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The Mad Nomad: Interview with Talât Sait Halman

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In the beginning

The poet created loneliness

Then God found it

Shadows of Love

Talât Sait Halman, who is one of the members of the Advisory Board of JAST, spent the Fall '96 semester as a visiting professor at Bilkent University. I took the opportunity to interview him.

Poet, scholar, academician, translator, columnist, statesman, Halman (1931-) is a many-sided personality. Born in Istanbul to a patrician family of Black Sea origin, he studied, from the age of twelve onwards, at Robert College (Note 1), an institution of secondary and higher education run by Americans, broken thus at a tender age into the biculturalism that is a salient feature of his personality. He went to the US in 1952 to study at Columbia University, and has been more or less there since, except for the year 1971 when he served as the first Minister of Culture in Turkey and was decorated "Knight Grand Cross, G. B. E., The Most Excellent Order of the British Empire" by Queen Elizabeth II. He has thus spent what amounts to an adult lifetime in the US as a permanent resident, teaching Turkish culture and literature for many years in such universities as Columbia, Princeton, University of Pennsylvania and New York University. Though a frequent visitor to Turkey, he now lives in New York City, dividing his time between writing and giving lectures. He is a much-sought keynote speaker who travels to the four corners of the world. In fact, when I asked him how he wished to be labeled in this introduction, he said: "Put simply 'The Mad Nomad.'"

While Halman is the author of numerous scholarly works in English published in the US on Turkish literature, and the translator into Turkish of American poets

ranging from Langston Hughes to Wallace Stevens, this interview concentrates on his aspect as a poet. He has so far published two books of poetry in English, and ten in Turkish (he is one of the few living Turkish poets able to write in *aruz*). He published *The Shadows of Love* in 1979, and *A Last Lullaby* in 1990. The latter is a bilingual book containing a selection of his poems originally written in English and then translated into Turkish by himself, as well poems originally written in Turkish he then translated into English. (Note 2)

The interview was begun in his third-floor office at the Faculty of Humanities and Letters building in January and ended in New York City in early spring.

How did you become a poet? You said your mother wanted you to be an engineer ...

Poetry burst in me shortly before I started going to school. I was already reading and writing, having been taught by my sister. But even earlier, I had developed a passion for rhyme and rhythm, for word-play and sounds as a sensuous experience. Most children experience the same joy of language, but unfortunately—perhaps fortunately in some cases—they outgrow it. Somehow this curiosity about words, sound patterns, juxtapositions, about the verbal sculpting of pain and exhilaration, about the *mysterium* of imagination never left me. From age six onwards I have lived with an obsessive commitment to reading and writing poetry.

Like most parents, my mother and my father took great pleasure and pride in my poems, but knew that the poetic vocation seldom makes a viable career. My father was a naval officer, an admiral, who had written and translated a considerable number of books. At the beginning, he was convinced one could combine a military career and poetry. Later he saw that I was unfit for military life—I was too delicate in health (I had many serious illnesses: diphtheria, rheumatic fever, hepatitis), too sensitive, too much of an individualist and nonconformist, and perhaps worst of all, too uneasy with authority, too unwilling to take or give orders. My mother had sensed this all along and thought that engineering—a profession she admired as "creative in a concrete way"—might serve best since I was "exceptionally good in math and had a structured mind." I felt that I should become an engineer specializing in road and bridges, but devote all my spare time to literature, especially poetry. (At that time I had no inkling that virtually no engineers have ever produced impressive poetry.) A poet-engineer until 40, I would go into politics and become a Member of Parliament. At 48 I would become a Cabinet Member and at 52 the President of the Republic!

Virtually on the day I turned 13, I dropped engineering from my agenda, and decided that I should pursue a literary career first and foremost. Profession? Earning a living? I thought of that, in my wild adolescent fancies, as a disease that could miraculously heal itself in time. My mother then began to urge me to go into

the diplomatic career (“a combination of elegance and eloquence, a luxurious life in civilized cities.”) My father, still anxious for some tenuous connection with the naval field, tried to get me interested in practicing and teaching maritime law. Both ideas appealed to me in some respects. Consequently, after graduating from Robert College, I studied political science, international relations and international law at Columbia University with the intention of going into the foreign service or pursuing an academic/legal career.

Yet, having completed my graduate studies, suddenly I found both prospects too constricting, almost claustrophobic. Like Macbeth I felt “cabin’d, cribb’d, confin’d.” I chose freedom in poetry. Freedom of intellectual and emotional exploration. Freedom in creative prospects. That gave me, in practical terms, freedom to seek diverse careers—business, academic life, journalism, public service, cultural diplomacy—and to do work in a variety of intellectual disciplines. In a sense, my strategy has been “verse as versatility.”

When I think of all the different directions my life has taken—is that “discordia concors”? Have I found unity in diversity? I am at a loss to provide a coherent, lucid answer. But I must say all this change in my life has been stimulating, exciting, often scintillating. I have enjoyed being a Turkish Walter Mitty. Freedom to transform one’s identity can be both startling and deeply satisfying. It constitutes the architecture of disquietude, the sculpture of dynamics. If you keep your core culturally and emotionally, you can undertake ventures in all directions without dissipating your energy in mere adventures. This certainly lacks the snug comfort of a circumscribed life and of an achievement in depth. But a multi-dimensional exploration has its contentments despite its perturbing restlessness. But then all this might well be the poetic life—or poetry itself. I offer no apologia. This is the way my passion for poetry gave hectic direction and inchoate shape to my life.

When the delegate to UNESCO is a poet ... or Halman’s Nauru Poem:

On 4 November 1995, The Executive Board of UNESCO discussed the admission of the Pacific Island of Nauru to UNESCO as a Member State. Many Board members supported admission. Some expressed concern about the small population (10, 000) and the possibility of the Nation’s eventually moving to another atoll. Some stressed Nauru’s mineral wealth, its high per capita income ($10, 000 a year per person), and its large real estate holdings in Europe, Australia, and the United States. Some members questioned the legality of taking a decision on the basis of an application sent in by fax. Some suggested that the matter be held in abeyance. Talât Halman, representing Turkey, presented a poem at the end of the discussions:

Here many a guru
Has welcomed the State of Nauru.

Even if it moves to another atoll.
That is no problem at all:

Nauru owns a lot of real estate
In many a superstate.

Let rich Nauru be embraced
By cash-poor UNESCO with deliberate haste.

Perhaps we can relax
About the legality of fax.

May the wisdom of Nauru
Become UNESCO's latest guru.

Let us admit this pinpoint nation
By acclamation.

After the poem, the Executive Board decided to recommend Nauru's admission by acclamation.

How do you write poetry? What is for you the inspiration or starting point for a poem? Can you give an example of how the process works? Pen, pc, etc.? Just how much revising do you do? Do you ever feel a work is complete—or is it abandoned?

How I start and how I write can be as varied as all things in my life. Sometimes it is one seminal word that leads to a long poem: "Wrong moments" somehow possessed me—eventually I crafted "My Year of Death." "A Desolate Locust" was the result of a series of visual experiences—watching grasshoppers as a child, then years later seeing a documentary on locusts—and reading books on locusts. I labored on this long poem as if it was a dramatic essay in which I tried to explore blind fury vs. creativity, intellectual crises and pagan as well as monotheistic religion, restorative powers of nature and love, destruction, passion and immortality. This was a deliberate, meticulous construction that went through many revisions over a long period. There are rare mysterious moments when a poem virtually creates itself as 'automatic writing.' One of my favorite poems, "A Last Lullaby" (Note 3), revealed itself to me very early one morning when it 'awakened' me. All I had to do was to write down what it dictated. Within ten minutes or so, it was ready in fullness. I did not have to change a word at that time or later.

Most of my poems, however, remain incomplete for a long time. I work at them, adding or cutting, redoing many of the lines. That is why I keep them waiting, sometimes several years, before publishing them, in the full knowledge that I shall go back to them over and over again. There is 'finality' in publication: once I publish the poem, I make no revisions at all. Not that I abandon it. I simply respect its integrity, its personality independent of myself, its own creative autonomy. But I do abandon countless poems that I start: if somehow a poem resists completion, if it

is malformed, or if it fails to perform its own music, I relinquish it, sadly but also gladly.

Pen, pencil, typewriter, pc—they can all be friend or foe. Often I use an ordinary ballpoint for the earliest drafts, then I transpose it all to typed pages. It is the poem that matters ultimately.

SON BİR NİNNİ

Annemin ömrü boyunca yaptığı tek garip şey
sundurmaya bir portakal koyup çürütmekti.
Portakal bir simge filân değildi onun için:
Amansız bir kader gibi görmüyordu küfleri;
Sinekler gurur değildi, ne de koku umutsuzluk.
Annem gözlerini dikip bakıyordu portakala,
Birşeyler fısıldıyordu eski ninniler gibi.
"Belki," demişti Ağabeyim bir kez, "Baka baka
bir Cennet meyvasına çevirecek onu." Hayır,
Annemin istediği yalnızca bakmaktı, mırıldanmaktı:
Portakal da durup mırıldanıyordu yerli yerinde.
Son pişmanlığın ninnisini söylüyorlardı karşılıklı.

A LAST LULLABY

The only morbid thing my mother did
was to let an orange rot on the porch.
I doubt if it was a symbol for her:
she did not see the molds as cruel fate,
the flies as hubris, the smell as despair.
She would gaze at it and whisper to it
the way she had once sung her lullabies.
"Maybe ," said my brother," she hopes to turn
it into a fruit of Paradise." No-
all she wanted was to stare and murmur:
and the orange just stared back and murmured.
They lulled each other to one last remorse.

You have done a considerable amount of self-translation. What are its advantages and handicaps?

In a sense, all learning and all creative approaches are a process of translation. I am averse to using the term translation as a mere mechanical transfer from one

language to another. A translation must encompass the fullness of a culture to create it in another culture. Unless the self is capable of translating itself, doing new versions is a travesty. The process must be compellingly creative—it must start from full absorption in one culture and culminate in regeneration in another culture.

In this sense, self-translation strikes me as being ideal. Because it is ultimately the same geography in two separate climates. With one's own poems, there is also the splendid advantage of doing new and quite different versions. After all, one is not constrained by the duty of remaining faithful to the original composed by someone else. Translating your own work provides the best kind of freedom. Taking liberties functions as a creative prerogative that you can enjoy to your heart's content.

Do you feel that, in self-translation and translation, bilingualism and biculturalism constitute a *sine qua non*?

Ideally, yes; although there are innumerable examples of magnificent translations made by individuals who were nothing more than 'mono' in language and culture, and at the same time dreadful work done by perfectly bilingual and impressively bicultural people. The highest imaginable competence can naturally be found in translators who are totally bilingual and bicultural.

A great advantage of living in the US, especially in a major cosmopolitan city such as New York, is that one can fully participate in American culture while immersing oneself in one's own culture as well. Maintaining two cultures does not, contrary to what many people fear, breed schizophrenia. Often, it nurtures a fruitful duality where one component enriches the other and vice versa. I think I have been fortunate in finding a milieu in NYC (where the academic and literary community is cordially receptive to colleagues from all types of national, ethnic, cultural backgrounds), while concurrently remaining active in the intellectual life of my country. I should point out that for decades now I have thought of "country" not in the mere sense of "place of birth or residency or citizenship," but as "the climate of culture and intellectual participation and language." For me, country is the quintessence of cultural life. Since my youth, regardless of where I have lived, I have steeped myself in two languages, in two cultural personalities. I feel perfectly at home in both Turkey and the United States, more particularly in İstanbul and New York City. İstanbul is my personal and historical city *par excellence*, the ultimate synthesis of memory, cultures, compelling natural beauty, and the refinement of the Turkish language. New York stands and vibrates, with creative energy, with international rhythms, with the dynamics of the openness and the alienation of urban life, and the vitality of the English language.

Since you seem to place language virtually above all else, who are the poets or what are the forces that have influenced or shaped your poetry? The poets you admire? Did American poets influence your Turkish poetry? And vice versa?

Since poetry, in many respects, has been the essence of my life for nearly sixty years, I have quite naturally come under the influence of innumerable poems. Please take note that I say 'poems,' not 'poets.' I have no total poetic hero. I cannot think of a single poet whose work I admire in its totality. I certainly do not believe that any one poet or poetic aesthetics has wielded a conclusive or shaping influence on me. But, in a sense, what I have written is a synthesis of influences I have absorbed from many thousands of exquisite and powerful poems from a panoply of traditions which I have consciously or subconsciously merged with my own passions, experiences, ideas, and private aesthetics. It is in this manner that my work is an amalgam of diverse influences, but at the same time original. I would challenge anyone to place my poetry in any school or movement or to relate it to any other poet. By the same token, I would venture to say that no other poet will imitate me now or in the future. No one will probably even try. This is essentially because my synthesis is so private as to be inimitable. Mine is a private voice. That is also the way I speak or deliver lectures. I have never encountered anyone who talks with my personal rhythms, mannerisms, turns of phrase and shapes of sound and accents. This, I think, is merely an objective observation. I am not making the statement with arrogance. I certainly don't want to imply that my way is better. Nothing of the sort. All I am saying is that, in person and in poetry, I sound different.

A list of the poems which have given me deep excitement and intellectual enjoyment is so enormous that I cannot compile such a list. Many of them I have probably forgotten, having committed them to a deeper memory. To many others, I keep going back—reading them again and again, often out loud, caressing them, sometimes fighting against them if they have disappointed me at later encounters, but I have a per-verse relationship with quite a few of those verses: I caress many of them, make love to them. Call it the ultimate neurotic erotic. It is a glorious experience.

The promiscuity of this phenomenon is bewildering. The typology of the poems I love defies description. The individual poems (or, in some cases, portions) can range far and wide—a Sumerian or ancient Egyptian love poem or a Qur'anic passage (Surah 131), an Oceanis lullaby or a Shakespearean sonnet, "Peter Quince at the Clavier" by Wallace Stevens or verses from Şeyh Galib's "Hüsn ü Aşk," a Negro spiritual ("Sometimes I feel like a Motherless child") or a ghazal by Rumi, a Bartrihari quatrain or numerous poems in Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*, some of the Psalms, or a Mandelstam, a Michelangelo madrigal or a Neruda love poem ... Oh, the list is truly interminable, and I haven't even referred to Chinese, Greek, Arabic, Roman, and German poetry yet, nor have I mentioned poems by Yunus, Fuzuli,

Karacaoğlan, Nazım or by Kavafy, Auden, Dickinson, Milosz, Donne, Dante, Petrarch, and hundreds of others.

The history of civilization is, in many ways, the history of world poetry. We are all fortunate that we have access to the best of that vast treasure. Mine has been a charmed life: I have devoted many years to discovering, adoring, and transposing innumerable superb poems from the world's best poets.

What have your experiences been with the PEN American Center?

I have been a member of both the American Center and the Turkish Center of PEN since the mid-1960s, and very active in the International PEN in the 1970s. From 1973 to 1981, I served as a member of the Executive Committee of the American Center, and represented the Center (as one of its two official delegates) at international PEN Congresses and Conferences held in Ohrid (Yugoslavia), Jerusalem, Paris, London, Sydney and Stockholm. I was one of the three or four Guests of Honor at PEN Congresses in Dublin, Sydney, and Rio de Janeiro. At the Rio Congress I became a candidate (one of two, and the first ever from outside of Europe and the Americas) for PEN International President, and lost to the Swedish candidate. I have served on many committees of the American Center. Since the 1980s I am a Member of its Translation Committee. I worked closely with many PEN Presidents—Thomas Fleming, Jerzy Kosinski, Henry Carlisle, Muriel Rukeyser, Richard Howard. As far as I know, I was the first and only non-US citizen to serve as American PEN Center's official delegate to the International PEN since PEN was created in the 1920s. This was an honor I shall always cherish.

It was, however, an extremely difficult task at a time when, at the height of the Cold War, International PEN was struggling with the problems of writers in prison, suppression of publications, silencing of writers and journalists in the Soviet bloc, in fascist dictatorships, and even in so-called democratic countries. Some day, I shall write my memoirs and deal at length with my PEN experiences.

Through PEN and other organizations and occasions, I have had the good fortune and honor of meeting many great writers, working with some of them, and becoming friends of some of them. These include Allen Ginsberg, John Ashbery, Stanley Kunitz, Muriel Rukeyser, Jerzy Kosinski, W. S. Merwin, Barbara Guest, Richard Howard, Gregory Rabassa, E. J. Kahn Jr., Naomi Lazard, Grace Shulman, Mario Vargas Llosa, V. S. Prichett, Heinrich Böll, Philip Emmanuel, Gallway Kinnell, Brian Swann, Adrienne Kennedy, Edmund Keeley, Stephen Spender, Adonis, Ahmad Shamlu, al-Bayati, Richard Murphy, Rebecca West, Hannah Arendt, Arthur Miller, Eugène Ionesco, Isaac Asimov, and many others.

What are your recollections of Jerzy Kosinski?

Jerzy Kosinski was one of the most fascinating personalities I have ever encountered—brilliant with a piercing wit, but also with a very dark and depressed aspect. He seemed to be in the grip of contradictions that, I think, he came to cultivate. He had very impressive intellectual courage, but on many occasions he would act with cowardice or let himself be intimidated. He wavered between virtually noble altruism and irritating egotism. Through correspondence, he waged war against the International PEN's London Headquarters, but could never summon up enough courage to attend a single International PEN Congress or meeting.

In many ways, Jerzy was desperately trying to reconstruct himself as a fictional character. He thought of himself as a creative act. Deep down, he was probably a mythomaniac. I have known very few writers or any other individuals who lied about themselves and lesser matters with as much intellectual resourcefulness and emotional relish as did Jerzy. The first time he and I had lunch in 1974, virtually the second thing he mentioned to me was that his father was an Armenian who had gone from Russia to Poland where he had taken the Polish name of Kosinski and that his mother was an uneducated (he remembered her as practically illiterate) Polish peasant woman. I had no inkling that his father was anything other than a Polish Jew, and of course took Jerzy's word for it. Many years later, however, in an interview he gave to *The New York Times*, he stated that his father was a Polish Jew and both his parents were scientists. Had he lied to me or to *The New York Times*? If so, why? I am sure he told me his father was an Armenian to test my reaction as a Turk. As for his mother being illiterate, I suppose he was trying to impress me on the 'fact' that his success was all his own, and that he had achieved it despite a deprived intellectual atmosphere at home.

Jerzy could be very affectionate and generous as well. Once he came to a dinner party at our home. It was probably in 1976 when my son Sait (now deceased) was about ten years old. Jerzy asked him, "Are you going to be a writer like your father?" And Sait answered "No, a scientist." And he added that a few days ago he had written a sci-fi story. Jerzy's eyes glittered: "I'd love to read it," he said. "Now?" "Yes, now." And spent two hours or more discussing the story with Sait.

Jerzy was a painted bird of many colors and moods. I miss him.

GERÇEK ÖLÜM

Oğlum
Ölümü
İlk düşündüğünde
Ne kandı duyduğu
Ne de sürgündeki mor

Güneş körlüğü
Ve kırık
Oyuncaklardaki suç

Oğlum
Bağışlayamadı
Umutsuzca
Sevişmemizi
Görmemişti hiç
Evden çıkan
Cenazeleri

Oğlum
Yarı kalmış
Gülümseyişlerle
Beni her gün
Gömüyordu
Ağıtsız

Ecel
Oğlumun
Oynadığı son oyun
Ben
Oğlumun
Öksüzüyüm

ULTIMATE DEATH

When my son
First
Dreamed of death
He sensed neither blood
Nor the violet in exile
Only the sun’s blindness
And the guilt
Of broken toys

My son
Could never forgive
Our desperate
Lovemaking
He had never seen
The coffins
Coming out of the house

My son
Cracking
A half smile or two
Buried me
Each day
Without a dirge

Death
Is the last game
My son ever played
I am
My son's
Orphan

You said you also knew Allen Ginsberg ...

I shall always cherish the memories of a wonderful friendship with Allen Ginsberg. I met him at the Greenwich Village flat of Theodore Wilentz in 1970. Ted was the owner of Corinth Books and a great friend of New York poets, including Frank O'Hara (an American Orhan Veli). Ted Wilentz had published a lovely book by Allen Ginsberg—*Empty Mirror*. He was preparing for publication my volume entitled *I am Listening to İstanbul: Selected Poems of Orhan Veli Kanık.* As we were talking in Ted's apartment, Allen Ginsberg expressed interest in hearing Orhan Veli's poems, so I read to him from the manuscript. He found the poems "enchanting." He wanted to hear some of the originals as well. Fortunately I had them with me—and read them to him in Turkish. He was, he said, "struck by the cadences and the melodic structure of Turkish." For another hour or so, we talked about mainly American poets. As he was leaving, he gave me a big hug and sloppy kisses on both my cheeks. After that encounter, whenever and where ever we met, it was the same ritual—a big hug and two sloppy kisses.

Allen was one of the most courageous and intellectually honest literary figures I have ever known. Uncompromising in his critical assessments and passionately committed to democratic freedoms, he was generous with his time, efforts and imagination. He had an impressive openness to other people's ideas.

In 1991, he came to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where I was spending the academic year as a Rockefeller Fellow in the Humanities. He invited me to a small private party in his honor. The following evening he was going to speak and read at the University of Michigan. (Due to an unfortunate coincidence, a lecture of mine had already been scheduled for the same hour.) At the party, he and I went into a long discussion of the Gulf War. He was deeply concerned about the US military action and cared greatly about the plight of innocent victims in Iraq, mainly women and children. I brought in the dimension of the dramatic contrast between the US

government's reluctance to do anything for the people being slaughtered in Bosnia and the Air Force pounding Iraqi cities. Allen said, "I had not thought of it in terms of the stark contrast. You are right." I added that "this will constitute one of history's most despicable hypocrisies of all time." I heard later that, at his lecture, he had quoted these statements, paying tribute to his "good friend Talat Halman."

Once I had the great honor of introducing him at a special poetry program at the United Nations. The program featured his lovely poem entitled "Song" read by him in English and by translators in as many as 16 languages. At the end, he read, in mesmerizing fashion, several other poems of his. There is a video-tape of the program. Allen was truly magnificent.

You have published poetry and scholarly work, translations in both languages and political articles. Could you give me a list of your publications, that is to say your bibliography?

Oddly enough, morbidly enough, I think of a bibliography as a cemetery. I have interred countless corpses there, many of them stillborn. What strikes my fancy and keeps me alive is what is still getting born.

I do have some favorite ghosts that rise out of the tombs of my biblio-cemetery—the earliest Turkish translation of Faulkner, my own books of poetry, my verse translations of Shakespeare's complete Sonnets (Note 4), my work on Yunus Emre, my anthologies of ancient poetry from all over the world, my version of O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh.* So far, I have published more than forty books, original and in translation (Note 5), and perhaps close to two thousand articles, journalistic, scholarly, literary.

But what lies ahead excites me a great deal more than what lies in the past. Would you allow me to give you my future bibliography?

Poetry above all. I refuse to die before I put on paper the myriad poems that are throbbing in my veins. No critics might pay attention to them, no literary historians might so much as refer to them, no readers or listeners might enjoy them, but they will get born, no matter what. For sixty years, I lived as a poet. I am willing to die as an unknown poet, without a monument. The poems matter. They were always my life. They shall be my death as well.

Many new books are about to get published or are in the works: a collection of my political articles (all from my *Milliyet* column since 1969) ... "İkiler" (a collection of two-line poems in *aruz*) ... A collection of my articles on literature and art ... Cahit Külebi in English ... A book on "Imagist Poetry" ... A collection of poems in translation ... "Archilochus, First Poet of the Western World" ... A new Orhan Veli Kanık book in English. Also a Sait Faik book ... 100 *rubai*s by Rumi ... "The Song

of Songs" ... "Ses ve Kubbe" (The Echo and the Dome), on classical Ottoman poetry ...

My passion for the theater remains vibrant. I am working on the tragedy of Takiyüddin, the 16th-century Ottoman astronomer ... Also on an open-air spectacle based on the tales of Dede Korkut, and a play relating to the life of Yahya Kemal Beyatlı ... Several one-man plays are taking shape: Neyzen Tevfik, Evliya Çelebi, Muhsin Ertuğrul ... I am planning a dramatization of the life and letters of Lady Montagu. Another play is in progress: it takes Tevfik Fikret and some of his colleagues to New Zealand at the turn of the Century when they planned to flee the Sultan's oppression and set up a commune, their own utopia, in New Zealand.

Three other projects are making headway—inch by inch: A semi-autobiographical novel in Turkish, a filmscript in English, and "The Essence of the Qur'an"/"Kur'an'ın Özü" presenting only the affirmative and humanistic passages.

Various works of scholarship have been crying out for completion—"A History of Turkish Culture" (in English), "A Critical Analysis of Gibb's History of Ottoman Poetry" (in Turkish), "Political Themes, Social Criticism, Satire, and Ideas of Revolution in Turkish Poetry" (English and Turkish), "Arts and Culture in İstanbul" (in English), "Turkish Love Poetry," "Utopia in Turkish Culture," "The Hero and the Martyr in Turkish Life" (all in English and Turkish), and "Ottoman Culture in the Tulip Age" (in English). Also, "The Enduring Echo: 15 Centuries of Turkish Poetry."

Can I do all this? Finish many or any of them? I need fifteen years of concentrated work. Life expectancy was 35 years at the beginning of the 20th century. Now it stands at about 70. It will probably rise to 100 by the middle of the 21st century. All I have to do is survive until 2030 when I'll be close to 100 and ready to stop writing which will probably be my best contribution to literature.

Üstadım, all this sounds wonderful; we will be looking forward to reading or watching these works. Are you aware that you have just given us, your readers, students and fans, a formidable arm? We will not let you have any respite until you are through with all these projects.

Let us go back a little in time. What were your Robert College experiences like?

Eight formative years full of tears and laughter, mental anguish and pleasure, the jungle of boarding-school life and the loveliest friendships, the best instruction that one could get anywhere and some of the worst teachers imaginable, a splendid milieu to cultivate not only two major cultures—Anglo-American and Turkish—but also to absorb world civilization.

My only regret is that, especially in my first few years at Robert College (those were World War II years, 1943, 1944, 1945), many of our teachers from abroad were not very successful and most of our Turkish teachers were dreadful. To this day, I cannot forgive the teachers who taught us history in Turkish—two of them were failed attorneys who probably became teachers at RC mainly to keep an eye on foreign faculty, one was a flighty young man who seemed to have no interest other than chasing skirts, and another was one of the most impressive intellects of the Islamic right who couldn't care less about teaching us anything at all.

In Turkish literature, I had four years of scintillation followed by four years of stupor. Baha Toven (who signed his name B. Toven to evoke Beethoven) was a truly magnificent teacher of Turkish grammar, style, poetry, literature; yet he also taught us about the wisdom of history and the mysteries of the universe. Far more significantly, he instilled in us intellectual curiosity, freedom of conscience, and analytical and critical thinking. From freshman through graduation, Turkish literature was hell for me and for many of my friends who were knowledgeable. We had a veteran teacher of philosophy and logic who had not even learned the fundamentals of literature. He used to make so many errors that correcting his mistakes became for some of us a risky, then embarrassing, then tedious, and ultimately absurd practice.

However, for English and American Literature, I had two glorious teachers. Charles S. MacNeal engendered in me a vital interest in American literature—and was so proud of the fact that I had produced the first-ever Faulkner translation. Unfortunately he did not live to see even my earliest translations of Shakespeare's Sonnets. I owe my passionate interest in the Sonnets primarily to his inspiration: in our Shakespeare course at RC, he used to analyze them in such fascinating ways and read them so exquisitely, sometimes tears flowing down his cheeks. Professor MacNeal, a superb organist and pianist, also taught us the joys of Western and Turkish classical music. Not in class, but at wonderful tea-parties at his home.

Another splendid teacher was Hillary Sumner-Boyd, half British, half American, but a man of universal intellect. I took all his courses; I also did with him tutorials (as electives) in Greek and Roman literature, mythology, and Greek tragedy.

Most of our required and elective courses with other teachers were an unconscionable waste of time and effort as far as I am concerned. I felt that way back then. In retrospect, I make the same judgement, except with greater anger and unforgiving resentment.

Allow me to make the (perhaps arrogant and wrong-headed) statement that my best education was private, on my own, acquired in isolation, as a result of personal endeavor. I say that about my graduate as well as undergraduate training. I came away from formal education with deep disappointment—and firmly convinced that most teachers do not and cannot teach, but some students learn. In several long

stretches of illness in my teenager years, I believe I learned more reading in bed on my own than what I had acquired in the vast majority of my courses at school. It was this independent and concentrated bedridden self-education that shaped my mind, my knowledge, and my ideas for the rest of my life.

Robert College, however, was a source of marvel to an ingrate like me in some vital ways: in addition to the three magnificent teachers I have paid tribute to, RC provided a splendid array of extracurricular activities including theater, music, and outside lecturers (Arnold Toynbee, Louis MacNiece, Yahya Kemal Beyatlı)—and it had a wonderful library, with an excellent Turkish collection, and perhaps Turkey's best English-language collection. Also, scores of brilliant students, most of whom have gone on to making dazzling contributions as scientists, writers, historians, artists, and intellectuals, created a very exciting milieu that nurtured our minds and expanded our knowledge.

I should also pay tribute to the fact that the multi-national and multi-cultural life on the RC campus gave us a predisposition to feeling at home in other countries as well. Had it not been for RC's pluralist culture and its broad curricular horizons, I might have found it less easy to adjust to and function in America and in the cosmopolitan life of New York.

I must say life has been exceedingly generous to me. I am grateful to the persons, organizations, and institutions that enabled me to have the diversity of experiences I had always been eager to have. I am grateful to you and *JAST* for this opportunity to bare my soul.

İSTANBUL

Şimdi de
ayazma
fısıldıyor Bizansın ağusunu
susuzluktan ölen aşk
ve kendini öldürmüş Tanrı

yaşlı balıkçı
ağları çektiğinde
Boğazın sularından
her balıkta gömülü
bir orospu buluyor

Sarayda
lâle öbekleri muştuluyor
yenilginin dilsiz mevlûdunu
ölüm çırılçıplak bir derviş

dönüyor yankısına ayak uydurarak
kızlar ağasının attığı kahkahanın

Yoktur
Allahtan başka
tanrı

Var
Gölge herşeydir

Yanılgılar depremler veba Tanrı temennası

Bir odalık sonsuz bâkiredir
Son hüsnühattın soylusu
atlayıverir
kaderden
camisiz bir minare

Güneş utanıyor
yoksulluğun kubbeleri içine doğmaktan
Katedralin mozaikleri unutmuş
çoktan
gözyaşı dökmeği
verdikleri ilham sadece badana

Tanrı karar vermiş
Ne Krallıktır
Ne de saltanattır
Kendi şehvetli odalığı

İstanbul anlıyor ama
öyle yorgun ki bağışlamaya gücü yok

İSTANBUL

Still
the cistern
whispers the venom of Byzantium
of love dying of thirst
of God a suicide

when the old fisherman
pulls the nets
out of the Bosphorus
buried in each fish
he finds a harlot

In the Seraglio
the tulip- beds herald
the mute requiem of defeat
death is a naked dervish
whirling to the echo
of the chief eunuch's laughter

There is
No God
but God

There is
shadow is all

First earthquakes plagues are God's obeisance

One concubine remains the eternal virgin
The last noble calligraphy
that takes the leap

from fate
the minaret
without a mosque

The sun feels ashamed
to rise inside the domes of poverty
The cathedral's mosaics have forgotten
long ago
how to shed tears
inspiring nothing but whitewash

God has decided
He is neither Kingdom
nor Sultanate
His own sultry

Istanbul understands
but feels too weary to forgive

Notes

1 Established in 1863 initially as a missionary school, Robert College is the oldest American College outside the US. A fictionalized account of life at Robert College in the second half of the 20th century can be found in Maureen Freely's *The Life of*

the Party (1984; Penguin Books 1986), a *roman à clef* portraying the likes of the late Hillary Sumner-Boyd whom Halman mentions.

2 His poetry in English was made the subject of a presentation at a panel devoted to American literature in English by Turkish Americans at the 1997 MELUS (Multi-ethnic Literatures of the US) Conference in Honolulu. His Turkish-language poetry written on US soil is anthologized in *The Longfellow Anthology of Multilingual American Literature*, edited by Werner Sollors, to be published in 1998 by Johns Hopkins University Press.

3 *A Last Lullaby* contains poems in two versions, Turkish and English. I have interspersed this interview with three examples of such poems. Which version was written first? Which version is better? It is up to the reader who knows both Turkish and English to decide. Eversince authors such as Isaac Bashevis Singer and Samuel Beckett wrote the same works in two languages, a debate has been going on as to whether self-translation elevates both versions to the status of creative originals. I publish the poems in the hope of rekindling the debate.

4 Halman's translation of Shakespeare's Sonnets into Turkish have reached the fifth edition (1997).

5 In 1986, the Translation Center of Columbia University awarded him its Thornton Wilder Prize.