

The historian Steven Runciman observed in *The Fall of Constantinople, 1453*, that, despite the often tragic events of the Conquest, Sultan Mehmed II lived long enough to “look with pride on the new Constantinople, a city where new buildings were daily rising and where workshops and bazaars hummed with activity... . He had destroyed the old crumbling metropolis of the Byzantine Emperors, and in its place he created a new and splendid metropolis in which he intended his subjects of all creeds and races to live together in order, prosperity and peace.” Now, some five and a half centuries after the Conquest and with financial support from the Turkish Ministry of Culture, Talisman House Publishers have issued translations of two works that offer to us, in very different ways, visions of modern-day Istanbul—a collection of poems written in the middle years of the 20th Century by Edip Cansever and a controversial 1996 novel by Nedim Gürsel.

Edip Cansever (1928-1986) was part of a “Second New” wave of modern Turkish poets. He also sold antiques for nearly thirty years in the Kapalı Çarşı, the Grand or Covered Bazaar, “with its corridors, its arcades, its large Ottoman hans.” His output was prodigious; his world view was
secular and oriented, sometimes longingly, towards Western culture; and like many educated Turks of his generation, by mid-century he was drawn towards Existentialism. In this short volume, the translators have provided for the English-speaking reader a useful introduction to Cansever’s work and a selection of nearly forty of his poems as well as an essay, The Grand Bazaar, an autobiographical sketch, explanatory notes, and their thoughts on the peculiar difficulties encountered translating the poet’s work from Turkish.

At the outset, we are introduced to the concept of hüzün, the feeling of sadness and melancholy that seems to have permeated Istanbul in the middle years of the twentieth century. Maureen Freely’s translation of Orhan Pamuk’s Istanbul, Memories of a City, is quoted: “the great mosques and other monuments of the city, as well as the lesser detritus of empire in every side street and corner – the little arches, fountains, and neighborhood mosques – inflict heartache on all who live amongst them.” Not unexpectedly then, we find the theme of hüzün running throughout Cansever’s work. In “Dirty August” we read: “A few hotels stick in my mind/ Or else don’t stick in my mind –/ It’s not any one hotel in particular./ The coffee-colored apparatus of loneliness:/ The accumulation of dreams,/ And an edifice of flames the color of coffee.” Or in “Dead Sirens” the lines “I walked through debris, through old cemeteries/ Between stones, dead heaps of bees/which had no place in memories anymore.”

The gloom is counterbalanced in part by the nature of the modern Turkish language, a legacy of Kemal Atatürk’s insistence that the emerging nation adopt a modern alphabet with a simpler, more specific vocabulary that would move poetry away from refined and ornate Ottoman divan traditions on towards Modernism. The melancholy is lightened also by the poet’s imagination, “a place where physical objects, sense impressions and ideas coexist joyfully and with ease.”
Hence in “Sweet Reality” we are told that “Once a man understands he is finished with nothingness/ He’ll be ready for windows and doors,/For a wife and children,/Scrubbed flagstones and the morning’s chores/ and he’ll return to the shop./What we call reality is something bright and shiny./ When you bite down on it crunches.”

In conclusion, this little book with its evocative photographs of city scenes by Samuel Retsov on both front and back covers, serves its purpose nicely. We only wish that the translators had included the dates of publication of individual poems. Cansever’s poetry appeared over nearly four decades, beginning in 1947 with the volume *Late Afternoon*. His early work, including the 1954 poem “What a Table That Table Is” (included here as “Table”), is cheerful and much anthologized; and Cansever would reminisce, “But we were like flowers freshly cut and worn in the Flower Arcade…. Everything was poetry, everything was a line, everything had not ripened yet to maturity, everything was something poetic that had not found its name.” Nonetheless, by the early 1960s, “the overall view of things in our poetry thoroughly changed and settled in….Sadness was our overriding emotion.” The reader instinctively wants to look for these changes, to find them in the poems. Even without a timeline though, it is clear that Cansever’s work retained to the end a quirky independence, an outlook not easily fazed by contradictions. In his poems, the seemingly direct becomes oddly elusive and hard to pin down. There are surprising word choices, a gritty directness, and unexpected rhymes. The sea and the broader worlds of nature provide relief which may then be rejected or disowned. Responding to a critic’s statement that his work was “infused with [a] problematic nature,” he agreed: “It’s a true analysis. Until my life is used up I want to think of man as an individual, as somewhat removed from society”, but “In order not to go mad and lose my way/ I remained as two
people/ Two people talking to each other.”

The duality that Edip Cansever perceived in himself takes a more ominous, indeed destructive turn in Nedim Gürsel’s *The Conqueror: A Novel*. Gürsel (1951- ) speaks from a generation later than the New Wave poets, and the Istanbul of his novel, set in the autumn of 1980, is permeated less by hüzün than by a sense of desperation. Born in southeastern Anatolia, Gürsel was schooled in Istanbul at the Galatasaray Lisesi in an atmosphere permeated by French educational traditions. He completed a doctorate at the Sorbonne, where he now teaches; and since the late 1960s he has published extensively in Turkey, where his work seems to have been, according to the fluctuations of the political environment, either honored with prizes or censored and reviled.

In *The Conquerer, a Novel* an expatriate writer has returned to Turkey during the summer of 1980 with his wife and two friends, another couple, to vacation in a *yalı*, a ramshackle wooden villa at the water’s edge on the Asian side of the Bosporus. He lingers on into September to research a novel based on the life of the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed. This novel within a novel will commence with the decision in March, 1452, to construct the fortress of Rumeli Hisar in preparation for the conquest of the city. From the *yalı*, the writer need only look for inspiration directly across the channel, there at its narrowest point, towards the present ruins, the *Boğazkesen* or “Cut-throat” tower.

The work is interrupted by a porpoise that strays from the Bosporus through the water gate into the boathouse underneath the *yalı*. Trapped and struggling to escape, “It was as if an escaped madman were trying to tear the *yalı* down with a sledgehammer, pounding the floors and walls.” The porpoise broke free out into the currents, turned about, and “gazed upon the mossy walls and the rotten planks of the dock, ready to collapse. It was as if he were looking for
a familiar face or the elegant, ornate, blue and green painted skiffs of the old days. Then he submerged his head in the sea and quickly passed beside me...” Soon afterwards, a young woman named Deniz arrives, looking for the friends who had returned to Paris. The writer recalls that Deniz was known to have “very blue eyes which unexpectedly attract people” and that “she was jailed for a while after March 12” [March 12, 1971, when the Turkish military forced the resignation of the country’s president.] Deniz stays for dinner, spends the night making love, and to the writer’s regret, insists on leaving on an early morning ferry.

The fictional recreation of the Conquest, presented in chapters that alternate with events in 1980, relies heavily upon the sorts of historical accounts one finds in Runciman, giving perhaps undue attention to cruel and gruesome incidents: the burning of a dervish; the impalement of a Venetian sea captain; the enslavement of a young Venetian seaman as the Sultan’s page; the last fretful days of a Grand Vizier awaiting execution. As the writer immerses himself deeper in research, turning the pages of old manuscripts, he also realizes that he is losing contact both with the Istanbul of his childhood and the present: “I had read in the newspaper during the summer about the terrorism which was rapidly rising, young people killing each other on behalf of political differences named ‘right’ and ‘left’... But we were on holiday in the yalı. We were away from all kinds of danger, living free, just together.” One evening, exhausted by his work in the library of the Fatih (Conquerer) mosque and after drinking heavily at a tavern in the Flower Arcade [the Çiçek Pasaji, where Edip Cansever and other New Wave poets had gathered in the 1960s], he takes a room in a hotel. There, we will learn towards the novel’s end, he encounters the presence of the Conqueror, summoned up by a picture cut from a Hayat magazine. Mehmed, looking “thin and tired”
as in the Bellini portrait, orders him to hurry to finish the novel “before I die.”

The story then moves quickly to the final attack on Constantinople, building first on historical accounts, especially the diary of a Venetian surgeon, Niccoló Barbaro, who remained in the city through the siege (1). Gursel transforms the real-world Niccoló into an enslaved Venetian youth, “the preferred page” of the Conquerer, who endured his captor’s taunt “that war was not as easy as making love.” Niccoló, rather surprisingly, emerges as the most thoughtful, decent and humane of Gürsel’s fictional creations, considering himself “only a witness, an ordinary witness, of the terrible days in which we live.” He survives the events that lead to the fall of the city but is killed off by his increasingly ruthless creator, “since there should be an end for this novel in which none of the characters dies a natural death.” [The real Niccoló Barbaro escaped the city, though barely, with his life. His young counterpart, we are told, has longed “to have the first woman of his life, not by her desire but by force,” and is stabbed in the back as he assaul/ts her.]

Having brought the story to this point, the writer realizes (as does the reader) that his manuscript resembled “a patchwork rather than a harmonious, rigorously constructed text ... full of deviations, unnecessary information and details.” Unsettled and discouraged, he determines to persevere, but the present, Istanbul in the autumn of 1980, intrudes as Deniz, by this time a fugitive, comes to the yalı again, this time asking for asylum. A coup d’état has taken place. There have been arrests and executions and Deniz fears “The circles are gradually narrowing in on me. They’ve searched the houses of my relatives one by one…. I thought I would be safe here.”

Sanctuary, once granted, involves extravagant sexual activity interrupted by bitter quarreling. Deniz, “a determined
revolutionary” mocks the writer’s ignorance, his lack of commitment, his preoccupation with events of five centuries before: “My friends are being tortured to death, don’t you understand?” He defends himself; their battles, increasingly physical, are followed by bouts of obsessive sensuality, related in terms of disturbing cruelty and violence: “I sank into her like a scimitar; yes, I was totally immersed.” As “desire to write The Conqueror gradually turned into a love poem dedicated to Deniz,” the abandoned characters from his novel also call out to him insistently. Past and present contend; the yalı becomes a prison; attempts to write become jumbled and confused. The novel ends, as it begins, with an evocation of the porpoise in the boathouse: “I must destroy Deniz’; the thought is fluttering like a bird in a cage, struggling to be free…. Then again, like a prisoner locked up for a long time, longing for light and freedom, it will start to hit the walls, throwing itself from floor to armchairs, from armchairs to closed windows, in order to mix with the glassy water, to be cleansed and purified in the flowing waters of the Bosporus, flowing always flowing.” One suspects that Deniz will also soon be leaving through the water gate, moving downstream with the currents – and here the reader who does not speak Turkish will miss out on some ironic word play, since deniz in Turkish is also the word for ocean or sea.

What is one to make of all this? That the embrace of a murderous past can be deadly? That inattention to the living present can lead to oppression, violence and death? All of this and perhaps more? The events that led to the 1980 coup and its aftermath figure also largely in other recent Turkish fiction. One thinks of Pamuk’s novels: Snow, The Black Book, and The Museum of Innocence, as well as The Bridge of the Golden Horn by Emine Sevgi Özdamar and Adalet Ağaoğlu’s Summer’s End. Nedim Gürsel has had to exile himself from Turkey twice, after the intervention in 1971
and after the more drastic events of 1980. As recently as 2008 he was charged with insulting religion, though subsequently acquitted. Too little of his work has been translated into English, and the publication of this powerful and disturbing novel is an important step in that direction.