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REVIEW: YUSUF ATILGAN. *MOTHERLAND HOTEL*. Translated from the Turkish by FRED STARK. City Lights Books, San Francisco, CA, 2016.

This unusual and very interesting novel was published in Turkey in 1973 to considerable success as *Anayurt Oteli*. The influence of William Faulkner on Yusuf Atılgan (1921-1989) was immediately perceived, and the book compared to *The Sound and the Fury*, which it resembles in its structure, style, and themes. Echoes resound also from other Faulkner novels, including *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Light in August*, and even the short story "A Rose for Emily." Stream-of-consciousness narration and the absence of punctuation were new and exciting for Turkish readers, and the novelty of Atılgan's style perhaps even more than the vivid portrayal of the novel's characters contributed to the enthusiastic reception of the novel. The book was adapted for an award-winning film by the Turkish director Ömer Kavur in 1987. One wonders why more than four decades have elapsed before the book will finally appear in English.

One reason for this may have been a general wariness of the Turkish language, which is notoriously difficult to render successfully in translation. Indeed my wife Lâle, who is Turkish, on first reading *Anayurt Oteli*, thought the task would be difficult if not impossible. Hence she was both surprised and impressed by the skill with which Fred Stark has captured the unique atmosphere, the fundamental Turkishness of the language and the authenticity of its characters. However, the book's popular and critical success may well have derived more from its modernism, its introduction of more open and experimental literary forms.

Time itself is a central preoccupation of the tale. We first see its protagonist, Zeberjet, the clerk and manager of the Motherland Hotel, letting himself into the room where, on a Thursday, three nights earlier, a mysterious woman off a delayed train from Ankara has stayed. Subsequent chapters are titled in an irregular sequence, mostly of days over the course of several weeks: Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, Night, Tuesday, etc., ending on a Sunday morning. By that first Monday, we have learned that the Motherland Hotel is in İzmir (ancient Smyrna) and that it survived a great fire set by the retreating Greek army in 1922 only because wealthy Greeks lived in the vicinity. The building, which served as the home of an Ottoman family through much of the 19th Century, was converted to a hotel following the conflagration.

Zeberjet, we learn, is thirty-three years old, and was born in late November of 1930. The birth was premature and he has been taunted for this inadvertent impatience all his life. Unremarkable in many ways, he is “of not quite average height, but not particularly short either.” Unmarried, he occasionally has sex with the charwoman, a woman from a distant village. She is thirty-five years old and the hotel’s only other employee. By way of contrast, the woman off the train from Ankara is striking in appearance, perhaps not beautiful but “Chesty, with black hair and eyes, long lashes, eyebrows plucked somewhat. Sharp-nosed, thin-lipped, her face dark and taut.” She is twenty-six years old and “fairly tall.”

As the story continues, Zeberjet finds that the woman has left most of her belongings behind, and he assumes she’ll return within a week. On that first Monday we see what seems to be the usual morning routine of the hotel. Zeberjet prepares his own breakfast and eats seated at the front desk. The hotel guests—a peasant with a bushy mustache, two newly appointed high school teachers, some livestock dealers, a rather suspicious person “who called himself a retired officer”, three young men beginning their service in the army—leave to go about their business. The charwoman goes grocery shopping: the newsboy arrives to take the week’s check-in forms to the police. Zeberjet does his weekly accounts and withholds the change the woman from the Ankara train had left behind, a “fiver” that he carefully folds and keeps for himself. In the afternoon he goes to a barber in a three-chair shop he has never visited before. There, after a haircut, he has his “trim, square” mustached removed, paying with the five lira tip. He then buys new clothes: black slacks, a light blue sweater, a black three-button sports jacket, as well as new shoes, black loafers to match the ensemble. Back at the hotel, several guests comment on his new appearance. In the evening, Zeberjet hears the diesel train from Ankara which was nearly on time. Before midnight he locks the front doors, and lets himself into the woman’s abandoned room, where he continues to speculate on her origins and activities, concluding that “one evening on the six forty train, she’d come back to spend another night.”

Tuesday morning, Zeberjet awakens with an erection and recollections of his first visit to a brothel. He dresses, prepares his breakfast, and returns to the front desk amid a cascade of reminiscences, a stream of consciousness that would include his childhood, family history, memories of his mother, who was born in the building before it became a hotel, his service in the army, peculiar guests and their predilections. In the evening he hears the train but the woman apparently was not among its

METAMORPHOSES

passengers.

By Thursday the pace of the narrative has changed. Zeberjet waits; the woman does not arrive; the recollections continue, as do his morning states of arousal. Thursday night after the train from Ankara passes, he lets himself into the woman's room to look again at the tea pot and glasses he brought up the morning she departed.. The pot is half full; the glass is smudged... Startled by a noise overhead, he drops the glass and it shatters as it hits the floor. Now the room had been violated; "Now she would not come back."

On Friday, the retired officer checks out of the hotel and Zeberjet replaces the broken glass with one from his own breakfast tray. Throughout the day other guests depart, and prospective guests are informed that the hotel is already full. At night, long after the train from Ankara has passed, Zeberjet brews himself some tea and takes it to sit in a corner armchair, wondering, "Was this the final night? The old manor, with its accrued years of child-birth, living and dying, was ready now. The train had not brought her; he would wait another hour. Until eleven." At midnight he closes and locks the hotel door, re-enters the woman's room, takes off his clothes and in the bed, perhaps the very bed where he was born, embraces and then relieves himself on a towel she had left behind.

This is all very heady stuff, melodramatic and overwrought, as Zeberjet spirals down through madness eventually to suicide. The next Tuesday he emerges from the woman's room—the towel, which we are told has broad red and yellow stripes and narrow black ones, is now badly stained. As he opens the front door, he hears car horns and the sound of a marching band. It is Republic Day, October 29, which commemorates the proclamation of the Turkish Republic and the formal end of the Ottoman Empire. It is also the day the clocks are all set back each year. In the evening, after waiting for the Ankara train to pass through, he goes out to a restaurant, orders but does not drink a shot of raki, watches the celebrations in the square by the Government Building, and, back at the hotel, resets his watch and resumes his fantasies.

On Wednesday, after he put a CLOSED sign on the front door of the hotel, the charwoman offers to leave, and he tells her to suit herself and goes out to the restaurant again. An altercation breaks out among the patrons and this leads to an attempted arrest and an escape. Some of the men decide to go a cock fight at a nearby café and Zeberjet follows them. In the fight, unusually violent, one of the birds is killed. New to this bloody sport, Zeberjet leaves the building dizzy and, at the same time, attracted to a young man who had been sitting next to him. The

youth, who says his name is Ekrem, works at a wrought-iron shop and lives in the city with his aunt. Zeberjet introduces himself as "Ahmet", buys some roasted chestnuts to share and the two go on to a movie. As they watch a Western film, as "images of actors, horses and wagons came through confusedly", Zeberjet becomes increasingly aware of the young man's arm and his muscular "well-shaped" leg. He attempts to leave, but the young man holds onto his hand and they remain till "the last of the bad ones was killed." Afterwards, uncertain whether or not to invite Ekrem back to the hotel, Zeberjet vacillates and the two soon part. At the hotel, Zeberjet returns to the woman's room, undresses, and in the bed gives way to more fantasies and recollections, of the cock fight and the film, of Ekrem's "soft deep-chested" voice, of homo-erotic sex play in the army barracks, of the arrival of the woman thirteen days before although "her face was blurred for him now."

Here if not earlier, it seems that Zeberjet's fantasies have broadened, encompassing things he could not possibly have remembered, emerging almost as myths arising from his origins. His consciousness seems to have been invaded and expanded by the minds of his ancestors, that they indeed are directing his activities. These recollections center on a family patriarch, Rüstem Bey, whose younger brother Faruk hung himself at the age of nineteen, "perhaps out of desperate longing for his sister-in-law" who was Rüstem Bey's young wife. Zeberjet, thinking of this forbidden and unrequited love, goes upstairs in his underpants to the charwoman's room and attempts to wake her, intending to make love. They struggle and he accidentally strangles and thus kills her. Back in the lower room, he relieves himself again on the towel, and startled by a noise overhead, runs upstairs only to find the hotel cat at the charwoman's door. After a struggle reminiscent of the cock fight, he kills the creature with a frying pan and throws the carcass out the window. Again downstairs, he envisions the assortment of people who over the years had stayed at the hotel, a virtual cross-section of Turkish society, including the woman off the train from Ankara. When the doorbell rings, he does not answer it.

The story resumes on the Monday following this violence. The hotel has remained empty and essentially closed. Sunday night Zeberjet, on a whim, admitted two former occupants, and as they leave he tells them they were possibly the Motherland Hotel's last guests. He balances the accounts for October and goes to the post office where the clerk asks him if he is related to Faruk Kecheji. He answers, "We're cousins. His father, my mother." After depositing the usual forms at the police sta-

METAMORPHOSES

tion, he buys groceries and returns to the hotel where two youths soon appear, claiming to have been sent from the village by the bey to get the towel. Zeberjet procrastinates: "What bey? Towel? What do you mean?" and the youths become ruder, more aggressive. Zeberjet agrees to search the woman's room but leads them instead to the room just vacated by the retired officer. To his surprise, a duplicate of the woman's towel, with identical red, yellow and black striping, hangs over the foot of the bed. The youths, now angered threaten to tie Zeberjet to the bed. One searches around and finds a length of clothesline for this, but then, losing their nerve, they curse and leave. Zeberjet coils the rope and puts it on the bedside table. He then lies down, drifting into a stream of childhood reminiscences: "Three of them, counting Muhittin the Kurd, had gone that May afternoon playing hooky to climb for sheep sorrel and stolen cherries. A sudden cloudburst sent them scuttling half-drowned for the shelter of boulders nearby. They were soaked through. The rain hid everything..."

Startled by a sound outside, he finds two policemen looking for the retired officer, who is apparently not an officer and wanted for killing his daughter. After the police leave, Zeberjet reflects "Strangled her. Nothing should surprise." The grocer appears, looking for the charwoman, and Zeberjet, lying easily, says, "She's gone to her village. To her uncle's funeral." The police return and search the room again.

Zeberjet then eats lunch and leaves the hotel, distracted by more family lore—"Their house was on the mountain, below the so-called Grand Mosque. They would sometimes go there, he and his mother, on Bairam days and listen to long stories of their departed kin." Entering the courthouse and a courtroom where a trial is in progress, Zeberjet stands with the accused, a man who killed his wife on their wedding night, and is told to sit down. Back outside, he sees the trees in Grand Park, and, in the section where his grandparents were buried, sits down on a bench. He is joined there by an inquisitive old man who had known the Kechejis and been to school with Faruk Bey, recalling, "... it had been such a shock when they said he had hanged himself." The old man continues with recollections—of his school days and then his own family history, talking on until the call for afternoon prayers. Zeberjet then chats briefly with a woman and invites her to go back to the hotel with him. She promises to join him there in half an hour but does not do so, and the novel moves towards its conclusion over the course of more than thirty pages in a complicated Faulknerian mingling of narrative and frenzied consciousness. Out of all this, more of the saga of the Kechejis

clan emerges. Zeberjet leaves the hotel again, quarrels and trades insults with the chestnut vendor, returns to the restaurant and drinks half a bottle of rakı. He then goes to the Spur and Beak Café, is told there is no fight that night, goes to the movie theater hoping to see Ekrem, collapses in the aisle and is taken home in a cab.

Sunday morning for the last time he buys a paper at the news booth in the station. The paper is dated November 7 and the station clock reads seventeen past eleven. He sets and winds his watch, returns to the hotel and goes to bed, reflecting in a lengthy internal dialogue that continues for several pages, “This manor and the dead, that was the Kechejis now. They had settled here hundreds of years ago. Kechejzade Mehmet Agha—Agha by virtue of captaining the Janissaries—who served under Mehmet the Hunter Sultan in the mid-1600s, had a son who distinguished himself in the suppression of an Istanbul uprising and as a reward was deeded the lands pertaining to two villages....and it was this tract of land, divided by a river and until then used only as a sheep pasture, which Hadji Zeynel Agha at the beginning of the previous century, using coercion and the promise of share-cropping rights, had induced the peasants to plow for him, reclaiming thereby a rich soil whose income was later to go for the buying and building of several shops in town. Zeynel Agha’s son Malik Agha had built this manor...”

Within this dialogue, we find a description of the young woman who was to be Rüstem Bey’s wife: she is “a dark striking girl, quite tall, chesty, with black hair and eyes, long lashes, a somewhat sharp nose, and thin lips” and we realize, just as we recognized that long strand of iron-gray hair on Miss Emily’s pillow, that the description fits exactly the woman who arrived off the train from Ankara in the book’s first pages. The tale proceeds with the torments of jealousy suffered by Rüstem Bey’s brother Faruk, who pines for his brother’s intended and who, “when the heat kept him awake and he left his bed to go half-naked down to the river...had seen them resting together or asleep on the small, tree-enclosed beach...”

Zeberjet’s reveries break off at this point; reason attempts to reassert itself: “All this was conjecture, his own reading of hearsay. There was nothing to ensure that his mother hadn’t exaggerated, even lied in telling what she had seen and heard...Interpreting and motive-hunting didn’t count, they brought no certain answers. What counted was the act, and there was but one certainty after all for man.” With little hesitation after this, Zeberjet hangs himself, having had, perhaps and then too late, “the parting realization that the gift of life is unparalleled and the one

METAMORPHOSES

task on earth to guard it, to hold out no matter, to stay.”

As the novel ends, in November of 1963, the Motherland Hotel, though fictional, is left standing. Faulkner assures us that the past is never dead, that it's not even past, and one can imagine the building lasting through the decade, a shabby provincial equivalent of the Pera Palace in modern Istanbul. Would the structure persist past the Millennium and hang on, an artifact if not an embarrassment, amid the high rise buildings of that neighborhood today? If so, Yusuf Atılgan assures us, it will house its share of ghosts.