me to say the least...

A taxi drove me to the Embassy of Kazakhstan, only ten minutes from the Embassy of Azerbaijan. It was a Monday morning, and as luck would have it, Mondays were that sole day when a tourist could apply for a visa, Wednesdays and Fridays being the designated days to pick it up...if the authorities do not reject it for a reason that you will never know...

A thirty-day visa cost 40 dollars for Frenchmen, over a hundred and fifty for Americans and Canadians! Another advantage of the French passport, *n'est-ce pas*? Unhappily, however, I would have to wait five days before obtaining it...

Confident that I would get my two visas in ten or twelve days, I began exploring Tblissi's streets, gardens and churches with a light heart. The Narikala fortress on the brow of the highest city hill hardly inspired me the climb, in spite of the remarkable panoramic view of the city. I chose rather to stroll along the banks of the Mtkvari, eastwards, and soon discovered a delightful park in which were exposed artists' paintings, sculpturings and photos. This was indeed a plunge into Tblissi's aesthetic past: classical and modern themes lined the squares and lanes of the park, without rhyme or reason...at least it appeared to me; a veritable 'Musée Imaginaire' à la Balzac, Rembrandt, Malraux...Young and old artists huddled in groups drinking tea or coffee, or sat on benches talking to potential customers or passers-by, embroiled in weighty matters. It was a warm sunny day; I was bedazzled by such colourful art work, such firm lines and appealing themes. I sat there for many hours, then strolled to the blackened walls that separate the river from the noisy boulevard.

The Mtkvari River is very shallow. At some points fisherman are not even knee-deep in the middle of the river! Speaking of water, Tblissi offers its denizens the best drinking water I have ever tasted in a city. Fountains abound and the water exquisite tasting...robust even! A refreshing change from Turkey's unhealthy, chlorine infused water, or the thick, soapy water of Ukraine, of Kazakhstan, too, as I would learn in a few weeks. Helathy drinking water, unfortunately, has become a privilege in cities when in fact it should be a given...

As I strolled about the museum-like streets of 'Old Tblissi', that is, between Maidan and Independant Square on Leselidze Street, a narrow zone of neon-lit expensive bars and cafés, shone that dull, opaque sheen of hastily thrown up globalization: Young girls tout from the doorsteps or in the narrow streets, pop music of the 60's and 70's blares out. The thought struck me that all European cities had refurbished their centres in the same artificial, nostalgic fashion. It was like walking through a time machine of wretched maudlin nostalgia, albeit riddled with

the inuendoes of modernism, especially the false smiles and astronomic prices of food and drink. Here the present overwhelms the past!

The Orthodox and Catholic churches and the synagogue appealed more to my frugal and historial penchants, as well as the Shah-Abbas Mosque, built in the 1600s, and whose hamam was and still is very famous. Pushkin apparently bathed in them as an inscription on the outer left wall reveals to the curious:

“Отроду не встречал я ни в россии, ни в турции ничего роскошнее тифлисских бань.”

“Never before have I come across in Russia or in Turkey more sumptuous baths”

extracted from Pushkin's 'путешествие в арзрум' 'Journey to Arzrum'.

The mosque itself it closed but visitors can enjoy the heat of the hamam. Over a small, wooden bridge to the left of the mosque and its wonderful gardens, one can follow a path that will lead him or her behind the mosque into a canyon, at the end of which crashes a cascade. A strange phenomenon indeed in the middle of the Old Town; many people take refuge in this primeval canyon either to paint, swim or simply escape the endless honking of car and bus horns...If I am not mistaken, one of Sergei Paradjanov's films was shot here, perhaps the *Askik Kerib*...I know it wasn't the *Colour of Pomegranats*...Above the crashing of the waters I recited:

*'At ten you were a child, servant Hodja Ahmet
You established a school for teaching, without devotion;
I am a Hodja you said, left on the Road, woeful to longing,
For this reason at sixty-three I passed into the soil of the Earth.*

*'At eleven a sea of compassion filled and overflowed me,
«Allah» I said, «the devil departed from me»;
A passing desire, egoistic thoughts ceased and moved on,
At twelve thus this mystery I saw.'*

*'At thirteen I was pursued by the desirous self,
I held and attacked the thousand sorrows binding the self;
I fought and conquered that haughty self,
At fourteen, thus, I became like the soil of the Earth.*

*'At fifteen houris and stewards came before me,
Heads bound, hands folded in reverence;*

*From the Heavens named Firdevs a messenger came,
Thus, I abandoned all for His Face.'*

One bright, blue-skied morning I took the metro at Independant 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. It was in North-Eastern Turkey or mediaeval Georgia that I discovered a fresco of Saint Nino in one of the decaying vaults of the Ishan church, nestled in the thick forests that girdle Artvin and Yusufeli. The face was black and the background blue; whether it be black either from the burnings that destroyed the church or from the paint, I cannot say.



The Svetitskhoveli Church on the banks of the Mtskheta River...

Svetitskhoveli is an immense edifice which contains the tombs of many Georgian kings and queens and priests of the Orthodox clergy. The frescoes on the right wall shine brightly still, whose the scenes depict the Apocalypse: a sea-beast which symbolizes the Romain Empire under the influence of Satan, a land-beast, perhaps a dragon, symbolizes a false prophet!



The pastel blues of the sea converge upon the golden mountainous borders...

The 'dormition', painted very high up the wall seemed reminiscent of the frescoes at Ani, the mediaeval capital of Armenia on the border of Turkey and Armenia, where the frescoes of churches of Georgian stamp bear a strange resemblance to those at Svetitskhoveli, for unlike the Armenia church builders, Georgians excelled in the art of the fresco, and that art has since continued in all its hues and depths upon the inner and outer walls of the newly restored or built churches of Tblissi. Upon the pillars of the crumbling Georgian church of 'Dört Kilesi', twenty-five kilometres from Yusufeli in Turkey, frescos emerge dully but visibly from her inside fissured and root and moss invested stones.

Those mediaeval Georgian churches and cathedrals that have withstood the onslaught of History in North-Eastern Turkey bear witness to a peerless craftsmanship. I had been to Dört Kilesi three times, and on my last voyage noted that masses had been secretly held in the now foul smelling space where the altar is situated. Inside the semicircle, ensconced in its niches, hundreds of gutted candles lay testimony to a very present fervour that surely crossed the Georgian border some thirty or forty kilometres to the North. In that barren altar space dripped, like frozen stalactites, layers of creamy, greyish wax off the stony ledges of the apse. Unlike the churches of Georgia, protected by UNESCO, these mediaeval gems lay in the deathly pallor of silence and abandonment, much to the delight of the Turkish government who has always deemed these 'wrecks' a sort of stumbling block in the rewriting of their own History, and consequently, stubbornly refused any historical status to Georgian, Armenian and Syriac architectural Art in Anatolia, besides the Aht'mar Cathedral in Lake Van, and this exception was accorded only after years and years of obstinate Armenian resistance and concessions after a certain number of anti-Armenian acts, including murder, had been perpetrated in Turkey ! The Armenians know how to negotiate historical truths with the Turks...the Georgians have neither the knowledge nor the motivations to do so...for the moment. The country has gone through much too much turmoil, embroiled in domestic intrigue and foreign conflicts, to negotiate with Turkey on such historical bagatelles...Furthermore, the Armenians are citizens of Turkey and do, in spite of their 'Christian' status, have certain rights as citizens, albeit limited; the Georgians claim no official historical status in the historical movement of Turkey, good or bad, and thus have no *revendications* concerning monuments. But this tale is a long one which cannot be developed here...



The frescoes of Georgian stamp are distinguishable at Ani, too...

The Svetitskhoveli Church, and in fact all of Mtskheta, are under the protective shield of UNESCO. The town clings graciously on the left banks of the Mthkvari and Aragvi Rivers, above which looms the Jvari Monastery perched high on a hill overlooking the confluence of the two rivers. It is quite pleasant to stroll around the town; there are few tourists, and those who come concentrate their energies round the church. The back streets allow an escape from mass tourism, and one can wander near the river banks, although beware of swamps and bogs, hidden by high, rising reeds...Further along the main road out of the town, forests abound, and further North, other churches and monasteries lay ; but I myself do not venture that far.

On the other hand, I naïvely attempted to reach the Jvari Monastery above me by simply following the river, where a bridge would undoubtedly carry me across it and to the monastery. Unfortunately there was none ! I had to huff it back to the high street, hitch-hike out to the main highway back to Tblissi, get off at the exit to the monastery and walk and hitch-hike the seven kilometre road that wound its way up through forests. Hitch-hiking around Tblissi, or to and from Tblissi posed absolutely no problem. Cars stopped immediately, and the drivers were friendly and talkative. Even Russian tourists picked me up now and then. This occurred when striding up the narrow road to the monastery in a heaving, pulsating mass of sweat: a young Russian couple, holidaying in Georgia, were surprised that the someone whom they scraped off the road spoke to them in Russian! Were they expecting a Georgian? Hardly not. A tourist whose only language of international communication was English? That goes without saying. Plainly, the driver, a youngster about twenty, affected reluctance in speaking Russian at first.

His wife or girlfriend hardly gave me a look; she never opened her mouth once, or if she did, it was to puff voraciously on a cigarette. Was their aloof attitude due to the cold welcome they had surely succumbed to in hostile Georgia? Or could it simply have been the customary cold shoulder behaviour Russians tend to exert on foreigners upon initial encounters? I thought they were Georgians, in fact. I hadn't noticed the Russian car plates. So I explained to them that everyone in Georgia spoke Russian, and that the majority of Georgians refused to confound language and nation. The young driver's smug look, which I glimpsed in the rear-view mirror, expressed serious doubts about my argument. Be that as it may, we crept up the hill to the monastery, and softening up a bit, either after reflecting on what I said, or due to the striking beauty of the monastery, they offered to drive me down to the main road in an hour or so ; they were heading for Batumi. I dutifully accepted...

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

*'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 Tūrkestan.*

*'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.*

*'At nineteen the seventy stations clearly appeared,
I said my invocations, my insides and out were cleansed;
Wherever I be, Khezir Baba was ready,
Thus I filled my insides with the wine of the knightly-monks.'*



Lofty Jvari as we approached...

A terrace to the left of the monastery entrance overlooks the estuary of the two rivers that serpentine to the left of Mtskheta. Again King Mirian, after his conversion, climbed the hill and raised a tall wooden cross upon it to commemorate his new birth! Between 586 and 604, a church was erected to contain the cross. A cross indeed stands proudly in the centre of the four-apsed and four-niched church, technically called tetraconch, albeit only the pedestal is of the original sixth-century relic. For this reason Jvari is named the Cross Church. There are no frescoes either inside or out, and in fact, if the forms of the gem limned a beauty rarely achieved, the decorations revealed no glowing talent. Not exactly bland, naked would be a better epithet. But then again, the church was constructed to contain a cross and not fabulous frescoes or reliefs; those could be consulted below in Mtskheta...Both holy lieus were complementary: Svetitkhoveli provided community gathering en masse, Jvari, high on its hill, pilgrimage for the penitent or the retributive. The monastery escaped Beria's heathenish eye and hysterical crusade against Christianity (especially Georgian); it was classed a national monument, but out of bounds to pilgrims because of a nearby military base, which 'by chance' had been established within the range of both religious centres! I wonder whether Beria knew of the monastery's existence.

As the Russian couple promenaded round the church, and the young man took pictures of his mute partner, posing next to the fence that separated the terrace from the fifty metre drop below, I strolled downhill a bit to take a few photos. It was very peaceful here, few tourists, many trees and birds. A couple of monks or priests paced back and forth on the monastery grounds, then were hailed by a group of Georgians.



A glimpse of Mtskheta from the Jvari Monastery...

We reached the car at the same time, and as promised, they drove me down the hill and wished me good luck 'удачна'. I hitched a quick ride back into Tblissi. At my lodgings I immediately sailed into the kitchen to cook some buckwheat. Sergo was sitting gloomily at the kitchen table, working on his mother's tax revenue forms. An unpleasant chore as everyone knows...He invited me to sit down and have a chat with him. His English was very good, and as I have already mentioned. He appeared to harbour very pro-Russian sentiments, not due to the usual anti-American clichés, but let us say, more directly due to the hostility towards his own country for having naïvely, sheepishly joined the American or Western crusade against Russia. My buckwheat was boiling over. I served myself, Sergo shook his head.

«A glass of *cha-cha*?» he smiled and magically produced a bottle of this Georgian homemade alcohol, a strong brew which tastes like the French 'marc'. Sergo belted his down in a big glass...I affected reluctance at first, but accepted, provided that I sip it between mouthfuls of buckwheat. He acquiesced with a shrug of his broad shoulders.

Sergo filled me in on Georgian politics -dishonest and filthy as in all countries of the world- his intimate relation with a Russian girl from Odessa -their love affair presently was effected by skype-, his passion for films -more especially Russian and French- a certain admiration for Stalin -but not Beria !-, his dislike of Western politics and his incomprehension as to why

foreigners never remain more than a few days in beautiful Georgia, en route to Armenia, Azerbaijan or other destinations of less poetic attractions. More than a nationalist, Sergo surely represented the grass-roots patriot...

I discovered that evening, tête-à-tête with this loquacious lad, his hatred of the former president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvilli, who launched a ridiculous war against his gigantic Northern neighbour because of the revolt in South Ossetia smack in the middle of the Olympic Games, with the stupid hope of dragging George Bush's America into the squirmish. A strategy which fell very short of its mark, not to say back-fired: his army was cut to pieces, and America's only answer to the president's estrangled pleas were a few bellicose discourses, war cries from the White House and hatchet raisings from the usual ill-informed. In short, much ado about nothing, or if one prefers, *beaucoup d'esbroufe*! South Ossetia, once free to choose its own destiny, became a territory of the Russian Federation. Sergo explained that the ill-fated Georgian president, an attorney educated in New York, and thus groomed on Western values, found himself more and more disliked and scorned in his country mainly because of the economic situation and his haughty policy towards Russia, if not the friendliest of neighbours, an important economic and strategic one! Saakashvilli treated Putin like Churchill treated Hitler, analogy which he hadn't invented on his own. Whoever be the more war-mongering, Putin or Saakashvilli, the Russian army swept into Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia in a blink of the eye, drove the Georgian army out of the tiny region and back into its own territory. Thousands of Georgians were displaced, and many could not return to their homes in South Ossetia.

The plan to come to Georgia's succour and chase the evil Russians from South Ossetia, and *dans la foulée* from Abkhazia, where NATO could then establish its military bases right at Russia's doorstep, dissolved into a fiasco. The rose withered and Saakashvilli with it. He exited through the back door in the same way that George Bush would do after his eight years of turning America into a petty war-machine...Thus do depart doomed heroes, manipulated by advisors as lecherous as their heads of States are gullible, blinded by their own ignorance to the circumstances of the world that begirt them. Did not Beria once state that those who are not blind, see? And speaking of the heinous Georgian purger...

In this branch of science Sergo excelled in adamancy. Lavrenti Beria deserved the death penalty decided by Kharsuchtchev's mock tribunal in 1953. I played the devil's advocate by citing some historians who, if not whitewashing him of his crimes, attempted to alleviate his infamous reputation as a sinister monster, a perverted maniac, a blood-thirsty, power-hungry tyrant. Was he really that Georgian who sought to settle scores either with ungrateful 'friends' or with an unreliable nation? Had the brain behind the execution of 6,767 Georgians during the purge years of 1937 and 1938 become ill or deformed through ambition? Was it the ill or deformed

brain that personally sentenced the poets Titsian Tabidze and Paolo Yachvili to death, and the writer Djavak Kichvili? According to Sergo, it was the both! Whether he kidnapped women from the streets to rape and have them strangled might be an exaggerated legend. *En revanche*, that Georgia had the highest percentage of executions during the purges than any other Soviet oblast is an unquestionable fact! Stalin and Beria are both responsible for this; and be they Troskists, deviationists, enemies of communism, counter-revolutionaries, saboteurs, rightists, or *des crétins utiles*, weighed not in the balance of these morbid statistics. Oddly enough, Sergo's fiery discourse made certain amends for Stalin; I detected in him a soft spot for the Little Father, for reasons that escaped me all together. Stalin, according to the drinking Sergo, was a compatriot...but so was Beria! Stalin despised Russians...Sergo did not! This being said, on other occasions when we sat eating and drinking at that kitchen table with or without his mother and the other guests, he did stand up for Beria, trumpeting that during the Soviet period Georgians were free to mingle with foreigners, come and go as they pleased to each other's homes without surveillance, free to speak their beautiful language (Sergo always tagged that epithet on to the Georgian language when beguiled by the ardour of his tirades), to learn their Georgian History at school without it being tainted by the Russification that Moscow had effected in other Soviet oblast schoolbooks, etc. Whether this exceptional liberty had really occurred is a matter of conjecture, as well as Beria's heroic actions to save the Georgian churches from demolition, and his aimable intervening on behalf of the historian Djavakhichvili, who, again according to Sergo, was saved by the benevolent Beria from execution...

Sergo's dislike of Armenians disturbed me because first of all I couldn't quite fathom why, and when I, more or less came to understand why, was abashed that Beria hated Armenians and their churches, and attempted to have them closed down. Did Sergo despise Armenians as much as Beria? Was it a genetic contempt or an historical one? Be that as it may, every night for ten days, Sergo's discourses danced from one personality to the other, now supporting one and the other, one against the other, now casting both into the bowels of Hell or raising them to the summits of divinity! True, Sergo had no respect for mediocrity, *la juste mesure* failed to domesticate him. It failed to domesticate me, too; and in this, we always agreed...

At one point Beria cut the figure of the founder of a new Georgia, nationalist, thus free from Soviet contamination, the saviour of his fellow countrymen from the evil clutches of Stalin's henchmen. Another night, however, when the fumes of *cha-cha* and his smoking choked us out of that exiguous kitchen, and we had retreated to the fresher air of the alleyway to breathe, Beria was transformed into a fomentor of conspiracies against members of the politico bureau in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, where he had hundreds of men executed or exiled, only to be replaced by his own spineless morons and touting goons. From all the waltzing, I adduced that Sergo had never come to grips or terms with either Stalin or Beria, and that the quick-witted former university student had embroiled himself within the webs of nationalist and patriotic

illusions, sustained and nourished by the flow of foreign tourists to Georgia, in transit to other destinations, uninterested in Georgian History, politics of culture, spending a day at Mtskheta, a day or two at Kazbek, perhaps another on a day excursion to the vineyards of the North to taste some famous white wine and buy a few bottles as a souvenir of Georgia because two or three days in a country will evaporate from one's memory more quickly than drinking its exquisite wine at home...far away! Nostalgia plays terrible havoc with our memories!

Undoubtedly Sergo had reason to be rancorous and umbrageous at the majority of the foreign visitors who flowed into his country, knowing nothing about it and having no desire to know something about it. After all, most of them were sheepishly following the auto-routes laid out for them by Lonely Planet, few indeed, because the sacred book covered three Caucasian countries in one publication, thus leaving very little space for developement, cut the umbilical cord to veer off the heavily trodden routes on to the more earth-packed, marginal ones. I promised Sergo that I would find translations of the national poet of Georgia, Rustaveli, and read him (a resolve I have since diligently accomplished much to my delight!). This somewhat allayed him. And when I added that the next morning I planned to hitch-hike to Saregevo, and then on to the Lavra Monastery, his eyes lost their smoky blur and his irateness vanished. He insisted, rather strongly, not to hitch-hike for the distance was long and the temperature high, but to take the *mashruka* at the metro station Ishani to Saregevo, and from there either a taxi or if possible a private car that would transport me directly to the distant monastery. I took his good advice and promised to give him a report the following night...

The journey to King David's Lavra Monastery offers the pilgrim sensations that drift between wonder and enhancement. A forty-five minute ride from Tblissi brings you 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. Luckily I had left the guesthouse very early in the morning because upon arrival in Sarejevo after painstakingly locating the road to the monastery, much to my disappointment not one vehicle passed after two hours' of waiting. A taxi crept up to me and waited patiently for me to crack : I did, and for fifty *lari* the driver proposed to take me there, wait for an hour or so, then drive me back to Sarejevo.



...the dry, airless air of the desert...

For forty kilometres we sped by flat dry lands peppered with clumps of grass, lonely, leafless trees, a huge salt-lake surrounded by bald hills, the village of Udabno, where a few villagers were milling about on the road...nothing else ! The last twenty kilometres required two hours of driving on a *piste* that stretched along the Azerbaijan border, so informed me the taxi driver whose Russian if not accurate was perfectly intelligible. At one point he indicated a tower erected on a bare hilltop, on the other side of which lay the Azerbaijan check-post. I searched the hill for a route, and only spotted a two-track way towards the brow of the hill. He nodded, and made me understand that the two-track way was indeed the road to Azerbaijan, prohibited to passengers. Two minutes later the Georgian flag hung limply in the dry, hot, airless air of this desert...

We were crawling over a wasteland where not a spear of grass grew! Neither a fuzz of moss nor lichen! I felt as if I were sailing over an ocean of huge rolls of tawny dunes and waves of choppy hollows. Indeed, the Orthodox monks travelled far and wide to esconce themselves in this forsaken land in the hope of never being found...Ten minutes later we arrived at the hamlet. He parked under an umbrella tree and pointed to the monastery some twenty metres uphill. I came across four or five monks, then a group of Polish tourists who probably had passed me on the road and snobbed my company! To appreciate the monastery complex, the pilgrim should climb a trail which hugs the right side of the complex and swings round to the rear, high above it. There the sight is breathtaking if there were any air to breathe! A veritable *plongée* whence the rudeness of the monastery 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 the 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...



The grassless wasteland of the knightly monks...

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?..



To approach the holy lieu from above...

The touch of stone or wood, the scent of jasmine, clarified butter or camphor; the sight of smooth, arid loneliness; the taste of the hot, dry air; the sound of foreign languages, liturgies and silence...Touched by these primary sensations, the vortex absorbs and instructs, it guides the pilgrim up and down stairways to monks' cells, courtyards and grotto-chapels. It bears him or her to the tower of King Alexander the Second, to the watch tower of King George the Twelfth, up high above the monastery to the solitary monk's cell at the summit of Udabno, then back down into the Church of the Transfiguration where David's tomb lies...

The vortex vomits forth the myriad martyrs fallen under Persian scimitars and Russian rifles. That it still stands is a miracle, given the numerous invasions and slaughters. The Past can only exist by being present...*hic et nunc*...on the high lieu of Events of which History has been forged and fashioned between the anvil and the hammer. Such a rugged refinement do these walls possess; such a hewn vividness those epic stones which reflect the pristine relief of perennial inspiration..



The walls that girt the Lavra Monastery...



Inside King David's church...

To penetrate the vortex after having circumambulated the outer perimetre, one gradually reaches the saint of saints, the heart. To knock at all outer doors will lead the pilgrim back to his innermost shrine, Tagore once wrote. The mediaeval sensation stirred by the penetration of the vortex insinuates no plunge into a wonderland: one may be beguiled but never cajoled into believing his own fantasy. Such lieus of the sacred are scarcer and scarcer, many have been vulgarly transformed into musuems for the masses, miniature Disneylands: lieus not of worship but of specious pleasures and despicable consumerism. Lieus of piety and preserverence are what we seek:

*'I reached twenty, surpassed the stations,
Praise to Allah, I fulfilled the service of the pious;
To the world and the birds of the world I exchanged greetings,
For this reason, thus, I became close to the True One.*

*'Servant Hodja Ahmet has just turned twenty-one,
What will you do, your sins are heavy as the mountains;
On the Day of Judgement if torment strikes me, my Rabb, the Mighty,
Hey friends, how, thus shall I answer?*

*'I at twenty-two attained extinction,
Ceasing to exist, I found remedy in true suffering;
Instead of spurious love I came to know true Love,
For this reason, thus, I came to seek shelter in the True One.'*



Inside the couryard...

I descended the path to the parked taxi, and we drove bumpily back to Saregevo. I imagined for a moment that if I had had my Azerbaijan visa would the frontier guards have allowed me to huff up the hill to cross their lonely border? They probably would have shot me...The taxi gestured that there were many problems on this stretch of the road, it being so close to Muslim Azerbaijan, who as we all know, harbours no great love for their Orthodox Christian neighbours, be they Georgian or Armenian! In fact, if your passport contains an Armenian stamp you will be refused a visa to Azerbaijan: the converse is not exercised...



The Tower at the Border...

That night round Sergo's kitchen table a few guests had gathered to eat and chat: a Swedish middle-aged man, a hopeless drunkard, two young Turkish lads on holiday, a Russian woman from Moscow, classy and aimable. Conversation, bouncing between Russian, Turkish and English, dragged on about liquor, men, women, patriotism, even the Jews (the Swede was overtly anti-Semite, and Sergo on his fifth or sixth glass of *cha-cha* followed suit!), however, no one put in a word about politics until the Swede, offending everyone's country and pleading for others to do the same to his own boring Sweden, opened the sluices by a slurred eulogy of Stalin and Beria, meant, I imagine, to ruffle Sergo's and his mother's feathers. The hostess of the house sneered but refrained from any discourteous remark, after all the Swede was her guest,

however untoward or cynical he carried himself. On the other hand, Sergo reacted aggressively, yet oscillating between the good and bad deeds of both tyrants, never rejecting completely the second nor ever praising completely the first! The Swede reminded us in pedantic pathos that thanks to Beria's double rôle before World War II, he had almost managed to topple the dictator by allowing the Germans to infiltrate the Caucasians. (I personally thought the converse would be more likely!) We all learned later that the Swede was a fervent follower of Hitler's European policy for the future...

«Perhaps. But when he learnt that the Germans and the Turks were preparing an alliance which, if the Soviet Union had been defeated, stipulated that the Germans would transform Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia into a German protectorate, ruled by the Turkish government in exchange for their military cooperation, he realised that a Soviet defeat would have meant a catastrophe for Georgians.» I lifted my dented glass to the mouth-twitching Swede. Sergo agreed. The Swede shrugged his shoulders and belched. The Turks didn't understand a word, their English being very limited, nor did the Russian woman who spoke not a word of it. Whilst Sergo painstakingly translated for her, and I for the Turks, inwardly I shuddered at the thought of a Christian Georgia and Armenia under Turkish yoke; undoubtedly Georgia and Armenia would have formed a coalition against Muslim Turkey, and would have fought to the last man! I smiled: -long live the Battle of Stalingrad and heroes like Vassili Grossman, whose written testimonies advanced the hypothesis that this battle proved to be the turning point of the war not only in favour of the Soviet Union, but marked the military and economic limits of Nazi Germany-.

As these thoughts assailed me, Sergo meanwhile had launched into a terrible tirade about Beria's calculated patriotism, pampering Stalin and his Georgian lackeys, whilst decimating those whom he hated or mistrusted. Sergo was obsessed with Lavrenti Beria...

«But he was anti-Communist!» screeched the Swede, guzzling *cha-cha* as if it were Coke-a-Cola or Fanta. Because of the alcohol his pasty face had become a mask of horror.

«Yes, and pro-Fascist,» spit out Sergo, grim-faced. He founded the Thetri Guiorgui fascist movement, inspired by Mussolini's political philosophy.» I could not recall quite clearly if this was true; the Mussolini-inspired group did indeed exist before and during the war, but Beria having founded it posed a problem for me.

«All the Georgian immigrants in Europe would have joined the ranks of the Wehrmacht if it weren't for Stalin!» rifled Sergo irritably, now protecting the Little Father, whereas last night he inveighed against him savagely.

«But did Stalin understand the urgency of all those alarming messages sent to him from Europe about Germany's impending attack?» I interrupted in an unconvincing voice, trying to reason and translate at the same time. «Or did Beria file them away so he would never see them? Was Lavrenti a Communist? A Georgian patriot? A Soviet for that matter? What were his real motives: did he scheme in order to assuage his instincts for domination, instincts that he himself could not fathom? The door opened and Alex, Sergo's friend and partner, straddled in. He looked a bit tipsy.

«Who wants to have a piss-up at the Irish pub?» he bawled cheerfully. Alex was to the point. Everyone raised their hands except Sergo and me. And as quickly as he entered through the door, he dashed out of it followed by the Swede, the two young Turks and even the Russian woman. Sergo smirked:

«They're all drunkards and pub-crawlers! He slammed his fist on the flimsy table upsetting the empty *cha-cha* bottle. They come to Georgia to get drunk, not to learn about her History...language» (here Sergo was unfair, how many foreigners have come to Georgia to learn its language unless they were CIA agents or Russian spies on Putin's payroll?)» And that Alex, you know, is a worthless parasite whom I pay for doing nothing but make the guests get drunk! He stood up, swayed a bit, disregarded his mother's signs to get some fresh air and fell into the canopy; seconds later he was snoring. I so wanted to describe my trip to the monastery to Sergo, but that would have to wait...

I returned to my room and read three strophes of the hikmets to rid my head of the political fumes:

*'Hey friends, I attained the age of twenty-three,
My superstitious lies, my empty devotion terminated;
I, on Judgement Day, naked, squinty-eyed, what shall I do?'*

*I reached twenty-four years' of age, far from the True One,
If I were to arrive in the next world, how would I ready myself?
The hundred thousand beatings that have struck and strengthened me on my death,
For this reason, thus, I came to take shelter in the True One.'*

*'At twenty-five my life has been a sinful one,
My Lord the Purifier pierced my bosom and taught me to invoke Him;
Unfastened the bonds that bound my bosom,
For this reason, thus, I came to take shelter in the True One.'*

At nine in the morning I was standing in front of the large iron door at the Kazakhstan Embassy. A little portal opened and the guard ushered me into the plain room where the friendly Russian woman handed me my passport freshly stamped with the visa; she wished me the best of luck: «удачно».

Immediately I sped to the Azerbaijan Embassy on foot, a twenty-minute walk or so. Hardly anyone was queued up at the outside gate, so I was gestured to enter the gardens, then up a stairway to a door whose entrance was barred by an iron gate, through which I negotiated my Azerbaijan five-day visa. An odd welcome this embassy, compared to the Kazakh one! No one was permitted into the building itself, the applicant spoke through the forged iron door-bars, handed the Turkish-speaking man his or her papers, and was told to telephone in two or three days... The payment proved more complicated than expected: it was much too easy just to hand the money to the official who studied your application form like at the Kazakh Embassy: why make things easy when they can be complicated? The applicant was handed a slip of paper for the Azerbaijan Bank, which he or she was to give to the teller of that bank, pay the fee, receive the receipt, then dart back to the embassy and hand over the receipt. Only then were you permitted to call back two or three days later. And since that Azerbaijan Bank was located in Libery Square, I had to retrace my steps, then retrace them again back to the embassy.

After all these formalities effected, I was in a heaving mass of sweat! All that for five days and twenty dollars! *Dans la foulée*, I bought my ticket for Baku at the bus station.

My last three days (I received my Azeri visa in two days) were spent in the gardens of the Metekhi Church and in those in front of the Mosque and the hamam, or wandering about the flower market off Rustavelli Boulevard, where I discovered a tiny restaurant that served excellent soups of all kinds. I visited the three or four churches that I hadn't been to yet, the three Catholic churches, one being just next to my guesthouse, the synagogue of the Akhaltsikhe on Leselidze street, five minutes from my lodgings, and the Artist's Park. I found Tblissi to be a wonderfully peaceful capital with many surprises nestled away in niches and crooks; one can stroll from space to space, dipping into the mediaeval or the classical past, into the ante- and post-Soviet past, into the roaring twenties' past! And of course when I say Past this contains the Present, ours, contemporary with the Present...*hic et nunc*...



The Metekhi Church gardens offered a refreshing refuge...

Modern buildings made entirely of glass such as the cultural centre on the right bank of the Mtkvari River or the enclosed bridge that spans it do not make those spaces ugly as they do in some capitals of the world. Tblissi is a small city where garden-girt mediaeval churches, restored or rebuilt, create contrasting scenes with the more contemporary hotels or public buildings, compose a complementary harmony, a nice, mild blend for the eye! It is also the birthplace of the XVIII century Transcaucasian poet-troubadour, Sayet-Nova, whose mortal remains lie at the Gevork Armenian church in Maidan Square. He sang songs of sorrow and composed odes to his untouchable beloved Nazaria, the princess Anna Batonachvilli, or so say the experts. To a certain extent, his memory has been preserved in Tblissi: a street and a small hotel have been named after him; this hotel, by the way, I found very expensive! Was it due to the name?

Sayat-Nova wrote 65 odes in Georgian for King Irakli the Second. He also composed in Armenian and in Azeri. However, Rustavelli is undoubtedly the national poet of Georgia,

Sayat-Nova being more appreciated, methinks, in Armenia: Whatever be his 'true' status in Tblissi, let us listen to these verses of pure magic, for they are indeed compelling:

*'My eye is purple like blood, painful and suffering,
You changed my tears into blood.
My sorrows make the summits weep,
What a sad state have you created?
Your Sayat Nova has gone mad,
You have driven him mad...'*

and

*'Dressed in silk, in gold gaily coloured, this five Cypress branch,
You hold a chalice, fill it with wine, I adore this pitcher,
If you come to the enclosure, you will torment Sayat-Nova,
For heaven's sake come to the garden, where I chant my praises, my beloved'*

pleads the poet to his princess...

If Sayat-Nova had lived at Beria's epoch, without a doubt he would have had him exiled, maimed or executed! Beria held poets, intellectuals, men of noble souls in contempt because his soul was ignoble...Sayat Nova was assassinated at the Haghbot monastery in Armenia by Muslims because he refused to convert to Islam. Would he have converted to Communism under the injunction of proletarians of the world unite? His poems and gardens are penetrated by the aromas of nutmeg, coffee and musk...tainted by saffron-amber, cinnamon and pomegranate coloured flowers in bowered alcoves...

My last night in Tblissi was a memorial one round that kitchen table, where the aforesaid guests had gathered to eat and drink to the health of Sergo's mother; she smiled, exposing a fine row of dull gold teeth. She was a very pretty woman, no more than forty-five; it now occurs to me that I never asked Sergo where his father was...

That night, discussions and disputes highlighted the evening whilst the hostess of the house cooked us all spaghetti, with thick tomatoe sauce. Alas no grated cheese crowned that delight! Sergo slammed two bottles of white Georgian wine on the rocky table, which transformed the dishes of spaghetti into a regal repast. Sergo hadn't as yet plunged two forkfulls of dangling *pasta* into his mouth when he began to brood on the deeds and misdeeds of Stalin and Beria. Sergo was obsessed by the two louts. I felt as if we were experiencing a *déjà-vue*, or watching a

maudlin American soap-opera! To divert this tiresome subject I toasted Sergo's mother; everyone followed, save Sergo who was obstinate:

«Beria was a Georgian, not a Communist,» he boomed in Russian and English. This statement was perhaps a commonality in Georgia but a moot one in the West (or was Georgia the West?). The Russian woman pulled a sour face: she had plump, rosy cheeks that were becoming rosier and rosier through the effects either of the white wine or the tomatoe sauce...Sergo pursued: « He despised the Communist Party, the Soviet Union and especially the Russians!» The Russian woman's face grew sourer. I flew to her rescue:

«He was an *arriviste*!» By using the French word Sergo suddenly stopped drinking. We knew each other well enough so that any frontal attack would not be read as belligerency but as a playful ply between two well-acquainted fellows: which we were not, in reality...A voice rang clear from the corridor:

«No! He was a patriot!» Sergo's mother had turned to us as if in defiance, either out of nationalistic support of a compatriot, or out of her anger for not having found the grated cheese. Sergo, always prone to shameless exaggeration, echoed the ring:

«Stalin was afraid of Beria's intelligence and boldness. Beria surrounded himself with a bunch of flunkies like Molotov, Mikoin the spineless Armenian (Sergo's dislike of Armenians could hardly be termed as mild), Malenkov...Khrouchechev...»

«Khrouchtechev a flunkey?» interrupted the Russian woman, appalled. « He became the supreme leader after Beria's death.»

«You mean his execution?» countered Sergo almost in a whisper, a little smile of seduction. The Russian woman was not to be seduced.

«I've seen Stalin's portraits scribbled on the walls of Tblissi which means that you Georgians have much respect for a murderer of millions. Nikita put an end to all these slaughterings and turned the pages of Stalin's and Beria's purges. » She certainly had a point. Sergo was not tactless: an adamant supporter of Russian politics the Russian woman might have been, nevertheless, she remained his mother's client. For a moment he had been silenced. In fact, a weighty lull overtook everyone at the table: the Turks had drunk so much wine that Sergo felt obliged to bring them another bottle; after all since they couldn't participate in the discussion, begoggled by the swift alterations between English and Russian, they gorged themselves with tomato dripping spaghetti, and guzzled large quantities of sparkling white wine...I decided to break the lull:

«Perhaps Beria deserved the death penalty.» I was indeed sickened of all this patriotic pleading for a criminal. «He was not meant for Soviet Party politics but for filling in Stalin's dictatorial shoes when the Little Father croaked! Khroustchev and his Ukrainian side-kicks knew this perfectly well; all those reforms of Beria's after Stalin's death only reinforced this sentiment. His decisions overrode his commitment to the Party, were carried out in spite of the Party members. Nikita chose to clean the slate, turn the bloody page of dictatorial carnage, suspicion and revenge.» Sergo scowled but continued to devour his now cold spaghetti. I began translating for the Russian woman who had already begun her third dish. My vocabulary being limited, Sergo succoured me, reluctantly. I'm sure he changed my propos to fit it into his own line of reasoning. That as everyone knows happens to be one of the setbacks of not mastering a foreign language. The Turks were so drunk that I thought it futile to translate for them. After Sergo's mistranslation, he counterattacked, moderately:

«Nikita never gave Beria much of a chance to prove his intelligence and administrative skills. The whole Ukrainian racist clique hated him and wanted his neck!»

«But he did plan a Coup d'Etat, Sergo; that is an historical fact and considered high treason,» I reminded him. He shook his curly-haired head:

«No, he planned reforms that even the West acclaimed as just and correct, even for Russians (although this cynicism was partially lost to the Russian women, she detected the tone of it!). «Beria was a liberal before liberalism even began. The Ukrainian racists were jealous of his genius and efficiency. During the mock trial the witnesses called him injurious names like viper, disgusting degenerate, dirty flea or something like that. Khrouchtchev accused him of treason and gave him the nickname of Blue Beard. » I laughed, taking a sip of white wine, served by Sergo's mother who had long since abandoned the thread of the dispute. I then remonstrated strongly:

«The West you say. Western politicians accused Khrouchtchev of murdering Beria and because of that, no government would negotiate with a State that murdered its leaders! In the eyes of hypocrites, Beria suddenly loomed as the great saviour of the Russian soul, the conscientious liberal of economic revival and consumerism. How those politicians quickly effaced the thousands tortured, imprisoned, executed from their memories. Those Soviet diplomats in the West, called back to the Soviet Union only to be executed or exiled by Beria, replaced by his own clique.» At that moment Alex strolled into the kitchen and sat down to a huge plate of spaghetti, opposite Sergo. Bolting it down hungrily, he stared at his friend and drooled:

«Still crying over Stalin and Beria?» Sergo ignored the remark, then turned to me and the Russian woman:

«I'm not saying that Beria was an angel.» Alex laughed, almost choking on his spaghetti. «Georgian historians agree that he was a hypocrite, a double-faced schemer who despised and humiliated his closest colleagues and friends». Sergo was almost sober.

«Yea» cut in Alex gleefully. «I read somewhere that in Georgia more toasts were raised high to Beria than to Stalin!» Alex poured us all another glass of wine and lifted his glass high. He was elated, thus probably drunk.

«He could have escaped to Turkey if he wanted to,» continued Sergo, giving us all a very significant look that I couldn't quite understand. At the mention of Turkey, the two young Turks suddenly broke out of their drunken lethargy; their eyes widened and a pair of vacant smiles broke their thick chapped lips.

«Yea, the harams suited his liberal side more than the Communist Party line,» snickered Alex. The word haram startled the Turks; they asked me to translate, which I did, dutifully. And again those besotted smiles stretched cracked lips. However, they made no comment.

«Beria sought to weaken the Soviet State ideologically by compromising with the Western Powers and Georgian patriots,» Sergo's mother suddenly insurged from behind us in Russian. The Russian woman, delighted at the mother's intervention, and at the sound of a female voice, added vehemently:

«He was probably behind the massacres at Katyn and Trosky's murder.» Now it was Sergo who insurged, protesting at these accusations, as well as his mother's specious information. I took Sergo's side on this one, adding that these accusations were never fully proven, even at Beria's trial. The two Turks stood and thanked Sergo's mother for such a fine meal. I couldn't really translate the Turkish formula 'eliniz sağlık' 'may your hands be blessed' in Russian so I let that drop. Alex also stood. I think this was a signal for another nightly drinking bout at the Irish pub. Alex and his two piss-up cronies stepped out into the alleyway, their harsh voices trailing into the side streets. How Alex communicated with them left me rather baffled.

«How many women did he rape and kill?» The Russian woman was on a rampage now, much to Sergo's distress who did not want to inveigh against an excellent client: it was her third time to Tblissi, and to his and his mother's homely guesthouse! Sergo might have been drunk, but when it came to business he remained extraordinarily lucid. Be that as it may, the stubborn Sergo would not tolerate such a fallacious and opinionised absurdity:

«These women were his spies.» He was firm but polite. After all, she was Russian and he loved Russian people, especially his girlfriend, although quite frankly, I never really understood whether she was Russian or Ukrainian! The Russian woman at our table threw her proud head back and took a sip of wine. Sergo's mother intervened:

«Whether he was or wasn't a sexual maniac has no bearing on his political decisions.» She had a wistful smile. There was something about Sergo's mother, she bore a certain seamliness about her. Sergo raised his head and glowered at her; his eyes were aflame:

«Which decisions; the good ones or the bad ones?» There was terrible irony in his ripost. His mother did not appear to have seized the urgency of the rhetorical figure and just shrugged her narrow shoulders. Someone knocked at the window from the alleyway. She pushed away the curtains; it was the debauched Swede who made an ass of himself two or three nights ago. The dotard was wearing a drunken smile which he pressed and smeared all over the window pane, grotesquely alit in the silvern expressionist aura of the moonlight. Sergo's mother pulled a disgusted face and made a nervous gesticulation that caused the smile to transform into a mask of sorrow. He backed off, methinks, and scurried away, because I heard the alleyway gate slam shut with a loud bang of ire! Sergo's mother lifted her chin in triumph: the Swedish slut had been properly punished for his untoward behaviour... With this unexpected interlude, the Russian guest yawned...politely, and stood to retire to her room. I thanked Sergo and his mother for such a wonderful meal and conversation and also excused myself. Through the door of my room I overheard Sergo's loud and coarse voice in the kitchen; since he was speaking Georgian I couldn't understand what they were arguing about. But I believe it was about Alex because his name was mentioned on many an occasion and in no light accents!

When I awoke to have some fruit, cheese and tea in the kitchen the next morning, Sergo was not sleeping on the canopy; his mother, though, paced back and forth in the alleyway, gathering wood or hanging clothes on the make-shift clothes-line. I followed her blurry figure through the lace-curtained window, then sat down to my breakfast. No one came in. I finished, packed my few belongings, then went into the alleyway to thank this very hospitable woman. I asked her to say goodbye to Sergo for me: she smiled faintly but said nothing...I slipped out of the alleyway into the side street and slowly made my way to a *mashruka* stop. Twenty minutes later I was at Ortachar bus terminal, whence my bus would take me to Baku. It was scheduled to leave at three o'clock. However, the six or seven passengers, all Azeri except one Turkish student from Hacettepe University at Ankara, sat huddled up in a very small *mashruka*, much to my dismay...and to the Turkish student's! The driver told us, in excellent Turkish, not to fret, his vehicle was a mere shuttle bus which would shuttle us all to a bigger bus some twenty-five kilometres East of Tblissi, not far from the Azerbaijan border. From there we would be bused to Baku. All this seemed so complicated...*Mais pourquoi faire simple quand on peut faire compliqué,*

n'est-ce pas? All these changes unnerved me. It was time consuming and I only had five days in Baku to get out! So instead of arriving in Baku in the early evening, we would be there at one or two in the morning, which meant another night sleeping on a metal bench at a foul-smelling bus terminal. This I all imagined as we waited in that sultry *mashruka*. Huge pearls of sweat dripped from my beard and armpits. And what in fact I was imagining in that sweathouse turned out to be the reality of a sleepless night on a metal bench in the unsavoury international bus terminal at Baku, some ten kilometres or so from the Caspian sea port...When we finally sped off 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 dressing. Yet, Tblissi breathes a certain charm, a certain continuity of poetic prowess, be it mediaeval or Sayat-Nova's ..



'The bloody red pomegranate juice dripped thickly from her almond eyes...'

Undoubtedly, I also have to thank Sergo and his generous mother for these fleeting images...

Baku

We were not more than fifty kilometres from the Azerbaijan border, so after being dropped off in a small town where we jumped on the Turkish 'Metro' long-distance bus to Baku, whose service, may it be said here, was next to nill: no water, no cake, no crackers...no nothing, quite unusual for Turkish bus services, we readied our passports at customs. I suddenly noted with horror that my visa was issued for the eleventh of July: it was nine o'clock, the tenth! The Georgian side stamped me out with a friendly farewell. As to the Azeri side, here severity (seriousness?) was the demean, and the pock-faced policeman seemed quite unmoved by the fact that this Frenchman spoke Turkish! Was it a strategy to disturb his examination of the visa entry date? (which included a photo of the applicant! A formality that was novel to me.) Without a word to or a glance, he stamped me in three hours earlier than my expected arrival time. So much the better...

At the border, too, I changed my *lari* for *manat* with an unofficial money-changer, then sat for an hour or so at a small café with the Turkish student waiting for our bus to clear customs. The student was very serious and scholarly; he was finishing his thesis on a Soviet Azeri poet, and would be spending five or six months at the Baku State University researching his project, scouring her archives, and translating into Modern Turkish this, up till then, ill-illuminated poet. The student had to grapple with the Cyrillic alphabet, not to mention the vast differences between Azeri and Turkish, which unfortunately many Turks, and not only nationalists, firmly believe to be a dialect of the Turkish language, much to the anger of the Azeri, in the same way that many Turks continue inanely to believe the Kurdish language a dialect of Turkish. As a matter of fact, if you ask many Turks, all the languages spoken round Asia Minor, save Arabic, are either of Turkic origin or are offshoots of it...The student sitting next to me believed none of this nonsense...If one needs proof of this linguistic reality, simply check the language programme at the State University of Baku or Caucasian University where four languages are proposed: Azeri, Turkish, English and Arabic.

In Azerbaijan the visitor will hear the shibboleth 'iki halk, bir devlet' 'two peoples, one State' which the Turks tend to assimilate to 'one people, one State'; a sort of linguistic assimilation that many nations have had the haughty tendency of exercising when in a position of economic and military dominance. I shan't go into details here, although I will say that my Turkish interlocutor next to me in the bus always laughed at this quaint formula...so did the majority of the Azeri with whom I spoke, albeit their tones were more cynical...

The Azeri are mostly of Shia confession or religion (some Shia believe themselves to be non Muslims!), confession or religion that the Turkish Sunna despise. For many official Sunna in

Turkey and throughout the Middle East, the Shia are a heretical sect to be disbanded, or better yet, exterminated. I say this because the Turkish student was an Alevite, and he indeed vouched for the Turkish treatment of the Alevites, true, somewhat attenuated since the 1990s, but still on the Black List of those enemies of the Sunna Republic of Turkey...

There are very few mosques in the Shia populated countries of the world: Iran, Azerbaijan, parts of Iraq, whereas in the Sunna populated areas, neighbours are aswarm with them: in my small quarter of Elma Dağ alone, near Taksim Square, there are two, and if that weren't enough, an enormous loud-speaker has been installed atop an apartment building that calls the prayer. Thus there are three muezzin voices, more or less in harmony, calling the prayer, not to mention the huge mosque down the hill at Dolapdere, which makes four voices, two of which imperfectly intone the prayer. We were presently in the month of Ramadan, the month that the majority of Shia do not follow, their fasting month being Muharrem, that period during which Huseyin, son of the murdered Ali, was cowardly martyred in the desert of Iraq, dying of thirst. This fast lasts twelve days, plus an additional five days during which time no water is to be drunk...

As I so imagined, we rolled into the Baku bus terminal about one in the morning. The Turkish student offered me a lift in a taxi to the university, but what would I have done plodding about the university grounds in the middle of the night? I declined his generous offer and wished him the best of luck with his thesis: iyi şanslar ve hayırlı işler...

Everything was pitch black round the station: buildings loomed large and gloomy in the darkness. Not a soul in sight. I crossed a very dismal and empty parking lot (*incertum*) and pushed open a door. I was inside an unlit corridor with staircases going up and down. I roamed about aimlessly, bumping into cigarette-smelling rubbish bins and cardboard boxes strewn on the floor. A shaft of light suddenly hollowed out a tunnel in the thick obscurity, followed by steady footsteps. It was a young night watchman. Very perplexed at my presence in the bus terminal (for it was the bus terminal!) he offered to accompany me to the waiting room after I had fully explained my situation and intentions. And again as I had imagined, upon a metal bench I did indeed pitch in for the night, or what was left of it, with ten or fifteen other habitués of these asylums for the homeless. They proved to be a motley crew: derelicts who missed the boat to the seas of petrol dollars which flowed into oil-rich Azerbaijan, bumpkins of a society who had not as yet, nor ever will, fed upon the crumbs that drifted slowly downwards in tiny morsels from the oligarchic banquet, that Petrol Repast...

The early bird may catch the worm, but whether I be the worm or the bus, when I wiggled out of that foul hole I caught no bus to the centre of Baku, simply because no bus went in that direction! I must have hoofed three or four kilometres before reaching a metro. This wasted

time annoyed me: I had five days to get out of Baku...Now my readers may infer that their narrator is very unfair or unkind to Baku and its people. There is some truth in this inference; I harboured a very subterranean revulsion about Azerbaijan, perhaps due to the over-enthusiasm of Turks when harping on their privileged relationship and good-hearted Muslim brotherhood with this openly dictatorial State. I recalled those vapid and cowardly insinuations screamed out on Turkish radios and televisions about Armenians during the war over the Karabagh, and ô how the Azeri peoples were the very brethen of the Turks, and being so, needed all the psychological support as possible from their dear brethen! The Azeri were angels, the Armenians the *çete*...the gangs of thugs and rebels...This being said, it has been Azeri professors and researchers and not Turkish ones, who have written about and appraised my translation of and monographies on the *Book of Dede Korkut*, and who have translated my sixty-five page introduction and sundry notes into Azeri for their academic journals and encyclopedias. These professors and researchers would probably consider me ungrateful! Yet, as I stood in the metro wagon, trying to understand the changes to get to Deniz Voksal, since not one person in that early somber morning wagon appeared either to understand the switches required or feign interest in them, I could not help but feel that these hard-working people had no objective reason to help a foreigner in dire need at five-thirty in the morning as they drearily began their labourous routine. Everything appeared so grey, dull and gloomy around me...

Exiting the mouth of the metro, there in front of me was the Caspian! I made a bee-line for the seaport: Deniz Voksal, an interesting composed word of the Turkish 'sea' and the Russian 'station'! The two men who sat behind a spanking new counter in the lavishly decorated hall informed me that ships for Aktau did not depart from their bright, new building but from the ugly, old one, a twenty walk from there...

There are indeed two ports of the oil-rich city of Baku: the large, bright, modern one where I had been, 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, 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:

«Are you Turkish?» she beamed. I answered, rather dejectedly so as not to disappoint her, that I was French. She flung her grey-haired head back and a smile tore through all those wrinkles round her mouth and nose. Throwing down her pen, she sized me up shrewdly.

Now I must here pause and interrupt this fresh encounter to open a large parenthesis: if my readers were to surf the Internet and scan the hundreds of blogs and sites, or whatever else Interest offers on how to get the hell out of Baku by ship to Turkmenistan or to Kazakhstan, he or she will surely be taken aback at the vicious attacks against this frail, grey-haired woman, sitting in solitary stoicism in her glum hanger. Some have called her a witch! Others a hag or even a lousy bitch! Still others refrain out of either dignity or bad conscious, but the undertone of their message is crystal clear: a horrible creature who treats the foreigner like a fly buzzing about a large mound of excrement! The crux of this problematic seems to lie in the fact that those buzzing foreigners who barge into her glum hanger speak neither Turkish, Russian nor Azeri. This may be asking too much from those globe-trotters who inanely believe that a smattering of English will bear them anywhere their little hearts desire. Alas! As I have oftentimes exclaimed, from Bulgaria to Kazakhstan, Turkish and Russian are the linguistic vehicles for 'mass' communication; namely, with the majority of the population that one will invariably encounter, provided that one exits those globalized, artificial zones of which I have also spoken, disparagingly...

This subject I shall dwell on deeper, further on in my pilgrimage. At present, I must stress that this woman not only helped me for the three days I spent at the forlorn port, but geniuently sought to find solutions to the sundry problems that assailed me from all quarters. In her mouth, I became the Frenchman who spoke Turkish, and this quaint appellation put me *dans les bon papiers de tout le monde* as we say in French ; that is, with everyone who worked or milled about the port, especially the police and custom officials, always good to have on one's side when in dire straits.

Be that as it may, she got on the phone and indeed a ship was to leave in a few hours! Hurrah! Hurrah! I cried inwardly, retrieving my passport and 120 dollars. As she wrote out my ticket for the *Shah Dagh*, we spoke about our respective families, Turkey, where she had never been but whose language she mastered, and other commonalities that people chat about when they hardly know one another, but whose decorous hearts, because of the pending speedy separation, stirs that desire for warm valediction! Perhaps it may be superstition that stirs this decorum, but be that as it may, she wished me the best of luck. I sped out of the hanger and ran along the railway tracks between the wagons and soon reached a gate where some policemen,

who had been notified by the good-natured old woman, signaled for me to enter the customs house, a small barracks-like building which stood between me and the looming *Shah Dag*h, moored to the long quay, its stout stack smoking thick black. I was in a daze from both lack of sleep and sheer ecstasy. In only a few hours I had managed to get on a ship for Kazakhstan. However, before I recount the tragedy that would therein befall me, here again I must open a large parenthesis:

Those same bloggers and surfers who called the elderly woman so many ghastly names, also inform their interested clients that boarding a ship to Turkmenistan or to Kazakhstan can and practically always is a nightmare. Some intrepid travellers, either on bicycle or on foot, have waited weeks, or so they wrote, whilst others ten days, seven days, etc. etc. Those who had a five-day visa paid five-hundred dollar fines! Those whose visas had expired for Turkmenistan (five days without escort) *rebroussaient chemin*! All this news is disheartening when consulted on a daily basis. In fact, there is such a quantity of it that one suspects a sort of copy-cat phenomenon, a sort of self-indulgence and pity, a wallowing in the mire of complacency. And again, I shall stress the importance of precise communication. How many monolinguist travellers have understood nothing of what that woman attempted to explain as best she could? A few pages futher on in my account, I shall furnish my readers an excellent example of this lack of linguistic accuracy...

There she smoked, the *Shah Dag*h, which means, by the way, 'Mountain Prince', grand and broad in all her departing dignity. The policeman's stamper was on its merry way downwards to stamp my passport; I was all agog, about to stretch out my hand to recuperate it when the arm stopped in mid-air. He looked up, grim:

«Friend, your Kazakhstan visa begins in two days.» I felt like telling him so what, but obviously refrained. «If you leave now you'll get to Aktau a day before your visa begins, and the police will send you back to us where you will not be allowed entrance because you only have a single entry visa: then what?» I looked at him as stupidly as he looked at me intelligently. My heart dropped low into my stomach. The smile, broad on my face, waned to a horrible sneer of comprehension, comparable to that sleeper who experiences no self-consciousness during a nightmare. I argued that the police would surely let me in, if it were only a day, or that they would simply keep me at the port until my visa began. He shook his head dejectedly.

«We can't take that chance, friend, and neither can you. Not only will we fine you five-hundred dollars, but even put in in jail for illegal reentry», so he said, but unaggressively. He told me to sit down and have a cup of tea with him; he noticed my disappointment (which here is a euphemism!) and offered a small compensation. How I hated his punctiliousness, but,

nevertheless, affected gratitude. I was crushed! There she lay, the *Shah Dagh*; I imagined myself aboard her, shown my modest cabin, then sitting down to a fine, hot meal, after which there I was, leaning over the ship's rail and peering dreamily down to the customs house where I had been gleefully stamped out. But there in that fantastic vision I saw myself, shoulders bowed in that hackney chair in front of a moustached policeman whose assistant was now serving me a hot cup of tea. I implored the kind officer to make an exception, to take a risk; that my visa expired in five days and that I hadn't the five-hundred to fork over if no other ship were to put into port. This supplication almost brought tears to my eyes. The officer cheered me up, dry-eyed:

«Ships to Kazakhstan come and go every two or three days. Just get a bed over there,» and he pointed to a long, narrow strip of embrowned trees and shrubs between two sets of railroad tracks, «and check everyday with the woman in the ticket office.» Other than being surprised at the words 'ticket office' 'tiket burosu' in Turkish, I dropped my eyes, drank my tea without pleasure and, head hanging heavily low, shuffled out of the tiny border customshouse. I had to pull myself together, snap out of that piteous self-commiseration.

First I ran back to the hanger. The old woman's shrewd eyes widened when she saw me charge in. I babbled my miseries to her; she listened without a word, then pulled out a small, black notebook from a drawer.

«Perhaps in two days round midnight or two in the morning the *Karabagh* will be in port.» She was intensely serious. «But you must come back to me tomorrow afternoon at five or so, I will know for sure. For now, get a bed with the women near the port, and come back to me. You also have a small grocery shop up the road near the port entrance. A bed is five *manat* a night, no more! Get on now and I'll tell you for sure tomorrow.» Which I did, a heart somewhat lighter, but still hardened by the vision of the *Shah Dagh's* smoking stack and droning engines! For indeed, as could be expected, I was still under the narcotic effects of the bloggers' blues...

I crossed the railway tracks and made a bee-line for a gaggle of huts and shacks wedged in between two rail tracks which led in and out of the port, now screeching with slowly moving wagons towards the open jaws of the *Karabagh*. This unusually situated homestead proved to be a world of its own: one far from the Flaming Towers of oil-rich Baku, from the graceful high-rising crystal-lined bank that threw glittering shadows upon this den of the forgotten...

The long narrow shanty town 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.

The toilets were out over the tracks at the port. They were gruesome; I had a glimpse of them when I left the port gate en route for the hangar or the ticket office, as the customs officier so graciously called it! There were no showers, but this luxury held no advantage for me at the moment. We sat down at the picnic table, solid still, neatly arranged under a grapeless arbour. The woman was glad about my staying; I smiled blithely, quite depressed about the whole situation. Had I any other choice? The only pension in Baku was about six or seven kilometres away in town, and a bed there costs eighteen *manats*, or so I was told at Tblissi by an Azeri student who knew the owner. Being so 'cheap', it was probably full anyway...

The owner of this enclosure seemed to have sensed my estrangement at such an odd residence amidst screeching trains, smoking ships, roaring vehicles on the road to the port, lost in the shadows of modern, shiny skyscrapers. For at that picnic table she began to describe her state of affairs, and why she lived together with so many people in such squalor ; why all these people shared inherited identical destinies...Here I shall report her details in a pity summary :

The Destiny of the displaced refugee, relocated temporarily only to be abandoned is one that can be read in novels, and her plight could have written a considerable amount of novels. The owner's story reposed on the misfortune of those outcasts of the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the mountainous region of the Karabagh, now a territory of Armenia.

«We lived in the Karabagh when war broke out between Muslims and Christians,» she began, fanning herself with a shredded newspaper. Sweat was pouring off my neck. Let me add that she spoke very calmly without any hysterical pathos at all. «It was clear that the Christians would win the war, so we all left» and she swung her chubby arm across the enclosures of the embrowned strip», and were settled here by our gouvernement. They gave us tents to live in, and said it would be temporary, whilst the municipality of Baku would finance proper lodgings for us. That was in 1993! When we all realized that our government had no intentions of relocating

us, we began to build our own homes out of the metal and wood that we gathered from the abandoned restaurants and cafés in and around the port. We planted trees and bushes to protect us from the terrible heat in the summer. We put in electricity to have heat during the long winters. Many of us immigrated to Turkey or to Russia to find work, and with the vacant beds, some of us rent them out to young men or immigrants from Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan who work in the city and need a cheap place to live. This place has become our home since the Karabagh has become the home of Armenians. » This last clause was pronounced without hostility, but empathically. It goes without saying that the Azeri have no great love for the Armenians.

I showed commiseration; indeed these people had been submitted to a dual injustice: Armenian wrath and their own government's treason! Betrayed by one's government is no easy pill to swallow, nor the loss of one's home! And here, the biting irony of History thrust its mighty jaws into these people, chased from their homes and sent into exile, similarly to those Armenians in Eastern Turkey some hundred years back, chased, too, from their ancestors' lands, deported to the deserts where they were either massacred by Turkish troops or Kurdish militia paid to do so, or simply died through starvation and heat. These Azeri refugees fared a bit better. Nevertheless, History can be a terrible Avenger. She fanned herself and disappeared in a hut...

I strolled about the enclosures; none of these former inhabitants of the Karabagh had any intention of welcoming to their miserable existence an alien. A few men stared at me coldly, in spite of the blazing heat. Luckily the water from the pumps was drinkable. As I penetrated one enclosure after another, via the earth-packed path, the horror of this strip of sorrow became fully manifest: the filth littered about and the lack of any sanitation obliged everyone either to walk a few minutes to the port toilets or evacuate in the tiny gardens that lined the main path. Some chose to go beyond the enclosures onto the railway tracks and there get down to business. These tracks bore the brunt of poverty, misery or indifference. It was grotesque, the stench sickening...

The litter strewn here and there mounted into high piles, attracting flies in the day mosquitoes at night. It was nauseating. I came across a bent old woman seated on a tiny patch of yellowed grass, staring emptily out and upon this dour scene, as if mesmerized by it. I went up to her and asked whether she wanted anything; she shrugged her bony shoulders without any facial expression. Above her shone that mammoth bank, bright and proud in all its petrol dollars. I felt an urge to defecate...

Up and down the tracks I roamed, sizing up this impoverished refugee camp with alien eyes; it took ten minutes to walk the length of it! I swung into one of its back gates, crossed the strip

diagonally, but discovered that the bowered entries on the opposite side were completely blocked by awaiting trains to be boarded on to the ships in port. I sat down in an armchair in my enclosure and ate some fruit and yoghurt, the yoghurt with my fingers since one of the residents of the enclosure, a double-chinned fat man who walked with a limp, gruffly refused to lend me a spoon.

Boys and men came and went. A few 'unemployed' loafed about the enclosures, observing the trains screech and cringe and creak onto the ships. There were three ships in port: including mine! Yes, as I worked my way out of the enclosures through the one nearest the port, weaving a zig-zag way round mounds of filth and debris, I caught a last glimpse of the *Shah Dag* as she headed out to the open sea in a thick cloud of greyish smoke, further and further away from the refugee camp. For a fleeting moment I believed the whole pilgrimage jeopardized, and mentally prepared to retrace my steps...

-The aeroplane from Baku to Aktau cost a hundred dollars, and left everyday!- This evil thought suddenly shot through my fatigued mind. I spat it out immediately: overland or by ship, if not there can be no pilgrimage, thus no voyage! In this I was unflagging. If there be no hope, neither could one voyage, much less reach Tūrkestan, Saint Jacques, Jerusalem, Mecca, Timbucktoo, Phucktal, Bukhara...I bent my steps towards the city centre to have a look at what remained of the famous 'old town', three or four kilometres from my home sweet home...

My prejudices of Baku or of Azerbaijan in general are many. But I will concede that if the petrol dollars have left eighty percent of the population in squalor, or to be put more mildly, at a survival level, at least a decimal percentage has been spent in the construction of a refreshing park that stretched the whole length of Neftchitar Avenue, the root of whose appellation tells the grand tale of the New Baku *Neft*! Palm and Date trees and Cactus have been asthetically planted to give both shade and pleasure to the eye, the newly planted grass is deep and lush, watered by a whole team of gardeners. The gay colours of jasmin, gerberas, white and red roses, chrysanthemums and orange-tinted lilies filled the balmy, sea air with enervating fragrances and with a certain Oriental charm, almost erotic. The layout of the park had been accomplished with exquisite care. Sections of the park are incomplete: the plan is for it to stretch the entire length of Neftchitar Avenue, perhaps seven or eight kilometres, along the Caspian coast. Thus the long walk from the old port to the old city transported the walker into one of the tales of *One Thousand Arabian Nights*, more or less...The screaming and honking cars to the right reminded the walker, nonetheless, that he or she was squarely strolling through a very ugly, modern city.

Once at the Old Town, or what is left of it, other parks emit similiar Oriental auras. They are magnificent, whose vast umbrella trees provide enough shade for all pedestrians to take a bit of

respite from the unrelentless beating sun. Inside the Old Town itself, in other words, the square perimetre that the family oliarchy has condescended to preserve for the trickle of foreign tourists into Baku, holds no grand attraction : as a matter of fact, it is quite depressing to wander about the narrow, cobblestone streets, for it reminds one of those museum display showcases set neatly and brightly out in the city centres of Tblissi and Europe, and like all museums, moribund, because globally resuscitated with just that dash of 'local colour' to tantilize the foreigner, excite his or her sense of the Exotic...

It just occurred to me that I hadn't as yet heard the call of the muezzin: was there a mosque in the museum? It was Ramazan, but in Shia Azerbaidjan the sacred month of the Sunna resounded of no ardent enthusiasm. Having observed that many people were munching on something or other in the wonderful Oriental park whose thick, green grass melded nicely with the tawny mediaeval outer walls of the Old Town, I retrieved from my pockets raisins and peanuts that I had purchased at the grocery shop in the port. I took refuge under the shade of the Palm and Date trees, pregnant with clusters of drooping dates, then sluggishly retraced my steps back to the port; I didn't know what depressed me more, the clean and modern Old Town or the squalor of the refugee camp at the port! My state must have been a sorry one, for on the way back a woman with her young daughter stopped me, and in Russian asked in such a voice of commiseration whether I were ill or not, that I began to believe that perhaps I was ill ! I smiled meekly and replied that it was only the heat and lack of sleep. She nodded and carried on: I felt so embarrassed; there must have been some truth in her question: who would stop a stranger in the street and ask him or her such a question? Perhaps she was Russian, indeed, Russians would ask such questions...

It was about five o'clock when I reached the entrance of the port. The gardian was whittling away a piece of wood with a penknife, completely bored, when he called me over. He was a burly fellow, small and cheery faced. We chatted for a while, his Turkish was very good. Every ten or fifteen minutes he checked a car or a van that needed entry into the port. The majority of the drivers were the police or customs officials. The gardian informed me that the old woman hadn't as yet arrived to resume ticket sales.

«Has a ship docked?» I asked lamely. He shrugged his shoulders:

«You have to ask her, she's the boss» and threw his piece of wood at a stray dog. He was matter of fact.

From out of the blue the old woman opened the heavy metal door and disappeared into her lair. I waited the polite period of time one does whenever he or she impatiently awaits someone to arrive and does not arrive, when he or she expects him or her to do so. I then casually raced

across the dusty square to the hanger. She was on the phone when the door creaked open, saw me, then indicated the metal chair. She delicately put down the receiver.

«So, Frenchman who speaks Turkish,» she was to the point. «as luck will have it, tomorrow night or in the very early morning of the next day, the *Karabagh* will dock and leave for Aktau. Give me your ticket,» she ordered. She opened the crumbled, white piece of paper, scratched out *Shah Dagh* and wrote *Karabagh*. «Be at customs at midnight,» she continued in a husky voice. She handed me back my ticket and wished me the best of luck with a broad smile that chased all the wrinkles from her leathery face. «Have you got your bed? Good. Buy some fruit and bread at the grocery shop before you board, some ships don't provide food.» The telephone rang. She waved me on with a brusque gesture of a very frail hand with crooked fingers.

Overjoyed, I thanked the 'hag' whole heartedly and trotted triumphantly down to the port where I bought some vegetables which I would eat raw, and yoghurt which I would again eat with my fingers; no one offering me a spoon in those enclosures! For some unknown reason the woman owner had completely vanished! I learned later that night from her that she had gone to visit her daughter in the city who had married a very wealthy man and was living in moderate wealth. Her daughter even had her own car, she glowed, her face agleam with parental pride.

That night was spent in ardent discussions with the Azeri lumpen proletarians and the Uzbek immigrants who live in the shacks of my enclosure. The Uzbeks spoke remarkably good Turkish; as to the Azeri, two of whom were very young, coming from the North or from the Iranian border, at times I couldn't fathom a word of what they were saying. I continually confused the Azeri 'pul' (money) from the Persian 'پول', with its Turkish homophone 'pul' but which means 'stamp'. All of them were working at low-paying jobs: construction, security guards, slaves in the hotel industry, etc. All of them were uneducated and without any financial help from their families, or and this goes without saying, from the oil-rich oliarchy.

My two nights were helplessly sleepless, answering the endless questions that the three boys in my shack plied me, more curious of my background than my pilgrimage. On the mention of Hodja Ahmet Yesevî they all shrugged their shoulders and made strange sounds with their tongues, a sort of annoying clicking sound. I either stretched out on my humble bed, fully clothed trying to sleep, or sat sleepily in a stool trying to understand what they so urgently wished to communicate to me, the dangling solitary lightbulb languishly lit, a welter of words aflies, as well as the mosquitoes...

When Azeris speak Turkish, due to the final rising syllable of their syntax, sentences end on a highly musical note, soprano if I may say so, and very agreeable to the ear, although this final tonic tendency may cause the listener to disregard the initial and medial score of the syntax

pattern whilst he or she impatiently awaits that final delicious ring! I indeed found myself fascinated by this Azeri phonetic trait, and deaf to the meaningful purport behind the rest of the phrase, be it the *signifiant* or the *signifié*! In short, communication proved to be haphazard, intermittent, elliptic...especially at two or three o'clock in the morning. Needless to say, I hardly slept for those two nights. The day brought no relief either, for the workers were always bombarding me with so many questions about my life; yet, hardly a word about the founder of Sufism in Central Asia. But then again, Azerbaijan is a Caucasian country not a Central Asian one. I thus took comfort in these strophes of sagacity:

*'I, at twenty-six years' old tasted ardent desire,
Like Mansur, I struggled to see His Face;
I existed in a state of pain, roaming without a Shiekh,
For this reason, thus, I came to take shelter in the True One.'*

*'I, at twenty seven, found a Shiekh,
I was covered and wrapped in the veils of each mystery I saw;
Propped upon the threshold, I kissed His steps,
For this reason, thus, I came to take shelter in the True One.'*

*'I, at twenty-eight became enamoured,
Slept not at night, I showed allegiance and suffered;
Whenas I became worthy of the dervish convent,
For this reason, thus, I came to take shelter in the True One.'*

On the third night, quite unexpectedly, the owner's daughter, an eighteen year old narrow-faced newly wed, urged me to cross the railway tracks and follow her to the end of the port where a café or small restaurant had been, now in total ruin, its kitchen and grand salon gutted and teeming with strewn rubbish and rats. Its former terrace jutted into a creek, also teeming with loads of litter. There we stood at the edge of that creek in the awful stench, admiring the electronic rising flames of the Flaming Towers. Gigantic orange and crimson tongues leapt upwards from the centre of Baku. She was rather mischievous this newly wed, and after the initial fascination, made some sly aside about the cost of that marvelous achievement, and scowled at her mother's denizen of utter poverty. -Why did she not bail her mother out of that horror?- I thought. -Perhaps her husband does not like the close proximity of the mother-in-law; if that were the case, I could not blame him...

That night I spoke to several Azeri and Turkmen who had been stoically waiting for ships to Turkmenistan for over ten days, huddled under a metal awning near the police gate, sleeping

on blankets thrown down either on the cement floor or on cement benches that lined the cement walls. The Azeri spoke politics, confirming the wretchedness of their economic situation, and the lies of their dictator. As to the Turkmen, less politically inclined, they rambled on about making money: the oil-veins in the deserts of Turkmenistan, the sorry tale of the immigrant, but never once did they criticize their country. Their Turkish was very good, and those who did not speak Turkish spoke very good Russian. They had those moon faces that situated them, anthropologically, between the Turk and the Chinese. And there, near that miserable hangar, at about eleven o'clock, as I sat on the steps of the public toilets waiting for a signal from the police, having packed my things and abandoned the white nights of that bleak strip of sorrow, I overheard a young couple speak French. They had stopped, leaning on their bicycles at the port entrance gate. The conversation that ensued eschewed once again that without knowledge of Turkish or Russian in this part of the world incomprehension will lead to misunderstanding and this to ugly scenes of 'cultural mishaps'...

I casually strolled over to them and politely asked where they were heading at eleven o'clock at night; undoubtedly to Kazakhstan?

«No, to Turkmenistan!» came the young boy's jubilant reply. This promised crossing appeared to me a bit suspicious since none of the Azeri or Turkmen spoke of a ship that night, nor for the following nights as far as they knew, according to the grey-haired woman. As an aside, I shall record here that neither the Azeri nor the Turkmen called the old woman a 'witch' or a 'hag', with whom they were in contact everyday. Now, these two hopeful riders were thoroughly convinced that a ship would be porting that very night. I inquired about their tickets and from whom they had bought them. The young boy, somewhat embarrassed, confessed that they had no ticket as of yet, but that the old woman in the awful grotto had told them, more or less, and in very cryptic inflexions, just to get out and hie to the docks. I felt awkward to dash their joy and jubilation; however, I showed them my ticket and explained that no one was allowed in the confines of the port without one, and as they could see, the ticket was for a ship heading to Kazakhstan. They refused to believe me, but did concede that the old 'witch' had lost her temper, and even told them (or so they understood) that no more boats were to leave the port for Turkmenistan, and that they would have to go to the new port! This information seemed to me dubious, probably imagined in their minds as one misunderstanding led to another. In sum, I took them to the police guard, who when inspecting my ticket, told me that no boat to Turkmenistan was scheduled that night, nor any other night for the next few days. I translated for the crestfallen couple. They sized up the port with sunken eyes:

«Where are we to stay?» came the disgruntled question, asked by the disappointed girl. She was angry about the whole situation, especially at the old woman, for whom she held in no great esteem! To compensate their dejection, and with permission from the port authorities, I

arranged for them to camp at the side of the railway tracks where a few picnic tables had been cemented into the soil, and a pump for drinking water been drilled, just a few metres from the docks.

The policeman showed us an excellent grassy place where the young French couple could pitch their pup tent. In my three days at the port I hadn't noticed this tiny grassy isle at all in the middle of concrete and metal. At one of the three picnic tables we spent a few hours chatting about electric cars (the boy had just completed his thesis on the future of electric cars), Central Asia and their voyage. It was their first lengthy bicycle tour; they had bicycled in France and Europe but never in Asia. They had crossed the length of Turkey, albeit at some stretches took a train. A policeman suddenly sprang out of the shadows into the glare of the port lamps and summoned me to follow him to the customs office. There, three days later, my ticket in hand, the *Karabagh* in port, although due to the blackness of the moles I could not see her, the same moustached officer, all smiles, inspected my visa, nodded in the affirmative, and smashed that exit stamp down into my passport! As I waited for these formalities, I heard on the television that was hanging off the wall the voice of François Holland: it was the fourteenth of July! I informed the officer of that memorial date: he shrugged his shoulders and waved me through...

The Caspian Crossing

I boarded the *Karabagh* by way of the railway tracks that lined its bottom deck. It was terribly empty. I heard my own footsteps clank along the metal plating. The ship and the port lay in the most deathly silence as I climbed the companionways ever upwards towards the ship's prow. It was a huge ship; I felt as if I were atop some skyscraper...not a sailor in sight! At the prow, however, a small, bright light guided me along the upper deck. To my right, the Flaming Towers 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...

The toilet and shower were across the corridor from my cabin, and in a pitiful state. Here I must open a new parenthesis and inform my readers, pithily, of the incommodious toilet situation aboard these Caspian cargoes, if, that is to say, they haven't as yet informed themselves by way of the comments and photos posted on the Internet.

The toilets of the Caspian Company Ships have indeed inspired the respiteless bloggers, for indeed a whole gamut of inunendoes pepper the electronic pages of their informative blogs: these inunendoes range from the thoroughly disgusting to the 'no comment', some have even supplied photos, testifying to their umbraged emotions. It goes without saying that the toilets on cargo ships are not suited for the delicate simply because for sailors, toilets are lieux of transitory needs, and thus subject to little or no attention. Furthermore, the crew on the Caspian ships spend at most three days aboard, and generally, when in port, visit their families or friends in their respective countries ; the toilets thus, of their vessels are viewed as any passing urinal or shit-bowl in bars, cafés, cheap, dingy fast food joints, etc. Why should they be cleaned for the trickle of *bourlingeurs* who cross the Caspian by ship? If those sweethearts are not happy about the situation, why don't they just fly, after all it's much faster and cleaner, perhaps even cheaper? This is the sentiment expressed by the crew when foreigners vent their ostensible repulsion or appal. This being said, the toilet into which I stepped caused me no immediate alarm: I had experienced worse in India, and especially amongst the Tibetan populations of China. But I shan't harp on these bagatelles here...

I strolled about the dark, silent decks of the ship unable to sleep, then zig-zagged the maze of corridors; a fountain for drinking water was located just to the right of my cabin. On the walls were nailed photos of Baku (the Flaming Towers: Was there any escape from them?), and other cities or towns that I knew not. I met a few sleepless sailors skulking about the corridors or on deck; they hardly glanced at me, much less engaged in conversation. Moored near the marshes covered with mats of reeds and jagged rocks, welters of mosquitoes buzzed about the decks and corridors...into my cabin. When I did turn in for 'the night', they wouldn't let me sleep a wink! There I lay in my clothes until the first rays of the orange sun...

I awoke groggy: the mosquitoes buzzed viciously about the cabin; the porthole had been left open because of the heat and humidity. I rolled out of the bunk, stepped into the corridor, washed a bit and trudged to the poop of the ship; it seemed to shake beneath my feet, and a deep, rumbling sound snapped the still morning air. On all decks the crew were swarming, like the mosquitoes, about the companionways, and below, on the lower deck, train wagons were being rolled aboard, onto the rails of the ship, their wheels then clamped down with iron chains

to thick lachet-loops. I suddenly spotted the French couple romping and frolicking along the rocky shore of their temporary bivouac, and behind them, that long, narrow strip of refugee enclosures: all that now behind me, too, though still clear in sight.... Odd really, I had been stamped out of Azerbaijan, but still remained in her territorial waters...what if we were not to leave for another two or three days and my five-day visa were to expire? This frightening thought dissolved when a young, long-haired lad taped me on the shoulder and pointed to the mess hall: breakfast was being served «çabuk!»

Tea, cheese, bread, jam, honey and hard-boiled eggs, cooked by the sole female aboard, a Russian from Nijni Novgorod, but resident in Azerbaijan for over twenty-five years! I had to ferret this information out of her, for indeed she was far from loquacious, even when I told her that I had spent three years in wonderful Siberia; Russians, unlike the Turks or Tamils or Chinese were never really impressed by foreigners who spoke Russian, or who had lived in their country ! Perhaps it is due to the colonists' mentality which takes for granted that it is the colonized who learn their language, like the colonizing British and French.

Three foreign passengers came aboard that afternoon: a young German couple, on foot, heading for China, and a Dutchman, my cabinmate, by the name of Gustav, on bicycle, heading for Indonesia. It was because of their complaints that I met the captain of the vessel, for it appeared that the third in command, a sallow-faced Azeri, demanded an additional twenty dollars for a better cabin from the German couple, who ostensibly refused the cabin, and pay the supplement fee. I intervened in their favour but not really on their behalf. It is a custom on cargo ships that the passenger offers the welcoming officer some money for his trouble; I pretended to be scandalised by this extravagant sum, and my acting chipped the twenty down to five, which I, too, paid without a second thought. Gustav paid it, but very grudgingly, and discontentedly, stormed back to our four-bunk cabin. This negotiation broke the ice between me and the crew, up till then, not hostile, but mistrustful of a Frenchman who spoke Turkish.

The captain and I discussed Azerbaijan politics, or I should say, he grouched against the poverty in their country whilst the petrol clan, of which Aliiev was the president supreme, lived in golden ghettos high above the rabble. He repined that his salary and those of his crew were very low, whence the 'tea-money' wrenched from the traffic of tourists between the Caucasians and Central Asia. One sailor in particular, a *révolté*, short and quick-witted, made his point very sharply by mentioning the imprisonment of Leyla Yunus, a dissident of the ruling clan, who had been to France, and on her return was immediately thrown into jail and tortured, accused of meddling in democratic affairs that concerned her not, and of spying for the ingratious Armenian government in its odious quest to overthrow the petrol kingdom! Her ungrateful husband, too, was picked up from his happy home and tossed into prison for security measures, reminding all thankless Azeris, bent on upsetting the oil-strategic oliarchy, what to expect for

their slanderous ingratitude! Hardly a word was said about this in the Western toilet papers, as could be expected: after all, Azerbaijan, like Saudi Arabia, is a strategic partner the mighty battle for democracy....

Indeed, the Azeri crew proved quite a merry lot, cynically reminding me of their emblematic slogan: 'one State, two peoples' when referring to their 'soul brothers', the Turks, and more cynical still about the dictatorial dynasty that catered to their clients whilst silencing any opposition. The only issue that all Azeris seemed to agree upon was Armenian perfidy...I displayed no overt emotion on this matter...

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...Gustav strode up to my side and leaned over the ship's railing. His English was very good, and began to recount his travels, and a bit about himself. He had been a computer wizard, and one fine day decided to abandon the whole boring technological race and cycle from Rotterdam to Indonesia via the Central Asian steppes. He kept a diary and a blog in Dutch, jotting down his adventures. He hoped to publish an account in book form of his travels, in Dutch, an idea which appealed to my linguistic singularities; namely, that all languages represent global languages, and that there exists no international language, global or local...

Gustav had no qualms about the 'witch' back in Baku port: he just walked in with his bicycle, pronounced the word Kazakhstan, and she handed him his ticket for one hundred and thirty dollars, ten for the bike! And that was that...He did, however, spend a few days at the only cheap hostel in Baku, which cost him over twenty Euros a day, and was aided by the owner who called everyday to the port about incoming ships. Gus acknowledged that he was generously assisted. He had indeed perused most of the blog-comments and scoffed:

«A lot of nonsense; I wasn't to be put off by all that babble.» Gustav was always to the point.

After a dinner of tomatoe salad, buckwheat (I hadn't eaten 'гречка' since leaving Russia!) and fish, Gustav and I strolled along the decks, admiring the setting sun and the changing colours of the waters. No cloud soiled the purity of the rosy fabric sky. During this spectacular scene a strange conversation ensued; up till then we had exchanged the banalities of two travellers en route towards their respective destinations, albeit I permitted myself to congratulate the Dutchman on his courageous decision to quit the world of windows and take to the real Road, whilst he thought it quite a coincidence that I had worked as a tourist guide in Amsterdam during 1974 at a small hotel adjacent the Concertgebouw on Jan Wilhembrouer Street, 14, only three streets from his parents' home! Anyway, as I said, during that scene embued by the rosy twilight sloughing into vermilion, Gus surprised me by inquiring whether or not, because of my

linguistic background and labour on the Turkish tongue, which I had also succinctly outlined for him in our cabin below, I had read about English etyma of Turkish origin. Needless to say I was taken very much aback by the question! Gustav, without demur, pulled out his trusty tablet, and after a few moments of fingering about the keyboard, showed me an article that he had come across whose author, perhaps a Russian or Turk, endeavoured to solve two hundred or so very common English etyma of dubious or unresolved origins with scientific evidence to prove their Turkic roots. What here follows is a succinct resumé of our crepuscular exchange as the *Karabagh* ploughed across the Caspian Sea. Mind you, to inveigh against these etymological escapades suggests neither aggressivity nor contempt on my part. I took no notes, and remember only seven or eight of the most notorious among them. I have added the Persian or Arabic equivalents to bolster my critique, a written exercise quite superfluous, given the spontaneous and I may add, bizarre circumstances of that balmy, tranquil evening.

First, however, the Dutchman explained that he had wished to study some Turkish before coming to Azerbaijan, and for this very noble reason his interest in the article was piqued or the more so. He had copied the whole article on a document and now unrolled it under the silvern light of the creamy, greyish moon:

He pointed to the word 'bad', and according to the author, its origins were undoubtedly Turkic. And yet, I personally never read the form 'bād' in Göktürk. However, in the *hikmets* of Ahmet Yesevî, one of the oldest extant traces of the Turkic language of Central Asia, one indeed reads the form 'bad', but as all etymologists must know, this word is a direct borrowing from the Persian ' باد ' /bad/ with the same meaning. The Hodja's Turkic was heavily Persianized as all the Turkic languages are today! During the Middle Ages, the Turkic languages absorbed Central Asian or Khorasani and Tajaki Persian words, whereas Persian absorbed words of Turkic origin at much later dates, and these from the higher strata of the Turkic society. Why then seek a Turkic fount when the Indo-European appears quite clear? Next, the Dutchman showed me the word 'day' whose Turkic etymology was traced back to the form 'dün' 'yesterday'. But again why should the author seek a Turkic origin when the Sanskrit 'dah', which meant 'to burn', seems a plausible candidate.

Then Gus unrolled the etymon 'tölc' 'to pay'. But what about the Greek ' τέλος ' 'to tax, toll' from the verbal form ' τάλαντον ' 'to take', borrowed by the Romans 'tollere' 'to take', and read in mediaeval Latin, or what I have always termed 'evolutive Latin' (le latin évolutif) 'toleneum'.

Another surprise to me was the proposed origin of the English subject pronoun 'I', supposedly derived from the Turkic 'iç' 'inside, inner'. The author pretends, I guess, that this inner reference to the self was borrowed by the Goths in the form 'ik', the Greeks 'ἐγών' and then the Romans 'ego'! But is this all possible? Why would the Goths, namely Wulfilus'

converted Goths, borrow a word from a people with whom they never came into contact? The Eastern Goths or the Ostrogoths had indeed collided and mingled with the migrating Turkic nomads from the East, but the Ostrogoths that migrated or invaded Europe in the IIIrd and IVth centuries had absolutely no geographic or racial affiliations with the Turkic nomads, who began their long migratory route during the VIIIth century.

The proposal for 'wake' that is, the movement of water behind a sea vessel, astonished me: the author believes the root to be 'vak'. Now there does exist in the Ottoman tongue a 'vak', but it meant 'heaviness', even a 'headache'. But has the author overlooked the Icelandic 'vök', 'an open space for a ship in half-frozen water', or a 'passage for a ship in frozen water'? Also we read in Dutch 'wak' 'moist', which my curious travelling companion knew perfectly well, and even beamed in delight that an etymon of his language might have been borrowed by the English! We can even extrapolate further: the plural form in Icelandic of 'vök' 'vakar' signifies 'a hole, an opening in the ice'. And as Turcologists know, there are few words of incipit 'v' in the Turkic languages that are Turkic in origin: 'vermek' 'to give' is an exception to the rule.

'Tili' presumedly gave the English verb 'to tell'. True, the Turkic 'dil' does mean 'tongue, language'. The verbal form 'tilmek' meant 'to pierce, forge' in Ahmet Yesevî's *hikmets*, and that the verbal form for 'to tell' at that time read 'timek'. Yet again, why seek out roots in distant geographic regions where hardly any linguistic contact was effected, if any at all, when we read the Dutch 'taal', from the Gothic 'talzjan' 'to instruct', or the Icelandic 'tal' with the same meaning?

And as Gus unrolled his little screen, which by the way caused my eyes to water, I ricoched from one surprise to another : for example the word 'sağ', which in Turkic signifies 'health, safe, right, straight', and according to our author, gave the English 'sage'. But is it not more historically accurate to investigate the Sanskrit 'sāhhu' 'good, healthy', or even the Sumerian (which has no genetic ties to Turkic as many Turkish historians and linguists still believe today!) 'zag'? These etyma evolved into the Latin 'sapium' and its accusative form 'sapius', which gave 'sabio' in Spanish and 'saggio' in Italian, words that Shakespeare used in his plays and sonnets, he who borrowed without restraint from the cornopia of Italy's weal of winsome words...Now, on the other hand, there could be a link with the Arabic 'صَاح' with the same meaning; however, this word is a late borrowing of the Islamized Turkic people, very late in their westernly migrations.

The Dutchman pointed to the notorious 'caviare', an etymon that has spilled much ink (or electronic letters!) in the linguistic departments of Europe's universities, that the author has dutifully classed as Turkic, following in the footsteps of several modern etymologists. However, I must press this issue and aver that 'caviare' or 'sturgeon', which is pressed and salted, was a

Caspian Sea delicacy shared by Persians and Russians : 'كلونيار' and 'икра', which appears to have been borrowed into the English language via Italian by Shakespeare, read in *Hamlet*.

The etymon 'timon' intrigued me as it rolled down the silvery-lit tablet screen: the author presumed it gave the English 'time'. There is no Turkic etymon 'timin'; however, there indeed exists a 'demen', which meant in Old Turkic 'a while ago', 'a bit before'. And why not? The forms resemble one another; but do similar forms signify direct borrowings from one language to another, especially if there is neither linguistic contact nor any family relationship? For in Sanskrit 'dati', from the root 'da-' or 'di-', and which meant 'to cut, divide' might have given forms such as the Greek 'δεμος', the Germanic 'timon', the Old Norse 'timi' and the Old English 'tid' 'a portion of time', or again the Swedish 'timme' 'an hour' !

The author asserts that the Turkic 'su' be a solid candidate for the English 'sea'. There is indeed an Old Turkic form 'suv', but also an etymon from the Herez dialect of Persia, 'tsob', and in mediaeval Anatolia the villagers reduplicated the form 'coc', thus 'coc coc', to define a 'marsh' or anything watery. 'Sea' is a difficult word to trace historically: we read 'saiws' in Gothic, which meant 'lake', the Old Saxon 'sea/sae' a 'lake'. The Turkic word might be a possible candidate, but I personally doubt it: where has there been any geographic or ethnic contact between the Saxons or Angles with the migrating nomadic Turkic peoples? The Turkic language emerged from the deserts and mountains of Mongolia long after the development of Anglo-Saxon, such as it is read in *Beowulf*...

There are, nonetheless, three words of the article that posed interesting problems, the first being 'oksüz' 'ox'. The Turkic and English forms do have obvious resemblances. Notwithstanding these, one must investigate the Sanskrit etymon 'ukshan', from a verbal form 'ukson' 'to sprinkle', whose function was the sprinkling of the rain upon the earth to bring forth fertility. A rite one finds in the sprinkling of the bull's blood upon the soil. In Greek we read 'υγρός' and in Gothic 'auhsa' or 'auhsus'. The Shamanist Turks abhorred the spilling of blood upon the soil; and the animal most sacrificed was the horse! Besides, the Turkic proposal appears superfluous, so much the more that etymologists are at loggerheads about the origine of the word: in Mongolian there exists 'ükür' and in Tokarian, an Indo-European language, 'Okso'...

Similarly with the second etymon that attracted my attention: 'tü' or 'tüyü' 'colour of a horse' out of which the English 'hue' was presumedly derived, as stated by the author. There are two reasons, I believe, that this suggestion is presumptuous : first of all the Sanskrit attested form 'chhavī', 'skin, complexion, beauty' gave the Gothic 'hiwi' 'form, appearance', and the Swedish 'hy', 'skin', an historical evolution which seems quite possible. Secondly, the Turkic 'tuğ' has its

distant roots with the Chinese'发', which meant and still does mean 'hair', a very probable etymon read in any decent etymological dictionary.

Finally, because both of us were fatigued by all these electronic scrolls and the stars, glittering brightly, offered more contemplating pleasures than those blurred etyma, Gustav pointed to a word that he knew existed in English, 'horde', that, according to the author of these electronic scrolls, was derived from the Turkic 'ordu' 'army'. This is certainly a genuine English borrowing direct from a Turkic language, although there does exist the Sanskrit form 'çardha' 'a herd, troop', which gave the Gothic 'hairda' with the same meaning. So ended out etymological escapade...

We turned our attention to the twinkling stars, and as we did so an idea arose in my mind: this study, which, as Gus had said, contained over two hundred etymologies, appeared to be ideologically motivated. I then began to express my thoughts aloud, turning to my cabinmate, revealing the underlying reasons for these toilsome archeological diggings. Perhaps the author had fallen into the throes of Pan-Turanism, those crank visionaries who lauded that the Turks were at the origins of the Sumeria and Greek civilisations of Asia Minor, that the Kurdish language is a dialect of that great civilizing Turkic language; namely, the Sun Language that radiates far and wide, East to West, North to South! That Iranians are also Turks, and that the Parthian language is not Parthian but Turkic; that the Tajiks, too, are Turks, and do not even know it, simply because Northern Tajiki has been semantically and syntactically influenced by the Uzbek language! That *Gilgamesh* is of Turkic origin and not Babylonian. That even the Indians of North America have Turkic blood running through their Turanian veins; that Mevlana, Ibn Sina and Ibn Farabī are all Turks! Turgut Özal even called Homer a Turkish compatriot because he was born on Turkish soil, as if this soil had always been Turkic, eternally Turkic; a magnetic, solar force, metaphysically rooted, without beginning or end...

Pan-Turanism! Turan is a word read a myriad times in the mediaeval Persian epic *Shahname*, which means the land of the Arya, and is derived from the proper name Turan, one of the sons of the Persian ruler at that time, and written 'توران'. Turkish intellectuals confounded Turan and Turk for their ideological pursuits. The word is both a geographic and ethnic reality of the Iranian peoples who lived in Eastern Iran: Iranians born from the race of Turan! If the innocent or ignorant reader were to read the epic fantasies of the Grey Wolves 'boz kurt' or the Ottoman-Sunna Islamic radicals, he or she would be truly abashed at the universal exploits of the Turkic nomads, exploits clothed in bombastic rhetoric with flashes of self-deceiving complacency and especially *mauvaise foi*...

Gustav, either confused or bored by these insipid subtleties, rubbed his star-gazing eyes and exused himself.

Breakfast was served at eight thirty. No coffee, only tea. Soup and bread with jam and butter. Excellent...As on all cargoes the few passengers have the run of the ship. I loitered about the decks, visited the pilot cabin where I discussed everything and nothing with the red-cheeked captain; a jovial man who sailed the high seas not for high adventure but to fill his pockets with official or/and unofficial *manats*, earned from the State or from subterranean revenues, perhaps even more lucrative than those of the State! One of the crew members, a jolly fellow who always sported a jaunty smile, and with whom I had a long discussion about the events at Gezi Park, called out for me to descend to the bow.

Extraordinary! In the middle of the Caspian Sea, 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...

So much for our Caspian Sea pool adventure aboard the *Karabagh*. Later I learnt that it was at that exact point on our northerly course that the waters of the Caspian were deemed impeccably clean; that is, without petrol rippling through their currents...

Twilight hour on deck with Gustav. The sun majestically slipped into that clean sea of laughter, glowing so red that we could hardly sustain her glare...

Gustav pressed me to explicit my pilgrimage. I went back to our cabin, procured Ahmet Yesvevî's *hikmets*, and as the sun dipped into the Caspian, read him seven strophes of sagacity:

*'I reached twenty-nine years' of age, my state ruinous,
I became not the soil of the Way's Love;
My ruinous state, my insides scolded, my eyes filled with tears,
For this reason, thus, I found shelter in the True One.'*

*At thirty the firewood I gathered they burned,
All that is great they heaped up and abandoned in the world;
Their beatings and insults made me love the True One,
For this reason, thus, I found shelter in the True One.*

*At thirty-one, of Khezr's wine I drank,
From my body Azrail fully fled;
I became amorous, the True One delivered me from sins,
Thereafter I was freed to wend the True One's Way, friends.*

*'At thirty-two came the True One's decree,
I consented to servanthood, desire I felt not;
When I gave my heart, I gave it to You, Light of Guides,
To the strange joy of my heart friends laughed.*

*'At thirty-three I became a cupbearer and served wine,
The winecup in hand I drank to the fill;
Much I struggled against the Devil and his heaps of battalion,
May Allah be praised, my two souls have died, friends.*

*'At thirty-four, wise I became with my knowledge,
''Wisdom speaks'' said my Rabb;
I drank with the Forty, I became a Companion,
My insides and out were filled with the True One's Light, friends.*

*'At thirty-five the Light of Joy within me, I entered a Masjid,
With good many students I founded the Shop of Love,
Whoever wended the twisted Way I insulted and beat,
Good tidings of the True One's Love reached me, friends.*

It goes without saying that my cabinmate's brow weighed heavy with embarrassment; there followed a painful pause, then I succinctly explained certain autobiographical points of the Hodja's life: he had written sixty-two strophes that traced his ascension to Godhood, for at sixty-three he descended into his underground cell in order to attain the highest spheres of Godhood. I had chosen these strophes because the Dutchman was in his thirties and was wending his Way towards...

«You know Gus, once upon a time Hazreti Mohammad was at war with his companions, and all of them were very hungry. He prayed ardently and the angel Gabriel brought him a plate of fresh dates which the Prophet shared with his companions. One of those dates fell upon the burning sands of the desert. Gabriel, who was observing the scene from afar, made the Prophet understand that this fallen date belonged to another believer who lived very far away. "Who will deliver this date to his proprietor?" the Prophet quiered. The voice of Gabriel, responded with clarity: "you will place this date upon the tongue of Arslan Baba, the Master of him who, a hundred years from now, will arrive at Yesî, and there will adopt the orphan, Hodja Ahmet, the Master's spiritual child and disciple, and guide him upon the Way of Self-Accomplishment." So spoke God to the Prophet. As you can see, Gus, the date has a tremendous symbolic value in Sufi writings...»Plainely, the Dutchman thought me pedantic. I carried on nevertheless:

«As to the wine, in the Hodja's case it was purely symbolic and likened to the angel of Death, Azrael. However, in other Sufi poetry, for example Yezid Bistamî's, winedinking was indeed indulged in, but only to demonstrate its impotent inebriety compared to the ecstatic drunkenness when in communion with the Creator:

*'I drank cup after cup of amorous wine;
Neither the wine nor my thirst was quenched.'*

intoned the Hodja...

«Wine is the beverage with which the Devil tempts us; no state, however artificially euphoric, can parallel the euphory of God's contact, be it conscious or subconscious...Thus the Hodja drinks to the health of the Forty, those companions of the Road, they who 'crossed the desert of Self', who accomplished the 'journey to the hinterworld', who experienced the 'pangs of birthhood'; they are the true companions of the Sufi Road, be they invisible or visible. They aid the wender to peel away the veils that obstruct his vision of God's Face, to bend our unworthy steps to the invisible monastery within our hearts, to gather the firewood to ignite the ardour of our souls, whose Light will guide us to Him...» Gustav nodded; he had never heard or read poetry like that. He appeared somewhat distraught...

"Don't worry, not many have, but if they did, perhaps we would have less conflicts in the world. Laziness and docility push people to read only newspapers and other illiterate rubbish where lies and fiction vie for rewards and prizes, where bald statements bespeak ignorance, where the grapevine keeps us ill-informed because entwined by the desiderium of lying politicians, criminal multi-national directors and their servile flunkies on the mass media payroll. Did not James Baldwin once write: *"We do not trust educated people and rarely, alas, do we produce them, for we do not trust the independance of mind which alone makes a genuine education possible."*

«This 'we' was intended for Americans, but the width and breadth of its message goes very far beyond the purple mountains and fruitful plains of that nation...Mass ignorance, like mass media, has become as global as google»...With these rather depressing thoughts, Gustav trudged off to our cabin whilst I remained on deck contemplating the creamy moon. But to tell the truth, I felt rather elated for my voyage was ever unfolding eastwards...

I experienced once again that sensation of being wrested from a streamline movement, borne into that other movement, sometimes tangential with it, yet never for long periods of time. These cursory *effleurements* prove more exploratory than requisital, more phenomenal than solicitous. I have indeed treaded heavily in both movements, the first out of sheer curiosity, the second due to the inevitableness of the self-exiled, without any psychological, social or economic support, especially as an adolescent. I harboured neither regret nor scorn for this streamline or mass movement, since its movers appear so puffed up with pleasure at being manipulated or cajoled into believing themselves 'free to choose'...

Parallal movment, thus, is a marginal movement; self-marginalizing. It has truly provided me a shelter against the manipulating and the manipulated, both caught in the web of mutual deception, or better put, of self-deception. The manipulating believe themselves the masters, those who pull the globalizing strings. The manipulated believe themselves the happy, joyful clients of those globalized strings; the result translates the master/slave dichotomy incarnated by the cynic and the dupe; a dichotomical neurosis which has paralysed the vital élan of humanity, the Creative Imagination of Mankind, and consequently which has forged our ugly, cleaved world...

As the veils of these nocturnal thoughts embued my vision with ugliness, I abandoned the deck and slipped into my cabin; Gus was writing in his journal: «Just finishing some notes about technology,» he said in his husky voice.

«Technology...what a boring subject after having discussed etymologies so seriously?» I slipped off my sandals and lay down in the bunk. He laughed:

«Well, I did leave my computer job after fifteen years of loyal service, fed up with a technology that had no real social function or value other than a market price.» Gus was far from wistful!

«Can you read it to me?» He smiled poignantly and looked down to his booklet.

«I wrote down three points: my company's high-ranking staff members taught us that computer technology educates, makes us more intelligent, and provides easier services for stocking and calculating.»

«Computers do calculate and stock for us; that is undeniable. I'm not sure, though, that they make us more intelligent.»

«Computers trick us into thinking that we are intelligent when we use them. Computer programmers say that children will become more intelligent if we use, for example, tablets in class. If we develop 'moodle' or 'google drive' for educational purposes, and that teaching through books has become old-fashioned, below the social and intellectual scope of the child today. But both these products are very restrictive and off-putting for teachers and students. Tablets or without tablets, they propose nothing attractive educational wise, be it intellectual or aesthetic.»

«I doubt that moodle, Google Drive, tablets or even the inordinate use of a computer will render children any brighter than they are,» I snorted. «Either teachers have been hoodwinked into believing this, or they have resigned to the fact that commercialised electronic equipment governs the principles of relationships today, wherever they be, and that there is no escaping this globalizing theorem. It's all a vast scheme to sell tablets and computer software to the billions of school-consumers of the world.»

«That's why I quit my job; I was assigned to convince gymnasium and high school principals that our computer programmes designed for schoolrooms were indispensable to a child's social and intellectual growth. I didn't believe what I was selling. In fact, I was parroting what had been sent to us from America; there was nothing Dutch about this propaganda, only an imposed American computer system, adapted to the needs of global control and mass herding.» Gustav here was cynical!

«You were told to peddle your wares?» Cynicism will appeal to my sense of humour.

«Yea, it's better to cycle in the world and write about it, than to sell or peddle wares or ideas to schools that you are ashamed of.» Gus was to the point. "Moodle and google drive deaden our imaginations, powtoon and edpuzzle are too time consuming and produce very meagre

results. None of them liberates our desires to transmit but lock them up in programmed slots which kill student and teacher incentives. Teachers told me that they spent hours on an exercise that hardly functioned in class, or that the kids finished in a minute! Education has reached a point of decline and by introducing monotonous technological exercises or games in schools will only slow down the decline and alleviate the weight of our dilemma.

«If you are convinced in what you believe, then you have made the best decision,» came my laconic reply. «I, too, must use computer technology in my lessons at universities and schools, but it only serves as a practical tool or support; these uses have no ontological or existential value to them. Let us say, they are like a car might have been sixty or seven years ago or spoons or forks to the British aristocracy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries! A computer is a mere tool in my hands, not a fetish or a toy...I have no qualms against computer technology, however, it tends as you said, to be a ripe substitute for creative imagination, and especially intuitive thinking as a method of acquiring knowledge and its pedagogical aims. I wonder whether it is the technological attraction that modern man gauges or its educational purport; somewhat like the surgeon who tests new technology on his patients: is it the excitement of the branding of the machine or instrument or the effects of it upon the patient that capture and absorb his attention? I personally dislike my concentration absorbed into the electronic contents or data of a computer programme; I have no desire to dialogue with it; I prefer to dialogue with human beings...Charles Péguy wrote: *«Je ne puis parvenir à me passionner pour ces questions!»*

Gustav closed his journal with a bang, a wry smile spread across his unshaven face «In the West, people are too fascinated by technology; they are so fascinated that they have forgotten how to deal with human beings. Techniciens consider humans to be objects of study, specimens to be analysed or exchanged.» Gus appeared distressed.

«Like doctors treat patients? I interceded. «Patients are objects in the hands of our modern doctors; operations are handled very well, but true medicine is preventive because it is human, and although operating is necessary, the humane doctor will follow up his or her surgery with a dietary treatment to alter the terrain which gave rise to the infection. Yet, the majority of doctors just perform the operation and release the patient, as if the surgery were some technological exploit without a cause or subsequent consequences. Medicine in the West has evolved into technological feats that have abandoned people to themselves ante- and post-surgery.»

«We are all guinea-pigs and objects in the hands of the technocrats!» Gus added rashly. «Our only purpose in life is to be submitted forcefully to their computer programme exercises in schools or their medical progress. You know that these two sectors are where the money is made today? That is our technological triumph!»

«Our defeat, perhaps.» I countered, emphatically. '*La technologie est le trou de cul de la science*,' dixit Roman Gary. But Gus wasn't listening...He got up, shut the lights then threw himself down into the bunk bed without another word. The ship hardly rolled or pitched. It was only the droning of the motors that reminded me that we were out at sea, far from moodle, google drive, hospitals and the festering welter of technological bombardment...

The next morning and afternoon were spent sunning on the decks, discussing Azeri politics with the crew or Gus' new life on the road after fifteen years of technological slavery. I hardly saw the German couple. Gezi Park lay thick on the lips of the whole crew; they besieged me with irrelevant questions since I had just come from Istanbul, where I had witnessed the event either at Taksim Square or from my Elma Dağ window. Gustav had been cycling for so long now that Gezi Park meant nothing to his ears. I answered their questions with levity, neither condoning nor criticizing the Event. Conversation suddenly stopped to observe an Iranian ship en route for Russia. It dawned on me that Astrakhan lay to the North, and that I had spent a week in that town three years ago. A marvelous place where so many nations mix; I had never seen such a bazaar as Astrakhan's! So many gay and clashing colours, fused with the rising sable dust from the streets, whose particles glistened dully amidst the waves of heat from above and people from below. The pungent smells of white cheese from the Caucasus regions, the sweet, ripened, purple figs and coral pink pomegranates mounted high on the wooden stalls that lined the narrow streets and tiny squares. Everything under that seething summer sun was sold at the bazaar of Astrakhan: nails, screws, rugs, animals, food, clothing, wood and metal, glass and plastic wares...the bazaar throbbed like an overpopulated town, a motley vortex of haggling, peddling, joltsing, fleecing and carousing...of a myriad languages babbled in all accents and tones. I had never experienced such an enclosed, pulsating movement of titanic energy...

Astrakhan is the last town on the Volga River Delta before it transforms into the Caspian Sea. 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 saucy 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 voyageur appealed to my instincts for the ontic and existential movement that radically transforms the voyageur as he or she travels on the Road of Life. For this very reason I dedicated my pilgrimage to him...

I translated Afanasya's voyages into French some years ago, hoping that this extraordinary personnage would be read in wider circles; whether he was or not I cannot readily say, although I suspect that the article simply melted into the myriad other articles and essays that swamp the European commercial market...

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...

The Land of the Kazakhs

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! Soviet ships ploughed this sea as if they owned it! Perhaps they did...The Caspian lies squarely in Eurasia, and today serves the many nations that comprise Eurasia. A sea called *Khazar* by the Turkic peoples and the Iranians, it symbolizes a bridge or hyphen between Europe and Asia, in the same way that the Russian Federation today ethnically reveals that point of Encounter between the Western Russo-European and the Eastern Turko-Mongol. Vassili Rozanov summed it up quite nicely when referring to the Russians: «...*ni un peuple oriental ni un peuple occidental, mais une absurdité artistique...*»! Perhaps...

All these Eurasian thoughts swarmed into my head as we stoically waited to disembark upon that vast and arid steppe which extended from the Caspian to Eastern China. We docked at two in the morning. A military vehicle pulled up alongside the ship, and three young soldiers escorted us very politely to the jeep, folded Gus' bicycle with infinite care, lay it in the boot, then sped us off to a dank and dingy customs building where they filled out entry forms for us, stamped our passports and waved us through into Kazakhstan: all this without a single

word...We exited a metal door into a metallic waiting room, full of sleeping Azeris and Kazakhs on metal benches, waiting for a ship's departure...

We were deep into the night, so the Dutchman chose to remain at the customs building until dawn. Why spend money for a few hours' sleep? I fully agreed. However, the German couple argued that to spend the night in such a horrible place made their stomachs turn. Gustav laughed and repeated that the night was over: Gus was always to the point...

I walked out into the moist night with the couple, found two women who were driving into Aktau, gave them the address of the Kirement Hotel, and told the Germans that I would join them tomorrow, and that I would not leave Gustav all alone here. In fact, I quite enjoyed Gus' conversation, and blithe attitude towards life. The German boy, disgruntled, disappeared in the car.

Gustav proposed that we sit outside on a low, cement wall surrounded by shrubs and thick yellowing grass. Here the air was much fresher than inside the waiting room, less infested with mosquitoes...

And there we sat for the remainder of the night, Gustav spinning his tales of cycling adventures, and me listening more than responding, at times dozing off, at times perfectly lucid. At one point, the night air still seeped in blackness, he stared at me, and his bulbous forehead agleam with curiosity and mine overwrought with wrinkled mootness, he asked:

«Are you a *révolté*?» The French word caught me off guard. Gustav did have a knack of flavouring his conversation with French words or formulae: he especially appreciated the expression '*variations sur le même thème*' and used it on sundry occasions, even though some occasions did not require its use! *Soit!* I launched into a very pedantic response...

«A social rebel without a cause» I laughed, cryptically. «Formally, in the 1960's, I did have legitimate claims and demands, or better put *revendications*. At that time, though, pragmatics and rationality should have been harnessed into a sounder and more theorized Idea of existential well-being and ontic goodness: *bonté* is a better word! No theory was postulated. No problem posed, thus nothing really resolved. There was no comprehensive solution simply because we, the *révoltés*, could not convince the American political machine not to confound rebellion with insurrection, well-being with Communism, goodness with mysticism; it was a machine, and perhaps still is today, that deemed and deems itself pragmatic, rational, logical!

«Problems that were finally posited were isolated then crushed. The Black Panthers posited them, made efforts to theorize them, were eventually marginalized and defeated. They proposed a theory to frame their movement, their *revendications*, and direct it into the streamline

consciousness of all Americans...all Europeans...all Africans...any minority group or community who suffered humiliation and depravation. Unfortunately, pragmatism and police brutality isolated, then either destroyed the movement if it was too dangerous, or contained it if the movement was relatively harmless to the establishment. What is being globalized today is the victory over dialectics by the imposing of an isolating pragmatism with police or military intervention to ensure its imposition. A *révolté* thus has little chance of becoming a revolutionary when movements are isolated from one another and annihilated. Gezi Park was a victory in so far as all distinct movements, when melded on that Square, became one vast Movement...This is a rare victory in our globalizing world. I myself chose self-exil in order to preserve my dignity. Are you not doing just that now, Gus?»

«Yes, because I don't believe either in a globalized world or in a world revolution that would change it radically into something else. I don't know what that something else would be, nor do I really care about it. Cycling for me means living in the present, *carpe diem*, after slaving for fifteen year with hard and software products.» Gus fell silent, one that silenced the already deathly silence of the night.

«Ah! The loneliness of the *révolté*...of the rebellious, like the long-distance runner! Neither globalized nor revolutionary...a spinning molecule in our gigantic universe, a wending wayfarer in the chaotic world of cleaved tensions whose contradictions have yet to be deciphered and overcome.» I was inordinately ironic. «This being said, Gus, I believe that I have overcome my mediocrity as a given, as a determined state of being; I believe that I have overcome that herd instinct docility which allows decision-makers to levy a vision of the world that incessantly attempted and still attempts to convince me of its natural, thus ineluctable course. I believe that I have rid myself of the shackles of my tribal condition, my clanish or mafia indoctrination which avers the triumph of community pride and prestige, of ancestral purity and taintlessness, of the all-encompassing superiority of kith and kin. I believe that I have surpassed the static, stifling and fanatical idea that a society or a nation is eternal, and never shall it evolve into something else. No Gus, I believe in movement, continued and dogged movement, in the nomadic thought, but one that refuses to be defined within an ideological framework, catergorized within a mode of reasoning, characterized by global or local colouring...»

Gustav pulled a disgusted face, mine affected serenity: was it because I had dropped out of Society forty-five years ago and the attraction of revolution still gripped me in its charming claws. Or could it be that a Philosophy of Life lived as a marginal was as unfulfilling as a monk without his community, a believer without his or her church, a citizen without a country or State? And yet, in spite of this unresolved contradiction, this condition of *heimatlos*, there is

something exhilarating in the passage from the known to the unknown, that passage of consciously acknowledging why you have chosen that passage and not any other...

The morning birds began their ritornello: that was our signal to get on the move; it snapped those irksome emotions that tugged at my conscious, ones undoubtedly that had not as yet overcome the contradiction of a maverick without a coterie...without an institutional bond...

We began the ten-kilometre walk as the first rays of pale light settled over the gardens and parking lot of the port. Gustav stretched his muscles, built up his bike. It took him no more than five minutes to do so! I reminded him that my little legs were no match for his large and long ones: he could have ridden into town, but we were now together, and together we set out...

As I said, the distance was ten kilometres: a very boring and ugly ten kilometres. The exercise proved invigorating enough, but hiking amongst huge oil pipes, tawny shrubs and grass, stretches of rocky desert, past derelict huts and shacks and abandoned cafés on a thin strip of asphalt road afforded no great joy for either of us. A pack of howling dogs threatened us from the side of the twilight-lit road, but they kept their distance. Gus shouted at them, then rambled on about the loneliness of the cyclist, and admitted that whilst cycling he had hitherto only spoken to foreigners, most of whom were cyclists, and felt quite estranged from the people of the countries that he traversed, with whom he had absolutely no contact, firstly because he was completely autonomous on his bike, and secondly because he spoke no foreign language besides English. Indeed, to walk the bicycle that morning offered him a refreshing change: to touch the earth with one's feet. To absorb the telluric forces that recharge our *élan vital*. To cross, slowly, unknown passages. To relinquish or abandon one's Self and confide in the Other. This entails the touching of the soil, of the earth with one's feet...Here on that ten kilometre stretch, the whole scene embrowned itself within a sort of forsaken sorrow...

Luckily the infamous Kiremet Hotel lay just at the edge of the Northern suburbs of Aktau, to the right of the main road from the port. Gustav had this address written in his cheap hostels or hotels notebook, and proposed that we share a room for the night; he would head out in the morning for the Uzbekistan border, a parched expanse of mirthless dunes without any hamlet or village...according to his map...

We got to the hotel very early, so the woman at the desk told us to come back at noon. Gus informed me about the horrors of this place as described by the many blogger-cyclists who had spent a night there; indeed it cost only 1,000 *tengi* for a bed, the cheapest hotel I would find during my whole pilgrimage. *Tengi*, the Kazakh money, is a derivative of the Russian 'деньги' /dengi/. The Dutchman suggested we sack it out for a while, go to the police station for the required second stamp, then return to the hotel. I would also profit from this occasion to change

some dollars into *tengi*. How astonished he became when I procured two fifty dollar bills from my trusty money-belt.

« You carry all your cash on you?» came his startled question.

«Of course, the safest system in the world.» I was laconic. He laughed that husky, manly laugh of his.

«The most primitive system, you mean. I used to do that when I was a child. You know, today we have bank or credit cards to get or change money.»

«Oh really,» I beamed, naïvely, «I must have remained at the primitive or adolescent stage; never have I possessed either credit card or any other intermediary between me and cash!» His bushy eyebrows arched in consternation. Without a word he lay down on the cement sidewalk after propping his bicycle against a stone wall and closed his eyes. I climbed atop the low stone wall and slept for a half hour so so.

When the white sun rose sufficiently enough to sweat us out of slumber, we headed for the local police station in quest of that second mandatory but ridiculous stamp...as if a visa and one entry stamp weren't enough! I asked several people where the police station could be found, and quite by luck it was located five minutes from the Kiremet.

Gustav left his bike outside the large, one-storey building; as I feared, we walked into a bedlam. Throngs of jostling people, mostly women, were pivoting round tables, gyrating about in circles, filling out sheets of paper, crowding about the doors of several offices, yelling or arguing in Uzbek, Russian, Kazakh and in other languages that I hardly identified. A huge police officer pointed to a particular bunch of women, where he said, our second stamp could be procured. We plunged into the vortex of that lot, much to their dislike; they became very nasty with us. Gus had no qualms about jumping queues; he was very big and played the naïve fool who absentmindedly works his way through mobs and droves in a befuddled daze. And indeed he managed to wiggle his way into the bureau, his passport high in hand, looking over the heads of several obfuscated women. I had not his stature nor build, and found myself engaged in a rather heated argument with a woman at the door who barred my way; I was shouting to her in Turkish and she in Uzbek, methinks. Even the police behind the four or five counters stared at us in bewilderment. I wonder if they understood us. I for one hardly understood her ribald arguments, but I'm sure she understood mine well enough. Be that as it may, my audacious companion called to me in the most benighed manner, caught the attention of the policeman behind the counter, grabbed the passport from my outstretched hand, and merely handed them to the policeman over the agitated heads of the two or three women huddled in front of him! I broke through the barred doorway, spoke to the policeman in

Russian; he jotted down my information: names, hotel address, duration of stay, next destination, etc, then disappeared with our passports, but not before telling us to come back in an hour or so, and much to the dismay and wrath of all those grit-toothed women. And that as they say was that...

Outside at the front gate, we ate some fruit as we waited for our stamps. The Dutchman decided to push off immediately for Uzbekistan; he had no real motive to remain in Aktau. He was not in Kazakhstan (or anywhere for that matter) to pursue any ontological or existential project, nor study its folklore or language; he was bent on cycling to Indonesia, and all his energy had been summoned up to accomplish that feat. For a feat it was, nothing more, nothing less. I wished him the best of luck, and when we received our second stamp, free of charge, he set off rapidly for the mirthless dunes of the barren and soulless territory that separates Kazakhstan from Uzbekistan. I ambled back to the Kiremet, and the women in charge put me into a big room with four beds and a window that framed a yellowing garden and a side street where few cars passed.

I inquired about the German couple and the woman, who spoke excellent Russian, confirmed their arrival very early in the morning.

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 or 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. This would mean two nights on different trains, which meant that I would have no designated berth, thus either spend the two nights seated, or because the wagons would be

more or less empty, sleep one of the nights in a berth. My somber calculations would turn out absolutely wrong...

With my tickets secured, I inquired about the whereabouts of the train station. There was no direct bus, one had to change at the corner of the new mosque, and carry on for some seven or eight kilometres. The whole tedious journey needed about an hour or so.

The comings and goings from my hotel to the centre of Aktau, or the excursions into the different sections or zones of the town, made me realize the vastitude of the spaces that I would soon traverse: Aktau appeared so small on the map, but in reality shops, restaurants, offices and flats were at such a distance from one another that to cross the length of the centre, for example, required over a solid hour's walk! There seemed to be so much space to be filled, so much emptiness to cross! Riding buses from one zone to another seemed endless. As to the people from whom I would ask directions or other daily necessities in the streets, if not unfriendly, were to a certain extent cold, aloof, untouchable, nothing like the Causcasus people or the Turks of Turkey; perhaps an admixture of Chinese aloofness with a smattering of Russian contempt...

Whilst at the 'old market' I came across an old woman selling *kvas* 'квас' out of a wooden keg. Now *kvas* is my favourite beverage; I had become addicted to the stuff in Russia. Quite frankly, only in Kiev, which was particularly tasty, and in a small town in Azerbaijan did I find *kvas* outside of Russia. It was no where to be drunk in Georgia nor in Armenia. The old woman told me that *kvas* was sold everywhere in Kazakhstan. Now what is exactly *kvas*? Apparently this light, refreshing alcoholic brew, made from fermented bread, wheat, rye and barley has been a national drink of Russia since the XVI century. However, it has become a manufactured product since the 1900's when an enterprising Russian founded a brewery at Harbin, at that time a province of Russia (the Orthodox church has been transformed into a museum there!), and began producing it industrially. The finest tasting *kvas* that I drank in Russia was in Samarra, and outside of Russia, in Kiev, although I will say that the *kvas* of Kazakhstan rivalled that of Kiev's! Ironically enough, it is considered uncouth to order *kvas* at a restaurant in Russia, uncouthness which I indulged in quite provokingly, much to the dislike to those who had invited me, wine deemed the more sophisticated drink during a restaurant diner. *Kvas* was drunk only by the popular folk...or so my hosts crudely and donnishly boasted...

At nightfall I would return to my hotel and confront the hordes of mosquitoes. This was no joke; the bloggers on this point exaggerated not! There were literally thousands of them in the rooms of that fleazy Kiremet. My room was adjacent to the womens' who owned or ran the place; their screaming and ranting stunned me by its violence, and yet I think they were merely having a chat. They reminded me of the Chinese hotel owners I had to deal with in Southern China: heartless, loud, bawdy, cunning...Anyway, as they bawled on into the night, before my

roommates returned from their piss-ups (the German couple on the first night and two German cyclists on the second), I pranced about the room reciting the Hodja's *hikmets* whilst smashing mosquitoes against the flimsey, plasterboard walls. Each time a mosquito bloodied the peeling walls, I cried victory. Now this entailed loud blows to those plasterboard walls, however, the women never banged on their walls to allay my wrath, nor did the volume of their pitch ever abate! So I continued merrily on, painting the plaster white and red with mosquito proboscis and blood. Once I pulverized three in one titantic blow, feat that formed a Pascalian triangle just over my bed, but without blood, only three minuscule proboscis spots. That deadly coup silenced, momentarily, the women; I listened for a while and curtailed my onslaught until they resumed their vibrant discussion...Then I resumed my litany:

*'At thirty-six I became the perfect Master,
They revealed to me the beautiful face of Mohammad the Just;
For this reason my eyes shed tears, my back stooped,
The dagger of Love pierced my bosom and stabbed my heart, friends.*

*'At thirty-seven I entered unawakened,
Wayward I wended towards the True One, moved by compassion;
At the hour of Dawn, crying, moaningly
I repented, accepting my Hodja, friends.*

*'At thirty-eight I entered the Way, my life spent,
I cried not, my time of death approaching;
The appointed hour come, the goblet was held up to me,
I remained unaware, my life having reached its end, friends.*

*'I turned thirty-nine, loneliness filled me,
Such a pity, my life expended, where was I to worship?
In those who worship the True One sweet joy swells up,
Without obedience my red face pales white.*

*'At forty-one I cleansed myself lest I not find the Way,
I was inflamed with each mystery lest I not see the knightly monks;
Of my sins I repented, fearfully I returned,
God, my great Hodja, I came to take shelter in You.*

*At forty-two I followed the Road that I desired,
I gave my heart to the One with devotion;
I strolled about the Kalem, passing through Arş, Kürsü and Levh,
God, my great Hodja, I came to take shelter in You.*

*'At forty-three I pursued the True One with sighs,
Tears shut my eyes embued with dew;
I crossed deserts that I filled with mirages,
God, my great Hodja, I came to take shelter in You.'*

To ascend the rungs of Divinehood upon the vehicle of theophanic discourse, Kalem, up to the seventh rung, Kürsü, then on to the ninth rung, Arş, and finally to God Himself, Levh, and within these mosquito-splattered walls was at all possible? What shelter have I ascended to...or descended to?..

In spite of the hundreds massacred to the intonations of Ahmet Yesevî (would all this be considered blasphemous?) mosquitoes buzzed and whizzed relentlessly at our heads the entire night. The heat was unbearable, but I covered my whole body and face with sheets and clothes, the German couple did the same. The second night the two German cyclists were so fraught with expectation of a sleepless night that they tried to pitch their tent in the middle of the room. To no avail; it wouldn't stand. They thus wrapped shirts round their heads, turban-style, and bore the brunt of those beastly, bloody buggers. Oddly enough, whether it be due to my nocturnal armour or wariness of a wily enemy, not once did a mosquito bite me during those two sullied nights! So much for the Kiremet Hotel at Aktau...

Towards the Aral Sea

To ride trains promises surprises, both good and bad, to the hieing wayfarer. In India, train travel can be a nightmare if a berth is not secured, and boarding a train in Northern India may produce scenes of extreme hysteria and violence. In Calcutta, I was literally knocked to the floor of a wagon whilst battling for a seat!

Chinese organization and discipline render boarding and riding trains in China quite an uneventful experience. Russian railroad organization, a legacy of the Soviet period, has its charms, oftentimes romantic, in boarding and especially in riding Russian trains. Russians settle in for the night, pyjamas and slippers, are very polite and enjoy conversation once everyone is seated and the train off on its destination, with great punctuality...Hot water is always available, and tea aplenty...

Now in Kazakhstan, train boarding and riding, albeit a legacy of Soviet organization, tends to demarcate itself from its Soviet progenitor, and indulge its own Kazakh savour: a tiny, energetic woman orchestrated people about in the wagon I boarded, but never did she check

tickets or personal documents, a blunder unheard of in China or in Russia. (I shan't discuss Indian customs on these niceties!) Second, no one would let me take a seat in their compartment, all of which were open; that is, there are no sliding doors for privacy. Indeed, I had no specific seat number, but...The energetic woman waved me on towards the rear of the wagon. Needless to say, that waving hand ruffled my feathers, so I stomped down the aisle, into the toilet space, where two or three young boys were smoking away, decided to slip into the interstice between two wagons and there threw my backpack down in wrath. A few seconds later three men entered and began smoking. The window, either opaque or caked with filth, nothing could be discerned outside! It wouldn't open either. That meant cigarette fumes and choking heat for a day and a half. I plopped down on my backpack watching the three leery-looking men puff away without a word amongst them. One or two cast me puzzled glances, then attempted conversation in Russian. I was about to take up their gambit when suddenly that tiny *chef d'orchestra* burst into the smoking zone and gestured for me to follow her ; I promptly obeyed. She ordered me to sit down in a compartment with a huge family of six or seven, and whose family head, an elderly, Chinese-bearded patriarch, pleasantly welcomed me into their horde by sliding a bit towards the window, gesture which they had refused to effect ten minutes earlier when I desperately sought a tiny space for myself! I thus squeezed between the patriarch and a young lad whose smile illumined the darkness of that rattling wagon. I made myself comfortable, so much moreso that these people spoke very good Russian, especially the patriarch, and he most of all, overwhelmed me with questions. My journey was pleasantly spent thanks to their belated but generous gestures, coarse in appearance, but mild in word and deed...

The heat rose. It seemed to wither every member of this family. Some had informed me in Aktau that the temperatures could drop to minus forty in the winter and rise to thirty-five or forty in the summer. We were peaking at thirty-three or four in the middle of July...

Ramazan had begun since the end of June, and I felt a bit self-conscious to eat in front of the Kazakhs, all of whom were Sunna, thus fasters. In Azerbaijan, since the majority of the Muslim population is Shia, I hadn't noticed much fasting in Baku, nor on the ship: men and women, young and old, were stuffing their faces with food or cigarette smoke in restaurants, cafés or parks. At the refugee camp of the port, no one was fasting! In Kazakhstan, ostensibly, the fast was followed as ritually prescribed, albeit in Aktau much eating and drinking and smoking filled the small restaurants and street corners. The two women managers of the Kiremet smoked like dockers all day long whilst stuffing their moon-shaped faces with sunflower seeds (spitting the shells on the floor) and peanuts...

I had more or else clarified my situation as a foreigner travelling in Kazakhstan much to the delight of the patriarch: his pierce, gimlet eyes indeed sharpened when the name of Hodja

Ahmet Yesevî slipped off my chapped and creviced lips. A smile flitted across his smooth and compressed ones, and he asked me to read a few strophes of sagacity. I retrieved my edition, overwrought with emotion: Why did he not wish to read it himself? Did he want to test me or was he illiterate? I opened at random and read these four strophes:

*'At forty-four Love was howling in the markets,
I walked through rose gardens howling and crying;
Like Mansur, Love gave my head to the gallows,
God, my great Hodja, I came to take shelter in You.'*

*'At forty-five I came longing for a need from You,
Of the faults I have committed I wish to repent;
I know, Divine One, that Your tenderness is infinite;
God, my great Hodja, I came to take shelter in You.'*

*'At forty-six pleasure and joy filled and overflowed me,
Drops of falling tenderness saved me from the devil.
Inspired by the True One, the door opened and a Companion I became,
God, my great Hodja, I came to take shelter in You.'*

*'At forty-seven my saintly soul grew weary,
My Hodja held a cup of wine, became a cupbearer;
The devil came and swallowed his own perverted spirit,
God, my great Hodja, I came to take shelter in You.'*

I read them aloud in Old Turkic, and he seemed to have not only understood my accent, but derived a certain delight from the reading. Indeed, the Hodja's language is akin to Kazakh and Uzbek, and for those who know Persian, this language rings if not distinctly, with uncanny familiarity...The partriarch smiled:

« The ascetics of our country sleep on kilims in the winter and on reed-mats in the summer. » Then he began to recite a poem in Kazakh, which afterwards he wrote down for me in Kazakh (thus he was perfectly literate) and in Russian. Here is my uninspiring translation:

*'Hey friend of our castle, the doors remain open,
Wide or ajar, illumined or dimly lit;
for those of the Way, weary or waylaid,
Always welcomed are you. Through our doors of charity,
The taste of food resembles my own inner state.'*

As he chanted these wonderful verses he pointed out into the sun-bathed wasteland; we were crossing a desert. Sandy, yellow steppes kneaded by the sun and winds, bulged with huge mountains of ochre-coloured rock: Bare and brawny lay aslant a range of piedbald mountainous dunes, whose sandstone flanks swelled with green and light red veins. I inquired whether this desert was inhabited by people and the whole family nodded yes in unison.

«Petrol and gas lie out there,» an adolescent pronounced in shaky Russian but in a thundering voice, his eyes widening in a stormy grey when suddenly a herd of wild camels raced across our picture-window! «Men work in the desert for petrol and gas; they hunt wild camels for food.»

At the word food my stomach began to grumble, but I refrained from eating my fruit and bread. The sun was too high, and no one made a move to eat. The patriarch opened a red basket, pulled out a small, prayer mat (secade), spread it out on our seat, put on a skull cap and prayed in the direction of the unfolding desert, outside our picture-window. When he finished no one drank or ate. I skulked about the train car and saw a few people eating and drinking; so I ate my apples and raisins in a corner of the wagon, near the toilet, then went back to my seat: no one was eating; the whole family had dozed off... I couldn't get over the fact that these Kazakhs spoke such fluid Russian. Of course there are historical reasons for this, but still, such fluency and precision, at least to my ears, impressed me.

The Russians conquered this country and the other Turkic nations of Central Asia during the XIX century in the most efficient and brutal manner, as all colonizers have done, be they the English, French, Spanish, Dutch, German, Ottomans. (Odd, when I explain to my Turkish students that they were colonizers they never believe me, deeming this appellation reserved for Westerners!) It was Alexandre the Second who started the movement eastwards, militarily seizing Verny or today's Alma-Ata in 1853, Samarkand in 1868 and Bukhara in 1873, the French and English having barred the Russians from their westward élan in the Crimea. The Russian thrust eastwards corresponds to the period of the English-Persian wars, and those two debacles suffered by the English in Bactria, today's Afghanistan. The Russian military built a fortress at Perovski, Kızıl Ordu today, 'Red Army'! The Czar sent scientists, philologists, ethnologists and artists to these newly conquered lands, where unfamiliarity and oddity melded with hostility and bitterness; the Russian soldiers hardly respected the religious rites or customs of the indigeneous. Skobelev was the hero of the Turkmenistan conquest, effected in the most violent and pitiless manner in his 'programme' of sedentarizing the savage nomads! This being said, not all Russian officers brutalized their newly conquered booty: a certain Von Kaufman, who administered Turkmenistan, respected Islamic customs, organized scientific expeditions and even opened museums in Russia, which published articles and books on the discoveries made in Central Asia. Within a few years of his administration, some 3,566 manuscripts were

collected and sent to Moscow, depicting all the facets of nomadic life of the Kazakhs, Kabards, Uzbeks, Kumaks, Avars, Turkmen, etc. These enlightened studies attracted artists of all categories. An Oriental School was inaugurated by Sergui Ouvarov. In the *Captain's Daughter* by Pushkin, we read:

'Beyond stretched the Kirghiz Steppes. I plunged into my reflexions which were for the most part melancholic...'

A rather romantic rendering which contrasted with martial cruelty...

The Wandering Painters of the XIX century Russia debunked the West in favour of *Lux Orientalis*: the fatherland of the Russian soul, or simply, the soul of Russia as Nicolas Berdiaev had occasion to aver! Certain Russian intellectuals even cultivated the theory that the origins of the Aryan race were found in Central Asia, and it was Russia's sacred mission to revive this dormant order of nobility and supremacy. In the bombastic words of Esper Oukhtomsky: *'Asia has both distressed and revived us'*, words couched in his *Voyage to the East of his Imperial Highness*. Amidst the ashes of the East, the Russian soul sloughed its nefarious Westernism only to resuscitate in bright Oriental garb...

Treaties and amities were founded between the Khanats of Bukhara and the Russian officers. Many Russians became so habituated to the East that they chose to live there, even wedding the steppic beauties of the Orient, much to the disdain of the Russian women at home! The colonial Okonstantin von Kaufman, after fourteen years of combat, settled into a cozy cushion of divan lethargy, taking up residence in Timor's palace, amusing himself by 'playing' emperor on the former lame-leg's throne, who, and let me remind my readers, was the genius behind Hodja Ahmet Yesevî's mausoleum in Tūrkestan...

The Soviet Union inherited this initial czarist colonization, transforming the ideological motivations and reasoning behind it into a dialectic progress, produced through historical materialism. It is known that the majority of the Muslims fought for the Red Army hoping for a better materialistic future without the swinging burner of inebriating incense! Whether this materialistic future transpired for them is debatable... When the Soviet Union crumbled, Putin's ideals of a vast Russian Federation gained enthusiastic adherence and allegiances amongst all the Turkic nations, now independant, currently under the auspices of Russian liberalism, neither imperialist nor communist, but behind whose paternalistic shield lies the looming shadows of the Russian language, her civilization and culture, her love of expansion: economic, religious...military...It is, thus, for all these historical reasons that forty percent of Kazakhstan's population is Russian, whereas thirty-eight percent, more or less, is Kazakh! Kazakhstan, indeed, hosts the largest Russian population of the Turkic Republics of Central Asia...

The Russian-made train rolled languishly over the flat, sandy steppes. Two-humped camels raced across the screen of my window, silently screaming. Were they being pursued ...hunted? My eyes fixed upon the window-theâtre; the movement of the train rocked me gently into a somnolent state as the two-humped camels disappeared from the stage, replaced by an emptiness, slowly filling with late afternoon shadows. For a instant, or should I say in a blink of an eye, an *Augenblink*, my mind experienced that soothing sensation of coexisting simultaneously in both the Present and the ontic Past, that Past of the most archaic nature which belongs to all animate beings, not only me. What Bergson had formulated as '*le saut dans l'ontologie*'. I followed the outer, spatial movement of the two-humped camels, who had magically appeared on the stage, whilst concentrated on my own psychological inner movement; the parallel movements combined in one englobing flux because my reflexive movement embraced both, creating thus a monistic triplicity that allowed me to coexist in the Present and the Past. The heat grew oppressive; I found it tedious to endure the state into which I had so haphazardly fallen. My mouth was so parched and my tongue so stiff and coarse...I thumbed through my translations and chose a *hikmet* at random, hoping the choice of words would relieve the strain and oddity of the leap:

*'Silence reached my morning ears,
« Invoke » it said, thus I walked and invoked;
As to the loveless I have seen, they remained on the Road,
For that reason I founded the Shop of Love.'*

The 'Shop of Love' *'âşk dükkân'*...such a noble commerce where no thing is sold...

The train came to a halt. The family awoke as quickly as they had fallen into a deep sleep. They rapidly readied their belongings, wished me the best of luck 'удачна'...and hurried off. I was left alone in a four-bunk compartment; I chose the upper berth for the night, and just in time too, for dozens of passengers had boarded and were haggling for bedspace...

Darkness crept over the steppes. I stretched out in my berth: the ontic leap bears witness to the inseparability of Present and Past, alerts one to the signification of the expression *Sense of the Past*, touched by the senses, all our senses, because experienced *hic et nunc*. Senses awakened by a sound, the sight of an object, an odour, the light brush of a hand or garment, the taste of drink or food. The senses explode within our memory as Events that surpass us as individuals, that comprise the whole of Humanity's History; in other words, mine! I closed my eyes and the visions abandoned me to a deep sleep, and in lieu of a series of amusing images, I felt ringed by an utter, velvet darkness...

That night I was petrified by the cold that knifed through the train car. My jacket served as a blanket, but still...Indeed, the desert is that abode of extremes: stifling heat in the day, biting cold at night. Were the other snoring sleepers shivering as much as I? It was doubtful, because their snores and whistles filled the car like so many discordant notes of a badly composed musical score...Drowsiness...dozing...deep sleep...In the night I heard my soul wafting to higher regions, unsolicited by daily commerce; had I stumbled into the 'Shop of Love? 'ô God, I die in your name and live in your name'...Drink up ! Drink up your milk, child! Is not milk a healing tonic for the world-weary and searching? Are you to be put off by heaps of dreams that have neither tail nor head? Tes yeux dorment, certes, mais ton cœur, veille-t-il? Voyage...voyages-tu en esprit ou en corps? J'ai fait descendre sur toi un Livre que tu liras endormi et éveillé...The birds will lead you to your Destiny: higher...higher...fly ever higher on the wing; spread those feathered wings ever wider and soar to the lofty nest. May each dreamable dream strike you like the rays of Dawn...That night I spoke to my best friend Kenneth, who had hanged himself in the 1970s. But I can't remember his words...nor mine...Then I discerned the whispers of my neighbours, awakening after deep slumber: « Glory to God who makes me live after having made me die; resurrection is His alone...»

I felt extremely groggy the next morning. The tiny, energetic woman, up and prancing about the wagon, politely offered me a cup of tea. She had mellowed out since her initial nervous flutterings at Aktau, and we had exchanged pleasantries on two or three occasions. In fact, an hour or so later, she invited me to her compartment where friends of hers were busily devouring olives, white cheese and bread, all doused with hot tea. The gay eaters made a tiny place for me, and immersed within Kazakh, Russian and Turkish (there was an Azeri amongst them), we all ate, drank and conversed in high, merry tones. The wretchedness dissolved and a certain elevation lifted me beyond that train into regions where I had been that night, where languages clashed and collided in the most unharmonious, discordant, unmelodious symphony...

I slept on and off most of the day, sweat poured off my face, dripped down my chest and belly, irritated my crotch! We pulled into Oktjabr'sk about three; the train from Aktyabr'sk would get in at six thirty (incertum).

Inside the rather large and clean train station, I made a bee-line for the toilet. I was desperate, but the fat woman at the toilet counter would not let me in without first paying. I had to undo my pack to get some change in *tengi*. When I emerged, two young, chubby-faced soldiers were waiting for me in the corridor. Politely, but firmly, they escorted me to a diminutive room, where another soldier, much older and less chubby-faced, interrogated me on my motivations for visiting Kazakhstan as he inspected my twice-stamped, crumbled piece of paper. He then began to rummage through my backpack quite unceremoniously. He pulled out the Hodja's

hikmets, leafed through the worn-out, grey-thumbed volumn and smiled a wide, poignant smile, as if he had discovered a new toy, or an immense gold-glittering treasure like Monte Cristo had done! Happily he pointed to my scribbled notes and translations in the marges, and even perused some of the *hikmets* in Old Turkic. In short, the soldier was elated! Coming back to his old self, however, he did very officially, and may I add rather delicately, too, place all the clothes and books that had been roughly wretched from my backpack and strewn on the hackney wooden table back into the bag, then shook my hand. The metamorphosis stunned me: in his excellent Russian he rambled on about the Hodja Ahmet, had pilgrimaged to T rkestan, and even pressed me to stay at the Yesev  university dormitory, cheap and clean. If this were not possible, he wrote down the address of a cheap, clean hotel, a five minute walk from the *turbeh*. He then slapped me on the shoulder and informed me that I could eat at the station restaurant on the second floor; that too was cheap and clean...

Relieved that Ahmet Yesev  had spared me the uncertainties of that unexpected inquisition, I climbed the wide staircase to the veranda-like second floor, and briskly walked into a medium-sized white-walled caf : it was oddly empty. I mean for a train station caf  or restaurant it was oddly empty...noiseless, uncannily incongruous to a normal train station caf  or restaurant. No one behind the counter nor at the cash register, either. I sat down, notwithstanding. Suddenly in strode two very plump, pale-faced women: Russians *  coup s r*! They filled the noiselessness with strident chatter, came fluttering over to me like hawks upon a meek prey, and chirped that they only had lentil soup, bread and eggs. That would do fine. Then they flew off to fetch a wooden-frame, dragged it across the linoleum floor, which made a shrill, screeching sound, and attempted to fit it, or better put, cram it into a hole in the wall. I heroically came to their rescue, fit the very heavy pane into the frame, and for my heroic efforts, gained a cup of coffee, a bar of chocolate and an hour of incessant chatter of which I understood more or less fifty percent! My guerdon consumed, I took leave of those two loquacious ladies, trotted down to the platform and sat opposite the empty rails. Now and then a few passengers truddled bundles about the platform or crossed them, but the emptiness of the station and the platforms, in spite of the devastating heat, chilled my bones. There is indeed something frightening about public transport zones that cringe under the weight of silence and immobility; it is difficult to describe, a sort of vacuum through which people stride but whose footsteps produce no echo; people talk, yet their mouths open and close in muted exchange. No loud-speaker blares out announcements, so common in Russian train stations, for example. No station master, with his gay shrilling whistle, broke the icy chill. When the train did pull in, on time, I experienced that jolt which the intense and unswerving writer or reader feels when the unexpected shrill ring of a telephone dislocates his or her concentrated state of mind...

The train car hostess, a rough-faced, pudgy woman, wretched the ticket from my hand and ushered me swiftly to the last compartment of the wagon, next to the constant flushing of the

toilet. At least a bed had been assigned to me. Two athletic men sat opposite me, whilst abreast, a young man was absorbed in eating his meal: the fast was broken for that day! *Capeci caxap* in Kazakh, after the evening prayer: намазшам...

The two sullen men opposite me spoke quietly amongst themselves, every now and then casting a sharp glance in my direction; I affected somnolence. Tired of this acting, I ate a few oranges and a piece of bread. The taller of the two, a rather handsome man with very fine features, whose paleness contrasted strikingly with his companion's swarthier complexion, offered me a swig of Kazakh vodka, which I did not dare refuse. Immediately, the effects of the brew set my insides afire! He engaged, at first, in a polite and formal chat, expressing himself in perfect Russian. He grew more animated when I described my sea journeys over the Black Sea and the Caspian, and my reminiscing on those over the Atlantic and Indian Oceans many years ago. They had both been officers in the Soviet Navy, and were now security officers under contract with some Kazakh private company. Their faces glowed brighter and brighter when they learned that I had attempted to join the Merchant Marines, but failed the entry examination; a failure that produced a sigh of general commiseration. But a renewed glow girt the darkness of the compartment in an aura of joy when I reported my twenty-day voyage from England to Durban on the *Edinburg Castle*. And how my own heart leapt, either from the vodka, or from their sea-faring tales of breaking through the frozen waters of the Arctic Ocean on Soviet battleships, or cruising silently over the oily, topical ones of the Red Sea in route to Somalia or Angola. They had sailed to Vietnam, China, had even been to the port of Marseilles, which they described as an Oriental city! As their tales waxed thick and the vodka waned lower and lower in that stout, nomad bottle, my body filled with the warmth of comradeship...a sort of community warmth when travellers relate their travels upon the high seas, adventures and misadventures at ports of call. And although many of my comrades' words escaped me, either from my lack of linguistic precision, the effects of the robust vodka or fatigue in general, all these stories stirred my mariner's blood, crimsoned my face agleam with enthusiasm and fervour.

The train at one point sloughed its earthy support and seemed to sail over the darkened steppes, the pitch and roll of our cabin, as we peered out the port hole, washed us all back to the heroic days of the sea-lords! Are not trains little boats? The handsome sailor insisted that his navy pension was adequate, but he enjoyed working, enjoyed team spirit and manly brotherhood. He smiled poignantly. His ruddy-cheeked mate nodded in the affirmative; he spoke only in spurts and rose quite often to have a cigarette or take a pee...Bored passengers who shuffled back and forth either to the toilet or to have a smoke, joined us in our cabin, all aglow, nodding their heads, adding snippets of phrases or snorts of approval. We had been to Africa at the same epoch: the 1970s. They, Red Army sailors, I a belly-bloated *bourlingueur* exiting the Sahara like a ghost its mortal coil...

How many hours passed in fervent reminiscence I cannot recall. Yet, the passion of those memories and fusion of Present and Past nearly suffocated me with elation. Dreamily my words sailed forth, as dreamily as theirs flowed in, like the sluggish fanning wakes of the Mekong or the ebb and tide of the African and Indian seas...

I slept so soundly that night, a sleep I had not as yet experienced on my pilgrimage. And when I awoke at the white light of Dawn, my mind was suffused with delight and hope. "He who dreamed of me, saw me in a state of awakening...He who dreamed of me, dreamed of reality..." murmured a soft voice within...

My cabinmates had descended at their port of call during the night, and mine lay in sight...at the thin line traced by the brightening sky and the flatness of the steppic sands. We berthed at Aral'sk about six in the morning...

The Waterless Sea of Aral'sk

'Ce qui enrage l'homme moderne-l'homme borné- c'est que la Nature est parfaitement indépendante de lui...parfaitement utile en Elle-même...'

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 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...

The sea lies practically dry today, not because of the exploitation, and the canneries that still hang limply off the eroding banks, but because of Stalin's ingenious plans to plant Communist cotton round the Northern part of the sea, which, coupled with the lack of rainfall, consequently

led to the slow drying of the waters, of which a few lingering puddles and several still glittering stretches of water, especially on the Kazakh side, have survived.

The reception hall smelt of mothballs and decadence, a particular stench that marries well in out of the way, obsolete hotels. I thought the price of a room -3,000 *tengi*- rather steep, and began to negotiate with the gimlet-eyed, moon-faced, middle-aged receptionist: she was a stubborn one: in no way would the foxy lady lower her price; she shook her head and finger in the most disdainful manner, lifting her double chin a bit to show her contempt for such transactions...

Just then through the doors three tourists briskly tumbled in, Frenchmen all of them, gathering from their nervous gesticulations and loud, incessant, enthusiastic interjections. They rolled towards the reception desk like a tidal wave. The younger of the three, in a very inflated voice, asked about a room in broken Russian. All three appeared to be excited about something, the older couple, waving their hands and talking rapidly between themselves, but loud enough for me to understand every word. It was their arrival to Aral'sk! To this decrepid hotel...Quickly and without standing on ceremony they offered to bail me out of my predicament, as if they had deciphered the situation: if I were willing to share a room with their son, he and I would only pay 1,500 instead of 3,000 *tengi*! No one needed to bend my arm when it came to frugality; I accepted, all agog. The hotel woman wrenched the money out of our hands and pointed to the right, where a wooden staircase led to the Soviet-style, wide, dimly-lit, thread-bare carpet smelling corridor, and thus to our rooms.

They were as seedy as the hall below; could it have been otherwise? The carpet soiled with suspicious stains hadn't been vacuumed or swept in ages. The moth-eaten curtains were stiff as a starched collar, and the russet streaks in the bathtub bore witness to either complete apathy or customary negligence...in short, to better days. Half price was half price...

My young roommate, Jean, a student of Russian at his high school in France, had accompanied his parents to immerse himself in the Russian language. His parents, Grégoire and Françoise, he, sporting a tangled beard, she, obsidian black, curly hair, knocked at our door and proposed a walk on the sandy Aral Sea. Yes, today one walks upon the cracked sea-bed of the Aral. We trudged down the carpet-worn steps, and to our left, past some very lush gardens, lay the forlorn Aral Sea...What a triste spectacle...

« This must be the greatest ecological tragedy in the History of mankind! » Grégoire expounded prosaically, as he snapped dozens and dozens of photos with an extremely professional air and equally professional camera. I gaped in awe: a vast bassin surrounded us; on the Southern bank stood ramshackled cannaries, in front of each rose huge rusting cranes that looked like the dinosaurs one sees at the Museum of Natural History in New York. Not far from our position on the sea, two hulls of middle-sized boats soared out of the muddy marshes

or clumps of weeds, their bows pointing towards the azure sky. I felt as if we were living out a scene in some science fiction tale which depicts the aftermath of a gigantic catastrophe...

We crunched along the cracked and parched soil. Huge puddles of muddy water crisscrossed the sea-bed in elongated forms, some of which narrowed into runnels that trickled into thick vegetation. A path cut across the lunar-like surface which we followed wisely; Grégoire disliked the idea of venturing too far from the higher grounds lest the muddy soil transform into quicksand...

Grégoire appeared quite versed in ecologic lore: as we strolled about awe-stricken and babbling away in some sort of drunken wonder, he recounted, pithily, his love of adventure, of travel and of study. He had become one of the foremost specialists of Mongolia, and had organized and accompanied many individuals and groups to Mongolia. Although unwelcomed by the academic highbrows of Mongolia in France, university and institutional bores who abhor and despise the outsider and marginal maverick, he, notwithstanding, paved his heroic way, more or less alone, and gained a sound reputation as an excellent cultural guide of Mongolia...until his too adventurous jaunts into the Mongolian deserts and mountains brought undeserved acrimony from group members, most of whom, having been cultivated on the bourgeois principles of *la juste mesure*, in other words, mediocrity with a slight touch of exoticism, failed to grasp the extreme condition of Grégoire's guided tours into this inhospitable land, quite alien to bourgeois amenity.

«J'ai tout basardé et maintenant travaille comme prof dans un lycée avec ma femme; c'est moins chiant, et à la longue, mieux payé,» scowled Grégoire curtly, taking a few more dozen pictures of a piece of rusty wreckage atop a small mound, around which ran runnels, channels and rivulets...

«I know three Swedes who are presently working on a dam that has gained twenty to fifty metres of water every year on the Kazakh side of the sea.» Grégoire turned to me. «On the Uzbek side no one is doing anything about the sea; it's as dry as the Sahara.» He pursued his lips. Françoise, after her marshy promenade with Jean, joined us.

«Shall we go to the museum?» Her nose was stuck in the Lonely Planet bible. Grégoire sighed with a shrug of his bony shoulders as if importuned:

«Why not.» And he turned his back to her.

So back we shuffled towards those thick, green gardens, which when we arrived, were being watered by the gardener, a very energetic, middle-aged fellow who not only did the gardening but also served as guide to the tiny museum and janitor to the sports centre that had been

inflated in the gardens. I say inflated because the centre was no other than an immense rubber circus-top tent, blown up by a generator, equipped with a boxing ring, physical fitness machines, dressing rooms, toilets, showers, an archery zone and volleyball courts! We were all taken aback by such an extraordinary array of sports in an inflated circus-top tent! The guide proudly explained that the president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazerbeyaz, invested in the planting of trees, flowers and shrubs in all the cities, towns, villages and hamlets of beautiful Kazakhstan, and that this ecological programme would transform Kazakhstan's deserts and steppes into the Gardens of Babylon! The analogy struck me as quite erudite; whether the result reckoned on would concur is of course another point. However, I praised the programme for indeed the gardens were lovely, watered and tendered with loving care...

The visit to the museum enchanted us: Grégoire took photo after photo of the photos that wall-papered the ill-lit walls. Black and white shots of Aral's former grandeur: those days of Lenin and the fervent beginnings of scientific socialism...of materialistic History...of a New Era when *les lendemains chanteraient*...but which, of course, never really did...

When all those mammoth rusty dilapidated cranes and gutted cranneries buzzed with Communist eagerness and comradely transport! When the foamy froth of splashing waves tossed and rocked the many trawlers docked at newly built moles! When Aral fish flooded the Moscow and Leningrad markets, and when all Russia hailed the Communist strong-armed, net-casting Kazakhs! Then Stalin appeared on the scene: vanity and arrogance supplanted eagerness; stupidity superceded comradely transport...the debacle commenced when Communism became less and less scientific, more Stalian. Plainly, Stalin remains the scourge of Communism...of Russian History...Perhaps of History, *tout court*...

The museum also boasted a perfectly intact trawler that had been left stranded in the drying sea, and which the authorities have since transformed into a museum showpiece. To reach the top deck, we climbed a ladder in the interior of the museum, and once at the top found ourselves 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 awe: 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 humain crime? Waves of heat and melancholic complacency overwhelmed me, until Grégoire, after snapping a series of photos, nudged me out of my reverie: «J'ai faim:» Grégoire, as usual, was to the point...

We thanked the curator, gardener and janitor and promised to promenade in his gardens tomorrow, which I did but my travelling companions did not, they taking a nap in the forty degree heat. We found a small eating house, and without my knowing it, ate horsemeat: it was a rubbery loathing...

The money-changers at Aral'sk played hard bargains; I refused to be fleeced. At the end, quite disgusted by the whole business, I went to the bank, and there to my surprise, one of the women workers changed my dollars for *tengi*, making it clear that her exchange rate bettered any that her bank could offer me!

At nightfall, we all sat on the narrow veranda of the Aral Hotel, discussing the day's events, narrating each others' plans for the future. I read them a few strophes from the Hodja's *hikmets*, for indeed this family, too, was heading for the sacred *turbeh*, but alas, though the name appeared in their guide books, had absolutely no idea who he was. I enlightened them on this point, in my usual, pedantic and fervent desire to convince:

*'At forty-eight my saintly soul grew weary,
Benumbed by sorrowful sins, I fell ill;
For this reason I awoke and feared the True One,
God, my great Hodja, I came to take shelter in You.*

*'At forty-nine His Love fell, I burned and singed,
Like Mansur, I turned away from my kin;
Struck by all sorts of torments, I accepted,
God, my great Hodja, I came to take shelter in You.'*

*'At fifty « I am a saintly knight » I said, my accomplishment fragile,
I shed bloody tears, my bosom crushed.
For my spirit, I erred like a wandering dog,
God, my great Hodja, I came to take shelter in You.*

*'At fifty-one I crossed deserts and ate grass,
I climbed mountains, scooped out my eyes, praying to God;
I saw not His Face, my heart satiated with my own self,
By my Oneness and Existence, am I to see His Face?*

*'At fifty-two I left my house and home,
My house and home, perhaps too my soul;
Everything left, my soul and faith, too,
By my Oneness and Existence, am I to see His Face?*

By the look on their puzzled faces, however, I doubt if I had convinced them of anything...

«Who is Mansur?» Françoise's question, by the tone of her voice, was perfunctory.

«An ascetic who practised severe self-abnegation and who believed himself imbued with Godhood. He cried out to those who crossed his path: Labyak! Labyak! 'Here I am!' He proclaimed to all who had ears to hear him: 'ana al-Hqq!' 'I am the Truth!' He was executed for blasphemy» This explanation made little impression on them. Jean yawned. Françoise smiled politely. Grégoire drummed his fingers on the splintered arm of the chair. The woman receptionist stomped on to the veranda and asked us rather brusquely to come in or step off the veranda because she had to fold the rotting, wooden chairs for the night. We chose to retire for the night.

The next day I returned to the gardens to admire the gay colours of the flowers. The aimiable gardener strolled over to me and on a bench, whilst he poured water into the plots of flowers and bushes, we conversed of events that I can no longer recall. Afterwards, I walked about the town, the centre nothing more than a huge round, empty space which was filled every night with summer attractions: dancing, music, meetings, etc., surrounded by modern public buildings and several gardens where statues of famous men had been erected. At the bazaar, an unattractive enclosed area where I had to haggle over every piece of fruit I purchased, the customary friendly smiles of the sellers or hawkers illumined not the sullen atmosphere. On the other hand, that night at the town square, a concert of modern rap music and hundreds of enthusiastic spectators transformed the diurnal emptiness into bombastic nocturnal gaiety. Grégoire accompanied me, Françoise and Jean decided to meet us at a restaurant where horsemeat would not be on the menu!

Grégoire genuinely enjoyed the live music, a group of young girls and boys played excellent rap music. In fact, on several occasions, either on trains or buses, I listened to Kazakh rap music which positively enchanted me. That night at Aral'sk, there was much laughter and joy, and from what some youngsters told me, almost every night during the summer, the young people of Aral'sk improvised plays, concerts and art expositions on that square.

Grégoire invited me to eat at the restaurant where his wife and son were impatiently waiting for us, but since I only ate one meal a day, I politely declined the invitation. Jean sneered at this rite, but I affected indifference, and watched them devour an excellent made and served dinner. Many individuals pull horrified faces when I explain that on the road I generally eat once a day, and only fruit, salads or vegetables, save of course when I cross seas or oceans, where the meals are included in the ticket. They believe that one must eat large quantities in order to hold the pace. Not at all! I feel more bouncy, suppler when travelling on a meal a day. Be that as it may,

we made plans to meet in T rkestan at the cheap and clean Sabin Hotel, incidentally, the one that the soldier had given me at the train station after my interrogation. I would be leaving before them on the three o'clock train, a slow train, whereas they were to board the night express. We left the restaurant quite late, and made our way back to the hotel, chatting about insipid school programmes, ungrateful adolescents, pert and insensitive principals, scheming and back-biting colleagues. In short, a dull and humdrum subject in the middle of the Central Asian steppes, under a vault of stars so bright, their very contemplation swept me away to regions of the mind far from the sound of human language...There I overheard the rhythms of Poetry...of the Hodja's *hikmets*...the melodious murmurings of the Wise. What was being murmured? Hodja Ahmet Yesev  soon ceased to be my voice translating his, but his voice guiding mine. My soul would commune with his without the support of my senses...The telluric forces of the holy site began their labour of love, and those forces were beckoning me not in words alone; images and figures crept across my mind, inhabited my heart. They were benevolent. They acted as Companions. They guided my steps towards the centre of attraction, towards the appeasement of a Desire...yet not its extinction! Not the  lan that ignites it, that girdles it with incandescent haloes, that maintains the lamps aglow with Hope...

I left the Aral Hotel very early the next morning, took a last stroll through the museum gardens, then regained the main road out of Aral'sk to the train station. As usual, cars crawled alongside me to offer a ride for a price, which, as usual, I declined.

Whilst waiting for the three-car train, seated on an outdoor bench, a woman came over, sat down beside me and in a high, shrill voice asked why a foreigner would ever come to a place like Aral'sk ? Her question, without circumlocution, left me no choice but to answer it:

«I came to see the Aral Sea.» Her red lips curled into a furtive smile, one that I ascribed to her not believing me.

« Instead of visiting a dry sea, why don't you take photos of our homes, our streets, our town hall and our clothing?» She was sharp. «Then you can show your people how we live in Aral'sk, and not the mud and litter of a sea without water and fish! That's all dead and in the past...the people living here now are not!» Her point could not be disregarded. However, I did not wish to get myself embroiled in a lengthy explanation in Russian why I hadn't taken photos of her lovely town because that would have entailed a detailed summary of how my camera no longer obeyed any order given to it. I beat round the bush, so to speak. She scoffed and shrugged her shoulders. A train pulled in, empty. It was ours. The woman scrutinized my ticket and pointed to the third and last wagon of the slow, stopping train. She waved me on towards it and took her place in the first car. How odd: I was the first passenger aboard. The wagon-chief, a woman, of course, just nodded for me to settle in any seat or couchette. Other passengers climbed

aboard, including five or six young boys who scrambled into my compartment as if there were a danger of it being overrun by frantic travellers. No one else came. We pulled out exactly on time...this would be my last train trip in Kazakhstan...

And quite an uneventful one at that! The boys, mischievously, mocked my scruffy backpack, albeit good-naturedly. They hardly spoke Russian, and were surprised that a foreigner, other than a Russian, did. One or two made serious linguistic attempts to communicate with the foreigner, whilst the others caroused in the compartment, taking photos of each other with their mobile phones. They insisted that I be photographed with each of the six of them...And when we steamed abreast the Aral Sea, whose waters were very much shimmering in the late afternoon sunlight, they signalled for me to feast my eyes on such a wondrous sight. They took pictures of those delightful waters, too...

Bored by the Aral Sea, they turned their bubbling, juvenile attention to music, and let me listen to some good rap on their phones. And as I mentioned before, Kazakh rap holds one's attention by its rhythm and emotional verbosity, a verbosity that I could not understand besides a few Turkic words. (the [v] in Turkish is pronounced [b] in Kazakh: for example, 'bar' instead of 'var'.)

The boys jumped off at the first stop, and I remained alone for the rest of the journey to Tūrkestan. Alone, that is to say, with my Self and those thoughts that the Self churns when no word from the outside snaps the inner monologue: with whom? At first with Ahmet Yesevî, for after all, was I not approaching that holy land?

*'At fifty-three with uniqueness I shared wine,
Surprised was I at the rough Road; I abandoned the Road;
« Allah » I said. « Labyak » He said and held my hand,
By my Oneness and Existence, am I to see His Face?'*

*'At fifty-four I made my body cry out,
I walked upon the place of wisdom;
Like Ismaël I sacrificed my saintly soul,
By my Oneness and Existence, am I to see His Face?*

*'At fifty-five I became a beggar to see His Face,
I singed and burned, attained non-existence like a slave;
May Allah be praised, I completed my quest for His Face,
By my Oneness and Existence, am I to see His Face?'*

And this wisdom I did murmur, enveloped in the silence of the unusually empty wagon. Then we halted at a village. Wild camels roamed the lunar-like landscape. I slid to the window and the name of the village read *Dada Qorkut*. Ettore Rossi, the Italian turcologist who had translated six of the twelve legends of the *Dede Korkut Kitabı*, had indeed mentioned a village on the steppes of Kazakhstan named Dada Qorkut, and reported, too, the existence of a mausoleum which commemorated the good name of the Great Grandfather and holy man. And there I was, without my camera working properly, at the village of either his birth or death (if he had ever existed at all!), there where my entire Turkic adventure had begun in 1987, and which had led me back into his Time... his Space...his Womb...

Dada Qorkut had ridden many a camel and horse, strummed many a pious tune on his *kopuz*, chanted and recited many a tale of heroism and treachery, resolved many a court intrigue or warrior grievance. How I immersed my Self in that ontological and existential nomadic adventure from Mongolia to Anatolia, from the Orhun stela to the pages of *Dede Korkut Kitabı*, from a rampaging nomadic tribe to the first faint foundation of the Turkic State! How I gleaned wisdom from Dede's sagacity, concomitant to that of the Hodja's; his voice echoes over distant times and spaces:

'Let us pray, my Khan: may your black snowy mountains not be lain low. May your great shady tree not be cut down. May your beautiful flowing waters not be dried. May the Almighty God not make you in need of cowards. When galloping your grey-white horse may it not stagger. When striking your pure black steel sword may it not be notched. When thrusting your sparkling spear may it not splinter into pieces. May your white-bearded father's place be Paradise, may your white-headed mother's place be Paradise...'

So says the venerable Dada before his Sultan. That hoary voice traversing times and spaces became ours, too, on this long and winding Road of Existence, of ontological affinities, of an uncalculated voyage from the *heimlich* into the *unheimlich*...A wicker-basket full of canned food crashed to the floor from an upper couchette; no one stirred...Night had fallen and with it an absolute indifference to one's surroundings...A ripple of laughter sailed into my compartment from an unidentified source. The cold set in, I retrieved my jacket. The night lamps flicked on. Dada Qorkut also lived to a hundred and twenty years' of age! Like Moses, the Hodja...and perhaps Abraham, too...

The night on that last train journey sped by without incident or nightmare, perhaps because Night became that inviolable garment which clad me in security; that impregnable fortress which girt me with security; that invincible shield under the aegis of which no evil could have befallen me...In sum, I slept soundly, a rare pleasure that occurred in my life...

Six o'clock. Terminus. Everyone out. I stepped into the ungainly train station of T rkestan, formally Yese, then out into the cool air of the still sleeping town. I had arrived on the fortieth day of my voyage...

T rkestan: The Turbeh

As usual, car drivers touted me to get in and for a small fee would drop me off at the *turbeh*! *Sacril ge*! The pilgrim gains his or her holy site on foot; be it one or ten kilometres. The distance was covered in about an hour...

As I made my way along the wide avenue, crying out " равствуйте!"-hello- and " оброе утро!" -good morning- to all and sundry, thrilled that I was slowly but surely approaching the jewel embedded within the bezel of Central Asia, the town began to awake and stir...and with it, the noise! Zig-zagging through the bazaar proved exhausting, so much more so that I found myself in a state of inflated excitement, the smell of spices, coffee...of donkeys plodding through the throngs of men and women, dully dressed, oblivious of my arrival, quickened my sandaled steps. I had experienced similar overflowing or whelming sensations at the awesome sight of Phucktal, at my nocturnal arrival to Timbucktoo. Yet here, at T rkestan, this indomitable, nay untoward sensation tore through me like an unnerving desire or a distressing delight. It seemed that my ontological and existential efforts were reaching some cupsed apex, some final rung on a ladder that I had been climbing since 1987...a Turkic ladder upon whose numerous rungs Sufis, warriors, sages, poets and seers had guided me rung by rung. As if Hodja Ahmet Yesev  limned that pinnacle to which I aspired, unknowingly, uncalculatingly, unquestioningly; aspired towards that rung which would elevate me into the realms of the unexplored Self, the Other awaiting recognition...

-...Il ob  it et partit sans savoir o   il allait... Et pourtant me voil  ! Il a quitt   son pays, sa maison paternelle et maternelle et ses amis pour voyager dans les pays qu'Il l'avait d  sign  ...Il n'ai regard   ni    gauche ni    droite. Sans demander, il est parti...sans calculer...Et pourtant me voil  .-

-Et me voil  !...-

I found myself floundering about on the campus grounds of the Ahmet Yesev  University. Everyone there spoke Turkish! No one, however, offered me a student accomodation, my status as a university professor in Turkey did not impress them at all. They pointed politely to the

very expensive hotel located seventy metres or so from the *turbeh*. By-passing the hotel (4,000 a night for one person!), I bore on towards Timur's XIV century crowning exploit of the steppes.

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*.

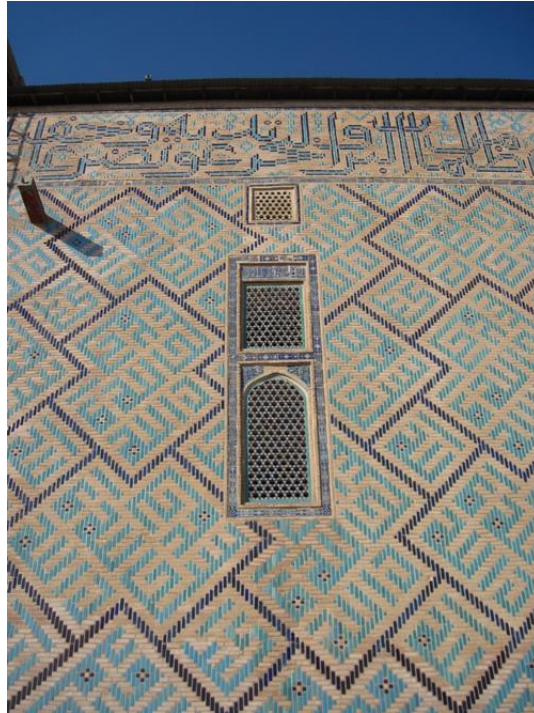
The gleam of the double-domed *turbeh* filled my eyes with tears, my mind with wild confusion. I think I had gone a bit hysterical for a few moments; my dusty sandals and frayed trousers cut a poor sight, methinks, because passing pilgrims glanced at me oddly. I shouted out the Hodja's name two or three 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 *turbeh* in all its splendor...

But before I escort my readers through that sacred ingress, a detailed description of it must here be recorded, for this entrance, this passage into the holy of holies, this verge that separates

the hallow from the worldly can only be compared to that of the Ka'ba, of Jerusalem's Holy Sepulchre and Wailing Wall, of Saint Jacques' Cathedral...of Huseyin's mausoleum at Kerbala...



Kufic inscriptions upon the marvelous jewel of the Steppes...

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 besoiling the entrance with their mindless droppings, the rancid odour of which pressed the most perseverant pilgrim to enter or exit! I know of no aromatic pommade that could have driven out that unholy stink!

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 vermillion 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 penetrated. A woman seated behind a tiny counter, a notebook opened before her, arrested my fervent élan:

«Sign the book!» she demanded in perfect Russian. Stern faced, she eyed me scornfully. Was it my grubby appearance: mud-caked sandals and frayed trousers? I must have cut a pathetic figure. I signed, nevertheless, as instructed, and she pointed to the corner where I was to dispose my filthy, torn backpack. Still not descended from my ecstatic state, I began to babble away about my forty-five day pilgrimage from Istanbul to the holy of holies ; how I obtained my visas, my three memorial sea-crossings, my translating and passionate studies of the Hodja's *hikets* and wisdom and ancient lore and language and...I had fallen into a delirium...

«Carry on, there are pilgrims behind you,» she interrupted, although her smile seemed to insinuate a wistful indulgence. Was I amusing her? Indeed a line had grown since my solitary arrival, so I meekly obeyed...How pointless it all was to communicate one's rapture to civil servant indifference...

The main hall was tremendously large: according to statistics, eighteen square metres. The Kazaks name this hall, the 'Copper Hall', in the middle of which is a bronze cauldron for ablutions, and round which the monks and other holy men would eat. The workers who were restoring the cupola had covered the cauldron, and ladders and scaffolding shot up forty metres into the alabaster-made *muqarnas*, or as Gerard Nerval poetically expressed them : 'gateaux d'abeille', which at present they were busy roughcasting and repainting. In Turkey, the Seldjuk portals that open the spaces of the sacred are of *muqarnas* forms, and are stone sculptured. The noise of workmen on the scaffolds lifting planks, banging hammers and plastering and painting and shouting, echoed round and round the cupola, then bounced off the walls. Knotty ropes were dangling downwards from it. The racket snapped my delirium: humanity had dragged me down to earth. The cupola rose high into the Heavens, the underside of the sparkling blue dome that nearly blinded me as I approached, and the width and breadth of which can only be assessed by standing directly in the centre of the celestial and terrestrial orbit, head up, staring into infinity, mentally drawing a circumference around one's Self in the middle, as if you were the axis round which the vacuity of the roundness rotated, light and airy, curving, or should I say, plummeting downwards into the walls of such solidity that their intersecting points accentuate the dual contrast of Creation, that simultaneous duality without which no Creation,

and thus Humanity could ever have been engendered. In awe, thus, I shuffled over to an enormous plaque on the northern wall: it listed all the holy men or Imams of the mosque since the time of Timur's construction...the last name figured in the 1920s (incertum); the Communists, mistrustful of these Sufi seers, which they defined as charlatans and crooks (like Atatürk), put an end to that chain of sages -the *silsila*-, that line of ancestral wisdom -the *ocak*- ! It has never since been re-established, nor will it ever, a book of wisdom cannot be read much less understood without a Hodja...Upkeep and restoration were, notwithstanding, effected by the Soviet authorities in the 1930s, but no pilgrimage to the mortal remains of the Hodja was allowed...

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. I fell into the category of the poor pilgrim lot, not the opulent patrons, whom I had not as yet detected inside or outside the *turbeh*. I pulled out my *tesbih* -rosary beads- : 'Such whispered litanies, murmured pleas: is not the tomb a veil which hides the Companions of Paradise? A prison is it? Perhaps. But at the same time a transport for the soul...'

*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...

And I began counting my beads in beat with the other bead-counting pilgrims. Once the prayer had finished, the pilgrim either touched or kissed the tomb, dropped some coins or paper *tengi* in a money box to the right of it, then filed out silently. Immediately another group entered, sat down and the Imam would begin his praying. There I prayed for a time measured by the intervals of five or six groups. Finally I rose, kissed the tomb and stepped into the bright

light of the main hall, then into the semi-obscurity of the adjoining chambers and cells of the mausoleum, which included the kitchen.

Out in the blazing heat of midday, after having retrieved my backpack from behind the woman, whose nod of the head appeared to affect a surreptitious connivance, I made a bee-line for a huge tree in the courtyard under whose welcoming shade, dozens of pilgrims had huddled and crouched. The dogged heat dragged me back down into the reality of human needs: food and accomadations. I headed thus for the Sabina hotel, a ten minute walk from the *turbeh*, and as luck would have it, a room was available, and the Russian owner and his Kazak wife, gave me a two-bed room for the price of one, that is 1,500 *tengi*. I immediately paid for five days.

The room was spotless with a writing table and a large window which looked out upon a narrow, uncluttered street; neither cars nor people nor dondeys...the shower and toilet were down the hall to the right.

I had just finished unpacking and was closing my room door behind me when in burst Grégoire, Françoise and Jean in a state of great excitement. Grégoire already had his camera out, snapping photos of the lobby and its smiling, toothless owner and moon-faced daughter, a sixteen year old budding, red-cheeked bundle of nerves. We greeted each other rather peevishly and marvelled at the preciseness of the rendez-vous, although in reality there was nothing precise about it since both parties had completely forgotten about the time and place of the rendez-vous! But why cast a shadow upon the fortuitousness of the Road?..

Checking in, Grégoire had read of a decent restaurant a few steps from the hotel. An excellent idea since I hadn't had a hot meal in two days. This was not due to any self-abnegation on my part, but rather the total absence of food vendors at the innumerable train stations where we halted, nor on the trains themselves, vendors so common in India, China and Russia. The French family had spent a bleak night on their express; as could be expected, they saw nothing of the countryside between Aral'sk and Tūrkestan. Not wishing to deepen their deception (or stupidity on taking a night train across the steppes of Central Asia!) I refrained from describing the wild camels, embrowned villages, gleaming Aral waters, the Dada Qorkut turquoise-glazed domed mausoleum, etc...

The restaurant was located in a huge tranquil courtyard, enclosed by a stockade and several tall buildings of wood and brick. We sat on the wooden verandah and menus were swiftly stuck under our noses by a woman whose Turkish was excellent! A pleasant surprise for me. The owner, a middle-age Russian woman with a certain bourgeois charm about her, knew no Turkish, but compensated for this failing by floods of conversation which only halted when she ate! This restaurant was to be our reference point for good meals and hearty conversation with

the woman owner and her employees. The woman who served and spoke Turkish was in fact an Uzbek whose father was Turkish. The Russian owner had a son who aided, now and then, either with the service or in the kitchen. All of these people showed us true hospitality, and bubbled over with energy, which I found meritorious taking into consideration the suffocating heat and the rowdy, drunken clients who, when not reviling each other, turned their abuse against either the women or us, a state of affairs that was rapidly amended by the owner's son, a strapping lad of eighteen whose breadth of shoulders and squareness of jaw reminded the rowdies where they were and what to expect if the revelling continued. It never did! With disgruntled offense and ripples of discontent they would stomp off to happier hunting grounds...

The soups were delicious, as well as the vegetable dishes served with buckwheat. Since I rarely eat meat, the women plied me with more vegetables; they even served broccoli and spinach...*Kvas*, too, they had, and of excellent quality! After lunch we separated and planned to meet at the restaurant for supper; I, breaking my one-meal a day ritual. The family had tickets for the night train to Alma-Ata the following day; they were in a hurry to reach the former capital, T rkestan only a brief halt on their Kazakhstan tour. I retraced my steps to the *turbeh*, this time by way of the central portal of the restored mediaeval walls, a restoration project financed by UNESCO, which girt Timur's offering to the Hodja, but also the vast gardens that surrounded it, and Timur's smaller *turbeh* opposite that of the Hodja's, memorializing his beloved daughter.

The legends about Timur have been related far and wide: the lame-footed Mongol emperor seemed as impervious to human suffering as he was insatiable in his lightning conquests. The formidable chieftain carved out an empire from Mongolia to the Mediterranean on the sole grounds of herding horses and cattle and sheep upon the thick grass of the bountiful steppes, which implied the ineluctable razzia of villages, towns and cities that defied this grazing right, their levelling to an earthy soil soaked with blood and sorrow. Pitiless he was to the defiant, generous, however, to the submissive, be they Jews, especially those who prospered wonderfully in Bukhara during his XV century reign, Christians or Muslims. The large Jewish population today of Bukhara, second only to Iran's, owe their very existence to Timur! The Emperor was converted to Islam and even toyed with the idea of wending the Sufi Way after his devastating victory over Beyazid the Thunderer at Ankara in 1405, with as guide, Sheikh Bedredd n, the scrouge of Ottoman authority. Bedredd n gained Timur's full confidence, parleyed long hours with him as a guest at his bivouac, but at the end, disinclined the offer: the lame-footed had other grains to grind, in other words, other cities to raze and enemies to annihilate! As to the Sheikh Bedredd n, one of the most enthralling and intellectual figures in the History of Turkey, dejectedly he returned to his Aegean Sea dwellings, and there, slowly established the most famous of Republics, regardless of creed or religion, a Republic that so

flourished that the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet the First, furious that Jews, Christians and Muslims live as equals, sent his Sunna armies against the Sheihk, and following many pitched battles and much bloodshed, captured Bedreddîn in 1416 and had him hanged on the highest of trees. Nazım Hikmet wrote a lovely epic poem which committed to memory his name and doughty deeds; a name hardly known to Turks, much less his deeds. As to Bedreddîn's companions, the Christian Börklüce was captured, his limbs severed, then sent on a horse through villages to be stoned and spit on, and finally crucified. Torlak the Jew, escaped Sunna degradation, and probably died in combat...Thus ended just another tentative to build a Republic...One that Republican Turks still pray and hope for...

«Gel! Gel! Gel!» exclaimed a burly, entangled bearded, plait-haired pilgrim in a booming voice as he barged into the centre of the sun-bleached court, a bundle of belongings dangling from a stick over his shoulder. «Gel!» Several pilgrims stopped in their tracks, petrified by this jolly phenomenon, gesticulating to everyone to follow him to a low wall and there, upon it, pray in unison to the measure of his invocations. Many followed indeed, including myself, sucked into this vacuum of compelling energy. He prayed, rocked to and fro, chanted and conversed, both with himself and with those who sat or stood near him. His leathery face of a coppery sheen bespoke no certain age; an ageless sage materializing in a timeless time, whose dramatic voice invoked the infinite goodness and kindness and grace of Him? I stood, put a bill in his wrinkled hand (which he later deposited next to the tomb of the Hodja) and walked through the throngs of pilgrims flocking towards the monumental wooden portal, drawn into the vortex of ontic consciousness. I felt groggy; the sun beat down on my exposed head like a drummer his drum. A hand touched my shoulder, firmly but friendly. I recognized the chanting Imam, his face glowed bright red: from the sun or was I hallucinating? He was singularly very tall, sinewy, and wore his skullcap:

«Esselâmü aleyküm.» He greeted me affably.

«Aleyküm selâm» I returned the greeting as affably...Then he said in broken Turkish:

«My friend would like to meet you. He has studied at the Yesevî University and speaks very good Turkish.» Did the Imam think I was Turk or a Muslim? True, I still clung to my *tesbih*! He took out his mobile phone, called someone and handed it to me, and indeed a man spoke to me in very good Turkish at the other end. He wished to see and talk to me whenever it was possible. We arranged to meet the next morning inside the *turbeh* at ten. I thanked my unknown interlocutor; the Imam pressed a hand to his heart then melted into the crowd...just like that...

I cooled my burning head under the shade of the leafy tree, after which, I circumambulated the *turbeh* seven times, keeping my right shoulder to the glazed wall, touching the faïence

gently with the tips of my fingers. A group of pilgrims squatted or sat in the shade of the back door entrance, listening to the sermons of an ascetic. I then headed back to the Sabin Hotel to have a nap...

As programmed, Grégoire, Françoise and Jean met me at the restaurant on the broad verandah. The evening coolness brought us all great relief. Grégoire had taken hundreds of photos of the *turbeh*. As miracles will occur in and around holy sites, my camera suddenly began to obey my instructions to it! My invocations or the Imam's? Whatever the voice, at least I would be able to take photos of the Hodja's eternal resting place.

Grégoire seemed genuinely curious about my one-meal day pilgrimage ritual, which at that very moment I was transgressing, and the fact that I do not eat meat or any dairy products, unless absolutely necessary.

«To decongest the body is to decongest the heart and spirit,» I began, as usual, pedantically. «In Istanbul, my wife and I drink vegetable juices, although now and then we will eat boiled and steamed vegetables. We drink fruit juices, especially grenadine and apple. They are excellent cell-builders. With every new moon, we eat only one fruit or vegetable: apples, carrots, beet-root, artichoke, either in liquid or solid form. A mono-diet cleanses the body of the virulent elements that attack it, and diminishes the fat that weighs down or chokes the functioning of our intestines: you are what you eat once said the greatest of doctors, Ibn Sina, and he knew that it is the intestines that govern our body, not the brain.» Grégoire and Françoise smiled politely. Jean was knocking down beer after beer and was at that moment, I believe, thoroughly pissed. It seemed clear that the conversation held no interest for him. I continued nonetheless:

«Herbal teas and specially prepared medicinal plants stave off cancerous cells by renourishing those that have been demineralized and impesticed by the noxious industrialized food that we consume everyday. It is not a question of going on a diet to 'lose weight', but to trim the body of its ungainly and lethal fat, whilst fortifying the white and red blood cells that energize the digestive system so that our body can assimilate easier, and thus evacuate easier. Overweight is not a sign of good health, but of sloven and sluggish body care, of a heedless life, negligent of one's extraordinary physical and mental capital.»

«Then we won't have any need for doctors,» Françoise interceded drily.

«A very limited need,» I responded coolly. «They should be our last resort. And if we were in real need of a doctor, I would suggest those who practice traditional therapies. When my wife and I were working in Siberia, we consulted a Nepalese monk, then living in Ulan-Ude, who practiced traditional Tibetan medicine. He checked the pulses of both our wrists for seven

seconds, and looked me in the eye: -плохой!- and he poked my pancreas (too much ('сметана' 'smetana', I suppose!). -плохой- and he touched my right hip, where torn cartilage, undoubtedly, was deteriorating. -плохой- and then he tapped my right knee with his pudgy finger, linked to the torn and crippled hip. In fourteen seconds he had uncovered the miseries of an aging body. He then reached behind him and began calculating the amount of medicine required for my ailments, and the exact hour of the day or night for taking it. This medicine was in the form of green, gummy pills which I had to take every three days at three o'clock in the morning over a period of two months for the pancreas after a careful preparation, over whose mixture the fat monk instructed me to spread a clean, yellow cloth and mutter a prayer to the Buddha, whose Tibetan letters he transcribed into Russian ones. As to the hip and knee, I chewed on gummy black pills every morning and night for a month or so.

«After two months of treatment, I no longer felt any gnawing pain in my pancreas, nor do I today, seven years later, and my hip and knee, albeit still aching from wear and tear, have greatly improved. Traditional care and medicine not only fortify and restore worn out cartilage, but the vegetable and fruit juices and yoga are aiding the regenerating process in the most spectacular way. This philosophy of life is both a regenerating and rejuvenating process.» Grégoire pursed his lips:

«If everyone followed your philosophy the French Social Security system wouldn't be broke today!» Grégoire chuckled. As all Frenchmen, Grégoire was obsessed by the French social security system, and its ever growing partner the Mutual, and what it costs each citizen who pays his or her taxes for them. I came to the point:

«This is because doctors, in connivance with the pharmacists, have convinced the unaware, the heedless, the negligent of the body, that every little ache and pain, every little tug and pull of the body must be immediately treated with pills, syrups or anti-biotics: *c'est le poudre aux yeux!* Nature will heal the majority of our daily ails and woes, and with a bit more perspicacity and practicing of the traditional Chinese, Indian or parallel therapies, one can relieve or even cure oneself more efficiently and cheaply than rushing off to doctors and laboratories where every sort of blood test and other useless examinations must be done before a simple diagnosis be delivered to the anguished patient. Anguish is the key word: the whole Western medical system has domesticated its clients by deliberately cultivating anguish, especially the unpronouncable 'cancer'! A medicalised anguish and fear that has combined forces with the governments of the West who have surreptitiously instilled the same fear and anguish of terrorism in the hearts of their tax-paying citizens. Governments that have imposed disturbing scenarios of insecurity in the psyche of the public, who have schemed police and military control and surveillance, cultivated denonciation. The medical and political agendas have proudly joined arms to subdue and manipulate the democratic élan of its citizens. These

governments seek to alienate both our bodies and intelligence, to sever the self-governing of our bodies by stuffing our metabolisms with industrial-made food, clinical statistiques that cause anguish, so that dependance upon doctors and technocrats mortifies the energy of self-dependence...perturbs one's full and satisfied independence of body and spirit; one's full adherence to God, and the spiritual and material benefits from what He has bequeathed us. Not dependence on Him, but adherence to Him and His Creation, quite contrary to our artificial, clinical dependence on medicine and partisan politics!" Now along with the French social security system, the mention of 'God' or 'Dieu' will also provoke a strong reaction within the Frenchman's Cartesian spirit. Grégoire stared stonily at me. Françoise bore the same pasty smile of courtesy, of the *bien élevée*; was I amusing them? «Medicine only eases pain, confirms its existence,» I persisted. «Alternative eating habits and changes of climate will eradicate the causes of pain, rehabilitate those tired and disfunctioning cells, lift our spirits to loftier climates where we become one with the Cosmos. Similarly with politics: war cries and discourses on our endangered democracy strengthen the illusion of the cancerous enemy within and without us. A cancer whose metastasia will spread and infect wider and wider zones of the body tissue unless eradicated by surgical strikes, chemical bombardments or eventual amputation This continual state of war pits us against both man and man's Creator.» Grégoire and Françoise were gaping at me; I became terribly self-conscious that to give vent to complete strangers on such delicate subjects was pointless. Grégoire smacked his lips, Jean's heavy head, which had long since fallen to the wooden table with an equally heavy bang, suddenly popped up:

«I hate two types of human beings: politicians and doctors! Liars all of them.» And as suddenly as it had popped up, that heavy head fell down again with a thud. Indeed, I couldn't have agreed with him more...

No one stirred. Fortunately the eloquent silence of discreet irresolution was shattered by a row between the formidable son of the Russian owner and two drunken Kazakhs, who were tossed out into the dark courtyard in a jiffy; the boy stood akimbo on the steps waiting for a reaction from the rowdies: there came none! The brawlers meekly shuffled out of the premises without a look behind...

This mild incident deflated the atmosphere of its weighty seriousness and paved the way for lighter subjects: the *domestication institutionnelle* of the French Education Nationale and other higher institutes of learning, the brutal and respiteless imposing of moodle, Storybird, powtoon and Google Drive on recalcitrant teachers and smug students, the complete ineffectualness of the '*conseils de classe*' and '*le recul de l'âge de la retraite*', that nemesis for those who have turned fifty and are thoroughly disgusted to be at the beck of the State ; the *proviseurs*, the younger technocratic colleagues, the riotous kids and their indulgent parents, etc. etc. Teaching in Europe had become a nightmare, at best a bread-winner, at worst a prison where any blow can

fall at any time: from above or below...Françoise was fiery on all these hot subjects, providing statistics, newspaper perusings, and personal testimonies to add fagots to the uncontrollable conflagration in her heart. Not being a habitué to this ignoble institution, I experienced neither empathy nor sympathy: *suum cuique* so practiced the Prussians before vanishing from the face of the earth, simply because penned up in their own domesticated system of hierarchical convention and self-consuming discipline. Grégoire's voyages into Mongolia had alerted him to the dangers of stringent principles and obsessional belief in one method, however, *les voyages doivent se transformer en le Voyage pour jauger l'efficacité du saut effectué*...One falls short of the mark when indulgence and complacency supplant *la maîtrise de soi par la volonté de se dépasser* ! In short, our last dinner ended on a flat note, as always when one begins to discuss health, education and politics in today's brave new globalizing world...

Iftar: the Breaking of the Fast

At the call of the morning prayer, I rose and hurried to the *turbeh*. The Imam was there praying with a large group of Uzbek pilgrims: 'Say: He is God, the One, God, the Impenetrable One. He does not beget, nor begets, and there is nothing like Him.'...I learnt afterwards that the majority of pilgrims arrived from Uzbekistan, Hodja Ahmet Yesevî having studied and taught in Bukhara and Samarkand. Few Kazakh pilgrims with whom I spoke originated from Tūrkestan.

I stepped out of the prayer room into the Copper Hall; a young man rushed towards me, grasped my hand and shook it very vigorously. He introduced himself as Ahmet, he who had phoned me yesterday, companion to the two Imams of the *turbeh*, guide on occasions, researcher on Sufi and theological matters...Ahmet spoke Turkish like a Turk ; he had studied five years at the university, ten minutes from where we were speaking. I had brought my edition of the *hikmets* for Ahmet to peruse. He pressed his lips, then smacked them in a rather odd way:

«Jagatay!» he mused, scrutinizing the *hikmets* like a doctor a wound or the tongue of his patient. I looked at him, then at the pages stupidly. He noted my demur to affect any original or worthy response: «Jagatay belongs to the same language family as Uzbek,» he began didactically in a sharp, clear voice that echoed strangely in the great emptiness of the Copper Hall. «You know, this language was the spoken one of all Central Asia, spoken by wise men and laymen alike. Of course, it contains many Persian and Arabic words, but it is a Turkic tongue out of which Uyghur, Turkmen, Kazakh and Uzbek have originated. Timur, who by the way, had this wonderful *turbeh* built (here Ahmet became horribly pedantic, even worse than me!), spoke Jagatay, just like our Hodja. I'm sure this is Jagatay.» And Ahmet peered fiercely at the

hikmets, sniffing and snorting them. From the slight pallor that spread slowly over his face, it was obvious that he was not perfectly sure...Jauntily he shut the book and handed it back to me. Alas, I would never really know what Turkic language Hodja Ahmet Yesevî spoke, or whether he wrote those *hikmets*. Most likely they were inscribed to writing by his disciples. But is that so important? Noticing Ahmet's slight embarrassment, I let the subject drop.

«Have you been to the thirty-eight adjoining rooms of the *turbeh*?» he suddenly beamed. I would soon discover that Ahmet's head was filled with every statistic that the mausoleum could afford him, statistics that I shall spare my readers, who if they are interested in them can consult any Wikipedia site! «Monk cells, libraries, eating rooms...meditation cells...»

«Has the chain of Masters been revived?» I interrupted rudely. He appeared surprised by my question.

«No...no...that is impossible. The last Shiekh's were chased or killed by the Russians. (I was tempted to correct the Russian with Soviet but wisely refrained.) You know, the Russians colonized our town in the 1860s, and Yese became a part of the Russian Empire. For us, there is absolutely no difference between Russian and Soviet!» Had he read my thoughts?..

«Even today?» I insisted with a faint smile. He disregarded the question for he led me out into the blinding white courtyard, boiling at noonday, then pointed to a small, modern building to our right.

«Have you been to our museum? No, well let me show it to you.» A stone-slabbed path wound round some grassy knolls. Half way to the building, my new companion suddenly halted and fixed his gaze on me. The gaze literally stopped me in my tracks:

«Are you a Muslim?» Was this an interrogation or a token of unconstrained curiosity?

«I'm a Christian.» I thought it best to avoid futile circumlocution. His lips stretched into a broad smile. Ahmet had a fine row of pearly white teeth.

«How happy I am to hear that!» he boomed. Ahmet never bemasked his emotions as I would later learn. «You are a living proof that the Hodja's wisdom has reached ears other than ours. Christian ears, and perhaps Jewish or Buddhist ears.» Ahmet had fallen into a state of great excitement. This being said, I was a bit sceptical about the Jewish and Buddhist ears...yet one never knows upon whose senses wisdom has sown her seed of light and grace...

All agog at this fortuitious encounter, Ahmet dragged me into the museum, past the two women at the ill-lit desk, and into a dark chamber where the final earthly *demeure* of the Hodja lay exposed: an opening in the tiled floor that led bottomlessly into the earth...

«Look at the inscriptions.» Ahmet grabbed my shoulder. »It is the Shiekh's prayer, see how each verset ends in Hû! Hû! Hû! You know, this invocation has its origins in the sound of the sawing saw on wood. All great wisemen cut and gathered wood for their Shiekhs.» When the woodcutters cut, their cutting is like a prayer, punctuated by the rythmic sounds of their tools: hû! Hû! Hû! And since then, 'hû' has been pronounced in all Muslim prayers all over the world. Ahmet had a way with words. His explanation suddenly diverted my thoughts to the wood-cutting and monastery-building Russian, Saint Sergius of Radonezh, the axe-bearer of the wild forests of the XIV century! «Come, I'll show you.» And he did...

We walked back into the main hall of the museum. There on the wall, which the lack of good lighting failed to illuminate clearly, was an enormous map of Central Asia, India and Anatolia. From the tiny village of Tūrkestan white arrows shot out into all directions with at their tips the names of all those disciples of the Hodja: I recognized Mevlana, Yunus Emre, Shams of Tabrezi, Hacı Bektaş, Pir Sultan Abdal...Those of India were unknown to me, as well as the Persian Shiekhs, save Shams-i Tabrezi, whose *turbeh*, by the way, lies in a small garden in Konya, Turkey. He was Mevlana's guiding light...Ahmet's arm swept triumphantly across the map:

«All these pious men have come from the womb of our Hodja!» My new companion excelled in metaphorical phrasings. Images exploded onto the outside world like the Hodja's *hikmets* in one's heart: formidable shells of flowers! He even imitated the sound of the sawing saw: hû! Hû! Hû!..

We stepped outside. He took my arm as we strolled back to the bustling court, where the plait-haired pilgrim was toting his bundle of belongings, lecturing with wide gesticulations and in a raucous voice. «Would you like to come to *iftar* tonight?» Ahmet asked, almost shyly.

«Would that be inconvient for the others?» came my crude reply.

«Of course not; the Imams know you, and your presence would be most heartily welcomed.» His joy was genuine. Ahmet did not stand on ceremony, unlike the Turks of Turkey, perhaps due to the Kazakh nomadic spirit, still very much alive, where hospitality remains a true mark of horizonless humaneness, and not a spirit jammed between a nomadic heritage shadowed or enshadowed by an aspiring ascension to sedentarized bourgeoishood, as is the case with most areas of Turkey today, an evolution not only confined to the big cities. We arranged for a rendez-vous in front of the *turbeh* portal before nightfall.

The Imam with whom I often prayed in the Hodja's chamber and Ahmet met me at the portal. 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 T rkestan; 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, dissimulated by a moth-eaten curtain, 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 illiterate 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. Honey, as is known, is the sweet symbol of Paradise, dreamed by many a sage and companion of the Prophet! Bowls of soup followed abundantly. Another sudden silence froze everyone in their gestures, then 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...

So there I sat, quite alone. I felt somewhat offended that neither Ahmet nor the Imams invited me to pray with them! Was it due out of respect for my religion or contempt of it?

I had on sundry occasions been invited to join in prayer with the Muslims whom I met on the road, either in a mosque or at their homes. At times I accepted when this partaking did not entail any resolution for conversion, sentiment that many Turkish or Kurdish Muslims harbour when inviting me to pray with them, and one that I particularly loathe. That night at *iftar*, I was at odds with my emotions: here I would have eagerly accepted their invitation, since, and no metaphor intended, I was presently partaking in their joyous repast. A few minutes later they filed back *leu-leu*, and returned to their places alongside the long, narrow table.

As swiftly as the soup had been rushed out from the kitchen, trays and trays of fuming mutton and vegetables, mostly cabbage and carrots, were placed before the hungry company. No one stood on ceremony here: groping fingers picked the meat off the bones, the biggest morsel given to the high guest, me, then distributed to all the others. I told Ahmet that I was a vegetarian; he waved an impatient hand and chided:

«Tonight can be a night of exception to your diet, since it is Ramazan, a month of exception on the Muslim calender. » Ahmet was never at a loss for words; I should know, nor am I...»How long have you not eaten meat?» he added mildly.

«Twenty years or so, although when I am invited and pressed to eat, I will eat meat.» My little smile put him at ease, and everyone else who was gaping at both of us, attempting to understand the discrepancy. Once settled, all and sundry ate with their greasy fingers; I followed suit.

«Do you Christians have Ramazan?» Ahmet translated the swarthy Imam's question, still sprawled on the divan, feeding his narrow, bearded face with mutton, grease dripping down onto the cushions.

«Yes» We have Lent, during whose forty days I will fast once a week from Thursday night to Saturday morning.» came my precise reply.

«Do you drink?» The host of the house seemed really curious.

«Yes, but only water.» He appeared suddenly distraught. Another question shot out from a small man down the table to my right:

«Do all Christians practice what you practice?» The question was well posed:

«No, each Christian follows his or her denomination or principles. The Syriac community will not touch either meat or dairy products for forty days. The Armenians, neither.» When Ahmet had translated this, a ripple of either disapproval or puzzlement ran through the assembly, which however, did not prevent them from sucking on their greasy fingers. Much to my astonishment, no water or napkins had been provided to rinse or wipe all this fatty grease dripping from fingers and drooling from mouths. A towel was being passed from hand to hand, but by the time it reached me, the cloth was so imbibed with grease that my hands became greasier when wiping them on it!

«But is there no community rite that everyone follows?» Ahmet was stubbornly persistent. I sighed:

«In the more Orthodox communities yes, but not with the Catholics, who abide by the principle that one must relinquish or suppress that desire for what he or she habitually enjoys desiring. Besides the breaking of that habit, for as you know, habits are our greatest enemies, nothing else is required of the Catholic. Of course, we must go to church and pray as much as possible. » At the word prayer 'dua', everyone nodded in unison and uttered 'Allah kabul etsin!' 'May Allah accept it!'

The magic word 'dua', common to all Turkic tongues, seemed to have broken the ice; faces relaxed, and when they did, I munched greedily on my mutton, grabbed an apple and a few slices of pineapple, probably canned...

Out of that moth-eaten curtain sailed the women with pitchers of tea and...kumiss! Yes, real kumiss, straight out of Dede Korkut's hoary pages! I was abashed: kumiss is a fermented drink made from the milk of the mare, generally highly intoxicating...and on *iftar*! If I were a Muslim, I would have been scandalized. No Kazakh at that noble table was, for they all drank kumiss in tremendous quantities. Ahmet stretched his long arm across the table and handed me a big mug:

«Kumiss fortifies the body during Ramazan, drink up friend.»

«But this is alcohol,» I observed, feigning indignation. He laughed.

«No, it has been churned just before it reaches an alcohol degree.» The Imam, host of the house, reaffirmed this statement because it was he who had spent hours churning and churning. There came a lull in the conversation round the table: everyone was guzzling their kumiss...

«Kumiss is no longer drunk in Turkey,» I added inanely for some ridiculous reason, whilst the burly Imam and three or four other guests on the divan cloyingly gulped down theirs.

«That's because they no longer follow the tradition of *iftar*.» Ahmet could be candid on occasions. «Have some tea, it goes well with kumiss.» The host of the house poured me some tea. Both beverages made me sweat (I shall avoid saying 'like a pig') like a bullock; I felt like I had just come out of the oil-infested waters of the Marmara sea round the Princess Islands. That grease-soaked rag now lay limp on one of the trays heaped up with mutton bones. Ahmet made a gesture to me: it was time to say farewell and be off...

I thanked everyone in Turkish and in Russian, then, after having fetched my shoes, exited into the courtyard with Ahmet and the two Imams from the Hodja's *turbeh*. There next to the stockade, the host of the house showed me the churn where the kumiss is churned. He smiled: «No alcohol at all.» And he laughed. This was undoubtedly true because after having drunk four or five mugs of that brew my thoughts were perfectly clear, and to tell the truth, save the rancid odour of it, I quite liked the robust taste...

They insisted on dropping me off at the Sabina with the Imam's car, albeit the distance could not have been more than a kilometre; for indeed, we arrived in two or three minutes. Again I showered them with a myriad religious blessings and profane gratefulnesses before taking leave.

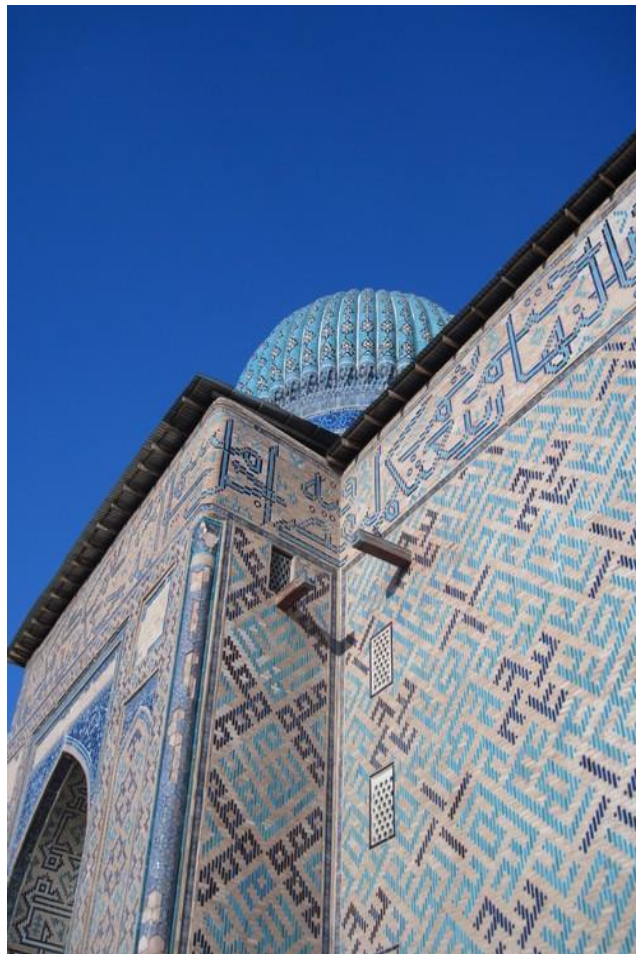
In the reception hall the owner and his daughter were munching away voraciously on melon slices. He handed me two and wished me a pleasant sleep. Yes, that night my sleep was pleasant...I dreamed of ships, camels, dangling knotty rope which hung from the clouds; I dreamed of milky white crested waves, thick green grass, a moon that blotted the stars...even a donkey flitted before my muslin veiled eyes, albeit wide open...In the morning my head was aswarm with colourful images and figures...

At night, that elder brother of Death, dreamless, I contemplated the Moon and yearned to become the Sea...

*'I reached the age of fifty-six, my head in a sorry state,
I repented, tears flowing from my eyes;
Without having adhered to the knightly monks, outside am I,
By my Oneness and Existence, am I to see His Face?'*

Circumambulations

Seven times round the Heart I circumambulated...





At the sacred door of the the Hodja's chamber pious sages preached and prayed

Every morning at the call of the prayer I would briskly walk to the *turbah*, 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?'*

*My eyes slept until their opening at sixty,
Enfeoffed I am not, how well have I laboured;
Day and night I roamed with grief, both in summer and winter,
By my Oneness and Existence, am I to see His Face?'*

*'At sixty-one I was not ashamed of my divine God,
Hey friends, I was greatly fearful of my sins;
I sacrificed my soul, wishing protection from Allah,
By my Oneness and Existence, am I to see His Face?'*

*'At sixty-two Allah set free His light,
From head to foot I was quickly salvaged from heedlessness;
My soul and heart, my comprehension and intelligence: «Allah»: he said,
By my Oneness and Existence, am I to see His Face?'*

*'At sixty-three a cry came: «Bondsman, enter the soil of the earth»,
Both my soul and my love passed away;
Accomplish the Self, take up the sword of Hû,
By my Oneness and Existence, am I to see His Face?'*



The majestic façade and portal

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...

*'To dance and drink from the Vessel of Love,
Friends, who enter the station of divine madness;
Who know not hunger and satiety, gain, loss,
Friends, chanting and dancing drunkenly.'*

*'Those who chant and dance in the illicit world,
Acquaintances and companions, from home and household come to an end;
At the break of dawn, continually crying, they take shelter in the True One,
Then, friends, chant and dance.'*

*'It is an error to chant and dance without overcoming one's Self,
Without accomplishing the bond of belief in Him, my Rabb;
If one be God's servant without rendering one's spirits pure,
He is two-faced, friends, accomplish the chanting and the dancing.'*

*'Servant Hacı Ahmet, abandon the world, put an end to your toil,
To the firmament rise, wailingly, sufferingly to Heaven reach;
When you give your heart, it is Mohammad the Just's hand that escorts,
For this reason, thus, you found shelter in the True One.'*



The glorious back door of the Hodja's final *demeure*

The town of Trkestan is not a particularly appealing place to spend a honeymoon or a week of tourism if the tourist has no penchant for the life and sagacity of Ahmet Yesev. The museum does contain many interesting objects and artefacts worth investigating, but to come to Trestan to visit this museum would be a waste of time, although the curious-minded will find several *obos* -those hewn stone effigies that the Shamanist Kazakhs worshipped (and perhaps some still do!)-, generally scattered about the grassy steppes, and of which William of Rubruck informs us in his *Travels to Mongolia*, painstakingly undertaken in the XIII century under orders of King Louis the Ninth, or Saint Louis, to convert the Mongolians to Christianity: he never converted one Shamanist soul, so he wrote...

As to the bazaar, it is quite unattractive, and the many gardens of Trkestan are embrowning for lack of water and attention. Besides the *turbeh* enclosure with its green grass and blossoming trees, the other gardens and parks of Trkestan appear to have been abandoned to their own fate. I suppose that all energy and finance have been channelled into the *turbehs'* and grounds' restoration and beautification...

As to the back streets or narrow lanes, they offer no originality; nothing like what one will discover in the Caucasian countries. There is the Ahmet Yesev University, snuggled amongst the struggling groves of pines and spruces against the barbaric rays of the sun. But why would

a tourist visit these dreary grey buildings, hardly known to anyone unfamiliar with the Turkic speaking world, and of course, with the Hodja's teachings?

I met no other tourists after the hurried departure of the French family. They had come to photograph the mausoleum, which Grégoire accomplished most adequately: he must have taken hundreds of photos. I cannot blame him, I took about forty, most of which are *nulles*! Grégoire hauled me out of another quagmire when, inquiring at a small travel agency across from the bus station, I learnt that a return trip ticket from Alma-Ata to Paris cost over 1,000 thousand dollars, whereas on the Internet I had found one for 520! Overwhelmed by confusion, I could not understand why the girl would not sell me the ticket as posted on the Website. She said that her computer did not offer that flight, but I did not believe her, nor wanted to believe her! Since I had only 650 dollars left, I suddenly saw myself stranded in Kazakhstan, in the sweltering heat of Tūrkestan: would the Imams have to put me up until money arrived from Istanbul or Paris?

I raced back to the *turbeh*, found Grégoire snapping away frantically, and explained the inextricable dilemma. He smiled and quickly pulled out his bank card. We searched for an Internet café which happened to be opposite our hotel, and ten minutes later Grégoire had secured my return ticket for 520 dollars! For this favour, I invited the family to drink *kvas* in the gardens of the *turbeh* at an outdoor café...

These gardens were still in their youthful years of flourishing, the tincture of roses and the hues of jasmine imparted scenes reminiscent of *A Thousand and One Nights*, and those gleaned in the rock gardens of China. I say somewhat reminiscent because the shortage of rain requires tons of gardening water and special care: the gardens are religiously watered every morning and evening. Most of the trees and shrubs and flower-beds were planted in 2003, thanks to the gallant efforts of the Kazakhstan government, and UNESCO's financing programme, without forgetting, of course, those Turkish engineers, architects and masons who have been sent by Ankara to offer their ingenuity, two of whom I had the pleasure of meeting. A plaque to the right of the portal when one is exiting the *turbeh*, and where the plait-haired pilgrim preaches every day near the low wall, commends Ankara's invaluable aid in the restoration, maintenance and preservation of this holy site, dear to all the Turkic peoples of the world. This aid has slowly given rise to annual symposiums sponsored by the Ahmet Yesevî association in Istanbul and in Tūrkestan: speakers come from all zones of the Hodja's vast influence, and inside the Museum of Tūrkestan their research, impressions and religious fervour and enthusiasm are voiced. The conference room is located on the third floor of the modern building. The symposium is always presided by the president of Kazakhstan himself, Nursultan Nazerbeyaz.



The *turbeh* begirt by a crenellated covered way...

Yasi or today's Tūrkestan was spared total destruction during Genghis Khan's onslaughts through Central Asia. In the XVI century, when Timur's dynasty and empire gradually disintegrated, and the town came under the leadership of the Kazakh Khanate, or the Khans of Kazakhstan, the name Yasi became Tūrkestan -the Land of the Turks-. The small town was transformed into the capital of the Khans, where coronations, meclis, divans and other State affairs were carried out. Its importance grew along with the Hodja's, or I would even say, thanks to the Hodja's *turbeh*, which indeed attracted pilgrims from all over Central Asia: Uyghurs, Tajaks, Kırız, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Kazakhs, etc. So influential did Tūrkestan become that all the caravans heading West or further East converged within its fortified enclosure: undoubtedly, Tūrkestan was the religious and commercial capital of Asia. Religion and commerce have always formed the perfect couple, bound tightly by the vows of shared interests: just go to Jerusalem or the Mecca, without forgetting, of course, Lourdes, and to a certain extent, Saint Jacques de Compostelle...

When the Soviets arrived, the town fell into ruin; Communism has such nasty effects on religion and on commerce! The first is prohibited, the second is centralized. Since 1990, these two pillars of Tūrkestan, nay of Humanity on the whole, have been rapidly restored, perhaps not to their former puissance, but restored, nonetheless, if not satisfactorily commercial at least religious, and as far as I am concerned, so much the better...I am not suggesting that religion and commerce should file for divorce, but let us say, a period of separation on good terms

would do no great harm to T rkestan, nor to the whole of Humanity for that matter...But here I am merely thinking aloud...

And so every day for the my remaining three days I circumambulated the *turbeh*, prayed with the Imam in front of the sacrophagus, met him and Ahmet in the gardens where we chatted about this and that. I came to regard Hodja Ahmet Yesev  as one of the *Rabi el-Alam ne* - le Ma tre 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 Yesev '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 *sam *, of dancing and chanting, is one inspired by Ahmet Yesev '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 imbued 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! Have the dreams of lavish green and honey come true? 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 *turbah*, 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 renascent...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 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



Annex

I have reprinted Hodja Ahmet Yesevî's *hikmets* from the Turkic edition that I read and translated during my pilgrimage so that my readers can measure for themselves the hoariness of his tongue and the correctness or incorrectness of my translations. I have not sought a poetic translation but rather one that will offer a taste of the Sufism behind the Old Turkic language forms. The order of the *hikmets* follow the chronology of my recount and not the numerical order as printed in my Turkish edition...

Hikmet XIII (epigraph)

VI

tüşim uzar burâk tozar kitse bâzâr
dünya bâzâr içre kirip kullar azar
başım bîzâr yaşım sizar kanım tozar
atım ahmed türkistândur ilim mening

Hikmet II

I

'eyâ döstlar kulak salıng ayduğumğa
ne sebebdin altmış üçde kirdim yirge
mirâc üzre hak mustafâ rûhum kördi
ol sebebdin altmış üçde kirdim yirge

II

hak mustafâ cebrâ'ıldin kıldı su'âl
bu neçük rûh tenge kirmey taptı kemâl
közi yaşlığ halka başlığ kaddı hilâl
ol sebebdin altmış üçde kirdim yirge

III

cibrîl aydı ümmet işi sizge ber-hak
kökke çıkıp melâyikdin alur sebak
nâlişige nâle kılur heftüm tabak
ol sebebdin altmış üçde kirdim yirge

VII

tört yüz yıldın kiyin çıkıp ümmet bolğay
niçe yıllar yörüp halkka yol körgüzgey
[yüz] on dört ming müctehidler hızmet kılğay
ol sebebdin altmış üçde kirdim yirge

VIII

tokuz ay u tokuz künde yirge tüştüm
tokuz sâat tura'Imadım kökke uçtum
arş u kürsî pâyesini barıp kuçtum
ol sebebdin altmış üçde kirdim yirge

IX

arş üstide namâz okup tizim büktüm
zârım aytıp hakka bakıp yaşım töktüm
yalğan âşık yalğan sûfî kördüm sögtüm
ol sebebdin altmış üçde kirdim yirge

X

cândan kiçmey hû hû digen barı yalğan
bu kaltakdın sormang su'âl yolda kalğan
haknı tapkan özi pinhân sözi pinhân
ol sebebdin altmış üçde kirdim yirge

XI

bir yaşımda ervâh manga ülüş birdi
iki yaşta peygamberler kilip kördi
üç yaşımda çil-ten kilip hâlîm sordı
ol sebebdin altmış üçde kirdim yirge

XII

tört yaşımda hak mustafâ birdi hurmâ
yol körsettim yolğa kirdi niçe gümrâh
kayda barsam hızır babam manga hemrâh
ol sebebdin altmış üçde kirdim yirge

XIII

biş yaşımda bilim bağlap tâat kıldım
tatavvu[la] rûze tutup âdet kıldım
kiçe kündüz zikrin aytıp râhat kıldım
ol sebebdin altmış üçde kirdim yirge

XIV

altı yaşda turmay kaçtım halâyıkydın
kökke çıkıp ders öğrendim melâyıkydın
dâmen kisip heme ehl ü alâyıkydın
ol sebebdin altmış üçde kirdim yirge

XV

yitit yaşda arslan babam izlep taptı
her sır körüp perde birle büküp yaptı
bihamdi'llâh kördüm didi izim öpti
ol sebebdin altmış üçde kirdim yirge

XX

sikizimde sikiz yandın yol açıldı
hikmet ayt dip başlarımğa nûr saçıldı
bihamdi'allâh pîr-i muğân mey içürdi
ol sebebdin altmış üçde kirdim yirge

XXII

tokuzumda tolğanmadım toğrı yolğa
teberrük dip alıp yördi koldın kolğa
kıvanmadım bu sözlerge kaçtım çölge
ol sebebdin altmış üçde kirdim yirge

XXIII

on yaşıngda oğlan boldung kul hâce ahmed
hâcelikke binâ koyup kılmay tâcat
hâce min dip yolda kalsang vây ne hasret
ol sebebdin altmış üçde kirdim yirge

Hikmet III

II

on birimde rahmet-deryâ tolup taşı
allâh didim şeytân mindin yırak kaçtı
hây u heves mâ vü menlik turmay köçti
on ikide bu sırlarnı kördüm muna

III

on üçümde nefis hevânı kolğa aldım
nefs başığa yüz ming belâ karmap saldım
tekebbürni yirge urup basıp aldım
on törtümde tofrak-sıfat boldum muna

IV

on bişimde hûr u ğilmân karşı kildi
başın üzüp kol kavşurup tazîm kıldı
firdevs atlıĝ cennetidin muhzır kildi
dîdâr üçün barçasını koydum muna

V

on altımda barça ervâh ülüş birdi
hay hay sizge mübârek dip âdem kildi
ferzendim dip boynum kuçup könglüm aldı
on yitimde türkistânda turdum muna

VI

on sikizde çil-ten birle şarâb içtim
zikrin aytıp hâzar turup kögsüm tiştim
rûzî kıldı cennet kızıp hûrlar kuçtım
hak mustafâ cemâlların kördüm muna

VII

on tokuzda yitmiş makâm zâhir boldı
zikrin aytıp iç ü taşım tâhir boldı
kayda barsam hızır babam hâzır boldı
ĝâvsu'l-ĝıyâs mey içürdi toydum muna

VIII

yaşım yitti yigirmige ötdim makâm
bihamdî'llâh pîr hizmetin kıldım tamâm
dünyâdaki kurt u kuşlar kıldı selâm
ol sebebdin hakka yavuk boldum muna

XI

kul hâce ahmed yaşıng yitti yigirmi bir
ne kılğay sin günâhlaring tağdın ağır
kıyâmet kün ğazab kılrsa rabbım kâdir
eyâ dôtlar neçük cevâb ayğum muna

Hikmet IV

II

min yigirme iki yaşda fenâ boldum
merhem bolup çın derdlikke devâ boldum
yalğan âşık çın 'aşıkka güvâh boldum
ol sebebdin hakka sığnıp kildim muna

III

eyâ dôtlar yaşım yitti yigirme üç
yalğan davâ tâatlarım barçası pûç
kıyâmet kün ne kılğay min bürehne lûç
ol sebebdin hakka sığnıp kildim muna

IV

min yigirme törtke kirdim hakdın yırak
âhiretka barur bolsam kanı yarak
ölgenimde yığlıp urung yüz ming tayak
ol sebebdin hakka sığnıp kildim muna

VI

yazuk bilen yaşım yitti yigirme biş
sübbhân igem zıkr örgetip kögsümni tiş
kögsümdeki girihlerim sin özüng yiş
ol sebebdin hakka sığnıp kildim muna

VII

min yigirmi altı yaşda sevdâ kıldım
mansûr-sıfat dîdâr üçün ğavġâ kıldım
pîrsiz yörüp derd ü hâlet peydâ kıldım
ol sebebdin hakka sığnıp kildim muna

VIII

min yigirmi yiti yaşda pîrni taptım
her sır kördüm perde birlen büküp yaptım
âstânesin yastanıban izin öptim
ol sebebdin hakka sığnıp kildim muna

IX

min yigirmi sikiz yaşda âşık boldum
kiçe yatmay mihnet tartıp sâdık boldum
andın songra dergâhıġa lââyık boldum
ol sebebdin hakka sığnıp kildim muna

X

bir kem otuz yaşda kirdim hâlım harâb
ışk yolıda bola'lmadım misl-i türâb
hâlım harâb bağrım kebâb közüm pür-âb
ol sebebdin hakka sığnıp kildim muna

XI

otuz yaşda otun kılıp köydürdiler
cümle büzürg yığlıp dünyâ koydurdılar
urup sögüp yalġuz haknı söydürdiler
ol sebebdin hakka sığnıp kildim muna

Hikmet V

II

otuz birde hızır babam mey içürdi
vücûdımın asâzîlni pâk kaçurdi
sevdâ kıldım yazuklarım hak kiçürdi
andın songra hak yolığa saldı dôtlar

III

otuz iki yaşda yitti hakdın fermân
bendelikke kabûl kıldım armân
cân birürde birgüm sanga nür-ı îmân
ğârîb cânım şâdmân bolup küldi dôtlar

V

otuz üçde sâkî bolup mey üleştım
câm-ı şarâb kolğa alıp toya içtim
leşger tüzüp şeytân birle köp uruştım
bihamdi'llâh iki nefsim öldi dôtlar

VI

otuz törtde âlim bolup dâna boldum
hikmet ayt dip sübhân idi gûyâ boldum
çil-ten birle şarâb içtim hemrâh boldum
iç ü taşım hak nûrığa toldı dôtlar

VII

otuz bişde mescid kirip devrân sürdüm
tâliblerge ısk dükkânın tola kurdum
igri yolğa her kim kirdi sögtüm urdum
âşıklarğa hakdın müjde yitti dôtlar

VIII

otuz altı yaşda boldum sâhib-kemal
hak mustafâ körsettiler manga cemâl
ol sebebdin közümlü yaşlıg kâmetim dâl
ışk hanceri yürek bağrım tildi dōstlar

IX

otuz yiti yaşka kirdim uyğanmadım
insâf kılıp allâh sarı tolğanmadım
seher vaktda zârî kılıp ingrenmedim
tevbe kıldım hâcem kabûl kıldı dōstlar

X

otuz sikiz yaska kirdim ömrüm ötti
yığlamay mu öler vaktım yavuk yitti
ecel kilip peymânesin manga tuttı
bilmey kaldım ömrüm âhir boldı dōstlar

XI

otuz tokuz yaşka kirdim hasret
vâ-dirîgâ ötti ömrüm kanı tâat
tâatlikler hak kaşıda hoş-saâdet
kızıl yüzüm tâat kılmay soldı dōstlar

Hikmet VI

The age of forty is absent in the Hodja's ascension so as not to associate his Self with the Prophet's Celestial Ascension, hearkening to Allah's call and summons on the sacred Night of Mi'raj in the oral gleaning of the Koran...

II

kırk birimde ihlâs kıldım yol tapay dip
irenlerdin her sır körsem min yapay dip
pîr-i muğan izin alıp min öpey dip
zâtı uluğ hâcem sığınıp kildim sanga

III

kırk ikide tâlib bolup yolğa kirdim
ihlâs birle yalğuz hakka köngül birdim
arş u kürsî levhdin ötüp kalem kizdim
zâtı uluğ hâcem sığınıp kildim sanga

IV

kırk üçümde haknı izlep nâle kıldım
köz yaşımın akuzuban jâle kıldım
beyâbânlar kizip özüm vâle kıldım
zâtı uluğ hâcem sığınıp kildim sanga

V

kırk törtümde muhabbetni bâzârıda
yakam yırtıp yığlap yördüm gülzârıda
mansûr yanglığ başım birip ışk dârıda
zâtı uluğ hâcem sığınıp kildim sanga

VI

kırk bişimde sindin hâcet tilep kildim
tevbe kıldım her iş kıldım hatâ kıldım
yâ ilâhım rahmetingni uluğ bildim
zâtı uluğ hâcem sığnıp kildim sanga

VII

kırk altımda zevk u şevkım tolup taştı
rahmetingdin katre tamdı şeytân kaçtı
hakdın ılhâm refîk bolup bâbın açtı
zâtı uluğ hâcem sığnıp kildim sanga

IX

kırk yitimde yiti yakdın haber yitti
sâkî bolup câm-ı şarâb hâcem tuttı
şeytân kilip nefis hevânı özi yuttı
zâtı uluğ hâcem sığnıp kildim sanga

Hikmet III

I

her subh-dem nidâ kildi kulakımğa
zıkr ayt didi zıkrın aytıp yördüm muna
ışksızlarnı kördüm irse yolda kaldı
ol sebebdin ışk dükkânın kurdum muna

Hikmet VI

IX

kırk sikizde azîz cândan bîzâr boldum
güneh derdi kesel kıldı bîmâr boldum
ol sebebdin hakdın korkup bîdâr boldum
zâtı uluğ hâcem sığnıp kildim sanga

X

kırk tokuzda ıŝkıng tüŝti köyüp yandım
mansûr-sıfat haly u hîŝdin kaçıp tandım
türlüğ türlüğ cefâ tigdi boyun sundım
zâtı uluğ hâcem sığnıp kildim sanga

XI

illigimde ir min didim fi'lim za'îf
kan tökmedim közlerimdin bağrım izip
nefsim üçün yörer irdim it dik kizip
zâtı uluğ hâcem sığnıp kildim sanga

Hikmet VII

II

illig birde çöller kizip giyâh yidim
tağlar çıkıp tâ'at kılıp közüm oydim
dîdârını köre'lmedim cândın toydım
bir ü barım dîdârıngnı körer min mü

III

illig iki yaşda kiçtim hânumândın
hânumânım ne körüngey belki cândın
başdın kiçtim cândın kiçtim hem îmândın
bir ü barım dîdârıngnı körer min mü

IV

illig üçde vahdet meydin rûzî kıldı
yoldın azğan gümrâh idim yolğa saldı
allâh didim lebbeyk diben kolum aldı
bir ü barım dâdârıngnı körer min mü

V

illig törtde vücûdlarım nâlân kıldım
ma'rifetni meydânıda cevlân kıldım
ismâ'îl dik azîz cânım kurbân kıldım
bir ü barım dâdârıngnı körer min mü

VI

illig bişde dâdâr üçün gedâ boldum
köydüm yandım kül dik takı fenâ boldum
bihamdi'llâh dâdâr izlep ada boldum
bir ü barım dâdârıngnı körer min mü

VII

illig altı yaşda yitti mungluğ başım
tevbe kıldım akar mu kin közde yaşım
irenlerdin behre almay içim taşım
bir ü barım dâdârıngnı körer min mü

VIII

illig yiti yaşda ömrüm yıl dik ötti
eyâ dâstlar amelsiz min başım kattı
bihamdi'llâh pîr-i muğân kolum tuttı
bir ü barım dâdârıngnı körer min mü

IX

illig sikiz yaşka kirdim min bî-haber
kakhâr igem nefsimni kıl zîr ü zeber
himmet birseng şôm nefsimge ursam teber
bir ü barım dîdârıngnı körer min mü

X

illig tokuz yaşka yittim dâd u feryâd
cân birerde cânânımnı kılmadım yâd
ne yüz birle sanga aytay kılğıl âzâd
bir ü barım dîdârıngnı körer min mü

XI

közüm yumup tâ açkunça yitti altmış
bilim bağlap min kılmadım bir yahşı iş
kiçe kündüz bî-ğam yördüm hem yaz u kış
bir ü barım dîdârıngnı min mü

XII

altmış birde şermende min ilâhımdın
eyâ döstlar köp korkar min günâhımdın
cândın kiçip penâh tiley hudâyımdın
bir ü barım dîdârıngnı min mü

XIII

altmış iki yaşda allâh pertev saldı
başdın ayağ ğafletlerim rehâ kıldı
cân u dilim akl u hûşum allâh didi
bir ü barım dîdârıngnı körer min mü

XIV

altmış üçde nidâ kildi kul yirge kir
hem cânıng min cânâning min cânıngnı bir
hû şemşîrin kolğa alıp nefsingni kır
bir ü barım dîdârıngnı min mü

Hikmet XXIV

I

muhabbetni câmin içip raks eyleben
dîvâneliğ makâmığa kirdi döstlar
aç u tokluk sûd u ziyân hîç bilmegen
sermest bolup raks u semâ urdı döstlar

II

raks u semâ urgenlerge dünyâ harâm
ehl ü iyâl hânumândın kiçti tamâm
seher vaktda hakka sığnıp yığlar müdâm
andın songra raks u semâ urdı döstlar

IV

özdin kitmey raks eylese allâh bîzâr
sübhân igem anga kılmas îmân atâ
tâat kılsa dillerini kılmas safâ
riyâ kılıp raks u semâ urdı döstlar

Hikmet IV

XII

kul hâce ahmed dünyâ koysang işing biter
kögsüngdeki çıkkân âhıng arşka yiter
cân birerde hak mustafâ kolung tutar
ol sebebdin hakka sığnıp kildim muna

Hikmet VII

XV

kul hâce ahmed nefsnî tiftim nefsnî tiftim
andın kiyyin cânânımnı izlep taptım
ölmes burun cân birmnekni derdin tarttım
bir ü barım dîdârıngnı körer min mü

Hikmet XXIV

VI

şiblî âşık semâ urdı pertev körüp
mustafânı hâzır körüp su'âl sorup
dünya ukbîn arka taşlap közin yumup
andağ kullar raks u semâ urdı döstlar

VII

şiblî âşık yığlap aydı eyâ resûl
bî-tâkât min semâ ursam hem min melûl
resûl aydı inşâ'-allâh kılğay kabûl
ruhsat tilep raks u semâ urdı döstlar

Hikmet XXVII

XI

bu dünyâda fakîrlıkñı âdet kılgen
hârlık tartıp meşakkatñı râhat bilgen
kul hâce ahmed yahşılarğâ hızmet kılgen
kıyâmet kün andağ kişi sultân bolur



The sons of God crossed the Desert in quest of their Selves...