The Eda of Ece Ayhan’s *Orthodoxies*

Iccius, I can see you love¹
this sweet-scented boy of the Arabian palace.
You are seduced by these jewels and rare gems
that are strewn about his bedroom and that hang from his
thin neck,
and his exquisite scent and his deep red lips,
and his blue radiant eyes, but beware
the gods say you will meet your death at his hands.

Istanbul, the city of unspeakable beauty; the city of stench,
crooked streets, endless vice.

*A portrait:* His only side — his face — to be talked about: the space
between his legs. And he has grown a mustache and a beard. An
inveterate. A pervert. Such talk about him. He doesn’t go near

---

¹ The italicized sections are from Murat Nemet-Nejat’s translation of Ece Ayhan’s *The Blind Cat Black* and *Orthodoxies*, published by Sun & Moon Press in 1997. This essay is a collage from various literary sources, including excerpts from Ece Ayhan’s *Orthodoxies* and my own work that explore the concept of a transgressive sexuality, that in Ayhan’s poetry is equated with the divine essence. Murat Nemet-Nejat has written about this concept of Eda, in Turkish poetry: “What is ecstatic in eda involves a blurring of identities, in pain, at the same time moving from object to object, unifying them in a mental movement of yearning, dance of dispossession.”
women as he should. He whets suspicion. An erect plume on his head. A barber’s piece. A pornographic masterpiece. He is buried alive in the ground. Head first. Ouch! A few sailboats, startled, shine at a distance.

Why couldn’t I understand?

I got laid, I punished myself, I was looking to die. At twenty-five I was HIV positive. Good. I was a dead man. The disappearance of shame is very recent. A few weeks in fact. With the books and the rest, I imagine, it’s gone. Moreover, I didn’t know that I was so ashamed. Yet I knew that I had been trying to get infected. I didn’t know that I was so ashamed. Ashamed of being hairy, ashamed of being homosexual, ashamed of being Jewish, ashamed of using drugs, in the order of what was most visible to what I was trying to hide. Monkey, rat, vermin, sub-human. It’s crazy. Do I need to explain the first sentence of this text? He carried me. He was telling his story. He was not ashamed. He loved hair. He bore the same name as a classic author. He was published by a chic publisher who gave him money to wander around. I jerked off repeatedly to Le Journal d’un voyage en France. I only just read Tricks this year … Until then I was afraid. I could not read a book that only talked about sex between men. I’m not kidding. It’s the truth.

Modesty, a mood … Now, a leftover. Know. The bend in a child’s heart. His crafty, elegant wrist … He has writings etched over his breast in saffron repeating, embroidering one word from the lexicon endlessly: hermaphrodite. A hermetic woman. A thief woman. A thief of she.

Istanbul, the long-coveted prize of the Islamic Ottoman Empire, the vulnerable, beloved, cherished spiritual center of Eastern Christianity.
Orthodoxies means “virtuous, pious,” but in slang it means “homosexual, pederast.” The life of the body is conflated with the spiritual. Moreover, transgressive sexuality is equated with the divine essence. It is a heresy that the Catholic Church has covered with layer after layer of dualistic thinking: the flesh must suffer in order to gain entrance into heaven, must reject the earth, the pleasures of the body, in order to inhabit the spiritual.

Istanbul, the site of the rational, tent-like simplicity of Turkish Imperial architecture; the awesome interior space of Hagia Sofia; the European and Asian city.

So, in the end it was warlike folk, Alexander and his Little Dwarves, the Successors, who carried out the dissemination of Greek education that Isocrates had foretold. War became a handmaiden of philosophy. To be teachers of the world, you had first to make the world come to school. And that meant war was also a matter of language. In a sense, Alexander’s mission was simply to force everyone to learn Greek, though all local languages would supposedly be honored too. And for this purpose, a simplified and easy-to-learn dialect was manufactured. That’s what I grew up with, as my more or less first language, learned from my parents in Gadara, alongside the Syrian that I learned from the servants who, though my skin was the same dusky hue as theirs, always seemed exotic to me.

*He loves easily, passes his hand below the belt of my vault, forgets easily what a secret Jew I am.*

Outside a leather nightclub, men are talking, laughing. It’s drizzling, early morning, crack of dawn. They’re soaked in sweat, exhausted, but wired at the time.

*There were no little words of loving him, these keys on his belt (warden, lover!) couldn’t be little cooing words of loving him. I ran away, scared, not to meet the porcelain doll. To meet him. That would be my going back to the Lexicon of Torture.*
The people in Ece Ayhan series of poems, *Orthodoxies*, inhabit a shadow world, they are outsiders, transvestites, boy and girl prostitutes, tattooed punks, heroin merchants, the unnamed, performing unspeakable acts, transmitting code-words among themselves to voice desires which cannot be absorbed by the dominant culture. They are heretical. But they delight in heresy, in the music of lust.

In the poems, a proper name signals a presence whose contours remain vague, as if partly obscured in darkness, defined by a gesture, their clothing, a starling detail. It is as if the poems illuminate the actors in the process of acting, but only for a moment, since what occurs is unspeakable, or rather, there is no language for it in the dominant lexicon. But homosexuality has always had an unusual relation to the dominant culture in Turkey. In Orthodoxy 4, Ayhan speaks of Kose Kahya, the comic hero of operettas, whose gay mannerisms were not explicitly named as gay as long as he was seen as an actor in theatrical productions, where excessive “gay” behavior is often the norm. But the way in which the visible and the invisible interact, often in equal measure, informs Ayhan’s poetics. A certain detail, a fragment, is able to inhabit and express simultaneously the visible and the invisible, able to articulate as much as it hides.

Imagine a person one meets in a tavern starts telling us about his entire life. This narrative leaves zero impression. But the same person’s allusion in a phrase to his life, maybe a detail he invents, displaces the narrative he is telling us at length. Instead of obeying stupidly the world order, the order of words is jolted by the finger of the imagination from its set arrangement and left in this new place.

Some of the figures in Ayhan’s poems:
She used to flog her girls, a madam, in a half-assed way. It is sacred and untouched with cum the guild of the red light district. (Orthodoxies 11)

Finduktar, constantly searching for his daughters. He was famous for his disrespect for his ancestors; but is punished. (Orthodoxies 12)

His chained arms brush his kept mistress. What a randy dandy monster! He etches out with a gimlet. He has laid paint on his face as best he could. (Orthodoxies 13)

A Levantine … A deacon, still thinking of the boy he couldn’t forget, will stoke out an engraved figure out of the ashes. Poems will lead him by the hand. (Orthodoxies 23)

He is combing his hair in cum water. Then treated to flowers. A garland of braids. From time to time blinking, with vast hanging earrings. (Orthodoxies 30)

“I’m the king,” a spoiled child was shouting … with his little and boastless cock

The market is crowded with men and women of all ages, and animals, the stink of sweat and feces is overwhelming, bright sun beating down, a man steps forth, offers his bid, the whore shrugs his shoulders, laughs, “what you want with little gold, think you can kiss me? Hahaha! Stupid American, go home buy cheap American whore.” The crowd erupts into laughter, he, the buyer, is humiliated, turns to the whore and spits on the sand, cursing the boy, then turns and disappears into the dusty afternoon, the whore smiles, unafraid, saunters toward a young man, leans down, smiling, exposing a single gold tooth, reflecting the sun’s rays, and kisses his red cheek. He will play the king at Gomorrah
The poems in *Orthodoxies* are suggestive; they flash across the readers eyes like images in a film, like discontinuous fragments of an event, a place, or a person. But the transition from one line to another does not create a linear narrative. The thrust is toward a verticality. In other words, **the less intrusive the photographer the better.** Ayhan writes, “time is whipped to shreds.” “Whipped” is certainly suggestive of BDSM practice, but more importantly the word is a clue about the essential nature of these poems. They exist in an alternate space not governed by linear time or daylight. The day belongs to people who can cope with everyday life but the night is for those who want to distance themselves from the light, and exist in a world of fantasy, and imagination, and art. They are chthonic: *I took shelter in a coffin.* Their arena is an underworld where the detritus of society can act out their desires. But the poems are not without their sense of camp and playfulness. Take this description of a dancing boy in *Orthodoxies* 3:

*Let them whistle the warped tune. His soapy earrings, a lewd bathroom ditty.*

In *Orthodoxies* 16, the poet plays on the word “straight” when speaking of Father Hamparsum, the first inventor of musical notations among the Ottomans. He writes, “*Due to his true faith, his notes go straight.*” Ayhan continues, “*Believing like an Orthodox, Armenian, he sang like an Ottoman. Hey!*”

Galata, a district of crooked, winding streets, where Turkish minorities, Armenians, Greeks, and Jews, reside among seedy bars, whoresouses, transvestites on the street corners of Istanbul.

Prostitutes on street corners, smoking, eyeing a target, a young man with shorts and dark shades, leaning against a wall, *he is spreading the lilies of jealousy on the ground,* cars slowing down across the street where there is rough trade waiting to be picked
up. A heroin dealer crosses the street, the traffic light turns from green to red. A transvestite lights a cigarette, coughs, fixes his mini-skirt, saunters up to a big muscular guy in leather and chaps, strikes up a conversation. *She could outsmart a fox, loaded with experience.* A teenager, heavily made up with lipstick and black eyeliner, walks arm and arm with an older man. A poet, they say. *The scarlet priest is turning the pages of the sultan’s private book woven with naked black slaves.*

Even if you feel shy and confused,

This dark room is a paradise for your senses

My dear boy. No, not those absurd places

Where they dance among the false glittering lights.

Here, your virgin lust can freely sing.

He carries this poem in his pocket as a magical charm. *There they spin children at a bottle game.* Then mount them at full tilt. He believes it will draw the boys out from the shadows. *He invents plots, a prince kept in the house. His armor has grown weak, delicate. His seal is of rusting iron, but his chest a flag of insurrection.*

*Gradually the speech of the red bird is like a scream*

**Works Cited**


