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“On the Train”

by Emine Sevgi Özdamar

Translated by Leslie A. Adelson

Translator’s Introduction

Emine Sevgi Özdamar, born in 1946 and raised as what the author herself calls a ‘child of Istanbul’, first attracted widespread attention from German literary critics in 1991 when she was awarded the prestigious Ingeborg Bachmann Prize for Literature for her first German novel, which appeared nearly ten years later in English translation as *Life is a Caravanserai: Has Two Doors I Came in One I Went Out the Other* (this novel has been translated into ten additional languages, including Turkish). Even prior to this dramatic entry on the German literary scene, however, Özdamar was already emerging as a transnational player in postwar German culture in several different ways that would significantly influence the trajectory of her literary career too. One of the so-called guest workers recruited from Turkey in the 1960s to mitigate the labor shortage in divided Germany, Özdamar lived in Berlin as a factory worker from 1965 to 1967. Pursuing a professional acting career upon her return to Istanbul in the late 1960s, she performed key roles in Turkish stagings of German plays by the likes of Bertolt Brecht and Peter Weiss, including the pivotal role of Charlotte Corday in the revolutionary *Marat-Sade* play that made Weiss internationally famous. After her return to Europe in the 1970s—when Turkish persecution of leftists was especially brutal—Özdamar assisted with theatrical productions by some of the most sought after directors in both the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic, including Benno Besson, Matthias Langhoff, Claus Peymann, Franz Xaver Kroetz, and Einar Schleaf. Various acting roles in theater and film have followed as well over the decades, and Özdamar has written her own multifaceted theater pieces since the early 1980s, sometimes drawing on motifs drawn from children’s literature or life as a guest worker in Germany or—more recently in particular—anti-heroic poetic traditions reflecting on exile, odysseys, death, and the surreal.

And yet the vibrant combination of whimsical wit and literary sophistication for which Özdamar has garnered numerous prizes of considerable distinction in Germany, including the Kleist Prize in 2004 and the Carl Zuckmayer Medal in 2010, is perhaps most keenly evident in her narrative prose. Some of this includes Turkish publications too (for example, Özdamar’s loving recollections and edition of letters by the Turkish poet Ece Ayhan). However, the lion’s share of Özdamar’s literary prose is written in German, beginning with the slim but powerful collection of short pieces with which her literary career in Germany began in 1990. *Mother Tongue* was followed by three novels between 1992 and 2003 that are retrospectively referred to as her Istanbul-Berlin Trilogy (*Sonne auf halbem Weg*), and a second collection of short stories appeared in 2001 under the title *Der Hof im Spiegel*. (*TRANSIT* published the lead story from this collection in English translation as “The Courtyard in the Mirror” in 2006.) A little known, beautifully crafted fairy tale of Grimm-like proportions reflects artfully on the state of German literary criticism and publishing in

2007 under the title *Das Mädchen vom halb verbrannten Wald* or “The Girl from the Half-Burned Forest” (Berliner Handpresse). Invited to hold the University of Hamburg’s special chair in Intercultural Poetics in Spring 2014, this especially talented and versatile contemporary author from Germany—she now resides in Berlin after having lived in Düsseldorf for many years—presented three public lectures on contemporary aesthetics that are scheduled for book publication soon.

The short story presented in English translation for the first time here was previously published only in the German newspaper *Die Zeit* in 2008. According to the author, newspaper editors at the time insisted on listing the story under the rubric “Leben im Dazwischen” [“Life in the In-Between”], a heading that Özdamar objected to then and refuses now in favor of “Im Zug” [“On the Train”]. Here readers will find some motifs that at first appear familiar from the author’s earlier writing too. This includes, for example, the role of mirrors in constructing rather than reflecting subjects in social time, the figure of train travel as a poetic locus of historical transformation, indispensable dialogues between the living and the dead, and a tender dance between love and grief. A dream featuring the narrative persona’s dead mother in “On the Train” even resonates formally with a key passage in “The Courtyard in the Mirror.” These apparent similarities are deceptive though, for “On the Train” also engages with transformative legacies of political violence and transnational affect that belong more properly to the 21st century than the one that preceded it, especially if one deems the latter to have ended together with the Cold War. Rigid chronological markers are of severely limited value of course, especially where ongoing cultural forces of violence and affect are concerned. Yet “On the Train” arguably diverges from earlier trends in the German literature of Turkish migration in three striking ways. First, this story explicitly weaves its own diachronic history of death, grief, and train travel into an updated tale of European becoming. Second, national borders and intercultural exchange yield here to much greater rhetorical emphasis on the Europeanization of nation-states, notably under the regulative watch of the European Union. Reference to a Bulgaria “freshly admitted to the EU,” for example, clearly situates the time of narration after January 2007, while even the post-Yugoslavian states of Croatia and Serbia are turned in Özdamar’s provisional diction into “Soon-to-be Europe” and “Not-Europe.” (Croatia was formally admitted to the EU in 2013, and Serbia only became a candidate for admission in 2012. Discussions about Turkey’s eligibility have been more or less ongoing since 1997.) Third, it quickly becomes evident that an entirely different form of Europeanization is under way on the drafty, mosquito-plagued train that Özdamar creates.

Here affective and intersubjective traces of citizenship debates, “ethnic cleansing,” mass rape, and the Balkan Wars of the 1990s subtly command our attention even as 21st-century borders are crossed, reconfigured, and undone with tears, song, conversation, and lots of scratching. With literary figures as tiny, disquieting, and persistent as mosquitoes on a train, Özdamar gives imaginative voice in German to experiential orders of magnitude for which language must still be found. The pesky mosquitoes at work on this train from Turkey to Europe may suck and commingle different types of blood—sometimes barely noticeable and sometimes “loud as a dive bomber” in the process—but the story they allow Özdamar to tell does not revolve around vampires, headscarves, or so-called third spaces of cultural contact. The European landscapes through which passengers, train, mosquitoes, and readers travel together have feelings, we are told, “as if they were living creatures.” The EU has certainly articulated collective values pertaining to the memory, prevention, and prosecution of genocide, but the 21st-century feelings that Özdamar’s landscapes of

travel begin to make available to us exceed this institutional grasp. For this, we need the language of literature. The train in this story is headed for the Austrian city of Villach, we read, “which is really close to Klagenfurt, the place where Ingeborg Bachmann was born.” This is no mere reminder that Özdamar first received critical recognition with the Bachmann Prize for Literature nearly twenty-five years ago. The anguished literary language that Bachmann so carefully wrought for cultural and subjective legacies of violence in her time spoke to desiderata of the 20th century as no other could. Sometimes mistaken by critics for small-scale naïveté, Özdamar’s vital wit and storytelling verve help guide us through contemporary landscapes of hope, despair, and opportunity instead. “The braid. A braid. A woman’s braid. Many men, a knife. A night, like this one here.” What cultural horizons and intersubjective affects does traveling on a train with Emine Sevgi Özdamar afford us beyond the millennial turn? Transnational readers are invited to see and feel for themselves on this journey of productive, imaginative, and welcome irritation.

On the Train

How long the train had already been standing in the landscape, I didn’t know. There wasn’t anyone I could ask either, no one besides me was standing in the poorly lit aisle on the train at this hour. Everyone was asleep.

The train was very old. The tracks on which it had been traveling from the Turkish border town of Edirne were also very old. Since yesterday the train had been hobbling along over tired tracks through Turkey, Bulgaria, and Serbia. But if you really listened to the tracks, you could tell how the old tracks were working hard to bring people from Turkey to their places of immigration in Europe.

Tomorrow, I thought, everyone would arrive in the city of Villach, which is really close to Klagenfurt, the place where Ingeborg Bachmann was born. From Villach, all the people who were now sleeping in their six-bed-compartments would continue on in the direction of Holland, France, and Germany, either on more trains or with their cars, which were being pulled along behind the old train that had even older train cars coupled to it. Today everyone had been asking all their neighbors in the aisles of the train where they had to travel to from Villach. They didn’t ask where do you live or where are you from. They asked: “What country are you working in?” – “Twenty kilometers from Rotterdam. From Villach we’ll still have eleven hours left to go. And you?” – “We’re traveling on to Berlin by train.” – “Oh, that’s far.” – “Just as far as to Rotterdam.” – “Yes, but Berlin is up there, close to Denmark.” – “If you look at it that way, Rotterdam is close to England.” – “It’s all Europe.”

Europe.

Since the train hadn’t stopped at any station during the night, I didn’t know whether we were still in Not-EU-Serbia or already in Croatia, which is going to belong to the EU very soon. But I didn’t care where we were, Soon-to-Be Europe, Croatia, or Not-Europe, Serbia. A mosquito had woken me up and was still biting my legs. The mosquitoes that had boarded the train yesterday, through the doors and open windows, were still all there, who knows, how many. As soon as the train had begun its trip in Edirne, or Not-Europe, the passengers had noticed the first Turkish mosquitoes. Afterwards European-Bulgarian mosquitoes and then the Not-European-Serbian mosquitoes had climbed aboard too. The mosquitoes would surely accompany us all the way to Villach. But how were they supposed to travel back to Edirne, or to Belgrade, or Sofia? At the beginning of the trip everyone in sleeping car number four had opened the windows in their compartments and the windows along

the aisle to get rid of the mosquitoes again. For hours the wind created by the movement of the train blew the window curtains around up high or leafed around in the newspapers that were lying on the beds, but the mosquitoes remained determined not to leave the train.

I went to the washroom so I could smear soap on my legs, which were all bitten up by the mosquitoes. Whether that would help? I didn't think so. But my blood should at least not taste good to them. Like drinking beer from a glass smeared with soap. In the washroom the mirror on the wall had cracked in two places, and a mosquito was flying in front of it. I saw the mosquito doubled in the mirror and killed it. A spot of blood on the mirror. I thought, the blood is certainly not mine; the blood looked very young. Maybe the mosquito had boarded the train in Sofia after first sucking blood from someone from EU-Bulgaria. And now I was taking revenge for him in the cracked mirror just as the train was stopping in Not-European Serbia. I laughed at myself becoming a blood expert on this train from Edirne to Europe.

From the washroom I returned to the compartment. Carl was awake, sitting up in bed, and scratching his heel. I sat down on the bed opposite his and scratched my legs. Carl laughed and said: "The Serbian mosquitoes are the most aggressive ones, they're the strongest." – "But how do we know they're Serbian mosquitoes?" Carl said: "I don't know. They've been biting me since we passed the Serbian border, even through my socks. Where are we now?" – "I don't know, maybe still in Serbia or already in Croatia." – "But then the Croatian border police would have been here already." – "Oh, right. We're still in Serbia. The houses in the village out here have balconies but no railings, half finished. That's what village houses in Serbia look like."

"Are the three girls from the next compartment sleeping, or are they also awake?" – "I think they're sleeping. Poor things. The mosquitoes are surely biting them too." – "Did you ask the one girl why she's wearing a headscarf?" – "No, I swore to myself I wouldn't ask." "They were just like three cats. One after another came out into the aisle in order to talk with you." – "Their mother is dead. They need a woman whose company can warm them up some." – "You did that well." – "Carl, on trains, especially on such old trains, you always meet a dead person." – "And the mosquitoes." – "Yes, they link Europe and Not-Europe in their blood. If a Serbian mosquito that's along for the ride sucks the blood of a Croatian border guard, would that make the mosquito puke?" – "No, it would become half European."

When Carl and I boarded this train yesterday in Edirne, we didn't know that our passports would be inspected six times on the way to Villach. First by Not-EU-Turks, then by EU-Bulgarians, then by Not-EU-Serbian, then by Soon-to-Be-EU-Croatians, then by EU-Slovenians, and at the end by EU-Austrians. In Bulgaria, freshly admitted to the EU, the young border guard winked at me when I showed him my German passport. He smiled and said: "A Turkish lady with a German passport." He savored the sounds of our first names as he pronounced them, Carl, Sevgi. I think he was happy that Bulgaria belongs to the EU, and that now he was meeting his European friends on this old train. How lovely, I thought, how lovely, that the Bulgarians aren't mad at the Turks any more for the Ottoman occupation, which had lasted for centuries. Now the Bulgarians are in the EU, and the Turks are still begging to get in. That's some small comfort, you have to grant them that. Years ago, for the same reason, I had been happy for the Greeks when they got into the EU.

But the landscapes we were traveling through didn't care whether they belonged to the EU or not. The train was traveling through landscapes of plowed fields in Bulgaria, in Serbia, that all looked alike, non-stop. Carl and I stood in the aisle for the

entire trip and looked out the window. Carl said, again and again: “Look, Van-Gogh-landscapes. I want to paint them. What a charming journey. It’s an old journey, a journey into the past, a journey through the past. Suddenly I can see the feelings of this old landscape, which were lying in shadow. Suddenly I can see them here as if they were living creatures.” What we were seeing from the window of the train was telling us something. The cemeteries, the gravestones. The cemetery trees were standing by their dead like children who had just lost their mothers. A lonely old man with a bucket in his hand, a young girl between the gravestones. Where are you going, little one, to your dead? A big wet dog on a hilly slope, walnut trees rubbing against the train windows. People at the rivers who raised their heads briefly at the train traveling by, and then returned to the river again, to their own shadow. Two children on a balcony with no railing, the lonely field, the thin birches in the woods that looked like melancholy poems. When night came, Carl said: “I already feel such longing for these images. I could cry.” – “Carl, you can cry on a train because the train is traveling on the ground. These old trains have seen so many tears. Feelings travel with us. On an airplane it’s hard to cry. Crying belongs to the ground.”

Crying belongs to the ground.

Many years ago, when I was always traveling by train from Germany to Istanbul, I had once seen how two old men in the aisle were constantly offering each other cigarettes and crying. They were standing at the open window. At that time there was no Serbia, no Croatia, everything was Yugoslavia. I was sitting in a compartment with a Turkish laborer from Frankfurt, a Greek laborer from Düsseldorf, and two Yugoslav laborers from Augsburg. Both Yugoslav men were construction workers. Both had intentionally injured their thumbs with a hammer at the construction site where they worked in order to get medical leave, and they were traveling with bandaged hands to their wives in Yugoslavia. They were singing songs of longing and love for their wives and translating them for us in their broken German. Then the Greek man, Stephane, also had to sing a Greek song of longing and love, and he too translated it into German for us. Then I had to sing a Turkish song and I translated it for them. Greeks, Yugoslavs, and Turks in one train compartment; their common language was German. Each of us used the images from his own mother tongue, each of us found his own German language. Something like an oratorium arose on the train. Then, somewhere in Yugoslavia, the two old Turkish men in tears got on. Behind them five coffins were carried onto the train. These old men had traveled to Yugoslavia with empty coffins from Turkey in order to bring their dead sons and daughters back to Turkey, sons and daughters who had died in car accidents on Yugoslavian streets while driving from Germany to Turkey. The two fathers were smoking cigarettes, standing in the aisle on the train, and talking quietly about the road their dead children had taken. One said: “This road has taken our five souls from us.” Then they stopped talking and cried. Some of their tears got hung up on their unshaven cheeks and stayed there.

On every train, death is a passenger too. Even the dead can travel by train in dreams. When my mother died, very suddenly and very young, in Istanbul, I dreamed of her one night in Berlin. I was standing in the aisle on a train, and another train went by going in the opposite direction. My mother was standing there on the roof, with many newspapers in her arms. When both trains passed very close to each other, my mother said to me: “If you only knew how very much I love you.” I didn’t hear her voice but I could read these words from her lips behind the train window.

“Oh, now a mosquito has bitten me on my little finger,” Carl said. “Why is the train standing still so long? What’s wrong? If the train would move, the mosquitoes

might fly out.” When Carl was asleep again, I turned out the light in the compartment and stepped outside. The aisle was lonely like before. No one was standing in front of an open window and smoking into the night. Even the houses with balconies without railings were asleep. As I stood there all alone, a mosquito buzzed close to my right ear, loud as a dive bomber. I slapped at my ear, at my face, hoping to hit it. I hurt myself and suddenly thought of Safiye, a woman from Yugoslavia who was now living in Berlin and working as a cleaning woman. When Yugoslavia still existed, Safiye was living in Sarajevo and working as a teacher. Then the war broke out. One morning she was sitting at the table with her husband and her brother. While they were having breakfast, the Serbian militia suddenly came into the house, killed her husband and her brother before her eyes, and dragged her along with other women in a truck to a camp. Men there raped Safiye and the other women for two days. Safiye lost consciousness. When she came to again, the first thing she did was to reach for her hair, her long braid, which reached to her thighs, it was gone. Cut off. Safiye’s first thought was: “Where is my braid?” She didn’t ask herself where her husband or her brother was, she asked: “Where is my braid?” The German Red Cross brought Safiye to Berlin.

When I looked out into the landscape from the window on the train, I asked myself in this quiet night, where did Safiye’s braid wind up in the war in Yugoslavia? Where? Where was this camp? The braid. A braid. A woman’s braid. Many men, a knife. A night, like this one here. The braid was lying somewhere but where? Were mosquitoes also there when Safiye’s braid was cut off? Or did they feel so uncomfortable that they flew away? Where did Safiye’s braid land? Where in Yugoslavia? Oh, the night, which keeps so many secrets from us and magnifies so much. What can I ask of you with your stars, which have their fixed place every night, and the moon, which also has its fixed place? How shall I ask you where Safiye’s braid is? Tonight you will illuminate our road to Europe, will get us as far as Villach, and then Carl and I will board another train for Berlin. The trees in Germany will accompany us there.

The next day, when we arrived in Villach, I saw a mosquito in the washroom again and spoke to it in the mirror: “Now how will you travel back to Zagreb, or to Belgrade, or to Sofia, or to Edirne?”

A Note on the Translation

“Bahnfahrt” first appeared in *Die Zeit* Nr. 42 (Oct. 9, 2008): 91, and *Zeit-Online* (Oct. 10, 2008): <http://www.zeit.de/2008/42/Tuerkei-Zugreise>