

FAQAT KOMMUNISTLAR
PARTIJA VA ŞURALAR
HUKUMATI ŞARQ XATIN
QIZLARNI AZAD ITADUR

NOT MOSCOW NOT MECCA by Slavs and Tatars



secession

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My contemporaries treat religious faith with respect and a lively interest, but almost always faith is something held by others that they have rejected for themselves. During the first three quarters of the twentieth century such radical changes took place in the way people lead their lives that customs which were still universal in 1900 have acquired the characteristic of exceptions, and my contemporaries experience these changes both as progress and as a loss about which nothing can be done.

Czesław Miłosz, "If Only This Could be Said"

اگر آن ترک شیرازی به دست آرد دل ما را
به خال هندویش بخشیم سمرقند و بخارا ر
حافظ

That beautiful Shirazi Turk took control and my heart stole / I'll give Samarkand & Bukhara for her Hindu beauty mole
Hafez's Ghazal 3 (translated by Shahrar Shahrari)

Preface

Vorwort

Das 2006 gegründete Kollektiv Slavs and Tatars versteht sich als „Faktion der Polemik und Intimität“, ein künstlerischer Verbund, der sich „mit dem als Eurasien bekannten Gebiet östlich der ehemaligen Berliner Mauer und westlich der Chinesischen Mauer“ beschäftigt. Die künstlerische Praxis des Kollektivs erstreckt sich aber nicht nur über zahlreiche Landstriche und geografische Regionen, sondern auch über unterschiedlichste Medien, Disziplinen und Formate und deckt dabei ein breites Spektrum unterschiedlicher kultureller Existenzen ab. Der Schwerpunkt der Arbeit liegt auf den vielfältigen Schnittmengen zwischen slawischen, kaukasischen und zentralasiatischen Einflüssen. In ihren vornehmlich forschungsbasierten Arbeiten beschäftigen sich Slavs and Tatars mit Themen wie dem Altertum und der Vergangenheit, dem Marginalen und oft Vergessenen und setzen die Ergebnisse ihrer Rechercheprozesse auf poetische Weise in Szene.

Mit der Ausstellung *Not Moscow Not Mecca* im Grafischen Kabinett sowie mit einer Installation im Außenraum der Secession schreiben Slavs and Tatars die Autobiografie einer hierzulande nur wenig bekannten Region, die viele Namen trägt: von Zentralasien bis Chorasán, von Turkestan bis Ma Wara' al-Nahr—einem Ort, der auf Arabisch „das Land hinter dem Fluss“ bedeutet. Das Kollektiv geht dabei von der Kraft der Flora aus, die für diese Region steht und die aus dieser Region auf sinnliche Art und Weise zu uns spricht. In konzeptueller Klarheit und gleichzeitiger formaler Überschwänglichkeit aktivieren Slavs and Tatars Früchte wie etwa den Granatapfel, die Quitte, die Maulbeere oder die Wassermelone als WissensträgerInnen aus fernen Welten und präsentieren sie als Opfergaben in einem offenen Schrein, der die BesucherInnen zum Verweilen und zur gemeinschaftlichen Diskussion im Ausstellungsraum einlädt. Ausgehend von der Frucht als Medium, um überkommene Vorstellungen von mündlicher Überlieferung und schriftlicher Fixierung herauszufordern, öffnen sie Themenfelder wie den Einfluss von Landschaft auf die Erinnerung oder die Dichotomie zwischen heiligem und profanem Wissen und konfrontieren diese mit den Hinterlassenschaften der westlichen Moderne. Die Ausstellung ist eingebettet in einen mehrteiligen Ausstellungszyklus mit dem

The collective Slavs and Tatars, formed in 2006, sees itself as a “faction of polemics and intimacies,” a group of artists concerned with “an area east of the former Berlin Wall and west of the Great Wall of China.” However, the collective’s artistic practice encompasses not only numerous geographic localities and regions, but also the most diverse media, disciplines, and formats—while simultaneously covering a broad range of different cultural existences. The primary focus of their work is on those diverse areas where Slavic, Caucasian, and Central Asian influences overlap. In their chiefly research-based work, Slavs and Tatars address topics such as the ancient world and the past, the marginal and the oft-forgotten; the results of their research processes are staged in a poetic form.

With the exhibition *Not Moscow Not Mecca*, in the Grafisches Kabinett, as well as the installation on the exterior of the Secession, Slavs and Tatars write the autobiography of a region that is little known internationally and that bears many names: from Central Asia to Khorasan, from Turkestan to Ma wâra al nahr—a place whose name means “the land behind the river” in Arabic. As its starting point, the collective takes the energy of the flora which speaks to us in a sensual manner of and from the region. With a conceptual clarity combined with formal exuberance, Slavs and Tatars activate fruits such as the pomegranate, the quince, the mulberry, or the watermelon as bearers of knowledge from distant worlds; they then present them as devotional offerings in an open shrine that invites visitors to take their time and to talk to each other inside the exhibition space. Taking the fruit *qua* medium as their point of departure—in order to challenge traditional ideas about oral tradition and written record—they open up thematic fields such as the influence of the landscape on memory or the dichotomy between sacred and profane knowledge, and they confront them with the legacies of Western modernity. The exhibition exists within the context of a multi-part cycle

Titel *The Faculty of Substitution*, mit dem die KünstlerInnen dem Thema der Selbsterkenntnis im weitesten Sinne nachgehen. Stets auf der Suche nach einer Vergleichsbasis zwischen den Kulturen, zwischen Orient und Okzident, zwischen der Moderne und dem Islam, entdecken sie Ähnlichkeiten im scheinbar Unvergleichbaren. Diese Gleichsetzungsprozesse führen zu einer Aneignung und Neuauslegung der Geschichte, die im Widerspruch zu den bekannten und großen Erzählungen der Mächtigen und Siegreichen steht.

Unser Dank gilt all jenen, die für die Umsetzung der Ausstellung und des begleitenden Ausstellungskatalogs verantwortlich zeichnen: in erster Linie Slavs and Tatars für die gute Zusammenarbeit, für das der Secession entgegengebrachte Vertrauen sowie für das theoretisch wie formal gelungene Künstlerbuch, das einen erweiterten Einblick in die Arbeitsweise des Kollektivs gibt. Ein herzliches Dankeschön an das Polnische Institut Wien sowie an alle MitarbeiterInnen der Secession, deren Engagement die Realisierung dieses Projekts ermöglicht hat. Für ihre anhaltend großzügige Unterstützung sind wir der Erste Bank, Hauptsponsor der Secession seit 1998, sowie den Freunden der Secession zu besonderem Dank verpflichtet.

András Pálffy
Präsident der Secession

of exhibitions entitled *The Faculty of Substitution*, in which the artists investigate the theme of self-knowledge in its widest sense. Always on the lookout for points of comparison between cultures, between Orient and Occident, between modernity and Islam, they discover affinities among the apparently incommensurable. This process of equation leads to appropriations and reinterpretations of history that contradict the well-known grand narratives of the mighty and victorious.

Our thanks goes out to all those responsible for the exhibition and for the catalogue that accompanied it: above all, to Slavs and Tatars for their superb cooperation, for the trust they placed in the Secession, and for an artist's book that is successful both in terms of theory and form, and which offers greater insight into the working process of the collective. And our sincere gratitude also goes out to those at the Secession without whose dedication this project could never have been realized. Finally, special thanks go to Secession partner Erste Bank, Secession's main sponsor since 1998, and to the Friends of the Secession for their unflagging and generous support of our work.

András Pálffy
Secession President

One must be prepared to meet with
organized incomprehension

Thomas Merton in a letter to Louis Massignon

**Die kürzeste Strecke
zwischen zwei Punkten**
Slavs and Tatars im
Gespräch mit
Franz Thalmair

FT **Woran denkt ihr bei dem Wort
Mythos?**
S&T An den Duft, der uns jeden Morgen
empfängt.

**Als multikulturelles polyglottes Kollektiv
reist ihr, ausgerüstet mit mobiler
Elektronik, von Flughafen zu Flughafen.
Wie integriert ihr das Spirituelle in euren
Alltag?**

Wir versuchen, das Spirituelle so konkret wie möglich zu machen. Das Wort *konkret* leitet sich etymologisch ab von *con + crescere*, zusammenwachsen, und vielleicht drückt das am besten die vielschichtigen, oft schwer zu fassenden Beweggründe aus, die der Motor eines jeden Kollektivs sind. Henry Corbin, der große Gelehrte und Kenner des schiitischen Mystizismus und der Philosophie der Erleuchtung von Suhrawardi (Corbin war übrigens auch der Erste, der Martin Heideggers *Sein und Zeit* ins Französische übersetzte), schreibt von *hamdami* oder *conspiration*, dem gemeinsamen Atem von Sinnlichem

**The Shortest Length
Between Two Points**
Slavs and Tatars in
conversation with
Franz Thalmair

FT **What comes to your mind when you hear the term
myth?**
S&T The fragrance greeting us each and every morning.

**How do you integrate spirituality into your daily lives as
multicultural polyglots with mobile computing devices,
traveling from airport to airport?**

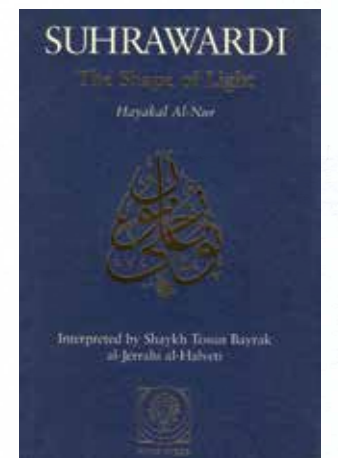
We try to make the spiritual as concrete as possible. After all, the etymology of *concrete* is *con+crescere*, to grow together, and that is perhaps the best way to distill the nebulous and complex motivation behind any collective. Henry Corbin, the great scholar of Shi'a mysticism and specialist on the Illuminationist philosopher Suhrawardi (not to mention the first person to translate Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* into French), writes about *hamdami*, or *con-spiration*, the "breathing together" of



Ibn Arabi (1165-1240)



Henry Corbin, photo courtesy of
l'Association des amis de Henry et
Stella Corbin



**Suhrawardi's *The Shape of
Light: Hayakal al-Nur*** (Fons
Vitae: Louisville, 1998). Via a
metaphysical reflection on light,
the 12th century philosopher's
phenomenological attempt to bring
Plato to bear on mystical Shi'ism.

und Spirituellem, der für ihn das Werk des sufistischen Theologen Al-Arabi prägt.

Slavs and Tatars leben in verschiedenen Ländern. Wie organisiert ihr eure Zusammenarbeit?

Wir kommunizieren viel über Skype. Ansonsten treffen wir uns circa einmal im Monat zu Ausstellungseröffnungen, Vortrags- oder Forschungsterminen und verlängern diese Begegnungen, um gemeinsam zu arbeiten. Wir erweitern den Begriff *Eröffnung* gewissermaßen dahin gehend, dass er nicht nur das Publikum einbezieht, sondern auch uns selbst. In der Regel sind Ausstellungseröffnungen festliche Ereignisse, bei denen man der Kunst huldigt, abschaltet oder nachdenkt. Wir hingegen nutzen sie als Podium, um einen bereits bestehenden Werkzyklus oder einen Ausgangspunkt mit noch ungewissem Ziel zu thematisieren.

Euer akademischer und beruflicher Background sind die Literaturwissenschaft und Typografie/Design. Welchen Einfluss hat das auf eure Arbeit als Slavs and Tatars?

Genau genommen kommen wir von der Philosophie, der bildenden Kunst und dem Grafikdesign. Komparatistik ist ein Hüllwort, das von englischen und amerikanischen Universitäten für die gesamte kontinentaleuropäische Nachkriegsphilosophie geprägt wurde, der man in den traditionell ausgerichteten Philosophieseminaren keinen Platz einräumen wollte: So fand sie Unterschlupf in der Literaturwissenschaft. Das heißt, wir haben ein großes Interesse am Diskurs.

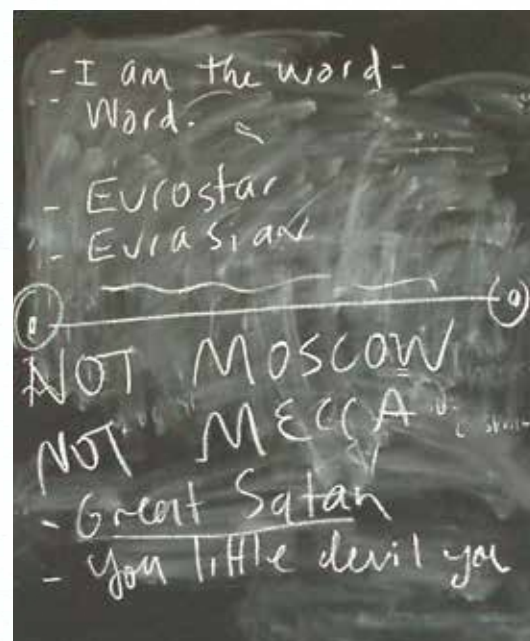
the sensual and the spiritual that is the hallmark of the Sufi scholar Ibn al-Arabi.

As a geographically dispersed collective, how do you organize yourselves?

We work quite a lot via Skype. Otherwise, we meet roughly once a month in person for various exhibition openings as well as research assignments or speaking engagements and then extend these stays to work amongst ourselves. In some sense, we are extending the word *opening* to include not just the audience, but also us. As opposed to the traditional dynamic, where an exhibition opening is a moment of commemoration, or for relaxing, reflecting, we use it as a platform to address an existing cycle of work or as a point of departure towards something.

Your academic and professional backgrounds are in literature and typography/design. What does that mean for your work as Slavs and Tatars?

Actually, our backgrounds are in philosophy, fine arts, and graphic design. Comparative Literature is a euphemism used in Anglo-American universities for all the post-war Continental philosophy that traditional English and American philosophy departments were not willing to integrate, and which then found shelter in literature departments. This means we are heavily invested in discourse.



Notes, "Group Affinity", Summer academy at the Kunstverein München, curated by Binna Choi and Bart van der Heide, 2011



The first day of discussion for *The Age of the Antimodern*, Slavs and Tatars' academy at "Group Affinity", 2011

Eben sprachen wir von der Etymologie als einem Kerngebiet der Sprachforschungen. Lässt sich in Verbindung mit eurem Interesse an Philosophie und Diskurs sagen, dass eure Ausstellung in der Secession, die Teil des neuen Werkzyklus *The Faculty of Substitution* ist, eine Forschungsreise in die Geschichte des Begriffes *Substitution* als mystisches Verfahren darstellt? Was bedeutet *Substitution*?

In der heutigen Zeit müssen wir nicht nur geistige, sondern auch metaphysische Klimmzüge vollführen: *Substitution* bedeutet, die nötige geistige Beweglichkeit, die Koordination und das Balancegefühl auszubilden, damit wir eine Geschichte *durch* eine andere erzählen können. Das heißt, wir müssen uns das Innenleben, die Erfahrungen, Überzeugungen und Empfindungen anderer *zu eigen* machen, um auf diese Weise die Vorstellung von Distanz als kürzester Strecke zwischen zwei Punkten zu hinterfragen. Um den heutigen Iran zu begreifen, haben wir zum Beispiel den Blick auf Polen und die *Solidarność* gerichtet (*Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz*). Um das Wesen politischen Handelns im 21. Jahrhundert zu verstehen, beschäftigen wir uns mit dem Muharram und dem 1300 Jahre alten schiitischen Ritual des unaufhörlichen Protestes (*Reverse Joy*). Um den Islam zu entmystifizieren, wenden wir uns dem Kommunismus zu (*Not Moscow Not Rome*), während wir uns dem Begriff der Moderne anhand der Mystik nähern (*Beyonsense*, Museum of Modern Art).

Für *The Faculty of Substitution* werfen wir unter anderem einen Blick auf das

Speaking of etymology, as a key field in the study of languages and in combination with your interest in philosophy and discourse: Could your exhibition at the Secession — as part of your new cycle of work entitled *The Faculty of Substitution* — be described as a research trip into the history of the term *substitution* as a mystical practice? What is substitution?

Today, we not only need intellectual acrobatics but metaphysical ones: *Substitution* requires us to cultivate the agility, coordination, and balance necessary to tell one tale *through* another, to adopt the innermost thoughts, experiences, beliefs, and sensations of others *as our own*, in an effort to challenge the very notion of distance as the shortest length between two points. In terms of our practice: to understand contemporary Iran, we look at Poland and *Solidarność* (*Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz*); to grasp the nature of political agency in the twenty-first century, we study Muharram and the 1300-year-old Shi'ite ritual of perpetual protest (*Reverse Joy*); to demystify Islam, we turn to Communism (*Not Moscow Not Mecca*, *Secession*); and it is through mysticism that we intend to address modernity (*Beyonsense*, Museum of Modern Art).

For *The Faculty of Substitution*, we are looking at, among other things, the notion of mystical substitution — also known as sacred hospitality or the transfer to ourselves of the



Portrait of JK Huysmans by Collignon-Tocqueville in *Les Hommes d'aujourd'hui*, 1885



The execution of Mansur al-Hallaj (Source: Wikipedia)

Reverse Joy presentation (installation view), Europa N, GfZK, Leipzig, 2012



Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz banners (installation view), Kiosk Gallery, Gent, photo by Yana Foque, 2011



Konzept der mystischen Substitution – auch bekannt als heilige Gastfreundschaft oder als die Übertragung des Leidens anderer auf uns selbst –, ein Konzept, das man bei so grundverschiedenen Persönlichkeiten wie Al-Halladsch, Joris-Karl Huysmans und Louis Massignon findet. Alle drei vertraten die Auffassung, dass wir nur dann zur Selbsterkenntnis gelangen können, wenn wir uns etwas von außen aneignen, etwas, das nicht zu uns selbst gehört.

Wie setzt ihr eure Forschungsergebnisse in der künstlerischen Praxis um?

Es geht darum, die Geschichte wiederzubeleben. Nur so können wir ihre Bedeutung an die Menschen herantragen, die unser Interesse an der Region und ihren Traditionen andernfalls für abstrus oder unerheblich halten würden. Wir verwenden das Wort *Wiederbelebung* ganz bewusst: Der sinnliche Gehalt, der darin liegt, einem Gegenstand Leben einzuhauchen (indem man, wenn man so will, seine Lippen auf den Mund des Forschungsgebietes drückt), verweist auf eine affektive Bindung zu einer Idee oder zu einem Text. Michael Taussig hat uns (anhand von Gilles Deleuzes und Félix Guattaris Konzept des *Unwahrnehmbar-Werdens*, des *Wolf-Werdens*) schon vor langer Zeit gelehrt, dass die kritische Auseinandersetzung mit abstrakten und/oder mystischen Anschauungen sich nicht darauf beschränken darf, ihre philosophische Herkunft zu analysieren: Wir müssen sie vielmehr als Anleitung nehmen, sie zu leben.

„Diese Anschauungen zu leben“ heißt, dass euer künstlerisches Selbstverständnis geprägt ist von einer

sufferings of others—a notion one finds across such disparate figures as Mansur al-Hâllaj, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and Louis Massignon. These individuals believed that it is only through the embrace of something outside oneself that one can achieve self-knowledge.

To what extent do you make your research results viable and practicable for the present moment?

It is crucial to resuscitate the historical. We don't know of a better way to demonstrate its relevance to people who might otherwise consider our interest in a region or its history arcane or irrelevant. We use the word *resuscitation* for a reason: Its sensuality, the idea of breathing life into a subject (by placing one's lips on the mouth of the area of study, if you will) points to an affective relationship with an idea or a text. It was Michael Taussig who taught us many moons ago that the challenge of abstract and/or mystical concepts (the example he used was Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's "becoming-imperceptible, becoming-wolf") is not only to analytically understand their philosophical genealogy, but more importantly, to use them as a how-to guide, to live the ideas.

“To live the ideas” means that your self-conception of being artists is a matter of personal, subjective, and experience-driven agency towards the world you live in and towards



Pucker up: resuscitating the past



PrayWay (installation view), "The Ungovernables," New Museum Triennial, 2012

persönlichen, subjektiven und erfahrungsorientierten Annäherung an die Welt, in der ihr lebt und aus der ihr kommt. Wie verbindet ihr diese künstlerische Praxis mit dem Kunstbetrieb? Wie manifestieren sich eure Erfahrungen in den physischen Räumen der Kunst?

Slavs and Tatars haben als einfacher Lesekreis begonnen, und wir wollen den Geist des Austauschens und Weitergebens erhalten, der zu unseren Ursprüngen, dem gemeinsamen Lesen, gehört. Wir haben damit begonnen, einen Ort der Besinnung, der Reflexion und des Austausches zu schaffen, der in den physischen Räumen der Kunst wider Erwarten oft nicht vorhanden ist. Es wird viel über die Einbeziehung des Publikums und von Öffentlichkeitsarbeit und so weiter geredet, aber wie oft betreten wir Ausstellungsräume, in denen es nicht einmal Sitzgelegenheiten gibt?

Seit der Sharjah-Biennale interessieren wir uns zunehmend für den Begriff der Großzügigkeit, sowohl auf praktischer als auch auf konzeptioneller Ebene. Für unser Projekt *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz* haben wir eine Oase eingerichtet – einer der wenigen Plätze, um der glühenden Sonne in Sharjah zu entfliehen. Unter aufgespannten *takhts* oder Fluss-Betten konnten sich balutschische Tagelöhner und Kunstbetrachter ausruhen, lesen oder sich mit dem überraschenden gemeinsamen Erbe beschäftigen, das Polen und den Iran verbindet. Bei unserem Projekt *PrayWay* wiederum konnten die Besucher im unversöhnlichen Raum des New Museum auf einer übergroßen Kreuzung aus dem *rahlé* (einem Pult für heilige Bücher) und dem Fluss-Bett Platz nehmen.

the worlds you come from. How do you link this practice with the art world? How does your experience manifest itself in the actual physical spaces of art?

Given that Slavs and Tatars began quite simply as a reading group, we try to maintain the spirit of sharing and exchange that is part and parcel of our origins—the act of reading *together*. Recently, we have taken to redeeming a space for contemplation, reflection, and exchange that is, contrary to what one would expect, often missing from the physical spaces of art. There is lots of talk about participation, outreach, etc., but how often do we come across exhibition spaces where there's simply nowhere to sit?

Since Sharjah, we have been increasingly interested in the notion of generosity, as much a tactic as a concept. Our *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz* featured *takhts*, or riverbeds (one of the few places to escape the otherwise scorching sun during the 10th Sharjah Biennial), where both Baluchi day-laborers and art-world types could relax, read, and engage with the unexpected common heritage linking Poland and Iran. Also, in the otherwise unforgiving space of the New Museum, *PrayWay* allows visitors to sit on a souped-up hybrid of the *rahlé* (a stand for holy books) and the riverbed.

Coming back to what you said about the integration of Continental philosophy in Anglo-American universities:



Ali the invigilator at Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz (installation view), photo by Alfredo Rubio, courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation, 2011



Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz (installation view), 10th Sharjah Biennial, 2011

Ich möchte noch einmal darauf zurückkommen, was ihr über die Verortung der kontinentaleuropäischen Philosophie an englischen und amerikanischen Universitäten sagt: Eure Methode, alte Texte (und im weitesten Sinne alle Formen von kulturellen Erzeugnissen) als Gegenstand zu nehmen, um neue Texte zu erzeugen oder sich Wissen über bestimmte Zusammenhänge anzueignen, ist eindeutig komparatistisch. Worin liegt das besondere Vermögen der komparatistischen Etymologie, die Slavs and Tatars betreiben?

In verschiedenen Sprachen zu sprechen, zu atmen, zu lesen und zu träumen führt zu einer Art höchst produktiver Schizophrenie: Auf Russisch sind wir ganz andere Menschen als auf Polnisch, obwohl beides slawische Sprachen sind, und das gilt ebenso für das Französische oder das Englische. Die Interdisziplinarität, der Heilige Gral aller Universitäten und Kunsthochschulen, ist immanenter Bestandteil jeder komparatistischen Arbeit, ob nun im sprachwissenschaftlichen oder im theologischen Bereich. Unser manifester Beitrag zu Komparatistik ist das konsequente Vermischen von Ebenen und Registern, die bislang als unvereinbar galten.

Könnte man eure Arbeit als kuratorisch bezeichnen?

Sofern man kuratorisch im Sinne von editorischer Praxis versteht, ja. Gleichwohl halten wir an der traditionellen Arbeitsteilung von Künstler und Kurator fest – auch wenn wir die Disziplinengrenzen nur allzu gerne überschreiten. Wenn die Kunst und der Künstler

Your working method of using ancient texts (in the broadest sense of all forms of cultural products) as a point of reference in generating new texts or in gathering knowledge about a certain fact is, without a doubt, comparative. What is the distinctive strength of comparative etymology as practiced by Slavs and Tatars? Speaking, breathing, reading, dreaming in different languages is a productive schizophrenia of sorts: We are very different people in Russian and in Polish, both Slavic, much less say French or English. So interdisciplinarity, the holy grail of academes and art schools alike, is an integral part of any comparative study – be it in linguistics or religion. Slavs and Tatars' ostensible contribution to comparative studies is the emphasis on mixing scales and registers previously considered incommensurate.

Could your work be described as curatorial work?

Insofar as the term “curatorial” means “editorial”? Yes.

Having said that – and despite a proclivity toward working and thinking across disciplines – we are committed to maintaining the traditional division of labor between curators and artists.

While art and the artist figure significantly in the curator's work, either as a point of departure – to explore a position or to tell a certain story – or as the result of this investigation, we look instead to history, linguistics, religion, and geography.



Mountains of Wit, “Frozen Moments”, curated by Joanna Warsza, Tbilisi, 2010. *Gore om Uma* (*Gore ot Uma*) is a famous 19th-century play about Moscow manners by Aleksander Griboyedov, a close friend of Pushkin's and diplomat to the Czar in the Caucasus. The play is translated into English as *Woe From Wit* or *The Misfortune of Being Intelligent*. By changing the 'e' in the original Russian title to an 'и', the title becomes *Mountains of Wit* and the urban premise of the original work is hijacked by a Caucasian setting equally imaginative and historical, one which played an influential role in Griboyedov's life and death, if not his work.



79.89.09, lecture-presentation, Triumph Gallery, Moscow, photo by Kolya Zverkov, 2009

in der Arbeit des Kurators eine maßgebliche Rolle spielen, sei es als Ausgangspunkt – um eine bestimmte Position zu erforschen oder eine Geschichte zu erzählen – oder als Ergebnis dieser Forschungsarbeit, betrachten wir die Geschichte, die Linguistik, die Religion und die Geografie, um diese Geschichten zu erzählen.

Könnte man eure Arbeit dann archivarisch nennen?

Wir würden wohl eher von restaurativ sprechen. Der Begriff *archivarisch* hat in letzter Zeit zwar eine Renaissance erfahren oder ist (je nach Sichtweise) zu einem überstrapazierten Modewort geworden, aber er ist nach wie vor geprägt vom Bild verstaubter Zeugnisse und Dokumente, die mit Ehrfurcht behandelt werden. Wir halten es jedoch für wichtig, gleichermaßen respektvoll wie respektlos mit seinen Quellen umzugehen. Das heißt, man muss seine Quellen umformen, neu verorten, neu interpretieren und das Archivmaterial so aufeinanderprallen lassen, dass seine Bedeutung und seine Brisanz sichtbar werden, nicht nur für Experten des jeweiligen Fachgebietes oder Intellektuelle, sondern auch für den Laien, der sich sonst nicht dafür interessiert hätte.

Wenn man die Essays, Erklärungen und Projektbeschreibungen liest, die ihr regelmäßig zu euren Arbeiten veröffentlicht, hat man den Eindruck, als würdet ihr stets zu einer Haltung des „Nicht nur, sondern auch“ aufrufen. Verweist ihr damit auf einen Wesenszug des antimodernen Menschen?

Nein, dieser Maximalismus hat wenig mit antimodern zu tun, sondern entspringt

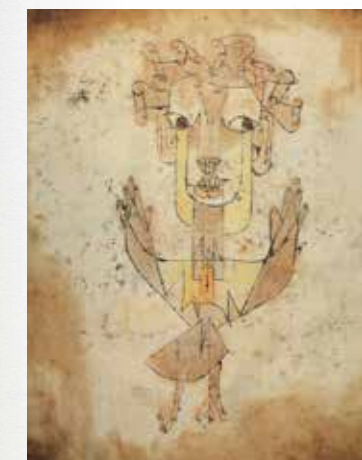
Could it be described as archival?

Perhaps we would prefer the word *restorative*. Despite its recent critical renaissance or promiscuity (depending on where you stand), the word *archival* still implies a dusty collection of documents and records and the aura that accompanies this material. We believe it is equally important to disrespect one's sources as to respect them. That is, to reconfigure, resituate, reinterpret, and collide the archival material with the aim of making it relevant and urgent – not just to the specialist in the field, nor just to the intellectual, but also to the layperson who might not otherwise be interested.

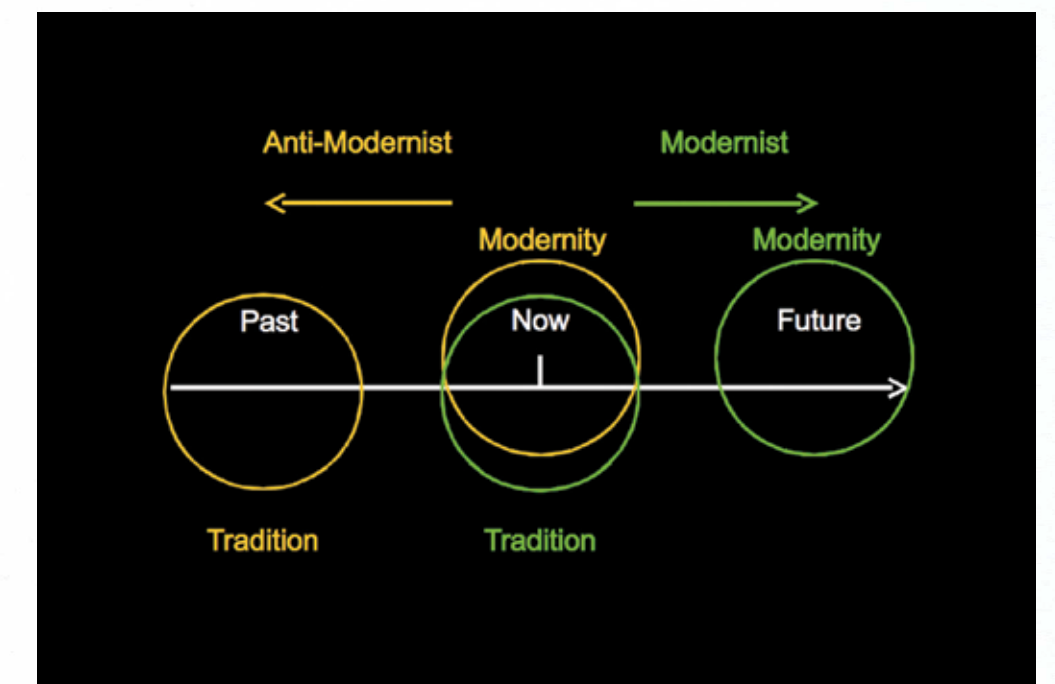
The essays, statements, and project descriptions that Slavs and Tatars publish repeatedly seem to suggest a kind of “not only, but also” attitude in your work. Is this one of the characteristics of the anti-modern condition that you refer to?

No, this maximalism stems more from a regional position and has less to do with the anti-modern per se. Without falling entirely into essentialist ethnocentrism, it is safe to say that Slavs, Caucasians, and Central Asians are a bit grander, less frugal, than Anglos, Teutons, and Gauls. We don't split the dinner bill twelve different ways.

In his book *Les Antimodernes* (Gallimard, 2005), Antoine Compagnon, Professor of French at Columbia University and the Collège de France in Paris, describes the true modernists



Angelus Novus, Paul Klee, 1920



Slide from Mark Sedgwick's “**Modernism, Anti-Modernism, and Traditionalism**”, opening keynote speaker, “Group Affinity”, Kunstverein München, 2011

einer regional geprägten Haltung. Ohne in essentialistischen Ethnozentrismus zu verfallen, lässt sich doch sagen, dass die Slawen, Kaukasier und Zentralasiaten ein überschwängliches Wesen haben und nicht so sparsam sind wie die Angelsachsen, Germanen und Gallier. Bei uns wird die Essensrechnung nicht in zwölf unterschiedliche Beträge geteilt.

In seinem Buch *Les Antimodernes* (Gallimard, 2005) beschreibt Antoine Compagnon, Professor für französische Literatur an der Columbia University und am Collège de France, die wahren Modernisten nicht als stetig nach vorne blickende Utopisten (wie zum Beispiel Wladimir Majakowski und Filippo Tommaso Marinetti), sondern vielmehr als „Anti-Modernisten“, innerlich zerrissene Visionäre, die vom Ende des vormodernen Zeitalters tief bewegt waren. Menschen, die, wie Jean-Paul Sartre über Baudelaire schrieb, vorwärts gehen, aber mit einem Auge in den Rückspiegel blicken. Eine ähnliche Trope verwendet Walter Benjamin mit seinem *Engel der Geschichte*, der in die Zukunft geweht wird, aber zurück in die Vergangenheit blickt. Diese Bewegung finden wir auch in der madagassischen Sprache, die im Gegensatz zur positivistischen Zeitauffassung in den meisten westlichen Sprachen das Wort *hinter* zur Beschreibung der Zukunft und das Wort *vor* zur Darstellung der Vergangenheit verwendet.

Eine eurer Aussagen lautet: „*Nous sommes les antimodernes*, das heißt, wir bevorzugen lieber die Arrièregarde als die Avantgarde.“ Inwiefern steht eure Arbeit in Zusammenhang mit dem Modernediskurs in der zeitgenössischen Kunst?

not as the utopianists who only look forward (e.g., Vladimir Mayakovsky, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti) but rather as the “anti-modernists,” those somewhat conflicted visionaries deeply affected by the passing of the premodern age. As Jean-Paul Sartre said of Charles Baudelaire: those who go forward, but with an eye in the rearview mirror. Walter Benjamin uses a similar trope with his *Angel of History*, thrust forward with her back to the future and facing the past—similarly to the Malagasy language, which, contrary to most Western, positivist conceptions of time, uses words such as *behind* to describe the future and *in front* to convey the past.

One of your statements is, “*Nous sommes les antimodernes*, that is, we prefer the rearguard to the avant-garde.”

To what extent is your work linked to the discourse surrounding modernity in contemporary artistic practice?

First of all, it would be important to ask: Whose modernity? Yes, we are critical of the traditional understanding of a modernity that broke with the past and attempted to create a New Man, be it *homo sovieticus* or *homo liberalus*. In doing so, it whitewashed the spiritual or numinous and led to such counter-intuitive behavior as quarantining the elderly and celebrating youth. To some degree, our work tries to come to grips with the complex role of the stranger (and the stranger’s region) as an agent of attraction and repulsion in modernity:



Zygmunt Baumann,
photo by M. Oliva Soto



Wheat Mollah, 2011

Zunächst müsste man die Frage stellen: Von wessen Modernebegriff sprechen wir hier? Es stimmt, wir kritisieren das herkömmliche Verständnis von Moderne als Epoche, die mit der Vergangenheit brach und mit dem Homo sovieticus oder dem Homo liberalis einen neuen Menschen schaffen wollte. Dabei wurde das Spirituelle unterschlagen, und es entstanden so widersinnige Verhaltensweisen, wie die Alten zu kasernieren und die Jugend zu preisen. Unsere Arbeiten zielen gewissermaßen darauf ab, die komplexe Rolle des Fremden (und den Ort des Fremden) in der Moderne zu begreifen: als Auslöser von Anziehung und Abneigung, als Quelle der Angst, Verlockung und zugleich Ziel der Ausgrenzung, wie es Zygmunt Bauman in *Moderne und Ambivalenz* und *Dialektik der Ordnung. Die Moderne und der Holocaust* schildert.

Würdet ihr sagen, eure Arbeiten sind rückschrittlich oder gar reaktionär?

In der heutigen, von Amnesie befallenen Welt ist es möglicherweise konservativ, sich zu bestimmten Grundeinsichten zu bekennen, und erst recht, danach zu streben, diese zu bewahren. Aber das ist keinesfalls reaktionär, sondern fortschrittlich. Je älter wir werden, desto milder stimmt uns ein sehr texanisches Sprichwort, das wir vor zehn Jahren noch kategorisch abgelehnt haben: „Man soll nicht reparieren, was nicht kaputt ist.“

Auf visueller Ebene betont ihr in euren Arbeiten die Schönheit, die der Folklore und der Volkskultur des Ostens und des Westens zu eigen ist, die Schönheit der

a simultaneous source of fear, exclusion, and enticement, as Zygmunt Bauman discusses in his *Modernity and Ambivalence* and *Modernity and The Holocaust*.

Would you say your work is reactionary or even unprogressive?

In today’s amnesiac world, even to acknowledge that there exist basic tenets of wisdom—much less strive to preserve them—is perhaps conservative, but not reactionary; on the contrary, it is progressive. The older we get, the more we soften our views on the very Texan phrase which only a decade ago repulsed us: “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”

Visually, your work tends to highlight the beauty inherent in folklore and popular culture in the East and in the West—the beauty of its forms, the beauty of its speech, the beauty of its tradition, a beauty deriving from something fundamentally combinative. Is this emphasis on beauty a form of cultural criticism? What are your strategies in this respect, how does it work?

Perhaps it is. We are suspicious of the notion that a single century can or should entirely overturn several centuries of understanding about culture. For some reason, it is inherently more fashionable, accepted, and widespread for art to dismiss beauty as *dépassé* or out of fashion, and in turn focus more on



Pajak study no. 2
(for *Friendship of Nations*), 2011



Pajak study no. 1
(for *Friendship of Nations*), 2010



The pajak as revolutionary talisman, the Scansen Church of the Podlachia region, Poland. We see in this pagan craft celebrating the yearly harvest, a testimony to the painstaking diligence and delicate nature of compromise crucial to the successful Polish precedent of civil disobedience during *Solidarność*.

Formen, der Sprache und der Traditionen, eine Schönheit, die auf etwas zutiefst Integrativem beruht. Was beabsichtigt ihr damit? Ist diese Hervorhebung des Schönen eine Form von Kulturkritik?

Ja, vielleicht. Wir sind skeptisch, ob ein einzelnes Jahrhundert ein über mehrere Jahrhunderte gewachsenes Kulturverständnis einfach so umstoßen kann oder umstoßen soll. Aus irgendeinem Grund gilt es in der Kunst gemeinhin als anerkannt und angesagt, das Schöne als *dépassé* oder *démodé* zu verwerfen und sich stattdessen dem Hässlichen, dem Destruktiven, der Verzweiflung zuzuwenden. Damit will ich nicht sagen, dass wir die Welt durch die rosarote Brille betrachten. Es ist wichtig, alles Unbequeme herauszustellen, aber heutzutage es ist wesentlich einfacher, interessante Kunst zu machen, die dunkel und schmutzig ist, als Arbeiten zu produzieren, die auf intelligente Weise erhellend sind und trotzdem Spaß machen. Wir versuchen Letzteres, egal, ob wir uns dabei in die Nesseln setzen.

Nehmen wir beispielsweise Humor. Für uns ist Humor ein Ausdruck von Großzügigkeit, und es gibt wohl kaum etwas Wichtigeres, als andere Menschen zum Lachen zu bringen. Dass eine Arbeit Spaß macht, heißt jedoch nicht, dass sie infantil ist oder oberflächlich: Die Herausforderung liegt darin, das Spektrum an beiden Enden zu besetzen, gerade weil diese irrtümlicherweise oft als unvereinbar gelten. Mit Humor zu arbeiten und gleichzeitig ernst zu sein.

Was erwidert ihr, wenn jemand eure Arbeiten als *romantisch* bezeichnet?

„Wollen wir uns zum Tee treffen?“

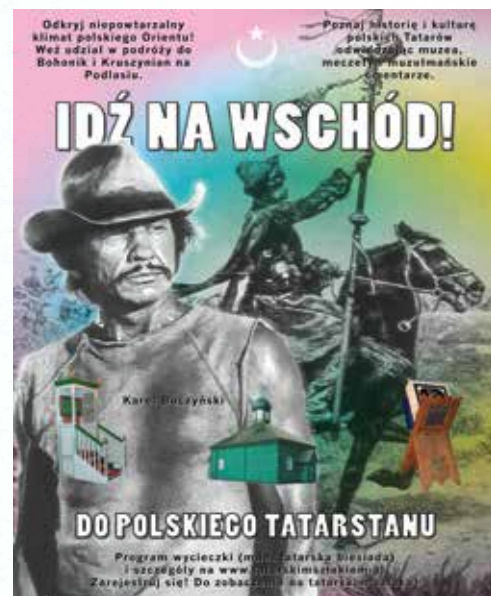
the ugly, the destructive, the distraught. This does not mean we wear rose-colored glasses: It is important to highlight that which is uncomfortable. But it is far easier today to make interesting work that is dirty and dark than to make work that is somehow enlightening or fun. We strive to be in the camp of the latter, never mind the risks.

Take humor, for example. We think making people laugh is perhaps one of the most important, in some sense, most generous things one can do. But just because the work is fun does not mean it need be silly or light. That's the challenge: to occupy both ends of a spectrum often, and mistakenly, considered to be incommensurate. To be fun and serious, cheerful and critical, at the same time.

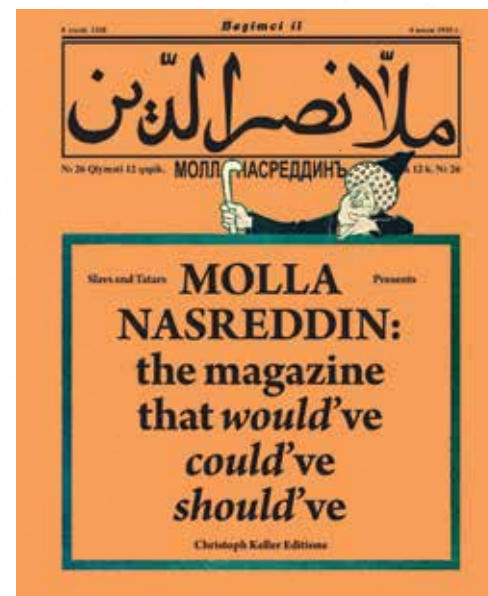
What do you say to people calling your work *romantic*?

“Would you like to meet for a cup of tea?”

One of the many strategies you use in your work is the conflation of cultural phenomena. When talking about *Molla Nasreddin: the magazine that would've, could've, should've*, one of your recent book projects, you mentioned that conflation is an important strategy, practiced from the thirteenth to the twenty-first century—from Molla Nasreddin to Ali G. Where do you see the main points of contact between the witty Molla Nasreddin and the



Idź na Wschód! (Go East!), billboard and day-trip to Polish Tatar villages—Bohoniki and Kruszyniany—in eastern Poland, “Wola Art Festival,” curated by Sarmen Beglarian and Sylwia Szymaniak, 2009



Arguably the most important periodical of the 20th century Muslim world, the Azeri weekly was compiled and translated into English by Slavs and Tatars in their ***Molla Nasreddin: the magazine that would've, could've, should've***, 2011.



Molla Nasreddin: Embrace Your Antithesis, lecture-presentation by Bidoun's Saturday Seminars at the Serpentine Gallery, photo by Babak Radboy, 2011

In euren Arbeiten vermischt ihr oft ganz bewusst unterschiedliche kulturelle Phänomene. Über *Molla Nasreddin: the magazine that would've, could've, should've*, eines eurer jüngsten Buchprojekte, sagt ihr, das Vermischen sei eine Methode, die seit dem 13. Jahrhundert bis heute praktiziert wird, von Molla Nasreddin bis Ali G. Wo seht ihr die entscheidenden Berührungspunkte zwischen dem geistreichen Molla Nasreddin und dem ziemlich derben Humor von Ali G, zwischen den kulturellen Strategien des 13. und des 21. Jahrhunderts? In welchen Bereichen überschneiden sie sich? Und was entsteht, wenn man Molla und Ali G zusammenbringt?

Zunächst halten wir Komik und Humor ganz allgemein für ausgesprochen ergiebig – nicht so sehr als Forschungsgegenstand, sondern für die künstlerische Praxis. Ali Gs Interviewtaktik – er weist sich selbst die Rolle des Blödmanns zu – unterscheidet sich gar nicht so sehr von Molla Nasreddin, dem weisen Narren aus dem 13. Jahrhundert. Ali Gs Milieu und seine Sprache sind eindeutig primitiver, aber seine Komik ist dennoch ein sehr ausgefeiltes Stilmittel. Indem er sich als hoffnungslosen Trottel präsentiert, entlarvt er die Arroganz und die Dummheit seiner Interviewpartner.

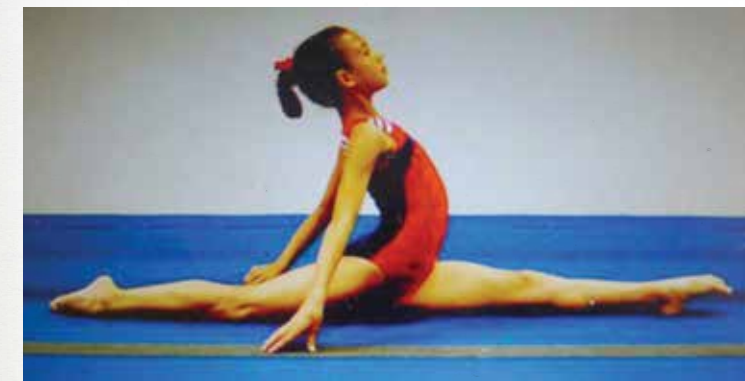
Vermischung kann viele unterschiedliche Gesichter haben – Kreolisierung, Mashup, Kollision –, aber alle ziehen an einem Strang. Das Aufeinanderprallen verschiedener Register, verschiedener Stimmen, Welten, Denkweisen, die als unvereinbar gegensätzlich gelten oder

rather crude Ali G, between the cultural strategies of the thirteenth and the twenty-first century? What are the fields of merging and blending, what does a blend of Molla and Ali G make?

First, we consider comedy and, more generally, humor, to be very fertile areas not so much for study as for practice. Ali G's line of questioning—positioning himself as an idiot—is not that far removed from Molla Nasreddin, the thirteenth-century wise fool. The former's context and language are definitely cruder, but it remains a very sophisticated comic device. By presenting himself as incorrigibly thick, he in fact reveals the arrogance and idiocy of his interviewed subjects.

Conflation wears many different disguises—creolization, mash-up, collision—each distinct, but all essentially playing for the same team. The collision of different registers, different voices, different worlds, and different logics previously considered to be antithetical, incommensurate, or simply unable to exist in the same page, sentence, or space is crucial to our practice.

Your work has a lot to do with translation or, as you term it, “transliteration, a fat ugly cousin to translation” or a “trashy, teenage sibling.” In comparison to the concept of *translation*, where a one-to-one-relationship between two texts is not necessary, in linguistics, the term *transliteration*



The splits, of the mind, and the soul: Not only Intellectual but also metaphysical acrobatics



Dig the Booty, A transliteration of an aphorism across Latin, Cyrillic and Farsi, in homage to the vicissitudes in the Azeri alphabet, 2009

bislang einfach nicht zusammen auf einer Seite, in einem Satz, in einem Raum stehen konnten, ist essenziell für unsere Arbeit.

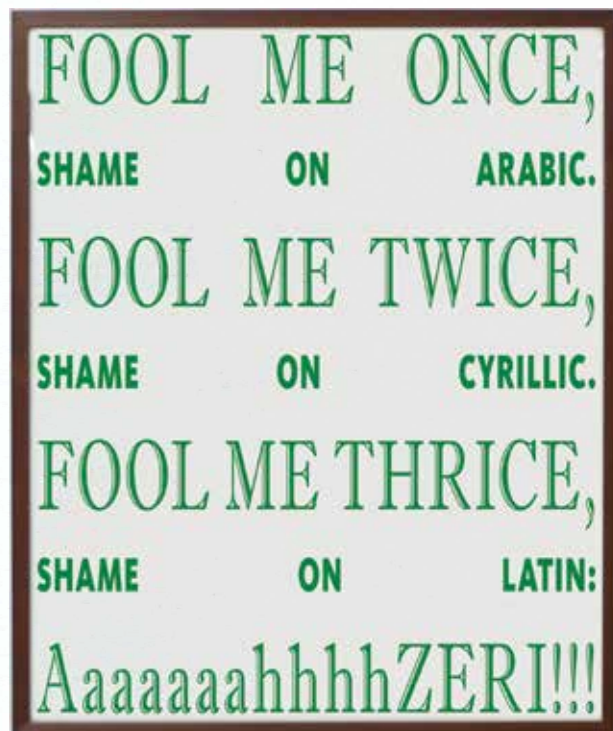
In euren Projekten geht es häufig um die Übersetzung oder die Transliteratation, die ihr als „dicke, hässliche Cousine oder billige halbwüchsige Schwester der Übersetzung“ bezeichnet. Im Unterschied zur Übersetzung, die kein Eins-zu-eins-Verhältnis zwischen Ausgangs- und Zieltext verlangt, bedeutet Transliteratation in der Sprachwissenschaft, dass ein geschriebener Originaltext mit Rücksicht auf seine Form, seine Gestalt und seinen Charakter in einen anderen geschriebenen Text übertragen wird. Welche Bedeutung hat dieses Eins-zu-eins-Verhältnis zwischen Sprachen, Gegenständen und Erzählungen für eure Arbeit in der Secession?

Die Arbeit in der Secession ist vielleicht eher eine Übung in Transsubstantiation, nicht im traditionellen römisch-katholischen, sondern im synkretistischen Sinn. Wir behandeln bestimmte Themen, indem wir radikal die Form, die materielle Gestalt, verändern, die traditionell mit ihnen verbunden ist. Insofern handelt es sich, um bei der Definition zu bleiben, vielleicht eher um eine Übersetzung als um eine Transliteratation. Grundsätzlich bevorzugen wir aber das Verfahren der Substitution: Wie die Verwandlung von Bill Pullman in Balthazar Getty, die sich in *Lost Highway* zwischen zwei Szenen ereignet, entzieht sich letztlich auch die Substitution der Erklärung. Sie stellt eine Herausforderung dar für den sehr säkularen Wahn, alles zu verstehen und allwissend zu sein.

means that a written text is transferred into another written text—respecting the form, shape, and body as well as the character of the original. To what extent is this one-to-one-relationship between languages, objects, and narrations relevant for your work at the Secession?

The work at the Secession is perhaps closer to an exercise in a *transubstantiation* of sorts, not in a traditional Roman Catholic sense, but a syncretic one. We are trying to address a set of issues by radically altering the form as the flesh, the corporality, that is traditionally associated with it. So in this sense, to take your definition, it's perhaps closer to translation than transliteration. In general, substitution is a more immanent concept for us than translation: it has a phenomenology, a being, that translation quite simply seems to lack.

In *The Task of the Translator* (1923), Walter Benjamin once used a metaphor to describe translation as a tangent which “touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux.” The crucial point about this statement is that fidelity and freedom do not come into conflict but are components of one and the same process. Does that apply to Slavs and Tatars with regard to fidelity to cultural identity and the freedom of its artistic reinterpretation?



AaaaaahhhhZERI!!!, 2009



To Beer or Not To Beer, 2012, commissioned by the graduating class of the Graduate Program in Curatorial Practice at California College of the Arts, "On Apology," CCA Wattis, San Francisco. Photo by Dane Jensen

In *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* von 1923 beschreibt Walter Benjamin die Übersetzung als Tangente, die „das Original flüchtig und nur am unendlichen kleinen Punkt des Sinnes [berührt], um nach dem Gesetze der Treue in der Freiheit der Sprachbewegung ihre eigenste Bahn zu verfolgen“. Das Entscheidende an dieser Aussage ist, dass Treue und Freiheit nicht in Konflikt zueinander stehen, sondern Teil desselben Prozesses sind. Gilt das hinsichtlich der Treue gegenüber kulturellen Identitäten und der Freiheit zur künstlerischen Neuinterpretation auch für Slavs and Tatars?

Voll und ganz: Die Freiheit der Sprachbewegung ist ein wesentliches Element unserer Arbeit und spielt eine entscheidende Rolle darin, uns unserer Umwelt und dem Begriff Identität zu nähern. Interessant daran ist, dass auch hier zwei Begriffe, die vermeintlich in einem Spannungsverhältnis zueinander stehen – unerschütterliche Treue und freie Bewegung –, Teil desselben Verfahrens sind. Eine Redensart sagt, der Kaukasus sei ein Mann, weil sein Körper keine Kurven hat – eine Anspielung auf den starken Willen und die Dickköpfigkeit der Bergbewohner. Wir versuchen, diesem Körper Rundungen zu geben und so das starre Bild von Identität als etwas Zerbrechlichem in Bewegung zu bringen.

Neben einer Fülle von Einfällen versammelt ihr in euren Ausstellungen kulturelle Zeugnisse und Artefakte, die den Eindruck erwecken, als stammten sie von ausgedehnten Reisen zu historischen Stätten der Vergangenheit. Würdet ihr

Yes, we embrace this idea wholeheartedly: The freedom of linguistic flux is crucial to our work and to the understanding of the world around us, including that of identity. Again, what's interesting is that two notions often considered to be in tension—the steadfastness of fidelity versus the flux of freedom—are part of one and the same process. There's a saying that the Caucasus is a man whose body is without curves: This is often used to describe the headstrong, muscular will of mountain peoples. We try to round out this body and to moderate the tendency to see identity as brittle.

In your exhibitions, you assemble not only ideas, but cultural objects and artifacts which seem to have been collected on long journeys to ancient times and places. Do you agree with descriptions of your work as a contemporary, visual form of travel writing, one of the most common forms of literature in all cultures and at all times?

We never thought of it that way, but that is a compelling interpretation. Advances in technology have facilitated travel incredibly over the past century, but this has not necessarily been accompanied by a proportionate increase in wisdom and understanding: In fact, the reverse is probably true.

What comes to your mind when you hear the term *folk*? More radical than punk.



Reverse Joy presentation, "Europa N, GfZK, Leipzig, 2012



79.89.09 lecture-presentation, Triumph Gallery, Moscow, 2009, photo by Kolya Zverkov

zustimmen, wenn man eure Arbeiten als zeitgenössische visuelle Form der Reisebeschreibung bezeichnet, ein Literaturgenre, das sich in allen Kulturen von jeher großer Beliebtheit erfreut?

Dieser Gedanke ist uns noch gar nicht gekommen, aber das ist eine spannende Deutung. Durch den technischen Fortschritt ist das Reisen in den letzten 100 Jahren unglaublich einfach geworden, aber das Wissen über andere Kulturen und der verständnisvolle Umgang mit ihnen sind dadurch nicht unbedingt gewachsen – vermutlich ist eher das Gegenteil der Fall.

Woran denkt ihr, wenn ihr den Begriff Folk hört?

Radikaler als Punk.

Und beim Begriff Pop?

Versüßt die bittere Medizin.

Glaubt ihr, dass Früchte wie der Granatapfel, die Maulbeere, die Wassermelone oder die Pflaume, die ihr in der Secession zeigt, als Medium dienen können, um einen verständnisvollen Umgang mit Kulturen zu transportieren, über die in der westlichen Welt nur wenig bekannt ist?

Indem wir durch die Flora einer Region sprechen, sind wir genötigt, uns ein Stück weit vom anthropomorphen Denken zu lösen. Früchte sind einfache Genussmittel, und ihr Verzehr bereitet eindeutig Vergnügen. Das Projekt in der Secession soll durch den Einsatz dieser einfachen Genüsse Gedanken an ähnliche einfache Genüsse wecken, die für

And the term pop?

Helps the medicine go down smoothly.

Do you think that the fruits that you are presenting at the Secession, such as the pomegranate, the mulberry, the watermelon, or the sour cherry, provide vessels or containers for containers for the understanding about cultures that are not so widely known in the West?

Speaking through the flora of a region forces us to think that much less anthropomorphically. There is an undeniable pleasure, a basic luxury that fruits offer as a comestible experience. The project at the Secession tries to translate this luxury into an agency or platform to think about similarly basic luxuries – reading, thinking, the communal practice of faith – across this particular region.

How does the outdoor installation, the two large hemispheric melons flanking the central staircase of the Secession, contribute to your exploration of “a collective autobiography of the region of Central Asia”? How are these objects linked to the shrine-like installation inside the Secession?

Like the balloon in *A Monobrow Manifesto*, the watermelon is a fun, stupid medium and epiphenomenon through which we can tell much more complicated stories. It is a fruit of



A Monobrow Manifesto (Qajar v Bert), Sharjah, 2011



Underwater Prayers for Overwater Dreams
(the watermelon vendor), 2012

diese besondere Region von Bedeutung sind – das Lesen, das Denken oder die gemeinsame Glaubensausübung.

Welchen Beitrag leistet die Außeninstallation – zwei große Melonenhälften, die die Haupttreppe der Secession flankieren – zu eurer Erkundung einer „kollektiven Autobiografie Zentralasiens“? In welcher Verbindung stehen diese beiden Objekte zu der schreinartigen Installation im Inneren des Gebäudes?

Die Wassermelone ist wie der aufblasbare Ballon in *A Monobrow Manifesto* ein Späbelement, ein witziges Epiphänomen, das uns ermöglicht, komplexe Geschichten zu erzählen. Sie eignet sich perfekt für die Karikatur: ob durch ihr sehr auffälliges grafisches Muster (siehe die Wassermelonenkugeln im Innenraum) oder dadurch, dass sie mit dem Anderen oder, wenn man so will, dem Farbigen, dem Einwanderer assoziiert ist. In den USA ist die Wassermelone eng mit rassistischen Stereotypen von der afroamerikanischen Kultur verknüpft, in Europa ruft sie durch ihr Herkunftsland und den Ort, wo man sie kauft, das Bild des Einwanderers, des Türken, des Moslems, also die Grundängste der Europäer wach. In Russland hingegen verbindet man die Wassermelone mit dem Kaukasus und dem krisenhaften Verhältnis zwischen den beiden Regionen.

Aber die Wassermelonen am Eingang der Secession verkünden ebenso den Beginn von Frühling und Sommer und die reiche Ernte, die diese beiden Jahreszeiten mit sich bringen – eine sehr wörtliche Umsetzung

caricature *par excellence*: whether in its very graphic pattern (see the watermelon balls inside) or its associations with the fruit of the Other, the darkie, the immigrant, if you will. In the US, the watermelon evokes racist stereotypes of African American culture; in Europe, its provenance and point of sale recall the immigrant, the Muslim, the Turk – essentially, those Europe fears. Finally, in Russia, it is linked with the Caucasus and the troubled rapport between the two.

In a no less important sense, the watermelons at the entrance to the Secession announce the arrival of spring and summer and the bountiful harvests of these seasons, a more literal take on the *Ver Sacrum* on the facade. Together with the syncretic shrine inside, the fruits are an invitation to engage with the exhibition affectively and not just cerebrally.

You deliberately play with the ambiguity of words, with their mis-, re-, or new interpretation and with accidental meanings that may or may not arise. Would you say that wordplay is a domesticated, tamed form of misunderstanding – a deliberate one, as it is played out by Slavs and Tatars in artworks such as *When in Rome, To Mountain Minorities (Kidnapping Mountains)*, or *Nations*? On the one hand, these performative acts on the text are part of the research itself: They are not the end result, but the process of coming to terms with the words in all their polyphonic glory.



To Mountain Minorities, “Frozen Moments”, curated by Joanna Warsza, Tbilisi, 2010. The original expression “*Chven Sakartvelos Gaumardjos*” is roughly translated as “Long Live Georgia” or “Vive Georgia!” By changing the second ‘a’ of *Sakartvelos* to a ‘u’ to make *Sakurtvelos*, the phrase becomes Long Live Kurdistan and the unresolved geopolitical identity of one mountain people is replaced by that of another.



When in Rome, 2010

des Wahlspruches „Ver sacrum“ neben der Eingangstüre. Gemeinsam mit dem synkretistischen Schrein im Gebäudeinneren laden die Früchte dazu ein, sich nicht nur auf intellektueller, sondern auch auf emotionaler Ebene mit der Ausstellung zu beschäftigen.

Ihr spielt absichtlich mit der Mehrdeutigkeit von Wörtern, mit ihren Fehl-, Um- oder Neuinterpretationen und den zufälligen Bedeutungen, die in diesem Spiel vielleicht entstehen. Würdet ihr sagen, dass das Wortspiel eine zahme, abgeschwächte Form des Missverständnisses ist – eine Form, die von Slavs and Tatars in Arbeiten wie *When in Rome, To Mountain Minorities (Kidnapping Mountains)* oder *Nations* ganz bewusst eingesetzt wird?

Einerseits sind diese performativen Akte am Text Bestandteil der Forschungsarbeit: Sie sind nicht das Endergebnis, sondern entstehen im Prozess, die Wörter in ihrer ganzen polyfönen Vielfalt zu verstehen. Andererseits spricht unsere Umformung von Texten auch vom Ringen mit der Sprache selbst. Uns verbindet eine wachsende Skepsis gegenüber dem geschriebenen Wort – seiner Macht, Wissen zu erzeugen, die vielleicht nur von seiner Schwäche übertroffen wird, Bedeutung zu vermitteln – und ebenso gegenüber den Texten von Sufis und Dichtern.

Textstücke wie *Long Live Long Live! Death to Death to!* oder *Keep Your Majorities Close, But Your Minorities Closer* sind von ihrem sprachlichen Aufbau her äußerst widersprüchlich: Zuerst weisen sie den

On the other hand, our revisions of texts speak, to some degree, about a struggle with language itself. We share an increasing suspicion of the written word – its ability to produce knowledge is perhaps matched only by a certain inability to convey meaning – and of prose with Sufis and poets, respectively.

The linguistic structure of text pieces such as *Long Live Long Live!, Death to Death to!, or Keep Your Majorities Close, But Your Minorities Closer* is quite contradictory: First you instruct the readers, then you reiterate this instruction by variation, and finally you rebut the entire complex you have just built up. Is this sort of being in between worlds emblematic for your working methods, too?

It is not so much being in between as occupying the far ends of the spectrum, and perhaps subsequently everything along the way. It is important to push at the walls of interpretation, of activity, and of agency, which otherwise would slowly cave in due to the very nature of growing old, understanding what one likes and dislikes. It's almost like an atavistic counterpart to the neoliberal idea of aspiration: The longer one lives, the more one understands what one likes, what kinds of ideas, which food, people, places. It's important to resist this *raffinement*, this narrowing of one's field of activity, and to embrace one's antithesis, to read things we don't agree with, to become friends with people to whom we might not normally be drawn.



The closest thing to a hindsight mascot to us, **Molla Nasreddin**, the 12th century Sufi wise-man-cum-fool also put in some years as mascot of the weekly Azeri political satire in the early 20th century.



Long Live Long Live!, exterior of heritage house of *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz*, Sharjah, 2011

Leser an, dann wird diese Anweisung in abgeänderter Form wiederholt, um schließlich das Konstrukt, das ihr errichtet habt, komplett zu widerlegen. Ist diese Form des Zwischen-den-Welten-Stehens ebenfalls bezeichnend für eure Arbeitsweise?

Es geht nicht so sehr um ein Dazwischenstehen, sondern darum, beide Enden des Spektrums zu besetzen und in Folge vielleicht auch den Raum dazwischen. Wir müssen uns gegen die Mauern der Interpretation und des Handelns stemmen, die einzustürzen drohen im natürlichen Prozess des Alterwerdens, in dem sich unsere Vorlieben und unsere Abneigungen verfestigen. Man könnte beinahe von einem atavistischen Gegenmodell zu der neoliberalen Vorstellung des Vorwärtstrebens sprechen: Je älter wir werden, desto klarer erkennen wir, welche Haltungen, welches Essen, welche Leute und welche Orte wir mögen. Es ist wichtig, diesem Raffinement, dieser Verengung des Lebens entgegenzuwirken und Texte zu lesen, mit denen wir nicht einverstanden sind, oder uns mit Menschen anzufreunden, zu denen wir uns normalerweise nicht hingezogen fühlen.

Ist es nicht ziemlich anstrengend, diese widersprüchliche Haltung auf Dauer zu behaupten?

Sehr sogar. Eine ganze Riege von Denkern beschäftigt sich mit dem Problem, wie man geistig in Bewegung bleibt: So befreiend es auch sein mag, eine bestimmte Position einzunehmen, man sitzt sofort darin fest. Oder wie Thomas Merton so treffend schrieb: „Gib diese Welt auf, gib die nächste auf und lass das Aufgeben.“

Maintaining such a contradictory position must be demanding, isn't it?

It is extremely demanding. A whole range of thinkers have addressed the difficulty of maintaining an intellectual and numinous agility: Once you take a position, no matter how liberating, you immediately become trapped by it. Or, as Thomas Merton wrote so eloquently, “Quit this world, quit the next, and quit quitting.”



Régions d'Être, 2012



Resist Resisting God, Tehran, 2009

Das Kollektiv Slavs and Tatars versteht sich als „Faktion der Polemik und engen Freundschaft“ und beschäftigt sich mit dem „als Eurasien bekannten Gebiet östlich der ehemaligen Berliner Mauer und westlich der Chinesischen Mauer“. Die Gruppe arbeitet mit verschiedenen Medien und Disziplinen und bedient sich eines breiten Spektrums kultureller Register von U bis E. Slavs and Tatars haben bislang folgende Bücher veröffentlicht: *Kidnapping Mountains* (Book Works, 2009), *Love Me, Love Me Not: Changed Names* (onestar press, 2010) und *Molla Nasreddin: the magazine that would've, could've, should've* (JRP-Ringer, 2011). Ihre Arbeiten wurden in der Galerie Salt Istanbul, der Tate Modern, auf der 10. Sharjah-Biennale, der 8. Biennale des Mercosul und der 3. Thessaloniki-Biennale gezeigt.

In den vergangenen fünf Jahren hat das Kollektiv zwei Zyklen geschaffen: Die Projekte *Kidnapping Mountains*, *Molla Nasreddin*, *Hymns of No Resistance* widmen sich dem Kaukasus und seiner komplexen Geschichte, während *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz, 79.89.09* und *A Monobrow Manifesto* einen Blick auf das überraschende gemeinsame Erbe werfen, das Polen und den Iran verbindet. In ihrem neuen, dritten Werkzyklus *The Faculty of Substitution* beschäftigen sich Slavs and Tatars mit dem Thema des mystischen Protestes und der revolutionären Rolle des Heiligen und des Synkretistischen. Der Werkzyklus umfasst Beiträge zu Gruppenausstellungen – *Reverse Joy* in der GfZK Leipzig, *Pray Way* auf der New-Museum-Triennale und *Régions d'Être* auf der Asia-Pacific-Triennale – sowie Einzelausstellungen in der Secession Wien (*Not Moscow, Not Mecca*), in der Moravia Gallery Brünn (*Khhhhhhh*), im MoMa New York (*Beyonsense*) und im Künstlerhaus Stuttgart.

Slavs and Tatars is a faction of polemics and intimacies devoted to an area, east of the former Berlin Wall and west of the Great Wall of China, known as Eurasia. The collective's work spans several media, disciplines, and a broad spectrum of cultural registers (high and low). Slavs and Tatars have published *Kidnapping Mountains* (Book Works, 2009), *Love Me, Love Me Not: Changed Names* (onestar press, 2010), and *Molla Nasreddin: the magazine that would've, could've, should've* (JRP-Ringer, 2011). Their work has been exhibited at Salt, Istanbul, Tate Modern, the 10th Sharjah, the 8th Mercosul and the 3rd Thessaloniki Biennials.

After devoting the past five years primarily to two cycles of work, namely, a celebration of complexity in the Caucasus (*Kidnapping Mountains*, *Molla Nasreddin*, *Hymns of No Resistance*) and the unlikely common heritage between Poland and Iran (*Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz, 79.89.09*, *A Monobrow Manifesto*), Slavs and Tatars have begun work on their third cycle, *The Faculty of Substitution*, on mystical protest and the revolutionary role of the sacred and syncretic. The new cycle of work includes contributions to group exhibitions — *Reverse Joy* at the GfZK, Leipzig, *Pray Way* at the New Museum Triennial and *Régions d'Être* at the Asia Pacific Triennial — as well as solo engagements at Vienna's Secession (*Not Moscow Not Mecca*), Brno's Moravia Gallery (*Khhhhhhh*), NY's Museum of Modern Art (*Beyonsense*), and Künstlerhaus Stuttgart.



The Crown
photo Oliver
Ottenschläger/
Secession, 2012



Underwater Prayers for Overwater Dreams (the mulberry tree), 2012

Not Moscow Not Mecca

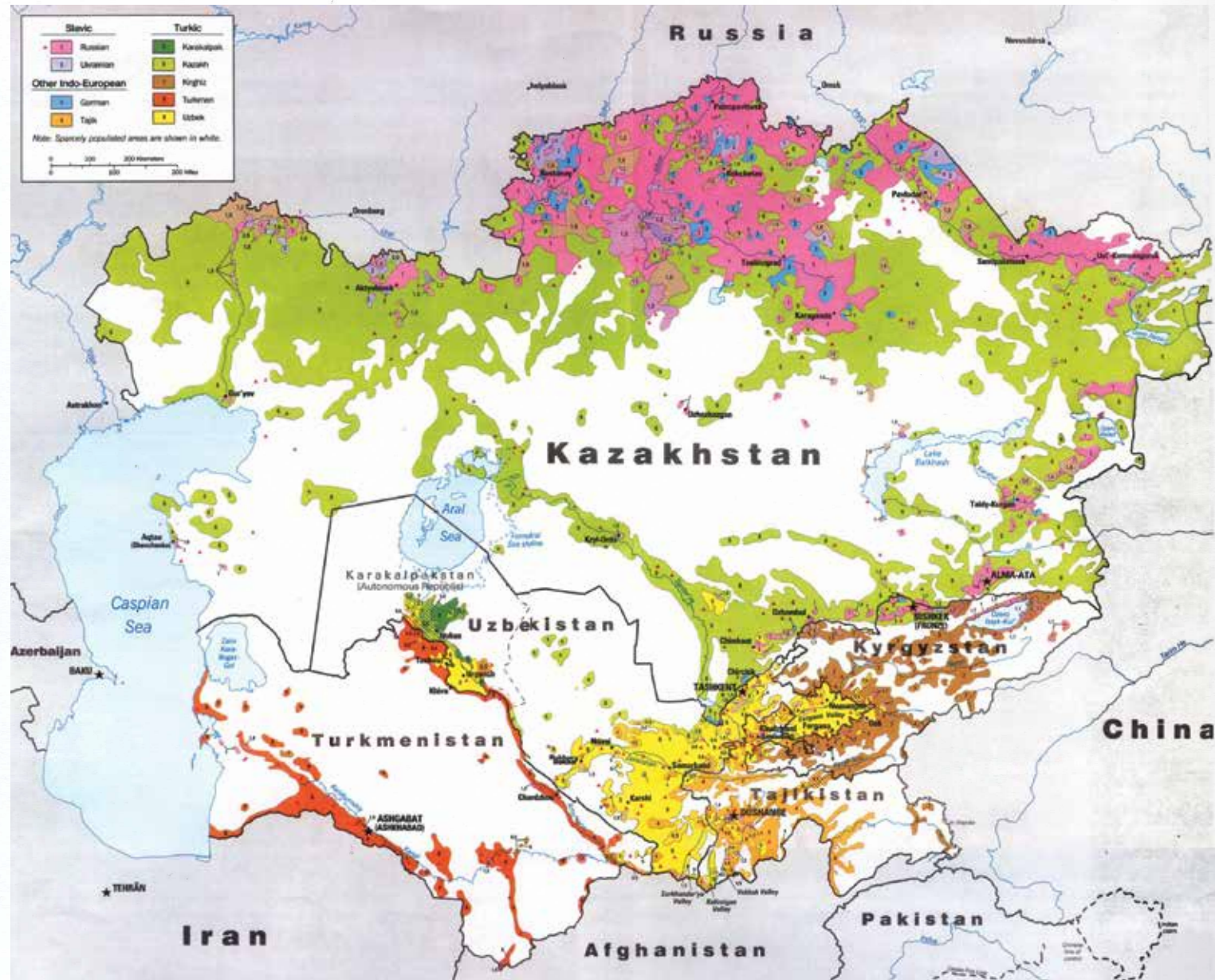
Mysteries are intrinsically esoteric, and as such are an offense to democracy: is not publicity a democratic principle?
Norman O. Brown

Few people dare mention Marx and Mohammed in the same breath. For, what on earth (or in heaven, with or without the 72 *houris*) could an atheistic economic and political philosophy have to do with a religion dedicated to the worship of the one and unique God? Does not the former continue to be the darling of leftists, who (like philandering partners, unwilling to make a clean break) keep coming back for one last chance, only to prolong the pain of all parties — while the latter takes pride in its traditionalist, some would say reactionary, positions? Rare are the legs, but rarer yet are the heart and mind, that can do the splits. It is precisely such mental and mystical acrobatics that woo Slavs and Tatars, not to mention Khazars, Bashkirs, Karakalpaks, and Uighurs, off our feet.

Between the twin towers of Communism and Islam lies a region alternatively called **ما وراء النهر**, Transoxiana,



“Down with You!” Mayakovsky's man yells at God. Or, alternatively, a precursor to “Get down! Get down!” from Kool and the Gang's *Jungle Boogie*. *Ни Знахарь Ни Бог Ни Слуги Бога Нам Ни Подмога* (Neither Healer, Nor God, Nor the Angels of God are any Help to the Peasantry), 1923. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, NY.



Map of Central Asia showing the major ethnic groups

Greater Khorasan, Turkestan, or simply Central Asia. Like us, it too belongs to too many peoples and places at once, caught between Imperial Russia and Statist China, Chingissid and Sharia laws, sedentary and nomadic tribes, Turkic, Persian, and Russian languages—not to mention Arabic, Latin, and Cyrillic alphabets. As Maria Elisabeth Luow writes, “The stubborn enchantedness of the world is perhaps most telling in the parts of the world where the concrete efforts to disenchant it were extraordinarily organized and profound.”¹ We turn to this “country beyond the river” (*Amu Darya*, aka the *Oxus*) in an effort to research the potential for progressive agency in Islam. In a land considered historically instrumental to the development of the faith, but nonetheless marginalized in our oft-amnesiac era, its approach to pedagogy, to the sacred, and to modernity itself offers a much-needed model of critical thinking and commensurate being.

1. Maria Elisabeth Luow. *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (London: Routledge, 2007)



Ceiling of courtyard in “bookbinding style,” Khudoyar Khan’s Palace, Kokand, Uzbekistan, 2011



Many Cribs, No Bloods. Kumtepa market, near Marguilon, Uzbekistan, 2011

Like our hero, Molla Nasreddin, and his twenty-first century protégé Ali G, we believe in the efficacy of asking stupid questions about otherwise sophisticated subject matter. If Islam is categorically overlooked and dismissed as reactionary, and if it is kept at bay by secular intellectuals and moderate Muslims alike, then surely it provides fertile ground for resuscitating the very roots and shoots of a progressive agency. To borrow from the more mundane, profane, if not entirely discredited, world of finance: the greater the risk, the greater the reward.

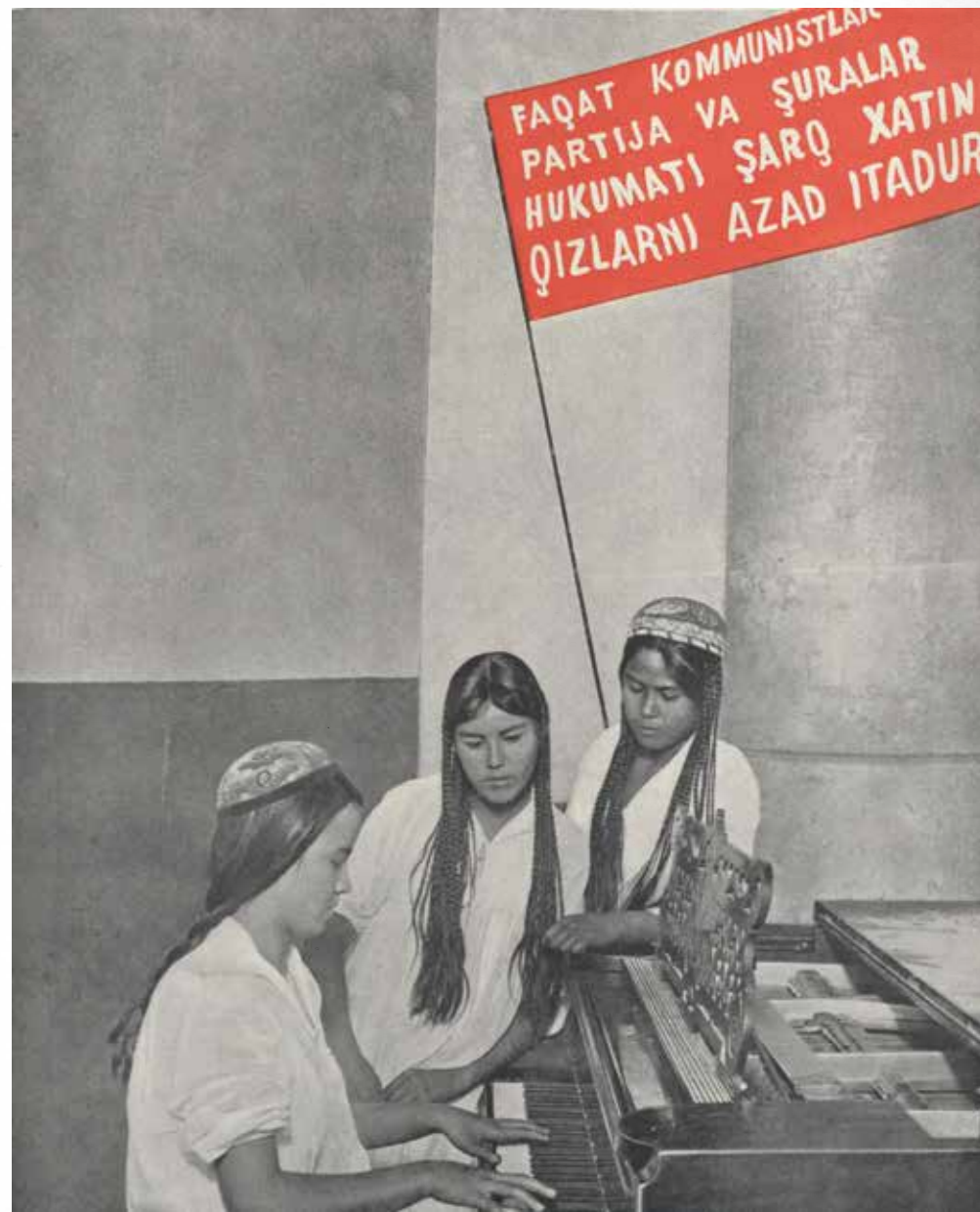
The Faculty of Substitution

For those of us inclined towards big brushstrokes (alas, we are not painters, but polemicists), the world could be quite easily divided into YES people and NO people. Despite a penchant for the critical, we sit squarely in the camp of the former: “Yes” just slides off the palate. Our big, beaming eyes say it before our lips know any better. With age, it slowly dawns on us that enthusiasm can only take us so far. Eager to touch the blaze of ardor with our precocious, pudgy fingers, we feel disappointment before we know how to read, write, or say it. With a register of adult feelings, inevitably, come adult words: We learn of the existence of such heartbreaking hyphenations as “over-committed.” With plenty to spare in childhood, time’s arched spine flattens in later years, under the weight of its dwindling supply. For such innocent but affable folk, the secret handshake of adulthood is sealed by the ability to push the tongue to the roof of one’s mouth and utter: “No.”

Set against the Atlanticist penchant for the positive, the negative builds steam as it moves eastwards amongst a whole array—or rather, increasingly disarrayed set—of nations until it hits a brick wall of impenetrability, courtesy of a quintessentially Russian expression: “да нет.” Literally meaning “yes no,” when you get to the bottom of it, “да нет” actually means just plain “no.” We would like, however, to divert this expression, kidnap it, indulge it, give it a dollop of the Stockholm syndrome and release it into the world to rage both “Yes!” and “No!” with one steady, repeated breath, a *zīkr* of sorts, thereby fulfilling its etymological dreams—not to mention ours.

After devoting the past five or six years to two cycles of work, namely, a celebration of complexity in the Caucasus (*Kidnapping*

یری سبحانه دیب
النملة السوداء، علی
الصخرة الصماء، فی
الليلة الظلماء.



“Only the Communist Party and Soviet power will liberate Oriental women.”
10 Лет Узбекистана СССР (10 Years of Soviet Uzbekistan), 1934. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, NY.

He sees all things, even the steps of the black ant on black stone in the dark of night. (Arab Proverb)



Slavs and Tatars, *Reverse Joy*, fountain, Masshad, 2011

Mountains, Molla Nasreddin, Hymns of No Resistance) and the unlikely affinities of Poland and Iran (*Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi’ite Showbiz, 79.89.09, A Monobrow Manifesto*), we have begun work on our third cycle: *The Faculty of Substitution*, replacing one thing with another, telling one tale through another—in the widest sense. At the heart of this research is an attempt to rethink the very notion of self-discovery via the slow burn of syncretism and the revolutionary role of the sacred.



Slavs and Tatars, *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi’ite Showbiz* (installation view), photo by Alfredo Rubio, Sharjah Art Foundation, 2011



Slavs and Tatars, *Mystical Protest (Muharram)*, “I decided not to save the world,” curated by Duygu Demir and Kyla Macdonald, Salt Beyoğlu, 2012



The Triumph of Leninist-Stalinist National Politics, by N. Narakhan, 10 Лем Узбекистана СССР (10 Years of Soviet Uzbekistan), 1934, courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, NY.

2. Richard N. Frye, "The History of Bukhara by Narshakhi," in *Central Asian Monuments*, ed. Hasan B. Paksoy (Istanbul: Isis Press, 1992), 75. At the age of nearly 92, Richard N. Frye, Aga Khan Professor Emeritus of Iranian Studies at Harvard University, received permission from the Islamic Republic of Iran to be buried in Esfahan.

The increasingly rapid pace of individualism is nothing new to us—if anything, we've been complicit in the romance. Willingly swept up off our feet, landing prostrate at the altar of acceleration, we often confound individualism with lofty notions of democracy, freedom, and happiness. Contrary to the creeds that pass for wisdom today, it is often only by adopting the innermost thoughts, experiences, beliefs, and sensations of another as one's own that one can achieve a semblance of awareness. As Richard N. Frye says, "just as in fine arts, we find individual biography in the West, so collective biography is the hallmark of the East."² *The Faculty of Substitution* attempts to redress this imbalance by playfully, intimately, and formally suggesting a recalibration: of registers, speeds, and form. We look at substitution—from *al-badaliya* to the anti-modern, from *la reversibilité* to mystical protest. How can indirection—looking at something *else* as a prism onto the chosen subject of study, going somewhere *else* that initially might not seem relevant, instead of directly heading towards one's destination challenge the very notion of distance as the shortest length between two points? There is some sass in this circuitry: Why go straight for the kill when you can circle it, tease it, taunt it out of its strict semantics?

Accordingly, *Not Moscow Not Mecca* tells the collective story of syncretism—of Central Asia—from the perspective not of the fauna but rather the flora. More topographic, if not transcendent, an autobiography of the region's fruits (from the persimmon to the mulberry, from the melon to the pomegranate) performs an etymological enema on triangulation. A platform of fruits—to read, experience, and taste—offers a third way, blessed between the two major geopolitical heavyweights of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: Communism and Islam.

Amping up the Amphiboly

We are particularly seduced when opposites attract. When it came to secularization, Communism and Capitalism put aside (however briefly) their thuggish ideological spat and engaged in a storm of make-up sex called Modernity, whose last remnants we are still suffering. The founding trio of modern social sciences, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber, all saw modernity as necessarily secular,

3. "This type of dichotomous formulation is expressed as feudalism and capitalism in Marx, mechanical and organic division of labor in Durkheim, and traditional and legal-rational (or modern) in Weber." Mark Saroyan, *Minorities, Mullahs and Modernity: Reshaping Community in the Former Soviet Union* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

the inevitable evolution from what they considered pre-modern, traditional, religious society.³ The disenchantment or de-divinization of the world, which Friedrich Schiller lamented, has found its echo equally in revolutionary (Bolshevik) Communism and late Capitalism. If grassroots, syncretic Central Asian Islam—out-financed, out-bureaucratized, and out-muscled by the USSR—could so effectively resist seven decades of systematic repression, what can it teach us today, in an early twenty-first century swimming against the rising tides of faltering economic liberalism, not to mention shrill secularism?

It would be foolish to believe that the approximately seventy years of revolutionary Communism, with its strict prohibition



Mardi Bas! Agit-prop anti-religious carnival, Moscow, 1930s, *Бригада Художников* (Artists' Brigade), issue 1, 1931. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, NY

of religion, have nothing to do with contemporary Muslims in the Middle East holding their noses up at their Central Asian coreligionists. During the Soviet era, sacred shrines from Ashgabat to Kashgar were desecrated: Mosques were destroyed or turned into gymnasiums, libraries, workers' clubs, and



A domlo (shrine-guardian) recites prayers for pilgrims. Shrine of Khwaja Mahmoud al-Anjir al-Faghnavi, of the Naqshbandi Golden Chain, outside Bukhara, 2011.

the like. Organizations with names halfway between a Russ Meyer B movie and a Richard Dawkins foundation — Союз воинствующих безбожников (translated alternatively as “The League of Militant Godless” or “The Union of Belligerent Atheists”) to name just one — were founded to combat what the Bolsheviks considered Islam’s backwardness. It sounds somewhat familiar: one dares not delight in imagining how today’s Islamophobes on the right would feel about sharing their zeal with their former enemies, the revolutionary Communists.

Yet, it was precisely this prohibition and suppression that created a fluid, complex, syncretic, if not progressive, approach to Islam — as opposed to the often rigid, Gulf-centric understanding of the faith. Today, against the backdrop of a supposed Cold War supposedly pulsating in the Muslim world, one that pits the Sunnis of the Arabian peninsula against a rising Shi’a crescent of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, it may be best to choose not to choose between the Wahabbism of the one and the theocratic Imamism of the other. In this context, Central Asia’s syncretic indigenization of the faith offers a rare alternative.

4.

The relatively recent arrival of these nation-states to the world stage has seen a scramble to create a compelling and distinct national identity, one that goes beyond the twin totalizing phenomena of the past (the USSR) and the present/future (Islam), see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006). After the fall of the Soviet Union, various efforts were made, in vain, to import a more strict — whether Wahhabite or other — Islam to Central Asia, for example, through the donation of text books and financing of mosques.



Village regiment in the fight against Basmachis, by U. Tansikbaev, depicting the fall of the Basmachi movement, a national liberation movement to end foreign rule over Turkestan. *10 Лет Узбекистана СССР* (10 Years of Soviet Uzbekistan), 1934, courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, NY.



Covered bird (quail) cage, Sheikh Tahir Shrine, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 2011

Big and small, government-sanctioned and grass-roots — an ecosystem of shrines (*avliyo* in Uzbek) dot the urban and rural landscape of the steppes. Resting places of saints, a spring of holy water nestled in the cliffs bordering Afghanistan, even a petrified tree can serve as sites of pilgrimage, or *ziyarat*. Pilgrims offer alms, in the form of food, water, or clothes. Some come to make a prayer and move on — either to the next shrine or back to their everyday life. Others return in the evening to pick up the produce and clothes that have been basking in the blessed aura of the shrine.⁴



Women pilgrims at the Naqshbandi shrine, outside Bukhara, 2011

In the active and powerful role played by women, the shrines testify best to the progressive muscle of Central Asia’s approach to Islam. They inevitably welcome women more than mosques, which, unless there is a separate, designated space for prayer, become essentially off-limits to females. During the repressive prohibitions of the Soviet era, the continuity of the faith largely



Fabrics, throws, and sheets are often draped on the tomb of a saint to soak up the benedictions before being taken home for use. Shrine of Muhammad Baba-as-Samasi, part of the Nasqshbandi Golden Chain, 2011



Pilgrims waiting to fill their jerry cans and bottles with blessed water, Omon-Xona, Uzbekistan, 2011

fell on the shoulders of women. Given their more prominent role in the private sphere, women were deemed the guardians of traditions and religious honor, especially when faced with



View of Omon-Xona, a make-shift spa-shrine in the mountains near Boysun, Uzbekistan, where holy water is collected, imbibed, bathed in, and honored.

5. Gillian Tett, “Guardians of the Faith?” *Gender and Religion in an (ex) Soviet Tajik Village*, in *Muslim Women’s Choices: Religious Belief and Social Reality*, ed. Camilia Fawzi El-Solh and Judy Mabro (Oxford, 1994), 144.

a hostile state. One man explains away the tension between the public allegiance to Communism and private practice of Islam along gender lines: “I am a communist. I cannot fast or pray at work. But my wife and *kelin* [daughter-in-law], they are sitting at home, so they must fast and pray! So we will not suffer from sins. We are a Muslim home!”⁵ At the shrines, elder women known as *otin* or *bibi-otin* often perform the recitations observed at life-cycle rituals. These *otin* are responsible for the transmission of sacred traditions, act as teachers to younger women in the community, and pass on religious expertise to their daughters or daughters-in-law, in an exemplary demonstration of the chains of transmission (see *Chains we can believe in*, below).

Our regional remit looks as much to the mountains that inform the men and women as to the individuals themselves. In an attempt to shed light on the resilience of the Muslim Kazakhs



Those with a sore throat or stutter drink a spoonful of blessed water from the shrine of Shayx Hazrati Qusam-Ota, near Dekhkanabad, Uzbekistan, 2011



A supplicant inside the Sheikh Abul Hassan mosque, Lyangar, Uzbekistan, 2011

6. Bruce Privratsky, *Muslim Turkistan: Kazak Religion and Collective Memory*. (Richmond: Curzon, 2001).

7. Pointing to the Safavids and the current Islamic Republic of Iran, Dabashi argues quite convincingly that Shi’ism thrives as a religion of protest but loses its *raison d’être* once it achieves power. Hamid Dabashi, *Shi’ism: A Religion of Protest* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2011).

of Turkestan, Bruce Privratsky talks about landscape’s power to trigger a collective memory. During seventy years of Soviet rule, the hagiography of one’s ancestors and elders was stored in a kind of dreamscape, collectively practiced every time one passes a place of *ziyora*.⁶ In Central Asia, by outlawing the shrines and places of popular worship, the authorities unwittingly made the past a foreign country — more sought after, more delectable, more relevant than they could possibly have imagined. To visit the tombs of one’s ancestors was the equivalent of breaking through the Iron Curtain and going abroad. Most importantly, the prohibition of Islam in the former Soviet Union coincided with an increased access to printing presses around the Muslim world. Instead of being swept up in the tides of doctrinal, scriptural discussions of theology, Islam in Central Asia was elaborated as a practice of community, retaining a significantly oral character. In effect, it was the de-modernization of the faith during Communism that allowed for its particular suppleness. Contrary to what one would expect, the faith regressed where it was given free reign. Where it was outlawed, it progressed.⁷

Long Live the Syncretics

According to lore, it is not heaven’s light that illuminates Bukhara, in modern-day Uzbekistan, Central Asia’s most storied city, but rather Bukhara’s light that reaches the heavens. From astronomers to religious scholars, from doctors to saints, there is clearly something in the water of this Silk Road stalwart. Perhaps we would do well

8. “Bukharans take pride in recounting the story of how, when the Afghan *mujahidin* took Soviet soldiers as prisoners during the Soviet invasions of Afghanistan in 1979, they would always ask them where they came from. If they came from the Christian parts of the Soviet Union—from Russia, Belarus, or Ukraine, for

example—they were executed; if they were from Central Asia, they were released. And if they were from Bukhara, the Afghan *mujahidin* would not only set the prisoners free, they would even show them reverence and respond with an *omin!* (amen!)” Luow, *Everyday Islam*, 63.

to redirect our thermal imaging resources away from military surveillance and criminal investigations to more metaphysical matters, namely, this city on the steppe where the number of holy souls per square meter gives Moscow’s billionaires a run for their money.⁸



Map of *ziyorat* (shrines) from Alexandre Bennigsen and S Enders Wembush's *Mystics and Commissars*, 1985.

When the Muslim world is defined or imagined today—by the West or by Muslims themselves—it often includes countries from North Africa to Southeast Asia, strangely skipping a heartbeat over the former Soviet sphere. Like a functionally planned highway, the newly minted acronym MENASA (Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia) takes a detour around what, until relatively recently, provided the pulse of the greater Muslim community.

Yet, Bukhara is arguably the fourth holiest city in Islam, after Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. Its name, **بجارا شريف** (Holy Bukhara), is renowned around the Muslim world.⁹ The founder of the Mughal Empire, Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur (1483–1530) claimed that *Ma wāra al nahr* was home to more Islamic leaders than any other region. Among the most authentic Hadiths (brief accounts of the Prophet’s sayings, which are second in importance only to the Qur’an) are those collected by Muhammad al-Bukhari, a son of the eponymous city. The founder of the largest Sufi order (or *tariqat*), Baha-ud-Din Naqshbandi, also hails from Bukhara.

9. In his “Tale of Occidental Exile,” (Treatise IX) Suhrawardi’s Illuminationist philosophy explicitly pairs wisdom and spiritual knowledge with the rise of the sun and light in the East and by extension the realm of matter and the material world in the West. Suhrawardi himself was known as the *Shaikh al-Ishrâq* (Master of Illumination) for his work on the theosophy, phenomenology and mystical existentialism of light. Interestingly, the word for illumination,

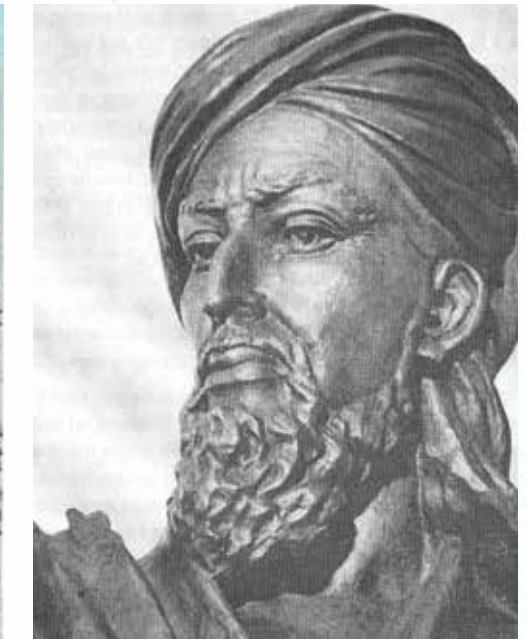
ishrâq, has its etymological roots in the “morning of knowledge” or the “dawn of knowledge” (*cognitio matutina* in Greek). So it comes as no surprise then Suhrawardi saw Transoxiana, the Eastern frontier of Islam in the 12th century, as the Sublime World. *The Mystical and Visionary Treatises of Shihabuddin Yahya Suhrawardi*, p 100.



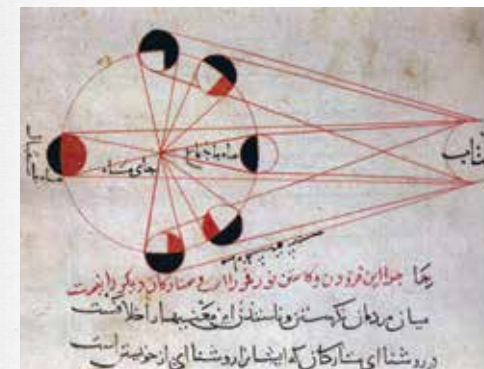
Statue of Muhammad ibn Mūsā al-Khwārizmī, photo by Michel Valdrighi, Khiva, Uzbekistan



Babur, the poet-emperor who ruled from Merv in present-day Afghanistan



Avicenna or Abū 'Alī al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn Sīnā



Early astronomical drawing of a lunar eclipse by Abu Rayhan Al-Biruni or “why the increase and decrease of the light of the moon is settled while other stars don't behave so. Observing these and not understanding the spirit of these is a misdeed; that the light of the stars is of their own.”

The neighboring Khwarezm Province is named after the founder of algebra (Muhammad ibn Mūsā al-Khwārizmī), the astrologer who discovered that the earth revolves around the sun (Abū Rayhān al-Bīrūnī), and the polymath whose Canon of Medicine was the standard text in Europe and the Islamic world until the eighteenth century (Ibn Sīnā).

To some extent, the lack of love is reciprocal, as demonstrated by the *Firdaus ul-iqbâl* (The Paradise of Felicity)—a history of the Khwarezm dynasty commissioned in the early nineteenth century. Going from the Creation and Adam all the way to the then-present day, the chronicle tells various stories of the community diverging from the path of Islam, only to be brought back into the fold by local heroes. As Adeeb Khalid, an eminent historian of Islam in Central Asia, notes: “Remarkably, [*Firdaus ul-iqbâl*] makes no mention of the Prophet, the rise of Islam in Arabia or the Arab conquest of Central Asia ... Islam becomes completely indigenized, an innate part of the genealogical heritage of the Turkic peoples of Central Asia.”¹⁰

What has been once, is for eternity. So it is with Bukhara, where cornering the sacred real-estate market predates Islam itself. Since the thirteenth century BCE, Zoroastrians have been making the pilgrimage to Diz Ru'in, where Siyâvash, the hero of a legend recounted in Ferdowsi's epic *Shahnameh* (the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Persianate culture), is supposed to be buried. A prince who was innocently killed by the Turanian

10. Adeeb Khalid, *Islam After Communism*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p 20.

SUFI GRRRL POWER

The Kiz Bibi shrine, outside Bukhara, is devoted to the famous spinstress who refused the hands of several suitors. Those seeking to have a child make a pilgrimage to this women-only mausoleum and khanaqa, or place of meditation, and tie a thread on a barren tree in hopes of being delivered from their own difficulties bearing a child.



A woman ties a knot to a tree outside the shrine of Xoja Ali Romitaniy. In a move of transubstantiation worthy of David Lynch, a supplicant one day came to Romitaniy, praising him and expressing a particular wish to the saint: not just to be like the revered figure but to actually become him. Romitaniy invited the man inside and when he left three days later, he had become Romitaniy, in action, in physique, and in truth. The visitor had not anticipated, however, the physical and spiritual efforts necessary to continue being the wise man. After two days, he collapsed and died. "The belief that pious figures could protect towns from danger likely manifested itself primarily around popular saints who were not Sufis. A jurist and teacher who was renowned more for his piety than for his learning, Muhriz ibn Khalaf achieved fame as a saint early on: according to his grandson, the townspeople attempted to obtain his blessings by grabbing his hand, touching his cloths and throwing their turbans or their pilgrimage garmets towards him which they then rubbed to their eyes and faces. A century later it had become customary for sailors to throw soil taken from Muhriz's tomb into the sea to calm its rough waters" Ahmet T. Karamustafa. *Sufism: the Formative Period* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2007).

11. Nowhere is this more evident than in the very language used: *pir*, an honorific for a saint, literally means "old," which is the literal translation of "buddha". For further reading on this topic, see Reza Shah Kazemi, *Common Ground: Between Islam and Buddhism* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2010).

king Afrasiab after a self-imposed exile, Siyâvash serves as a pre-Islamic precedent for Imam Hossein and the Ta'zieh Shi'a passion play performed during Muharram (see our *Reverse Joy*). Neighboring Buddhist and Hindu rituals are incorporated into the daily practice of Muslims throughout the region. Lotus motifs, among others, grace the needlework of the famous Central Asian textiles. Women tie strings, as hopes and benedictions, to trees found near the resting places of saints. Khizr, the initiator of mystical Islam (see below) is depicted sitting on white foliage, under which green sprouts forth—much like Buddha on his bed of white lotus flowers, with their green underbellies.¹¹

Ninety-Nine Ways of Saying One

A strict monotheism and emphasis on *tawhid* (God as one and unique) is the driving theological, legal, and creative force of Islam. Worshipping anyone or anything but God is perhaps the



Melek Taus, the Peacock Angel. A fallen angel and central figure in the Yezidi faith, Melek Taus is often mistakenly conflated with Iblis (who later became Satan) in Islam for his initial rise in God's favor and subsequent refusal to submit to Adam. Instead of cursing this insubordination, though, Yezidis revere Melek Taus and believe instead evil to be a wholly human creation, not a supernatural one.

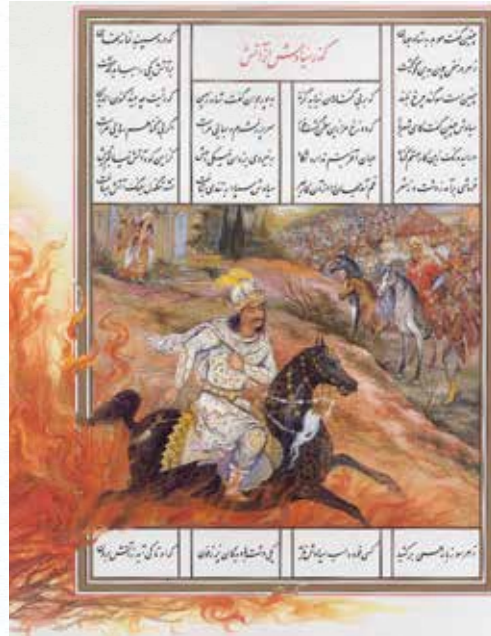
only unpardonable sin in the faith. The most touching, though counterintuitive, example of *tawhid* is the story of Satan or Iblis. According to the Qur'an, Satan was an angel so enamored with God, so devout in his belief in His unity, that he defied His command to submit to Adam, made of mere clay, and was thus banished to hell. What we too often see as a cartoonish scourge of evil, the devil, is in fact nothing more than a spurned lover.

Angelology is prevalent in Islam, in particular in Shi'ism. Henry Corbin, the eminent twentieth-century scholar and specialist on the Illuminationist philosopher Suhrawardi, discusses at length—if obliquely—the parallels between Catholic and Shi'a angelology and eschatology. Though Central Asia is overwhelmingly Sunni, its syncretic, big-tent approach to the faith moves beyond such sectarian divisions, not to mention those between homo sapiens and the animal kingdom.

On the way to Lyangar, a village in central Uzbekistan that is known for its hilltop shrine to Abul Hassan Sheikh and his four



Where the winged horse drank and fed: the shrine of Dul-Dul Ot, near Lyangar, Uzbekistan, 2011



Siyāvash, the Persian Prince from Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, known to some as Hossein the Prequel

sons, we come across another spoke in the surprisingly complex wheel of the one, the unique, and the multiple. Our guide, Lutfollahan (Lutfi), who hails from nearby Shakhrisabz, Timur's birthplace, asks the driver to stop at a fairly nondescript site. From the road, an old, bare tree seems to have been particularly pampered. A rectangular plot of some twenty square meters is surrounded by a fence with an ordinary stone base. As we approach, Lutfi tells us the story of Dul Dul Ot, the winged horse on which Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law and fourth Imam, rides across the ages. A Muslim take on a Pegasus of sorts, Dul Dul Ot can also be seen in the very figurative work of Shi'a countries such as Iran. In the reverse glass paintings depicting the winged creature, each hoof morphs into another heavenly messenger—Escher gone eschatological. An endless angelology spills out of each appendage, a *mise-en-abyme* at the extremities of both body and spirit. The dry, aging bark and the anemic, though ambitious, branches of the tree belie the prime plot in which it finds itself: The fence marks the feeding and drinking troughs for Dul Dul Ot. Visitors stop by en route to Lyangar, just as we had, and pause for a moment to reflect on a constellation of subjects—from the quotidian to the cosmological. Another precious patch of land, many thousands of miles away, also serves as a testament to the immanence of animals. On London's tony Park Lane, a marble edifice commemorating the creatures who served in World War II was erected in 2010. Both speak to a taxonomy: the former of spirits, in peacetime, and the latter of flesh, (not coincidentally) in a time of war.

Mystical Substitution

As one would expect from a controversial idea straddling the three Abrahamic faiths played out across a motley crew of Charles de Gaulle, JK Huysmans, TE Lawrence and the tenth-century mystic, Mansur al-Hallāj, the story of mystical substitution is a highly disruptive one. The man at the center of this storm, also known as *la reversabilité*, the one who brings together all these incommensurate figures, is a twentieth-century French Orientalist by the name of Louis Massignon. In *Kidnapping Mountains*, our celebration of complexity in the Caucasus, we devoted a short chapter to those who change their names. In the stories of two individuals who had devoted their life's work to gaining recognition for overlooked, oppressed nations that were not their own, the decision to



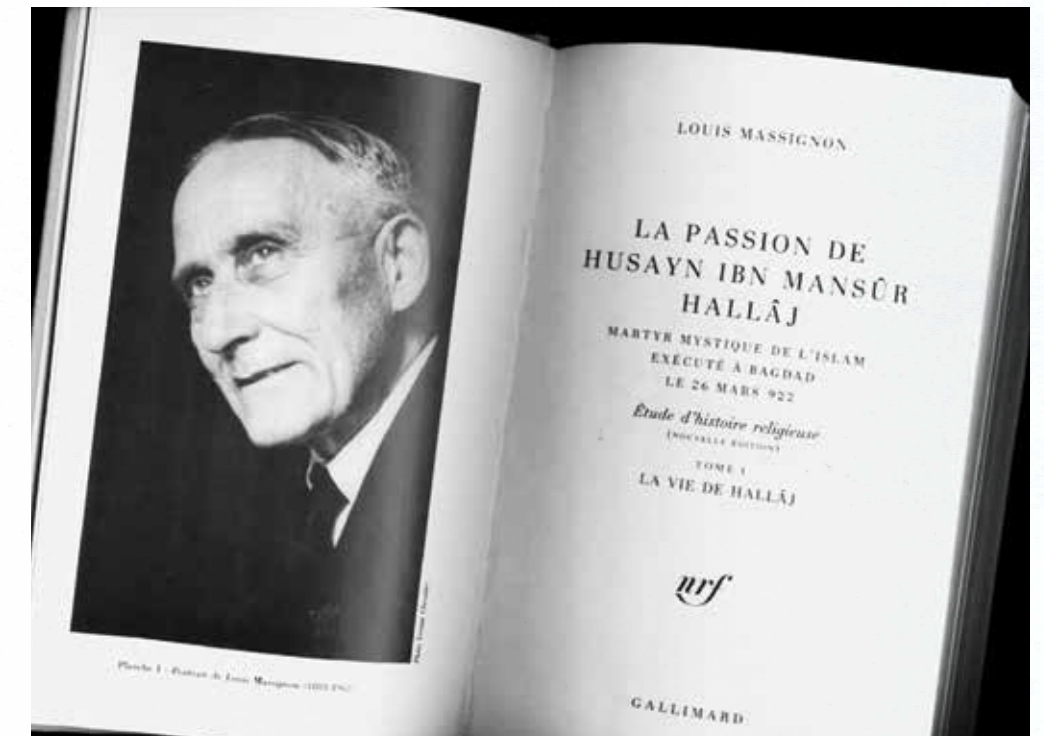
The turbans of saints, set near their tombs, Sheikh Tahir Shrine, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 2011



Female pilgrims at the Naqshbandi shrine, outside Bukhara, 2011

change one's name—in this case from Théophile to Toufik, David to Daoud—strikes us as a small but telling gesture. What is, after all, more intimate and personal than one's name? Immediately unleashing an unruly vocabulary of terms such as fate and transcendence into a lexicon reserved for the strictly political (think solidarity, resistance), a name change nonetheless pales in comparison to its more metaphysical counterpart: the adoption of another's suffering as one's own.

Massignon achieved a hat-trick of substitution, and then some. Not only did he devote himself to an entire region, the Middle East, a language, Arabic, and a religion, Islam, but on top of that, a historical figure. It was through his monumental study of Hallāj, one of the most thorough biographical works ever written,



Louis Massignon's biographical magnum opus: *The Passion of Husayn Ibn-Mansur Al-Hallāj*, volume 1 of 4, Gallimard, 1975



Old pillars, Khudoyar Khan's Palace, Kokand, Uzbekistan, 2011

and through Islam, that Massignon converted to Christianity. Later in life, outraged at the injustices inflicted upon the Algerians at the hands of the French (not to mention the Palestinians by the international community), Massignon cultivated—in mystical substitution—the rare ability to forcefully marry the highly esoteric and spiritual with the need for direct action. Through an emphasis on the figure of Abraham and the importance of “sacred hospitality” in Islam, he argued for the adoption of the suffering of others as one's own, championing what today sounds hopelessly dusty, if not naïve, while retaining all its urgency: the harmony of Christian-Muslim relations.



Father Serge de Beaurecueil (1917-2005), a Dominican friar, who lived his Catholicism thru a study of Muslim mysticism, much like Thomas Merton



Slavs and Tatars, *A Monobrow Manifesto* (Roustam), Frieze Sculpture Park, 2010.

In Cairo in 1934, he teamed up with Mary Kalil, a Copt whose family hailed from Damietta, a port city on the Mediterranean, to found a prayer group called **البدالية** (*Al-Badaliya*): a sodality of Christians living in Muslim lands who would pray and offer their lives for their Muslim brothers and sisters, “not so that they would be converted, but so that the will of God might be accomplished in them and through them.” In the group’s weekly newsletters, *Dar Es Salam*, he swung vigorously between ecumenical exegesis and calls to action (hunger strikes, protests, etc.), in an almost athletic display of *coincidentia oppositorum*, the union of opposites. Parallel to a sophisticated investigation of The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, Massignon would organize sit-ins against the massacres of Algerians, not to mention informal sessions advising De Gaulle during the conflict. The newsletter brought together two of Slavs and Tatars’ somewhat disparate indulgences: our penchant for the dulling effects of bureaucracy and a taste for simple, very unglamorous, if not stupid, media (cf. the balloon in *A Monobrow Manifesto*).

THE NUMBERS NAME

The saints of Central Asia are spoiled with nicknames. It should come as no surprise of course. We proffer nicknames to those whom we consider dear, and the sacred souls whose shrines are visited on a daily, weekly, monthly or even on an occasional basis are no exception. In fact, the dearly departed enjoy an intimacy unimpeded by space — i.e., the long distances traveled, or the large leaps of faith or time. Few, though, can compete with Hoja Akhror Valli, a Sufi saint otherwise known as 4444, for the years he lived. A figure not unlike Khidr (see page 44), Valli began his life during the time of King David, who prophesied that he would live a uniquely long life in order to accompany four prophets: Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammad. Though he measured a whopping 28 meters in height, his tomb, just outside Bukhara, measures only 14 meters. Broken in two when over-run by enemy armies late in his life, 4444, more than a bibliophile, a bibliocompanion, asked for four holy books — The Talmud, Torah, Bible, and Qur’an — be placed on his body at the time of his burial, some fifteen kilometers outside Bukhara.



Shrine of Khoja Akhror Vali, aka 4444, outside Bukhara, 2011

necessarily colonialist or Zionist. It is too easy to see in mystical substitution a mere reiteration of Christ as original Substitutor-in-Chief. Massignon never shied away from the explosive nature of his self-assigned task: asking Christians living in Muslim lands to pray for these very Muslims, without their solicitation, in a milieu that has seen its fair share of interreligious turmoil. His investment in what he called “a science of compassion” was equally one in his own faith, first Catholic and eventually Greek Melkite. His directional agency — a complete and utter dedication to something outside himself in order to come to terms with a being as complex as the times in which it existed — interests us more than the brittle discourse of identity politics and postcolonialism.

When Two of Three Abrahamic Faiths Catch Cold, the Third Better Dress Warmly

Much like a child, in whose first words parents read a preamble to a life yet to be lived, our *Holy Bukhara* (or *Queen Esther takes a bite*) turns to Massignon’s first

בוכורי
יהו שריף

Slavs and Tatars, *Holy Bukhara (Queen Esther Takes a Bite)*, 2012



Jewish children with their teacher in Samarkand. Photo by Sergei Mikhailovich Prokudin-Gorskii

12. Similarly, one could argue that Jewry's critical agility, if not its defeatist humor—once pulsating through the streets of Odessa and Lvov and providing us with the likes of Babel and Benjamin—has today hardened and fallen victim to a triumphalism picked up on the more buoyant, if less seductive, shores of North America.

Christian prayer in Arabic, as a harbinger of a spirit lived through another language and another culture – one whose apparent distance is nothing more than a return to its origins. The text, *Bokhori yeh Sharif*, is an homage to the Jews of Central Asia, aka Bukharan Jews, whose language (Bokhori) provides an unlikely collision of Persian dialect with Hebrew script; we reclaim the city of Bukhara, the sacred city of Central Asia, and its approach to Islam as an urgent mantle for the faith.¹² In lieu of only celebrating the city itself, we fête the language named after the city – as a sign of pluralism, past and present. Massignon's choice of the Arabic name Al-Badaliya for a Christian sodality was no coincidence: *abdal* means substitute in Arabic and is used in particular to speak of a substitute in battle, one who takes the place of another.

From the moment he decided to learn Arabic, in Fez in 1904, to the trembling prayer of 1908, to the Sorbonne in 1959, when, as president of the Jury for Arabic Language Certification, he conceded, "I am still learning it," Massignon saw language as an affective practice. Learning a language served as an active engagement – from simple grammar to dialectics to metaphysics – not only with a given culture, but with an entire way of being, that is: thinking, acting, and believing. *Not Moscow Not Mecca*, our missive to *Ma wâra al nahr*, shadows Massignon's determination to return Christianity to its Eastern

origins: If he saw its evolution in the West increasingly beholden to the trappings of individualism, capital, and power, we see the syncretic continuity of this "land beyond the river" too often drowned out by a Gulf of differences.



Mural in Kurgan Monument to World War II, Qarshi, Uzbekistan, 2012

NEO
NEO
NEO
JADIDISM
JADIDISM
JADIDISM

Despite its often anti-clerical nature, the reform impulse of Jadidism came from within Islam. From the word جديد meaning "new", the Jadidists advocated rethinking the method of education in *maktabs* (or primary schools) in the region, including the use of printing technologies, text books in Turkic or Russian (as opposed to Arabic), and the teaching of sciences and maths. Like the editors of the Azeri journal *Molla Nasreddin*, the Jadidists were inspired by the work of Tatar publisher Ismail Gasprinski and included other prominent individuals such as Abdurauf Fitrat and Mahmoud Khoja Behbudi. For more info on Jadidism, cf. Adeeb Khalid's *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

Chains We Can Believe In



Copper plate commissioned by Massignon from his father, the sculptor Fernand Massignon (Pierre Roche), in 1920-21, based on a monogram belonging to Father Charles de Foucauld. In 1953, Jesus Caritas–Yasu'-ibn-Maryam Huwa' Lhubbu—was inscribed in Arabic. Different versions of the plate were gifted to chapels in Tehran, Beirut, Rabat, Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad.

One of the more misleading and, unfortunately, overused terms of our era is communication. Though it sets out quite nobly—to share and inform—what it inevitably does best is to make common and ordinary. In order to restore some of the solemnity to the act of sharing, we turn to a less profane precedent: transmission. Steeped in the oral, in apprenticeship, in lived experience, transmission trades as much in the immaterial as in the tangible and concrete.¹³ True to our immigrant nature, we would like to "soup up" transmission further, customize it, if you will. Not so much neon lights underneath the vehicle as heuristic hydraulics. We'd like to offer it a temporal concern: extending not only from a given place but also from one *time* to another. From our investigation into the anti-modern¹⁴ to our *Pantheon*



Molla Nasreddin, (Istanbul: Selt, 1997)

of *Broken Men and Women*, our practice acts as a relay between that which is too often considered arcane and obscure and that which is deemed consensually urgent. This is where transmission veers into the disruptive and becomes intercession. The Central Asian figure of spiritual intercession *par excellence* is a puzzling personage who, some claim, will be alive until the end of time. Known as the Green One (or Khidr), Khizr is not a prophet, but an enigmatic figure with mystical knowledge who has accompanied all the prophets throughout the ages. Some of his more notable appearances in the Qur'an show Khizr attempting to trip up Moses—a kind of mystical trickster. Described as “a teacher who wants no students,” he nonetheless helps each understand his or her true self, through direct experience, not pedagogy.¹⁵ Sufis hold Khizr as particularly dear for his role as the hidden initiator to the path of mystical enlightenment (*tariqat*). A version of him is



Often depicted riding on a fish, Khizr coasts towards the next challenge. Source: <http://spirituallegend.blogspot.com>

even said to have crossed over into European literature, via the Crusades: as the Green Knight in the tales of King Arthur. If Molla Nasreddin, our transnational mascot—a version of whom can be found across our Eurasian remit, from Croatia to China—stands on one shoulder whispering into one ear *where*, then Khizr, our transhistorical one, whispers into the other *when*.

13. In our forthcoming book *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz*, we will further investigate the sacred guilds of craftsmen, both in Christian and Muslim traditions, where subordination, tradition, and repetition act as a triple counterweight to the cult of individual creativity erected in the modern era.

14. In his book *Les Antimodernes* (Gallimard, 2005), Antoine

Compagnon describes the true modernist not as the utopianists who only look forward (e.g. Vladimir Mayakovsky, F.T. Marinetti) but rather as the ‘anti-modernists’, those somewhat conflicted visionaries deeply affected by the passing of the pre-modern age.

15. Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, “Buddha in the Qur'an?” in Kazemi, *Common Ground*.



Living amongst the Touareg in southern Algeria, Charles de Foucauld's hermetism and self-sacrifice were exercises in a quest to welcome strangers in an effort to understand the origins of sacred hospitality. “Ordained in June 1901, Foucauld determined to live his vision – and form his community – among the Moroccans, who had first taught him about God. He would create a center of hospitality, a place where God and bread were equally present and he could pray for and welcome strangers as brothers. He went to Béni Abbès and built a chapel consisting of four palm trunks supporting a roof of woven twigs and branches. A board served as an altar. He slept on the floor, ate dates and barley cakes. His only icon was a large drawing of the Sacred Heart holding out its arms to embrace, hold, and call humans and giving itself to them by offering its Heart! His neighbors called his place the *khaoua*, or brotherhood. He became ‘Brother Charles’: ‘I want to accustom everyone – Christian, Muslim, Jew, or pagan – to look on me as a brother, a universal brother.’ Fraternities inspired by de Foucauld's example, The Little Brothers of Jesus and The Little Sisters of Jesus, continue to this day across more than 40 countries and his life was the subject of a best-selling biography by René Bazin in 1921 called *Charles De Foucauld: Explorateur Du Maroc, Ermite Au Sahara*. “Sacred Hospitality: *Badaliya* - The Way of Mystic Substitution,” Christopher Bamford. <http://www.secondspring.co.uk/articles/bamford.htm>

Though difficult to possess, Khizr is not himself the possessive type. Massignon came to Hallâj and mystical substitution through the intercession of Charles de Foucauld, a French Catholic priest and hermit who had lived among the Tuareg in southern Algeria, with whom Massignon had corresponded; and through that of JK Huysmans, the decadent-author-turned-Catholic of *À rebours* (Against the grain), who had apparently prayed for Massignon's salvation on his deathbed. His (re)turn to Christianity was even sanctioned by the intervention of his host family, the noble Iraqi Alussis, who supported his study of Hallâj and provided him with refuge and shelter during a particularly transformative experience: On a steam liner heading down the Euphrates to Baghdad, Massignon suffered what seems like a nervous breakdown during a particularly trying episode in which he faced mortal danger. Until that moment in his life an agnostic, Massignon underwent a moment of spiritual transformation, converting back to the faith of his childhood, with his first prayers coming out not in his maternal French but in his adopted Arabic: “*Allah, Allah, as 'ad du'fi*” (God, God! Help my weakness!).



Charles de Foucauld's grave in El Menia, Algeria. Massignon saw his death at the hands of the Touareg with whom he had lived for several years in peace as a particularly powerful example of substitution, of being a willed hostage or martyr: “Foucauld's respect for the Guest and his right for hospitality (asylum), which is sacred for a priest, was so ingrained that if he allowed for an armory to be held at his home, given that he had vowed never to let a weapon inside his quarters, it's because he had sanctioned for his enemies the ‘dispensation to spill his blood’ in a legal immolation. Foucauld commuted in advance the qualification of their murderous act... He had already entered into their hearts, like an inebriating wine.” Massignon, Louis. *Parole donnée* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1983).

16. Brown, *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 63.

17. The seven shrines that make up the Golden Chain, from Abdul Khaliq al-Ghujdawani to Baha'uddin Shah Naqshband, are all situated in the environs of Bukhara.

18. "Les musulmans n'attribuent de validité qu'au témoignage oral, et ils se représentent précisément l'histoire vraie de leur Communauté comme un tissu, où les chaînes parallèles

et séparées de génération succédant aux Compagnons du prophète, sont traversées par des trames continues et perurables, les lignes de transmission (isnâd) de la Tradition prophétique dont ses témoins transmetteurs constituent de génération en génération, les noeuds numérotés (depuis Muhammad). En particulier, la vie islamique d'une ville est caractérisée par la succession chronologique des témoins de la Tradition qui y enseignèrent." Massignon, *Parole donnée* (Paris: Julliard, 1962), 90.

The act of reading one text through another is a particularly compelling form of lateral thinking, if not being. Norman O. Brown reads the Qur'an through Blake and Joyce: "the line from Jesus to Blake goes through Muhammad."¹⁶ In particular for the Sufis of the Naqshbandi order, the chain of transmission, called the Golden Chain, traces a spiritual lineage of masters going back to the first caliph, Abu Bakr.¹⁷ The sacred chain of transmission—*isnâd* in Arabic—serves as a tool not only of theology but of historiography and genealogy as well. In the Prophet's sayings, the Hadiths, the sequence becomes one of attribution: tracing the saying back through the ages to the close circle of the Prophet. The oral dimension of such a scale and scope of fact-checking not only gives it a performative vigor, but, more importantly, jogs the memory in ways likely to drive the neighborhood epistemologist (if not the local postmodernist) mad. A "science of impugment and justification, of doubting and justifying" permeates the study of the Hadiths.¹⁸ *Who* said it and *when* it was said become equally important to *what* was said. Contrary to what could be construed as an elevation of gossip, it's the particle collision of history, philosophy, and liturgy.



Evening Prayer by Rudolf Ernst, 1910. Source: <http://www.museumsyndicate.com>



Cover of Vladimir Mayakovsky's *Ни Знахарь Ни Бог Ни Слуги Бога Нам Ни Подмога* (Neither Healer, Nor God, Nor the Angels of God are any Help to the Peasantry), 1923. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, NY.

It's Like This and Like That and Like This and Uh ...



James Joyce, accidental interpreter of the Qur'an



Norman O. Brown, photograph enclosed in a 1999 letter from former Balliol College classmate at Oxford, F. Tremaine "Josh" Billings, Jr., ca. 1934, courtesy of University of California at Santa Cruz archives

The ability to bring together in one space, one page, or one voice two ends of a spectrum—previously considered antithetical or incommensurate—is crucial to our understanding of the world, if not the times, in which we live. We've attempted to do so via the collision of scales, that of the macro concerns of polemics with the micro ones of poetics; via geographic goalposts, as our remit kicks us between the former Berlin Wall and the Great Wall of China; and, perhaps most importantly, via the two great geopolitical narratives of our region, not to mention of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—that of Communism and Islam.

Ideologies fail, as they are wont to. But their failure gives us little solace. By refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of a history soaked in triumph, Norman O. Brown provides a shoulder to cry on. "And so I end with a vision of two kinds of social criticism alive in the world today: Marxism and Islam. Two still-revolutionary forces. Two tired old revolutionary horses. Neither of them doing very well but it would be a mistake to take any comfort from their failure. The human race is at stake. And they both, Marxism and Islam, agree on one



Slavs and Tatars, *Triangulation*, commissioned by "The Station" at Konsthall C, curated by Kim Einarsson and Adnan Yildiz, Stockholm, 2011

19. Brown, *The Challenge of Islam: The Prophetic Tradition* (Santa Cruz: New Pacific Press, 2009), 49.

20. Brown points to Thomas Carlyle and John Henry Newman, who despair at the impenetrability and illegibility of the Qur'an. He quotes the former's *Heroes and Hero Worship*: "I must say, it is as toilsome reading as I ever undertook. A wearisome, confused jumble, crude, incondite;—insupportable stupidity, in short!

Nothing but a sense of duty could carry any European through the Koran. . . . Much of it, too, they say is rhythmic a kind of wild chanting song, in the original. . . . Yet with every allowance, one feels it difficult to see how any mortal ever could consider this Koran as a Book written in Heaven, too good for the Earth; as a well-written book, or indeed as a book at all; and not a bewildered rhapsody; written, so far as writing goes, as badly as almost any book ever was!" Brown, *ibid.*

20. "Islam is first of all a reduction of the prophetic tradition to its pure essence as revelation, discarding the element of sacramental magic common to both conciliar Christianity and the mystery of religions of late classical antiquity. By discarding sacramental and sacerdotal magic Islam prepares the way for Dante

and Blake: the only miracle is the book: and the book authenticates itself as miracle. At the same time, it is a return to that emphasis on cognition, visionary cognition, which orthodox Christianity condemned and condemns as Gnosticism." Brown, *ibid.*

21. Brown, *ibid.*

proposition: There will be one world or there will be none." By the 1960s, the renowned philosopher had unwittingly become a darling of countercultural circles, one read even by the political adversaries of his groupies. His attempt to psychoanalyze history itself, *Life Against Death*, and his study of human history as a struggle between eroticism and civilization, *Love's Body* (in which he clearly chose the camp of the former), were the results of a mind firmly trained in classical studies and particularly adept at bringing together the disparate in ways previously unimaginable. Brown famously brought Sigmund Freud to bear on the Gospel, William Blake, and Karl Marx before his real coup—reading James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* through the sura of the Qur'an ("Joyce quotes the title of exactly 111 of the 114 suras of the Qur'an").¹⁹ Before the early twentieth century, and before the arrival of *Finnegan's Wake* in particular, Brown claims it was impossible for a Westerner to read the Qur'an.²⁰ Only through the similar confusion of characters, the similarly unyielding dictums of Joyce's modernist mountain could one begin to understand the holy book of Mohammed.

Towards the end of his life, Brown did something that seemed incomprehensible to the legions of colleagues and fans who had convinced themselves that leftist politics were the foundation of secular, liberal democracy. In the last volume of his trilogy (*Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis*), Brown turned to Islam as a prophetic tradition unburdened by the teleology of Christianity (or Marxism) and the Qur'an as a proto-modernist text, where the possibility of recurring defeat is written into the script, where time is not linear, progress not a given, and epistemology is amplified by a choreography of the esoteric (*batin*) and exoteric (*zahir*).²⁰ In his *The Challenge of Islam*, a series of lectures delivered in 1981, he exhorted us to look beyond the divisive view of Muslims and the West as incompatible, asking us to "to recognize that Islam has just as much right to claim to be the synthesis of Hebraism and Hellenism as Western civilization, or whatever it is we are, has the right to do. That is to say, Islam is not another cultural tradition, with that implied traditional distinction between West and East. It is not another oriental tradition: It is an alternative, a rival interpretation of our tradition."²¹

True to our original mission as a reading group, more Özbek than Oprah, we tend to see the very act of reading as a form of intercession: a disembodied voice speaking



Melon vendor, *Советские Субтропики* (special issue of *Огонёк*, one of the oldest Russian-Soviet weeklies, still in print today), 1934. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, NY.

from beyond the increasingly endangered, if not extinct, page. When we stumbled upon "The Apocalypse of Islam" (in this volume), we were beside ourselves to discover a kindred, if more mature and eminent, spirit, attempting to glue the legacy of leftism together with the incongruous and unexpected shards of Islam.

Via an offering of fruits, to be both consumed and considered, *Secession's Not Moscow Not Mecca* looks to the importance of hospitality—both as a spiritual agency in the Abrahamic faiths as well as a secular strategy—to think through such thorny concepts as generosity, pedagogy, and modernity, which are at the heart of the two major geopolitical narratives of our times, Communism and Islam. If recent centuries have seen hospitality as a service in the forced marriage otherwise known as "the hospitality business," *Not Moscow Not Mecca* aims to redeem its progressive potential, to help us think, act, and believe beyond ourselves: An invitation to extend home and hearth, if not life itself, to others, to strangers, friends, and family alike. Hospitality welcomes the unknown, guiding substitution to a more enthusiastic, if indeterminate, topography—that country beyond the river, too often eclipsed by the Gulf before our eyes.

The Apocalypse of Islam

Norman O. Brown

We can read the Bhagavad-Gita in translation, and Confucius; we cannot read the Koran. Carlyle has perfectly articulated the response of every honest Englishman: "I must say, it is as toilsome reading as I ever undertook. A wearisome confused jumble, crude, incondite; endless iterations, long-windedness, entanglement; most crude, incondite;—insupportable stupidity, in short! Nothing but a sense of duty could carry any European through the Koran.... With every allowance, one feels it difficult to see how any mortal ever could consider this Koran as a Book written in Heaven, too good for the Earth; as a well-written book, or indeed as a *book* at all."

1. L. Massignon, *Opera minora*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1969). I, 107-125, "L'homme parfait en Islam et son originalité eschatologique." I, 142-161, "Elie et son rôle transhistorique, Khadiriya, en Islam." II, 606-612, "Le Temps dans la pensée Islamique." III, 104-118, "Les 'Sept Dormants' apocalypse de l'Islam." III, 119-180, "Le culte liturgique et populaire

des VII Dormants Martyrs d'Ephese (Ahl al-Kahf): trait d'union Orient-Occident entre l'Islam et la Chretiente." The translation is that of M.M. Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (reprinted with permission from George Allen & Unwin, London).

Louis Massignon called Sura XVIII the apocalypse of Islam. The solemn recitation of Sura XVIII every Friday is all that Islam has in the way of weekly liturgy corresponding to the Christian Eucharist. In Islam the Body is the Book, and the part that represents the whole is Sura XVIII.'

1. Norman O. Brown is Professor of the Humanities at UCSC and the author of the books *Life Against Death*, and *Love's Body*. The present text was presented at an international conference titled "Facing Apocalypse" held at Salve Regina College, Newport, R.I., June 10-12, 1983, the proceedings of which are expected to be published in the spring of 1984. 155

SURAH XVIII - THE CAVE

Revealed at Mecca

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

A key contribution of the Naqshbandi *tariqat* (order) has been its emphasis on work and engagement with the people and community as a key tenet of mystical erudition. Linguistic and metaphysical genealogies "git" together and dance to the Eight Principles (though some say 11), a medlée of Uzbek (Turkic), Farsi, and Arab words thought processes and travel. One of them, Safar dar Watan, asks us to travel within the homeland, not the one that beckons only to disappoint but the interior empire, that of convictions and considerations.

1. Praise be to Allah Who hath revealed the Scripture unto His slave, and hath not placed therein any crookedness.
2. (But hath made it) straight, to give warning of stern punishment from Him, and to bring unto the believers who do good works the news that theirs will be a fair reward.
3. Wherein they will abide for ever;
4. And to warn those who say: Allah hath chosen a son,
5. (A thing) whereof they have no knowledge, nor (had) their fathers. Dreadful is the word that cometh out of their mouths. They speak naught but a lie.
6. Yet it may be, if they believe not in this statement, that thou (Muhammad) wilt torment thy soul with grief over their footsteps.
7. Lo! We have placed all that is in the earth as an ornament thereof that we may try them: which of them is best in conduct.
8. And lo! We shall make all that is therein a barren mound.
9. Or deemest thou that the People of the Cave and the Inscription are a wonder among Our portents?
10. When the young men fled for refuge to the Cave and said: Our Lord! Give us mercy from Thy presence, and shape for us right conduct in our plight.
11. Then We sealed up their hearing in the Cave for a number of years. Norman
12. And afterward We raised them up that We might know

which of the two parties would best calculate the time that they had tarried.

13. We narrate unto thee their story with truth. Lo! they were young men who believed in their Lord, and We increased them in guidance.
14. And We made firm their hearts when they stood forth and said: Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. We cry unto no god beside Him, for then should we utter an enormity.
15. These, our people, have chosen (other) gods beside Him though they bring no clear warrant (vouchsafed) to them. And who doth greater wrong than he who inventeth a lie concerning Allah?
16. And when ye withdraw from them and that which they worship except Allah, then seek refuge in the Cave; your Lord will spread for you of His mercy and will prepare for you a pillow in your plight.
17. And thou mightest have seen the sun when it rose move away from their cave to the right, and when it set go past them on the left, and they were in the cleft thereof. That was (one) of the portents of Allah. He whom Allah guideth, he indeed is led aright, and he whom He sendeth astray, for him thou wilt not find a guiding friend.
18. And thou wouldst have deemed them waking though they were asleep, and we caused them to turn over to the right and the left, and their dog stretching out his paws on the threshold.
19. If thou hadst observed them closely thou hadst assuredly turned away from them in flight, and hadst been filled with awe of them.
20. And in like manner We awakened them that they might question one another. A speaker from among them said: How long have ye tarried? They said: We have tarried a day or some part of a day, (Others) said: Your Lord best knoweth what ye have tarried. Now send one of you with this your silver coin unto the city, and let him see what food is purest there and bring you a supply thereof. Let him be courteous and let no man know of you.
21. For they, if they should come to know of you, will stone you or turn you back to their religion; then ye will never prosper.
22. And in like manner We disclosed them (to the people of the city) that they might know that the promise of Allah is true, and that, as for the Hour, there is no doubt

1. ХУШ ДАР ДАМ / KHOSH DAR DAM — AWARENESS OF BREATHING

Being aware or conscious of one's breathing. Breathing deeply in a natural rhythm without being preoccupied by breathing. Inhaling and exhaling whilst in remembrance of God.

- concerning it. When (the people of the city) disputed of their case among themselves, they said: Build over them a building; their Lord knoweth best concerning them. Those who won their point said: We verily shall build a place of worship over them. 23. (Some) will say: They were three, their dog the fourth, and (some) say: Five, their dog the sixth, guessing at random; and (some) say: Seven, and their dog the eighth. Say (O Muhammad): My Lord is best aware of their number. None knoweth them save a few. So contend not concerning them except with an outward contending, and ask not any of them to pronounce concerning them.
24. And say not of anything: Lo! I shall do that tomorrow,
25. Except if Allah will. And remember thy Lord when thou forgettest, and say: It may be that my Lord guideth me unto a nearer way of truth than this.
26. And (it is said) they tarried in their Cave three hundred years and add nine.
27. Say: Allah is best aware how long they tarried. His is the invisible of the heavens and the earth. How clear of sight is He and keen of hearing! They have no protecting friend beside Him, and He maketh none to share in His government.
28. And recite that which hath been revealed unto thee of the Scripture of thy Lord. There is none who can change His words, and thou wilt find no refuge beside Him.
29. Restrain thyself along with those who cry unto their Lord at morn and evening, seek- 156
Islam ing His countenance; and let not thine eyes overlook them, desiring the pomp of the life of the world; and obey not him whose heart We have made heedless of Our remembrance, who followeth his own lust and whose case hath been abandoned.
30. Say: (It is) the truth from the Lord of you (all). Then whosoever will, let him believe, and whosoever will, let him disbelieve. Lo! We have prepared for disbelievers Fire. Its tent encloseth them. If they ask for showers, they will be showered with water like to molten lead which burneth the faces. Calamitous the drink and ill the resting-place!
33. Coin for them a similitude: Two men, unto one of whom We had assigned two gardens of grapes, and We had surrounded both with date-palms and had put between them tillage.

34. Each of the gardens gave its fruit and withheld naught thereof. And We caused a river to gush forth therein.
35. And he had fruit. And he said unto his comrade, when he spake with him: I am more than thee in wealth, and stronger in respect of men.
36. And he went into his garden, while he (thus) wronged himself. He said: I think not that all this will ever perish.
37. I think not that the Hour will ever come, and if indeed I am brought back unto my Lord I surely shall find better than this as a resort.
38. And his comrade, while he disputed with him, exclaimed: Disbelievest thou in Him Who created thee of dust, then of a drop (of seed), and then fashioned thee a man?
39. But He is Allah, my Lord, and I ascribe unto my Lord no partner.
40. If only, when thou enteredst thy garden, thou hadst said: That which Allah willeth (will come to pass)! There is no strength save in Allah! Though thou seest me as less than these in wealth and children.
41. Yet it may be that my Lord will give me better than thy garden, and will send on it a bolt from heaven, and some morning it will be a smooth hillside.
42. Or some morning the water thereof will be lost in the earth so that thou canst not make search for it.
43. And his fruit was beset (with destruction). Then began he to wring his hands for all that he had spent upon it, when (not) it was all ruined on its trellises, and to say: Would that I had ascribed no partner to my Lord!
44. And he had no troop of men to help him as against Allah, nor could he save himself.
45. In this case is protection only from Allah, the True. He is best for reward, and best for consequence.
46. And coin for them the similitude of the life of the world as water which We send down from the sky, and the vegetation of the earth minglith with it and then becometh dry twigs that the winds scatter. Allah is Able to do all things.
47. Wealth and children are an ornament of life of the world. But the good deeds which endure are better in thy Lord's sight for reward, and better in respect of hope.
48. And (bethink you of) the Day when We remove the hills and ye see the earth emerging, and We gather them together so as to leave not one of them behind.
49. And they are set before thy Lord in ranks (and it is said

2.
HAZAR DAP
QAДА / NAZAR BA
QADAM — WATCHING
OVER THE STEPS

Watching over one's steps, ie being aware of one's intention. Paying attention and not being distracted from one's goal, maintaining awareness and being open to opportunities, so that one does the right thing at the right time.

- unto them): Now verily have ye come unto Us as We created you at the first. But ye thought that We had set no tryst for you.
50. And the Book is placed, and thou seest the guilty fearful of that which is therein, and they say: What kind of a book is this that leaveth not a small thing nor a great thing but hath counted it! And they find all that they did confronting them, and thy Lord wrongeth no one.
51. And (remember) when We said unto the angels: Fall prostrate before Adam, and they fell prostrate, all save Iblis. He was of the Jinn, so he rebelled against his Lord's command. Will ye choose him and his seed for your protecting friends instead of Me, when they are an enemy unto you? Calamitous is the exchange for evil-doers!
52. I made them not to witness the creation of the heavens and the earth, nor their own creation; nor choose I misleaders for (My) helpers.
53. And (be mindful of) the Day when He will say: Call those partners of Mine whom ye pretended. Then they will cry unto them, but they will not hear their prayer, and We shall set a gulf of doom between them.
54. And the guilty behold the Fire and know that they are about to fall therein, and they find no way of escape thence.
55. And verily We have displayed for mankind in this Qur'an all manner of similitudes, but man is more than anything contentious.
56. And naught hindereth mankind from believing when the guidance cometh unto them, and from asking forgiveness of their Lord, unless (it be that they wish) that the judgement of the men of old should come upon them or (that) they should be confronted with the Doom.
57. We send not the messengers save as bearers of good news and warners. Those who dis-believe contend with falsehood in order to refute the Truth thereby. And they take Our revelations and that wherewith they are threatened as a jest.
58. And who doth greater wrong than he who hath been reminded of the revelations of his Lord, yet turneth away from them and forgetteth what his hands send forward (to the Judge-ment)? Lo! on their hearts We have placed coverings so that they understand not, and in their ears a deafness. And though thou call them to the guidance, in that case they can never be led aright.

**3. САФАР ДАР БАТАН/
SAFAR DAR WATAN —
TRAVELLING IN THE
HOMELAND**

Making an interior journey, ie inside oneself, observing oneself in a detached and not overly-critical manner, learning from one's errors and travelling from blameworthy to praiseworthy qualities.

59. Thy Lord is the Forgiver, Full of Mercy. If He took them to task (now) for what they earn, He would hasten on the doom for them; but theirs is an appointed term from which they will find no escape.
60. And (all) those townships! We destroyed them when they did wrong, and We appointed a fixed time for their destruction.
61. And when Moses said unto his servant: I will not give up until I reach the point where the two rivers meet, though I march on for ages.
62. And when they reached the point where the two met, they forgot their fish, and it took its way into the waters, being free.
63. And when they had gone further, he said unto his servant: Bring us our breakfast. Verily we have found fatigue in this our journey.
64. He said: Didst thou see, when we took refuge on the rock, and I forgot the fish-and none but Satan caused me to forget to mention it-it took its way into the waters by a marvel.
65. He said: This is that which we have been seeking. So they retraced their steps again. 66. Then found they one of Our slaves, unto whom We had given mercy from Us, and had taught him knowledge from Our presence.
67. Moses said unto him: May I follow thee, to the end that thou mayst teach me right conduct of that which thou has been taught?
68. He said: Lo! thou canst not bear with me.
69. How canst thou bear with that whereof thou canst not compass any knowledge?
70. He said: Allah willing, thou shalt find me patient and I shall not in aught gainsay thee.
71. He said: Well, if thou go with me, ask me not concerning aught till I myself mention of it unto thee.
72. So the twain set out till, when they were in the ship, he made a hole therein. (Moses) said: Hast thou made a hole therein to drown the folk thereof? Thou verily hast done a dread-ful thing.
73. He said: Did I not tell thee thou couldst not bear with me?
74. (Moses) said: Be not wroth with me that I forgot, and be not hard upon me for my fault.
75. So the twain journeyed on till, when they met a lad, he slew him. (Moses) said: What! Hast thou slain an innocent soul who hath slain no man? Verily thou hast done a horrid thing.

76. He said: Did I not tell thee that thou couldst not bear with me?
77. (Moses) said: If I ask thee after this concerning aught, keep not company with me. Thou hast received an excuse from me.
78. So they twain journeyed on till, when they came unto the folk of a certain township, they asked its folk for food, but they refused to make them guests. And they found therein a wall upon the point of falling into ruin, and he repaired it. (Moses) said: If thou hadst wished, thou couldst have taken payment for it.
79. He said: This is the parting between thee and me! I will announce unto thee the interpretation of that thou couldst not bear with patience.
80. As for the ship, it belonged to poor people working on the river, and I wished to mar it, for there was a king behind them who is taking every ship by force.
81. And as for the lad, his parents were believers and We feared lest he should oppress them by rebellion and disbelief.
82. And We intended that their Lord should change him for them for one better in purity and nearer to mercy.
83. And as for the wall, it belonged to two orphan boys in the city, and there was beneath it a treasure belonging to them, and their father had been righteous, and thy Lord intended that they should come to their full strength and should bring forth their treasure as a mercy from their Lord; and I did it not upon my own command. Such is the interpretation of that wherewith thou couldst not bear.
84. They will ask thee of Dhu'l-Qarneyn. Say: I shall recite unto you a remembrance of him.
85. Lo! We made him strong in the land and gave him unto every thing a road.
86. And he followed a road
87. Till, when he reached the setting-place of the sun, he found it setting in a muddy spring, and found a people thereabout: We said: O Dhu'l-Qarneyn! Either punish or show them kindness.
88. He said: As for him who doeth wrong, we shall punish him, and then he will be brought back unto his Lord, who will punish him with awful punishment!
89. But as for him who believeth and doeth right, good will be his reward, and We shall speak unto him a mild command.

4.
**ХАЛВАТ ДАР
 АНДЖУМАН / KHALWAT
 DAR ANJUMAN —
 RETIREMENT IN COMPANY**

Developing the ability to detach from and distance oneself from external noise, disturbance and confusion when in company, and remain tranquil, perhaps with the aid of a zikr, an exercise in remembrance of God. Also being able to re-attach one's attention to the outward when necessary. Though outwardly the Sufi is in the world, inwardly he or she is with God.

90. Then he followed a road
91. Till, when he reached the rising-place of the sun, he found it rising on a people for whom We had appointed no shelter therefrom.
92. So (it was). And We knew all concerning him.
93. Then he followed a road
94. Till, when he came between the two mountains, he found upon their hither side a folk that scarce could understand a saying.
95. They said: O Dhu'l-Qarneyn! Lo! Gog and Magog are spoiling the land. So may we pay thee tribute on condition that thou set a barrier between us and them?
96. He said: That wherein my Lord hath established me is better (than your tribute). Do but help me with strength (of men), I will set between you and them a bank.
97. Give me pieces of iron-till, when he had levelled up (the gap) between the cliffs, he said: Blow!-till, when he had made it a fire, he said: Bring me molten copper to pour thereon.
98. And (Gog and Magog) were not able to surmount, nor could they pierce (it).
99. He said: This is a mercy from my Lord; but when the promise of my Lord cometh to pass, He will lay it low, for the promise of my Lord is true.
100. And on that day We shall let some of them surge against others, and the Trumpet will be blown. Then We shall gather them together in one gathering.
101. On that day We shall present hell to the disbelievers, plain to view,
102. Those whose eyes were hoodwinked from My reminder, and who could not bear to hear.
103. Do the disbelievers reckon that they can choose My bondmen as protecting friends beside Me? Lo! We have prepared hell as a welcome for the disbelievers.
104. Say: Shall We inform you who will be the greatest loser; by their works?
105. Those whose effort goeth astray in the life of the world, and yet they reckon that they do good work.
106. Those are they who disbelieve in the revelations of their Lord and in the meeting with Him. Therefor their works are vain, and on the Day of Resurrection We assign no weight to them.
107. That is their reward: hell, because they disbelieved, and made a jest of Our revelations and Our messengers.

5.
ЯДКАРД / YAD
KARDAN —
REMEMBERING,
RECOLLECTING
EXERCISES

Remembering experiences one has had and that one is a part of the Tradition from which one may draw positive energy and derive strength. Using inner or vocalized zikr, remembrance or "making mention" of the Divine names, to remain attentive and alert, and so that the heart becomes aware of the presence of Truth.

2.
Encyclopedia of Islam, s.v. "Ashab al-Kahf." A juicier account of this "insipid legend of ecclesiastical history," which is often retold early in bed and later on life down through all Christian and also Muslim minstrelsy, in Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, ch. XXXIII, *sub fin.*

108. Lo! those who believe and do good works, theirs are the Gardens of Paradise for welcome,
109. Wherein they will abide, with no desire to be removed from thence.
110. Say: Though the sea became ink for the Words of my Lord, verily the sea would be used up before the Words of my Lord were exhausted, even though We brought the like thereof to help.
111. Say: I am only a mortal like you. My Lord inspireth in me that your God is only One God. And whoever hopeth for the meeting with his Lord, let him do righteous work, and make none sharer of the worship due unto his Lord. In the farrago of Sura XVIII the bewildered Western mind discerns and fastens on to three mysterious episodes—one cannot call them narratives—(1) The Sleepers in the Cave (vs. 9-26); (2) Moses' journey (vs. 61-83); (3) Dhu'l-Qarneyn's Wall against Gog and Magog (vs. 84-99). The Sleepers in the Cave:

ASHAB al-KAHF, "those of the cave". This is the name given in the Kur'an, and in later Arabic literature, to the youths who in the Christian Occident are usually called the "Seven Sleepers of Ephesus". According to the legend, in the time of the Christian persecution under the Emperor Decius (249-51), seven Christian youths fled into a cave near Ephesus and there sank into a miraculous sleep for centuries, awoke under the Christian Emperor Theodosius (c. 437 A.D.), were discovered and then went to sleep for ever. Their resting place and grave was considered, at any rate since the beginnings of the 6th century A.D., as a place of worship.²

Dhu'l-Qarneyn, literally the "two-horned," is Alexander the Great, as in Syriac legend of the 6th century A.D., in which Alexander says to God: "I know that thou hast caused horns to grow upon my head, so that I may crush the kingdoms of the world with them." In late classical antiquity—in between Christ and Muhammad—apocalyptic syncretism, Judeo-Christian-Hellenistic, expanding on lines laid down in the Biblical Books of Daniel and Revelations, absorbed the figure of Alexander

into its sequence of world-conquerors. Gog and Magog are Biblical figures of eschatological terror. In Ezekiel XXXVIII and XXXIX, Gog and Magog represent peoples of the north who are let loose against the peaceful land of Israel, unwallled and undefended, with a great army of countless troops. In Revelations (XX,7) "When the thousand years are over, Satan will be let loose from his prison and will come out to seduce the nations in the four quarters of the earth and to muster them for battle, yes, the hosts of Gog and Magog." Koranic commentary, in the spirit of the modern historian W.W. Tarn, sees in Alexander a prophet of the unity of man-kind as well as a world-conqueror; and thus a prefiguration of Muhammad himself. Early Christian tradition, and Jewish tradition as early as Josephus, identified Gog and Magog with barbarian peoples to the north, looked away behind iron gates at the Caspian Sea by Alexander the Great; but destined to break loose at the end of time.³

The episodes of the Sleepers in the Cave and Dhu'l-Qarneyn's Wall palpably allude to preexistent legends. The episode of Moses' journey is more complex. The most bafflingly elliptical of the three episodes, and the centerpiece of the Sura, introduces a new Moses, a Moses who like Gilgamesh and Alexander is committed to the quest for the Fountain of Life—v. 61, "I will not give up until I reach the point where the two rivers meet." The new Moses, having become a seeker, submits to spiritual direction by a mysterious master who bewilders Moses through a series of Zen-like absurd actions, finally justified by his privy knowledge of the secrets of predestination.

Again we have to do with pre-existent materials, but here the action is positive confusion. In the first place confusion between Moses and Alexander; not the historical but the mythical Alexander of the Alexander Romance, a complex literary production, completed about 300 C.E., giving voice to eschatological dreams close to the heart of late classical antiquity. Alexander goes in quest of the Fountain of Life. By the merest chance his cook discovers the fountain: he was preparing a dried fish by cleaning it in a fountain; the fish came to life again and swam away. The cook jumps in and gains immortality. He tells Alexander the story but they cannot find the fountain again.

The Koran, with its creative confusion of Moses and Alexander, in a characteristically abrupt and monumental gesture, breaks with Judaic ethnocentrism and reprojects the prophetic tradition on a new transcultural, universal, world-historical plane. At the same time by making Moses a seeker, on the same plane as the pagan Alexander, the Koran defines

3.
Encyclopedia of Islam, s.v. "Dhu'l-Karnain." *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. "Gog and Magog." G. Cary, *The Medieval Alexander* (Cambridge, 1956), 130.

a limitation in Moses and in the Halakhic Judaism of which he is the author: he lacks eternal life. In so doing the passage mobilizes, without naming, the powerful contrast, latent in Jewish tradition, between Moses and Elijah-Elijah the most popular figure in the legendary world of post-Biblical Judaism: Elijah who did not like Moses die in sight of the Promised Land but who never died, being caught up to heaven in a chariot of fire; Elijah the omnipresent Comforter-Spirit present at every Jewish circumcision ceremony and every Jewish Pass-over; Elijah the herald and helper of the Messiah at the time of the return; Elijah who knows the secrets of heaven and is claimed as the direct source of revelation by Jewish mystics including Kabbalists. The Koran sends Moses to Elijah's school-"it was taught in Elijah's school" Jewish mystics say.⁴

4. *Encyclopædia Judaica*, s.v. "Elijah."

To represent what Moses learned in Elijah's school, the Koran has recourse to a folktale, type #759 in Aarne-Thompson's *Types of the Folktale*: "God's Justice vindicated." Thompson's paradigm is the Christian story of the Angel and the Hermit, very popular among Oriental Christians about the middle of the fifth century: "An angel takes a hermit with him and does many seemingly unjust things (repays hospitality by stealing a cup; inhospitality by giving a cup; hospitality by throwing his host's servant from a bridge and by killing the host's son). The angel shows the hermit why each of these was just." Just as the Koran transplants the Christian legend of the Seven Sleepers and the Hellenistic legend of Alexander into a new Koranic context, so it is drawing here on the vast ocean of traditional Talmudic Midrashic Aggadic wisdom. For example, the Jerusalem Talmud interprets *Deut* 21, 18 ff., with regard to the "stubborn and rebellious son" in the following manner: "God has foreseen that this son is destined to waste and squander all the property of his parents, to commit various acts of robbery, to murder innocent people and to do all kinds of evil. The Torah has therefore ordained that it is much better that he dies whilst still unblemished and guiltless. Another passage in the Jerusalem Talmud employs the parable of a fig tree whose owner knows the exact period of collecting its figs. In case of delay the sun will render the figs rotten and worm-eaten. Similarly God knows the proper season for the removal of His righteous from this world."

Conventional Western commentators, who are quite sure that there is nothing new in the Koran, assume without hesitation that the folktale is to be taken literally and all that is going on in the passage is the transmission of conventional Aggadic piety. A detailed study of the Jewish and Muslim theodicy legends by

6. БАДГАШТ / BAAZ GASHT — RESTRAINT

Being self-disciplined, for example cultivating the quality of patience, keeping one's thoughts from straying when repeating prayers or zikr, being repentant and returning to righteousness.

Haim Schwarzbaum shows that Sura XVIII, taken literally, offers nothing new to justify the ways of God to men.⁵ What is new is its promotion of Aggadic folklore material to the status of revelation, its transgression or confusion of the boundary separating Aggadah and Torah. And the Koran, if one may say so, knows what it is doing. Schwarzbaum, who is not free from Westernizing condescension-he quotes "the excellent Orientalist" R.A. Nicholson's remark that "Mohammed with his excitable temperament does not shine as a raconteur"-and who thinks that "most of the stories in the Koran are narrated in a rather clumsy and incoherent fashion, full of vague, cryptic allusions and dim references and digressions," recognizes the "admirable clarity and cohesion" of the Koranic version of Aarne-Thompson #759.

5. Haim Schwarzbaum, "The Jewish and Moslem Versions of Some Theodicy Legends," *Fabula* 3 (1959-60), 119-169.

The Koran with characteristic monumentality, reduces the folktale to its archetypal essence and makes evident its folktale form, alerting thereby the intelligence to the problem of interpretation. Folktales, like dreams, are not to be interpreted literally. And the content the folktale-the episodes of the ship, the youth and the wall-tells us in the most literal, even crude way, three times reiterated, that there is a distinction between "what actually happened," events as seen by the eye of historical materialism, and "what is really going on," events *sub specie aeternitatis*, as seen by the inward, the clairvoyant eye, the second sight. The form and the content of the folktale obliges us, as it has obliged all subsequent Islamic culture, to make the distinction between literal meaning and something beyond-in Islamic terminology between *zahir* and *batin*, between outer (exoteric) and inner (esoteric); between external-visible-patent and internal-invisible-latent; between materialist and spiritual meanings.⁶

6. S.H. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (Boston, 1972), 58. I. Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung* (Leiden, 1920), 182.

Sura XVIII is the apocalypse of Islam: the heart of its message, not displayed on the surface, is the distinction between surface and substance, between *zahir* and *batin*. The context in which the folktale is embedded contains further paradoxical revelations for those who have eyes to see and are alert to read between the lines as well as in them. The context obliges us to identify prophecy (the prophet Moses) with the literal or external view of events (the ship, the youth, the wall) and to attribute the deeper view into the hidden reality to a mysterious other servant of God; not a prophet, or a prophet of the Elijah type as opposed to the Moses type. The context also obliges us to associate the mysterious other with the water of life-or where the two waters meet, the water of life and the water of death.

7.
**НИГАХДАШТ/ НИГАН
 DASHTAN —
 WATCHFULNESS, USE OF
 SPECIAL FACULTIES**

**Concentrating on
 the presence of God.
 Being alert, watchful
 for and open to subtle
 perceptions, positive
 energy, positive
 opportunity and positive
 impacts. Being watchful
 over passing thoughts.**

7.
*Nasr, Ideals and
 Realities, 58-59.*

8.
*Nasr, Ideals and
 Realities, 87.*

Sura XVIII opens up, silently, majestically, in the heart of the Koran the question, what lies beyond or after the Koran? For Muhammad is like Moses a prophet. Muhammad is the seal of prophecy; what comes after prophecy? Prophecy is delivered in the form of a book, a scripture. But everything including the Book has an exterior (*zahir*) and an interior (*batin*). Especially the Book, according to the Prophet himself. Of Ibn Abbas, one of the most respected sources of Hadith, traditions about the Prophet, it is said: "One day while standing on Mt. Arafat he made an allusion to the verse 'Allah it is who hath created seven heavens, and of the earth the like thereof' (LXV, 12) and turned to the people saying 'O men! if I were to comment before you this verse as I heard it commented upon by the Prophet himself you would stone me.'" There is therefore a basic distinction between *ta'wil*, the symbolic and hermeneutic interpretation of the inner meaning, and *tafsir*, the literal explanation of the external aspect of the Book.⁷ Sura XVIII became in fact in the subsequent history of Islam the basis for the elaboration of a distinction between prophecy and another transcendent or esoteric kind of wisdom; a kind of wisdom which in the fullness of time came to be most notoriously represented by, on the one hand the Sufi master (*pir*), and on the other the Shiite Imam. Whereas the cycle of prophecy is over (Muhammad is the seal of prophecy), the cycle of *wilayat* continues, which Seyyed Hossein Nasr tells us, for want of a better term may be translated as the "cycle of initiation," and also "sanctity."⁸ For want of a better term: the translation has to be in terms of Western Judeo-Christian religious experience. "Initiation" is closer to Shiite notions: Sufi masters on the other hand are often more like Christian saints. The Shiite Imam represents a principle of authoritative guidance in interpretation of the revelation; the Sufi *pir* represents a principle of mystic illumination which supplements the legislative or imperative mood of prophecy.

The text of Sura XVIII leaves us with a riddle: Who is the mysterious other, "one of our slaves, unto whom we had given mercy from Us, and had taught him knowledge from Our presence" (v. 66). Although he is like Elijah, he is not exactly Elijah; the Koran with a characteristically majestic gesture leaves him unnamed. The Koran leaves us with a riddle, or an assignment, to find him. The ellipses in the Koran are pregnant with the future. Very soon, within the first century, Muslim traditions and commentary on the Koran had given a name to the "Servant of God" who initiates Moses-al-Khadir, or Khidr, the Green (the sacred color of Islam), or Evergreen; taking their cue not from the reminiscence of Elijah but from the bold Koranic

association of the servant with the Fountain of Life in the Alexander Romance. The name, the Evergreen, while naming, preserves his unnamable, un-historical or supra-historical, archetypal or folkloristic, essence. In traditional Muslim piety Khidr, like Elijah, enjoys eternal life and invisible omnipresence. Like Elijah he participates in the small rituals of domestic life and in the great public liturgies. Every Friday he prays in five different places-Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem, Quba (S.E. of Medina) and Tur Sina (Sinai). For the annual fast of Ramadan he is in Jerusalem: for the Hajj (pilgrimage) he is always in Mecca. The eternal protector of the community will appear at the Return at the head of the armies of the Mahdi who will fill the earth with justice even as it is now full of injustice.⁹ In Islam the umbilical cord which connects "popular superstition" with avant-garde esoteric, theosophic speculation has not been cut; and Khidr is that cord. The Sufis attribute their illuminations to the inspiration of Khidr: Corbin's book on Ibn Arabi, the mastermind of Sufistic theosophy, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*, is organized around the two questions- *Who is Khidr?* and *What does it mean to be a disciple of Khidr?* The rendez-vous of Moses and Khidr becomes the prototype of all those later mystic voyages in the company of a spiritual guide; including, when Western Civilization becomes strong enough to absorb into its own system some of the strong medicine of Islam, Dante under the guidance of Vergil or Beatrice.

The post-Biblical Aggadah shows the efforts of Jewish orthodoxy to reduce Elijah's stature and to counter the excessive veneration accorded to him in apocalyptic Jewish sectarianism and Christian circles. It was denied that Elijah had ever gone up to heaven, Biblical evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. Elijah's habit of revealing divine secrets to pious mortals once earned him a severe punishment of 60 lashes of fire. The Koran goes the other way. Without impairing its veneration for Moses as a prophetic figure it endorses the eschatological longings and mystic revelations associated with the figure of Elijah, without naming him. But the orthodox Sunni *ulama* regress to the posture of Halakhic Judaism. The official theologians of Islam, we are told, are and always have been averse to these excesses of the popular Khidr belief; even as the Talmudic rabbis tried to put down the popularity of Elijah. "There are two things I hate about the orthodox canonists," says the mystic master Shadhili, "They say that Khidr is dead and that Hallaj was an infidel"- Hallaj the martyred prototype of Sufi mysticism, the subject of Massignon's masterpiece.¹⁰

9.
*Massignon, Opera
 minora, I, 151-152.*

10.
*Encyclopedia Judaica,
 s.v. "Elijah." Hastings
 Encyclopedia of
 Religion and Ethics,
 s.v. "Khidr," 695.
 Massignon, Opera
 minora, I, 148.*

Who is Khidr? How much does he know? These are questions neo-orthodox Sunni Islam can do without. The great Egyptian modernist, or neo-fundamentalist, Islamic reformer Rashid Rida attacked the Friday liturgy of Sura XVIII as a degenerate innovation (*bida*), a departure from the original Sunna, the hallowed practice of primitive Islam. Rashid Rida also condemned as subjective interpretation all *ta'wil* which claims to find a hidden sense beyond the literal, and he restricts Koranic exegesis to simple literalist commentary, *tafsir*.¹¹ But the controversy between literalism and mysticism in the interpretation of the Koran is aboriginal in Islam, and reaches into the split in the core of the Prophet's followers over the succession to his leadership. The rejected leader Ali is to be identified not simply with the principle of hereditary legitimacy, but also with the assertion of charismatic authority after the Prophet, and inspired interpretation after the Koran. Sura XVIII is pregnant with the Sunni-Shiite split and the whole subsequent history of Islam.

11. Goldziher, *Richtungen*, 335. *Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. "Islah," p. 147.

The Koran is pregnant with the future. It is only in the light of later developments that we can find the riddle, the question, who is Khidr, in Sura XVIII. We need more work like Massignon's work: his demonstration of the significance of Khidr in Islamic Tradition remains a unique achievement. Khidr is the key to the Sura as a whole. The occult spirit of Khidr links up with the Seven Sleepers and with Dhu'l-Qarneyn's Wall. Khidr is the Director of the Seven Sleepers, their watch-dog; together they form a community of apotropaic or intercessory saints whose virtue saves the city, like those ten just men for whose sake the Lord would have, at Abraham's intercession, spared Sodom. They repair breaches in the Wall against Gog and Magog that Dhu'l-Qarneyn built. The weekly liturgical recitation of Sura XVIII is to invoke the spirit of Khidr and join the communion of saints in their action of repairing that wall. The fight (*jihad*) against Gog and Magog is an eschatological reality but not in the future. In the Islamic sense of time we are always in the last days.

The interpenetration works both ways: Khidr is assimilated to the Seven Sleepers: he is an anchorite who has to flee from persecution and lives, exempt from death, having found the Fountain of Life, concealed in a remote island. The melting or merging—"confusion"—of Khidr and the Seven Sleepers generates mystical, i.e., non-literal, interpretations of that sleep. The literalists, Christian or Islamic, cite the story as "proof" of the resurrection, literally understood as life after death. Seen with the inward eye, to be immured alive in a cave

is an image of saintly or eremite withdrawal from the world, taking refuge with Allah; and sleep the image of that extinction of self, that condition of being lost in God which characterizes the saint (*wali*) as distinct from the prophet (*nabi*); in the Night of Unction, the Night of the Heavenly Ascension, the blessed Night, the Night of Enshrouding which is also the Night of Power; the Dark Night of the Soul which is also the Night of *Finnegan's Wake*.¹²

The spirit of Khidr is eschatological as well as mystical. The Sleepers Awake at the end of time, to figure together with Khidr in the Return of the Mahdi. History becomes a night, or seven nights. And everything is their sleep: the Seven Sleepers can represent the seven prophets who periodize world history—Adam, Idris, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. The text explicitly provokes millenarian calculations: "which of the two parties would best calculate the time that they had tarried;" "it is said they tarried in their Cave three hundred years and nine;" "say: Allah is best aware how long they tarried" (v. 12, 26-27).

It is Shiite exegesis that has made the most elaborate eschatological interpretations of Sura XVIII. The Sleepers hidden in the cave are the Koranic authority for the Shiite notion of the Ghayba, or occultation, of the Hidden Imam. In the Ithni'-ashari or Twelver Shiites the occultation becomes the principle on which they base their periodization of the whole of post-Koranic history. We are living in the occultation, which began with the disappearance, or sleep, of the twelfth Imam in 874 C.E. and will last till his reappearance, or reawakening, with the Mahdi at the end of time. Modern times are divided into the lesser occultation, which lasted from 874- 941 C.E., in which the Imam though invisible was still in regular touch with visible representatives of his authority; and the greater occultation, which began in 941 C.E. and is still our present condition, in which communication with the Imam is irregular, rare, unpredictable, miraculous. In this vision of history modernity means the disappearance of authority (authoritative guidance in the interpretation of scripture). The Shiite notion of the Hidden Imam is to be understood in analogy with Folktale #D1960.2. in Stith Thompson's index: Barbarossa, King asleep in a mountain; will awake one day to succor his people. Thus interpreted, the legend of the Seven Sleepers contains a perpetual threat of an eschatological outbreak. For example, the Seven Sleepers are Seven Imams of the Ismaili Shiites hidden in the cave, the womb of Fatima, and guarded

12. Koran XLIV, 3; XCII, 1; XCVII, 1. Massignon, *Opera minora*, II, 354, III, 104-118. H. Ritter, *Das Meer der Seele* (Leiden, 1955), 588-589.

8. ЯДДАШТ / YAD DASHTAN — KEEPING OF MEMORY

Sensing one's being and one's body, recalling positive memories and positive experiences.

13. Massignon, *Opera minora*, III, 104-118. *Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. "Ghayba," "Ithna 'ash-ariya."

The 3 remaining principles are rather distinct universes, relying on a phenomenological regime that has yet to recognize our plodding passports.

14. M.G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago, 1974), I, 443. Massignon, *Opera minora*, I, 108, II, 606.

15. T. Burckhardt, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning* (World of Islam Festival Trust, 1976), 19.

over by their watchdog, Ali. The great Shiite insurrection (resurrection) on behalf of social justice in the 9th and 10th centuries C.E., which succeeded in establishing the Fatimid anti-caliphate in Egypt, was commenced in 309th year of the Hegira, as prophesied in Sura XVIII, verse 26.¹³

Massignon calls Sura XVIII the apocalypse of Islam. But Sura XVIII is a resume, epitome of the whole Koran. The Koran is not like the Bible, historical; running from Genesis to Apocalypse. The Koran is altogether apocalyptic. The Koran backs off from that linear organization of time, revelation, and history which became the backbone of orthodox Christianity, and remains the backbone of the Western culture after the death of God. Islam is wholly apocalyptic or eschatological, and its eschatology is not teleology. The moment of decision, the Hour of Judgment, is not reached at the end of a line; nor by a predestined cycle of cosmic recurrence; eschatology can break out at any moment. Koran XVI 77: To Allah belong the secrets of the heavens and the earth, and the matter of the Hour is as the twinkling of an eye, or it is nearer still. In fully developed Islamic theology only the moment is real. There is no necessary connection between cause and effect. Time does not accumulate. The world is made up of atomic space-time points, among which the only continuity is the utterly inscrutable will of God, who creates every atomic point anew at every moment.¹⁴ And the Islamic mosque discards the orientation towards time essential to a Christian Church: "The space," says Titus Burchhardt, "is as if re-absorbed into the ubiquity of the present moment; it does not beckon the eye in a specific direction; it suggests no tension or antinomy between the here below and the beyond, or between earth and heaven; it possesses all its fullness in every place."¹⁵

The rejection of linearity involves a rejection of narrative. There is only one decent narrative in the Koran: Sura XII, "Joseph," acclaimed by condescending Western Orientalists: for once Muhammad overcame his temperamental incoherence and managed to do it right. The strict sect of the Kharidjis, on this point and on others the voice of rigorous Islamic consistency, condemned Sura XII on the ground that narrative has no place in revelation.¹⁶ The Koran breaks decisively with that alliance between the prophetic tradition and materialistic historicism—"what actually happened"—which set in with the materialistically historical triumph of Christianity. Hence the strangely abortive and incoherent character of the pseudo-narratives in Sura XVIII. Something happened but his strange

16. W.M. Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an* (Edinburgh, 1977), 46.

9. UKUFI ZAMANI (OR WUQUF-E ZAMANI) — time-half (or pause)

Suspending intellect, judgement, preconceptions and conditioned thought. Reprising one's thoughts and actions. Accounting for how one's time is spent, being thankful for acts of righteousness and asking forgiveness for wrongdoing.

17. P. Nwyia, *Exegese coranique et langage mystique* (Beyrouth, 1970), 74.

18. Cf. Massignon, "Le Folklore chez les mystiques musulmans," *Opera minora*, II, 345-352.

revelation manages not to reveal what or why. In fact the impossibility of history as "what actually happened" becomes the theme of an abrupt interruption in the narrative at v. 23-25: the Sleepers; how many were there? The Lord only knows.

"Recalls of former times" are an integral component of Koranic revelation, but as Massignon's Muslim disciple Nwyia says in his indispensable study of the mystic tradition of Koranic exegesis, "recalls of former times" does not mean history: "Schooled in the Koran, Muslim consciousness is spontaneously ahistorical, that is to say mythic. It takes up events of the past in approximately the same way as the apocryphal gospels adapt the gospel narratives. When Muslim consciousness takes up for its own ends an event borrowed from the Bible or Judeo-Christian hagiography, it in most cases cannot resist effecting a transvaluation by introducing fabulous details or otherwise transforming the meaning. Passing from one hand to another in a chain of Muslim transmission the historical event evaporates and all that is left is a vague memory submerged in a story which has become mythic." The use of the term mythic, with its Hellenic origins and overtones, may be questionable: I would prefer folklore. But the principle Nwyia is articulating we have seen at work in Sura XVIII.¹⁷ At any rate apocryphal: not obsessed with the question, what really happened; willing to surrender to the fiction that is more real. Gibbon delighted in the irony that the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin, the Dogma of 1854, is first offered as a salvific image in the Koran (III. 35-6). The Koran, with its angels and Jinns, is pregnant also with the *Arabian Nights*; and with Rumi's *Masnawi*, the synthesis of Koranic inspiration and *Arabian Nights* imagination.¹⁸

In Sura XVIII, in the Koran, there is a mysterious regression to a more primitive stratum, archetypal, folkloristic, fabulous, apocryphal. Historical material is fragmented into its archetypal constituents, and then subjected to displacement and condensation, as in dreams. It is a rebirth of images, as in the Book of Revelations, or *Finnegans Wake*. In becoming unhistorical it becomes elliptical: "And they forgot their fish; and it took its way into the waters, being free." The fish appears suddenly from nowhere, as in dreams; no causal explanation, no narrative coherence. The fish becomes a symbolic, or the archetypal fish, the same one you see on California bumperstickers; or in the mediaeval jingle *piscis assus Christus passus*. Moses and Elijah meet; Moses and Alexander merge, or "reamalgame" (FW, 49), not on the plane of materialistic historicism—what actually happened—but in the world of

archetypal images, that world in which Moses and Alexander meet because they are both two-horned. In Sura XIX, 25-26, Mary giving birth under a palm tree on the desert is also Agar the wife of Abraham; and in Sura III Mary is also Miriam the sister of Moses. In this condensation Western scholarship sees only confusion—who is who when everybody is somebody else; as in *Finnegans Wake*. Massignon speaks of trans-historical, or meta-historical, telescoping; systematic anachronism. Islam is committed by the Koran to project a meta-historical plane on which the eternal meaning of historical events is disclosed. It is that plane on which Moses and Elijah are seen conversing with Jesus in Matthew chapter XVII; that plane on which Dante's *Divine Comedy* unfolds; and Blake's prophetic books; and *Finnegans Wake*. History *sub specie aeternitatis*.¹⁹

There is an apocalyptic or eschatological style: every Sura is an epiphany and a portent; a warning, "plain tokens that haply we may take heed" (XXIV, 1). The apocalyptic style is *totum simul*, simultaneous totality; the whole in every part. Hodgson on the Koran: "almost every element which goes to make up its message is somehow present in any given passage." Simultaneous totality, as in *Finnegans Wake*; or, more generally, in what Umberto Eco called "The Poetics of the Open Work." "We can see it as an infinite contained within finiteness. The work therefore has infinite aspects, because each of them, and any moment of it, contains the totality of the work." Eco is trying to characterize a revolution in the aesthetic sensibility of the West: we are the first generation in the West able to read the Koran, if we are able to read *Finnegans Wake*. In fact Carlyle's reaction to the Koran — "a wearisome confused jumble, crude, incondite; endless iterations, long-windedness, entanglement" — is exactly our first reaction to *Finnegans Wake*. The affinity between this most recalcitrant of sacred texts and this most avant-garde of literary experiments is a sign of our times. Joyce was fully aware of the connection, as Atherton shows in the most exciting chapter of *The Books at the Wake*; I particularly like his discovery in the *Wake* of the titles of one hundred and eleven of the hundred and fourteen suras.²⁰

In both the Koran and *Finnegans Wake* this effect of simultaneous totality involves systematic violation of the classic rules of unity, propriety and harmony; bewildering changes of subject; abrupt juxtaposition of incongruities. Sura XVIII is a good example. In addition to the melange of pseudo-narratives there are two intrusive parables ("similitudes," vs. 33 and 46) to remind us of the Day of Judgement; intrusive allusions to the current circumstances of the prophet (his grief,

19. Massignon, *Opera minora*, I, 109; cf. I, 143, III, 143.

20. M.G.S. Hodgson, "A Comparison of Islam and Christianity as Framework for Religious Life," *Diogenes* 3d (1960), 61. U. Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington, 1979), 63. J.S. Atherton, *The Books at the Wake* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1974), ch. 12.

10. UKUFI ADADI (OR WUQUF-E ADADI) — NUMBER-HALT (OR PAUSE)

Carrying out exercises involving numbers, such as the awareness of the number of repetitions when carrying out one's silent heart zikr exercise, and also certain forms of counting using the Abjad system.

21. Hodgson, 62. Watt, *Bell's Introduction*, 32.

22. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities*, 47-48.

v. 6; his lack of children, vo. 40); and one intrusive pointer on pious decorum or etiquette in speech (v. 24-5). As in *Finnegans Wake* the Koran rudely insists on indecent conjunctions. The Sura on Light (XXIV), in the words of Hodgson, contains the most ethereal passage of visionary mysticism juxtaposed with what might seem some of its most sordid, dealing with matters of etiquette, with sexual decency, and in particular with an accusation of infidelity levied against a wife of the Prophet. The whole texture is one of interruption (Joyce's "enterruption"); collision (Joyce's "collideor-scape"); abrupt collage, or bricolage, of disconnected ejaculations, *disjecta membra*, miscellaneous fragments. The widely accepted tradition is that the Koran was collected, after the death of the Prophet, not only from the "hearts of men" but also from pieces of parchment or papyrus, flat stones, palm-leaves, shoulder-blades and ribs of animals, pieces of leather and wooden boards. In the words of *Finnegans Wake*, "A bone, a pebble, a ramskin; chip them, chap them, cut them up allways; leave them to terracook in the mutthering pot" (FW, 20).²¹

Hence it does not matter in what order you read the Koran: it is all there all the time; and it is supposed to be all there all the time in your mind or at the back of your mind, memorized and available for appropriate quotation and collage into your conversation or your writing, or your action. Hence the beautiful inconsequentiality of the arrangement of the Suras: from the longest to the shortest. In this respect the Koran is more avant-garde than *Finnegans Wake*, in which the over-all organization is entangled in both linear and cyclical patterns which it is trying to transcend.

Every Sura is an epiphany and portent; and therefore not beautiful but sublime. Again He speaks in thunder and in fire! What the thunder said. Dumbfounding. Wonderstruck us at a thunder, yunder. Well, all be dumbed! (FW, 47, 262). In the Koran as in *Finnegans Wake* there is a destruction of human language. To quote Seyyed Hossein Nasr:²²

Many people, especially non-Muslims, who read the Quran for the first time are struck by what appears as a kind of incoherence from the human point of view. It is neither like a highly mystical text nor a manual of Aristotelian logic, though it contains both mysticism and logic. It is not just poetry although it contains the most powerful poetry. The text of the Quran reveals

human language crushed by the power of the Divine Word. It is as if human language were scattered into a thousand fragments like a wave scattered into drops against the rocks at sea. One feels through the shattering effect left upon the language of the Quran, the power of the Divine whence it originated. The Quran displays human language with all the weakness inherent in it becoming suddenly the recipient of the Divine Word and displaying its frailty before a power which is infinitely greater than man can imagine.

In Islamic apologetics the miraculous character of the Koran is self-evident in the immediate effect of its style, its *idjaz*, literally "the rendering incapable, powerless;" the overwhelming experience of manifest transcendence, compelling surrender to a new world vision.²³ The bewilderment is part of the message: "Through the windr of a wondr in a wildr is a weltr as a wirbl of a warbl is a world" (FW, 597).

23. *Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. "Idjaz."

How do you start a new civilization-in the 7th, or the 20th century C.E., with all that history weighing like an Alp on the brains of the living? Out of the rubble of the old; there is no other way. "He dumptied the wholeborrow of rubbages on to soil here" (FW, 17). Massignon speaks of the farrago of folklore (*fatras folkloriste*) in the Koran. First you trash or junk the old, as in *Finnegans Wake*, or the Koran; reducing preexistent traditions to rubble. Muslim piety, for whom the Koran is the suprahistorical word of God, is troubled by the question of the relation of the Koran to preexistent traditions. Western historicism, with its well-honed methods of source criticism—*Quellenforschung*—is only too delighted to lose itself in tracing the Koran to its sources, with the usual nihilistic result: the Koran is reduced to a meaningless confusion. Meaning is attributed to the original sources, but in Sura XVIII it has been "mutilated almost beyond recognition," and mechanically combined "in a most artificial and clumsy manner." Schwarzbaum refers to Muhammad as making a brave show with "borrowed trappings."²⁴ The notion that Muhammad was a charlatan who stole from the treasury of Western civilization and passed off his plagiarisms on his unsophisticated Bedouin audience as the voice of God, is still very much alive at the back of Western minds. Witness the latest to come from the London School of Oriental Studies and the Warburg Institute: P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism*.

24. *Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, s.v. "Khidr," 694. Schwarzbaum (n. 5), 135.

11. UKUFI QALBI (OR WUQUF-E QALBI) — HEART-HALT (OR PAUSE) OR VISUALISATION

Visualising one's heart (Qalb), perhaps with the name of God inscribed on it, and identifying with Truth or with God.

25. Massignon, *Opera minora*, I, 158-159, 162-163; III, 128, 143.

Muslim piety need not be so troubled, nor Western scholarship so complacent and condescending. Sura XVIII with its imperious restructuring of Christian Hellenistic and Judaic tradition is not troubled. It is a prototypical model of Islamic syncretism. The Koran is not an operation of high cultural continuity, the *translatio* of the legacy of Greece and Rome (or Jerusalem), or the appropriation of the jewels of Egypt as we make our Exodus, as in Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*. To start a new civilization is not to introduce some new refinement in higher culture but to change the imagination of the masses, the folk who shape and are shaped by folklore and folktales. Prophecy is an operation in what Vico called vulgar metaphysics. The Islamic imagination, Massignon has written, should be seen as the product of a desperate regression, back to the primitive, the eternal pagan substrate of all religions—that proteiform cubehouse the Ka'ba—as well as to a primitive pre-Mosaic monotheism of Abraham. The Dome is built on the Rock. Islam stays with the dream-life of the masses, the eschatological imagination of the lowly and oppressed. The dream-life of the masses, discarded by the elite of the Enlightenment as superstition—the stone which the builders rejected—becomes in the twentieth century the Golden Bough for the return to the archetypal unconscious, *quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*. Here Comes Everybody.²⁵

Sura XVIII, and the Koran as a whole, like *Finnegans Wake* shows us preexistent traditions, Jewish, Christian, Hellenistic, pulverized into condensed atoms or etyms of meaning: the abnihilation of the etym (FW, 353). Out of this dust the world is to be made new. We are once amore as babes awondering in a wold made fresh where with the hen in the storyaboot we start from scratch (FW, 336). In the words of Iqbal:

the Koran- a hundred new worlds lie within its verses, whole centuries are involved in its moments... A believing servant himself is a sign of God, every world to his breast is as a garment; and when one world grows old upon his bosom, the Koran gives him another world!

The Koran is not responsible for the way Islam developed into a closed system, and the drily rational spirit of the Sunni *ulama* turned all the luxuriant cosmic imagery of the Koran into common sense prose. In the tragic view of history taken by the Shiites, things went wrong from the moment the Prophet died.

26.
Igbal, *Javid-nama*
(tr. A.J. Arberry,
London, 1966), lines
1132-1140. Hodgson,
Venture of Islam, I, 392.
Goldziher, *Richtungen*,
217.

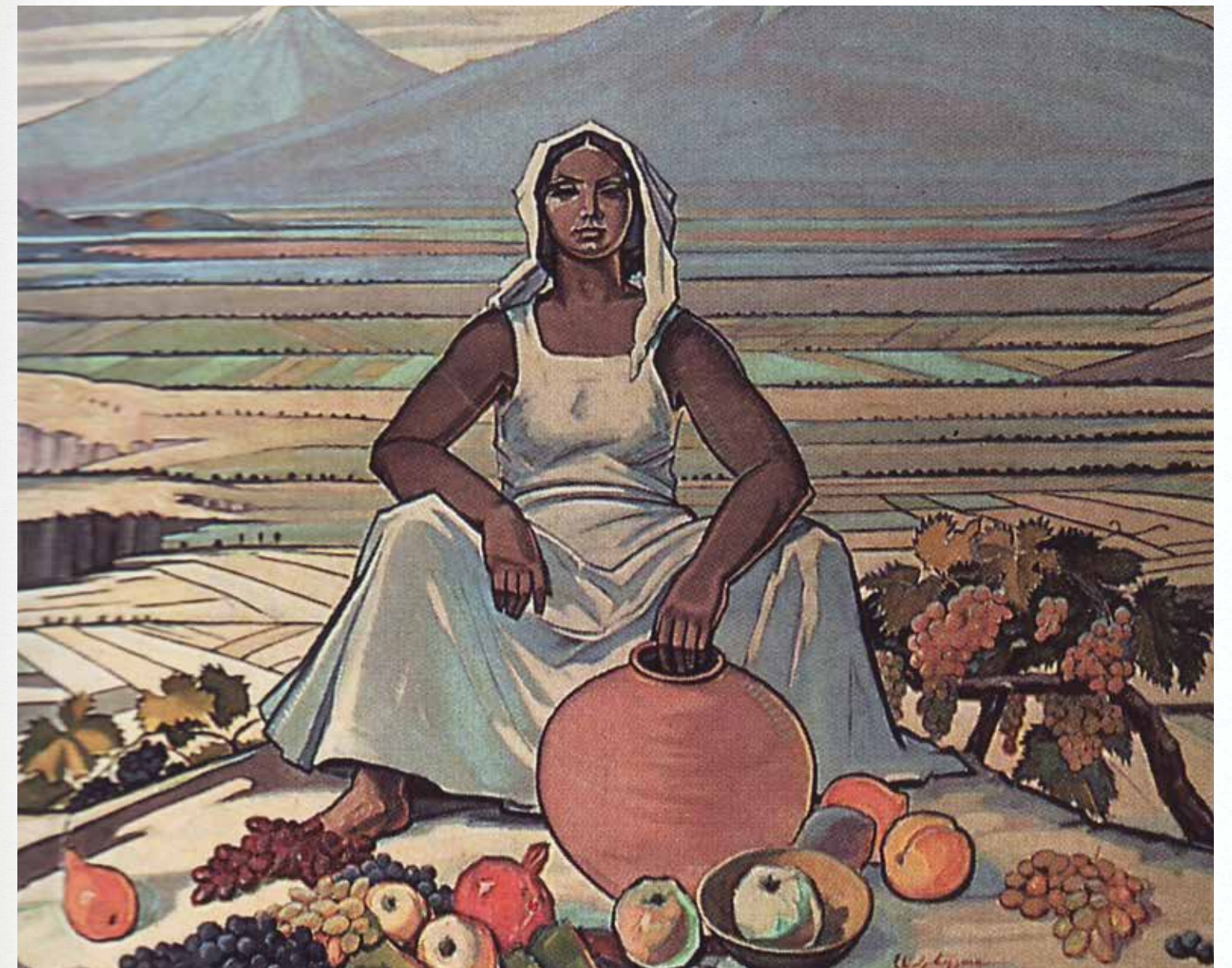
The problem is, What comes after the prophet? The question is, *Who is Khidr?* And, *What does it mean to be a disciple of Khidr!* – the question at the heart of Sura XVIII. Pursuing that question, Ibn Arabi said that he had plunged into an ocean on whose shore the Propets remained behind standing.²⁶

Лежала я вечер в
беседке ханской,
В середине бусурман и
веры мусульманской.
Против беседки той
построена мечеть, Куда
всяк день пять раз
имам народ влечет.
Я думала заснуть, и
лишь закрылись очи,
Как уши он заткнув,
взревел изо всей мочи.
О, Божьи чудеса! Из
предков кто моих
Спокойно почивал от
орд и ханов их?
А мне мешает спать
среди Бахчисарая?
Табачный дым и крик...
Не здесь ли место рая

Семён Сергеевич
Бобров "Таврида,
или мой летний день в
Таврическом Херсонесе"

I lay one evening in the Khan's summerhouse, / In the midst of Muslims and the Islamic faith. / In front of this
summerhouse a mosque was built, / Where five times a day the Imam calls the people. / I thought of sleeping,
but as soon as I closed my eyes, / He shut his ears and roared with all his might ... / O, godly miracles! Who among my
ancestors / Slept peacefully from the hordes and their khans? / But what prevents me from sleeping in Bakhchisarai /
Are tobacco smoke and this roar ... Is this not the place of paradise?
Semen Bobrov, "Tavrida, ili moi letnii den' v Tavricheskom Khersonise"

The Faculty of Fruits
The Apricot, The Mulberry,
The Persimmon, The
Watermelon, The Quince,
The Fig, The Melon,
The Cucumber, The
Pomegranate, The Sour
Cherry, The Sweet Lemon.



Warm Greetings! Azeri poster, 1972. Azerbaijan: Land des Feuers, 2008

THE APRICOT



17th century Armenian tile. *Armenien: Wiederentdeckung einer alten Kulturlandschaft*, 1995

A small, yellowish fruit, cleaved down the middle, is caught up in a custody battle of seismic proportions—and the claimants could not be more mismatched. In one corner, a country whose only instance of independence



The invigilator of the Nodira museum in Kokand goes to great lengths to shake some apricots from the tree in the courtyard, Uzbekistan, 2011

before 1991 dates to the first century CE; in the other, the world's most populous nation. In the middle, like a child unwilling to choose between (a



Apricots drying in Capadocia, photo by Bjørn Christian Tørrissen

petite) mommy and (towering) daddy, the apricot tries to please, providing medicinal relief to both. According to an old Armenian tradition, over twelve maladies can be treated with the flesh and seeds of the apricot. The Hayer (Հայեր) have raised their orange, blue, and red flag on the genus and species (*Prunus armeniaca*) with a dollop of Biblical bathos to boot: Noah was not just any tree hugger, but an apricot-tree hugger (the only one to make it into the Ark).

The Chinese, though, give the Caucasus, a land renowned for its poetic streak, a run for its (highly

leveraged) money. Via the velvety skinned fruit, the Middle Kingdom brings together what might seem two disparate worlds to Western eyes — that of medicine and education — for a one-two punch of holistic healing for the body and brain alike. It is no coinci-



My Courtyard by M. Saryan. Source: *Iskusstvo Armenii*, 1962

dence that the fruits here hail from Xinjiang, aka Uighuristan, the westernmost region of China, sometimes lumped into Central Asia under the contested name of East Turkestan. A particularly lyrical way of addressing a doctor in Mandarin is "Expert of the Apricot Grove." Dong Feng, a doctor in the third century CE, asked his patients to plant apricot trees

instead of paying fees. The legend lived on for centuries: When patients sought treatment, they said they were going to the Xong Lin, or Apricot Forest. Meanwhile, school children, in lieu of flowers, often bring their teachers dried apricots to bless the 'apricot altar' or 'educational circle.'

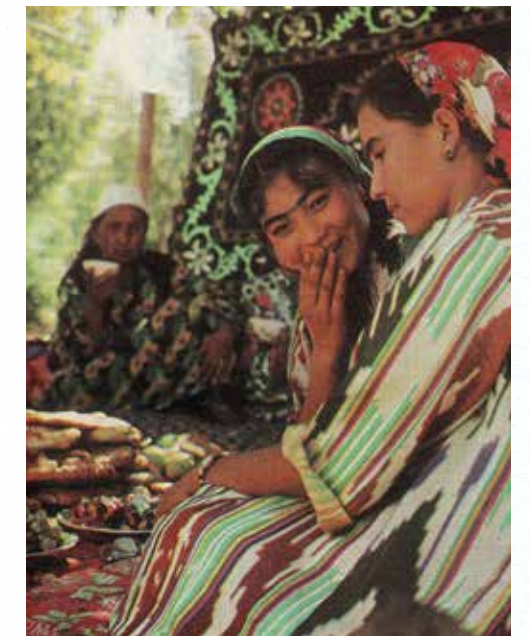
Between the diasporic duels of the Armenians and the Chinese, a third contender permits a welcome turn of triangulation, one which helps us to move beyond the partisan battles over the precocious, early-ripening fruit. For much of the Latin American world, apricots are called *damasco*, in reference to their Syrian origins and the early-twentieth-century migrations to that region from the Middle East.

If the fresh fruit incites juicy rivalries, the dried version doesn't disappoint either. When thinking of Damascus today, we turn helplessly to the Turks to will their former Ottoman influence over the restive Syrian capital. In far rosier times, they would turn to the pitted yellow prune and say—*bundaniyisi Şam'dakayısı*—the only

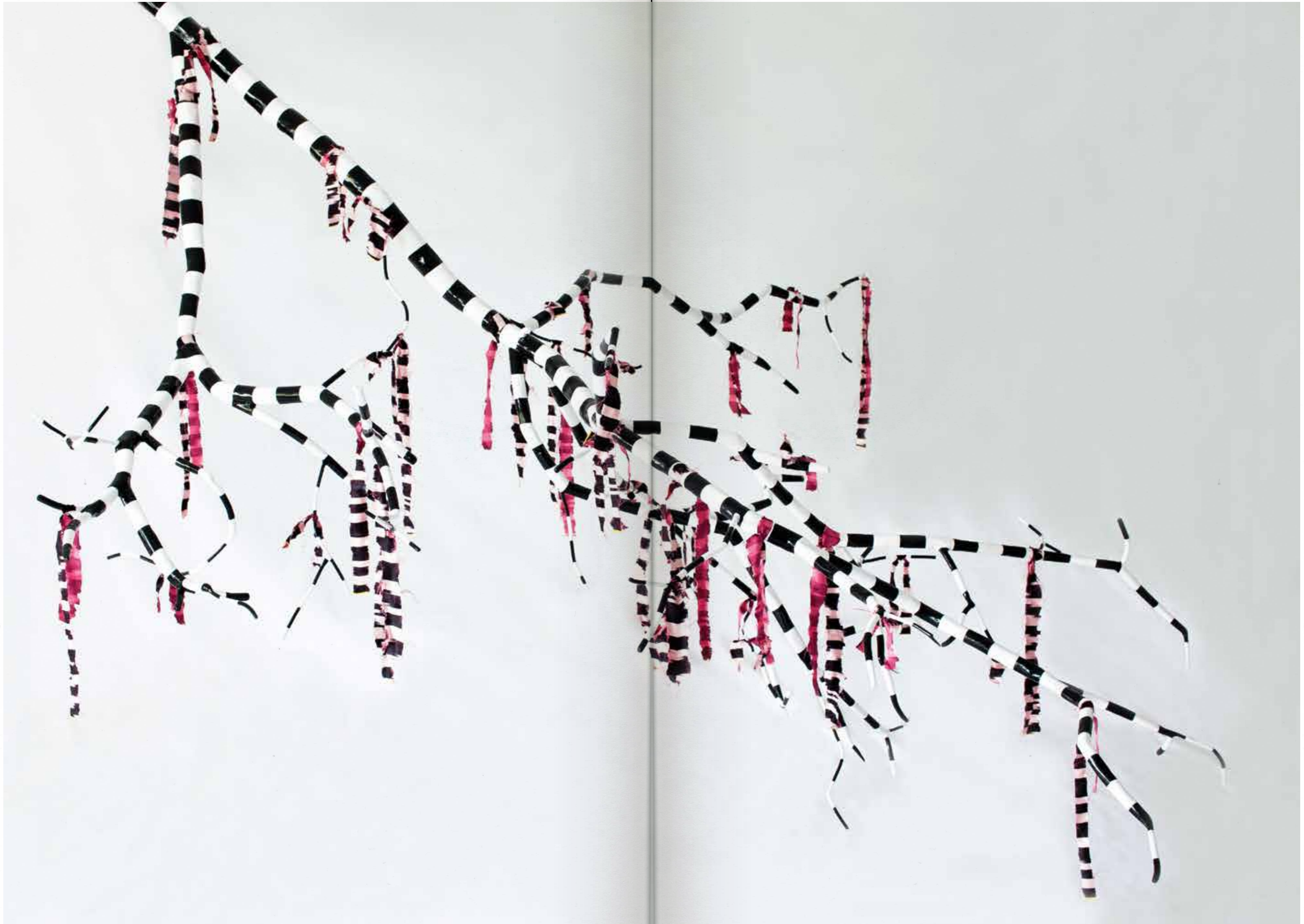
thing better than this is an apricot in Damascus.

THE MULBERRY

A worm with a voracious but selective appetite has proven to have had more of a Eurasian geographical bite than Ghenghis Khan himself. Gobbling up all the white mulberry tree leaves in its path, the castoffs of every little silkworm's metamorphosis



Uzbek girls in Khan-Atlas patterned textiles. *Sovetsky Soyuz Uzbekistan*, 1967



Slavs and Tatars,
**Long Live the
Syncretics**,
photo Oliver
Ottenschläger/
Secession, 2012





Khan-Atlas silks from master *abbrband* (literally 'cloud-tier') Turgunboy Mirzaahmedov, Marguilon, Uzbekistan, 2011

have sculpted landscapes by lining fields and villages with luscious shade to drink tea under, by caressing the purple backs of royal Byzantium, and by etching sunsets and trickling water into Rorschach riddles in cloth – substituting a Margilani artist's daughter with Atlas Khan fabrics, the impossibly exquisite patterned silks that adorn the ladies, bazaars, and mosque-floor cushions of Uzbekistan.

James I and the British were so greedy for such softness and labor-intensive melancholy that they brought mulberry trees over to the murky banks of the Thames, hoping to



Black and white mulberries, Tbilisi, Georgia

grow their own cocoons and save themselves rush-hour congestion on the Silk Road. But color- and flavor-challenged as is their wont, they picked the

wrong breed: They found to their chagrin that the darker strain of mulberry was not only as appealing to the haughty worms as salt to a slug, but an invasive stainer as well.

Lore (and dry-cleaners) say that the clear, white juice of an unripe black mulberry can remove the stain of a mature one: tell that to the pavement of Samargand, Baku and Tehran. When wet, the شاه توت, or Shah's mulberry – beloved as a dried snack both



Silk cocoons. Soviet Central Asia Encyclopedia, 1967

white and black – sticks to the soles of shoes taken off before setting feet on carpets. Interiors stay pristine, sidewalks are as bloody as a Nightmare on Mulberry



R. Akhmedov, 1964. Uzbek Encyclopedia, 1981

Street. But, in order to catch those berries in their edible prime, lithe boys are sent up into the branches to shake the fragile fruits into the fabrics pulled taut by *ikat*-clad *babushkas* below.

By the time the juices reach the Chitralis of northwestern Pakistan, however, the stain is of another sort. Something of a Muslim mulberry moonshine accompanies the Chitrali masculine rites of *lštok*, plays performed for unseen women perched in the shadows. *Halal* and *haram* dance together on the outskirts of town, only to be found on secret pathways by following the sound of drums. The fear is that the same road will be found by *dašmanán*,

the ephemeral "bearded men," who would attack the men's mulberry besmirched piety with sticks in the black night.

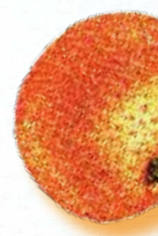
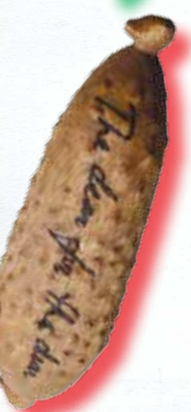
THE PERSIMMON

Two fruits hitched at the hip linguistically evoke a reliably mimetic taste but attest to little authenticity when it comes to exteriors. The persimmon – or *Khormaloo*, "date-plum" in Persian



Persimmon tree, Crimea. Source: Flickr, Sasha_Photos

خرمالو – tastes like many namable things commingling, but instead of giving a new name to smooth a rubric over this multiplicity, it hyphenates, it takes its elements as its title, it is a surface



Slavs and Tatars,
Holy Bukhara
(Queen Esther
Takes a Bite), 2012
 photo Oliver
 Ottenschläger/
 Secession, 2012

for flavors, for other points of reference, a palimpsest for those things that already know what they are or think they know what they are.

Carl Ludwig Hablitzl or Hablitz (also known as Karl Ivanovich Gablits), the botanist responsible for *The Natural History of East Tartary: Traced through the Three Kingdoms of Nature*, charted the flora and fauna of Tartary – aka Tauric Kherson aka Qırım (Crime-

(nicknamed *Figchen*) – aka Екатерина II Великая aka Katharina die Große aka Catherine the Great – and named all the elements around the place with little word as to color, smell, or shape, but only as to place of origin.

Relatively green in comparison to the Klondike-like conditions to the North, but amped, hyped, spin-doctored and PR-ed by Potemkin et



Portrait of Murtaza-Kuli-Khan by Vladimir Borovikovskiy, 1796. The Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia

after the treaty of Küçük Kaynarca¹ (signed in 1774, in what is now Кайнарджа, Bulgaria) and the Crimean city of Bahkchysarai was to channel Constantinople, the cradle of Eastern Orthodoxy that Imperial Russia dreamed of recovering. Taxonomies then fractured into prisms and reunited as lasers of genealogy, toponyms of the soul, otherwise known as the wet and wild world of Russian Orientalism. Or perhaps it was love, love for the great fairy stepmother with adopted names and tongues, a Lutheran cum Orthodox, a Prussian cum Russian, who slept peacefully despite the din of the

al into downright “lush, the Crimea was called a Garden of Eden, too, but only following its annexation a few years



Imperial splits? Catherine the Great bridging the gulf between Russia and Constantinople

an Tatar for “my hill”) aka Tauris aka Крым aka the Crimea – for Sophie Friederike Auguste von Anhalt-Zerbst-Dornburg

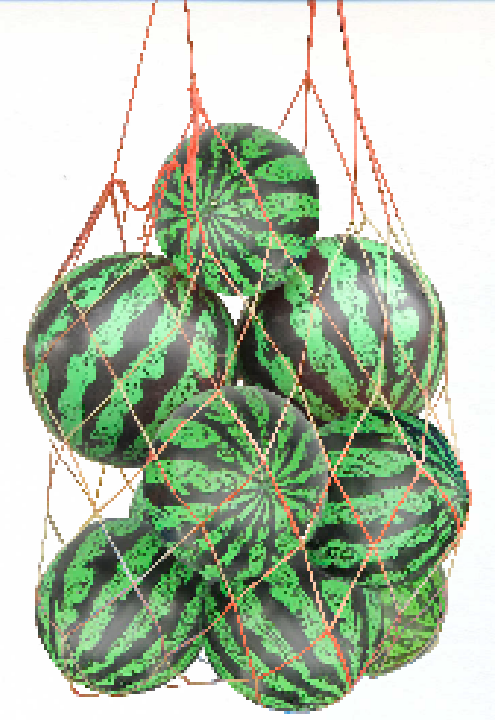
minarets. She was the builder of the garden, where shrubbery was clipped into submission but could still be enjoyed “freely”: There may, perhaps, have been walls in the garden, but no shackles on ankles.

Yet as any Dubya-era bumper sticker will tell you, freedom ain’t free, and the Crimean garden once again became a playground of doom for wrestling superpowers. The bloodied plaything successively of the Cimmerians, Greeks, Scythians, Goths, Huns, Bulgars, Khazars, the state of Kievan Rus’, Byzantine Greeks, Kipchaks, Ottoman Turks, Golden Horde Tatars, Mongols, Venetians, Genovese, the Crimean Khanate – in the proto-modern and modern world, the almost sea-locked Crimea later became a stage for the playing out of massive, geo-political desire. After having the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire, Nazi Germany, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, and the Ukraine trample its fragile green underfoot,

it now holds the trembling, beleaguered moniker of “autonomy.”

1. With the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, the Crimean garden – formerly part of the Ottoman Empire and nominally independent before being adopted /annexed by the Russian Empire – became a sort of foster-crib for the “biological” kids of the Ottoman Sultan, who continued to legally

be their spiritual protector as the Muslim Caliph, while Catherine became mother-warden of all the Orthodox Christians throughout the Ottoman Empire. This became a dire point of contention a century later in the scramble leading up to the Crimean war (1853-1856).



vulgaris is the seductive trick up the proverbial sleeve of the minority deemed not to belong. Conveniently overlooking its 97% water content, its supposedly low price made it a summer treat for rural black and white Americans alike in America’s South during the early 1930s. It even went by the honorific (if not very *halal*) epithet of “Depression ham.” The racially charged association of African Americans with the fruit often employs grotesque caricatures (pitch-black skin, white eyes, red lips), best parodied in Melvin van Peebles’ *Watermelon Man*.

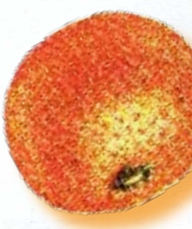
In Europe, the arrival of the watermelon at the market sends a definitive signal to weary, wintered eyes of more temperate climes and times to come

THE WATER MELON

Despite the amounts of ink spilled in recent decades on subjectivity and alterity, there’s been precious little thought given to alterity’s consumer profile: What, for example, would the subaltern’s favorite color or fruit be? It is safe to say that the watermelon would win hands down – as the fruit of the foreigner and immigrant, the watermelon is the fruit of the Other. Whether in Europe, China, or the US, *citrullus*



Slavs and Tatars,
Before the Before,
After the After
 (Installation view),
 photo Oliver
 Ottenschläger/
 Secession, 2012



— if not here and now, then at least somewhere, sometime soon. Vendors sellin' the melon in Paris, London, and Berlin today might have little in common, but they are all likely to find themselves at the receiving end of anti-immigration bluster — not to mention at an Ottoman Empire reunion party.

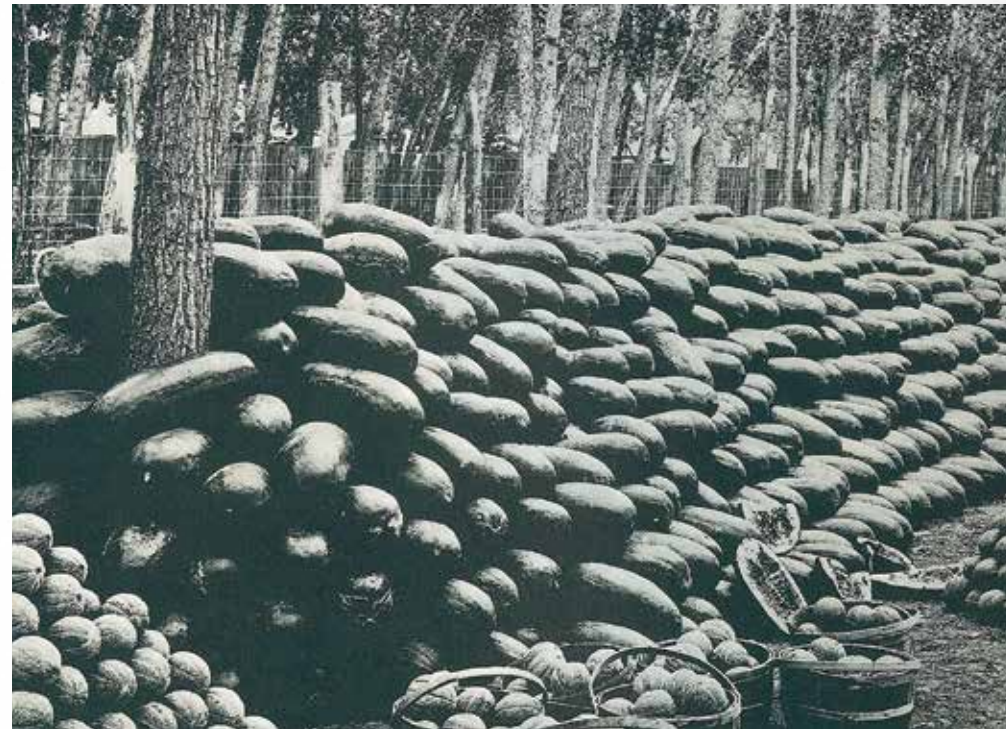
In Russia, despite a recent rise in dastardly nationalism, customers seek the best watermelons from the Caucasus, be it from Astrakhan or Baku. The mountainous region was known in the nineteenth century as Warm Siberia, where

Mongolian Riddle 552:
People who have a house full of people have no doors to go in and out.
Answer: Watermelon.

Mongolian Riddle 551:
Many thousands of warriors in a home without a door.
Answer: Seeds of a watermelon.

Mongolian Riddle 773:
A house that has neither a door nor an opening in the roof contains many thousand objects.
Answer: Watermelon.

Mongolian Riddle 107:
You can not block the head of a pig.
Answer: Watermelon.



Watermelon harvest, courtesy Ellen Ficklen's *Watermelon* (Washington D.C.: Library of Congress, 1984)



Watermelon genocide, Ficklen, *ibid.*

radicals and writers of all stripes were sent: But how bad could exile be amidst verdant peaks and crispy, fresh melons, surrounded by Narodniks

and Subbotniks, not to mention the likes of Lermontov and Griboyedov? Even in China, despite its arrival more than a millennium



Watermelons in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan. *Aschgabad Reisefuehrer*, DDR 1981

ago, the watermelon continues to be called 西瓜 (pronounced she-gua), literally: melon from the West.

Within the diabolically diverse world of fruits, the watermelon is an outlier. Its graphic, green-patterned exterior, coupled with a luscious, red-flesh interior, give it a synthetic character

that is easy to mock, parody, or replicate. Unlike the more spotlight-seeking tropical fruits (think dragon fruit, rambutan, lychee), the watermelon's relative simplicity makes it a darling of folk artists the world over — if not a slap in the face of Creationism and Darwinism alike. Bold tones and a graphic physique recall a color-

by-numbers drawing scheme more than they do a Cucurbitaceous crop, a relative of the more demure members of the gourd family: the cucumber, squash, and pumpkin.

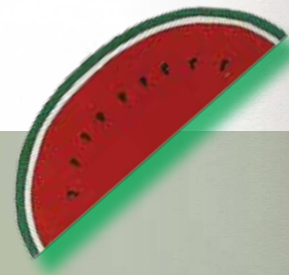


Slavs and Tatars, *The Offering* photo Oliver Ottenschläger/Secession, 2012



Sellin' the melon: or the endless merchandising potential of the watermelon, courtesy Ellen Ficklen





Slavs and Tatars,
**Not Moscow
Not Mecca**
(Installation view),
photo Oliver
Ottenschläger/
Secession, 2012

THE QUINCE

Dunja, "quince" in Serbo-Croatian, *Dunya*, "world" in Arabic: the world we live in, not the world to come. As things tilt, by season certain hemispheres feel the fall, by day others feel the sunset. Yellow, like the leaves falling around it as it ripens, the quince felt the Greeks drill a hole into its bumpy, bulbous, less-than-lovely, but no-less-lovable exterior and fill it with honey, to be eaten by brides and grooms together: after all, it was Paris' "golden apple," awarded to Aphrodite for being the fairest, inside and out.

Yes, the goddess of love was immortal, but mortal manifestations are precisely elaborate set-ups, booby traps for disappointment. Love petrified in its twilight is hard to chew. Sour, acidic, and astringent, it must be intensively

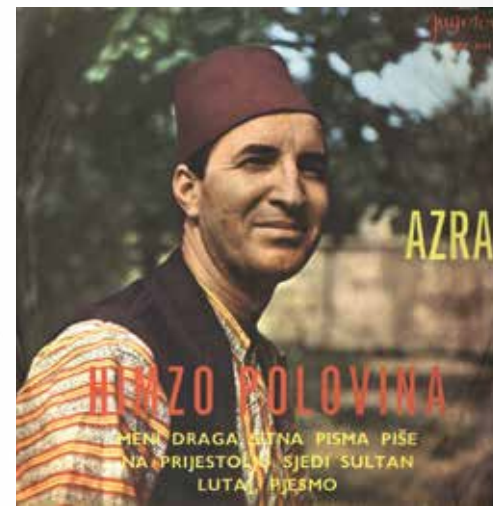


Golden Autumn: a quince tree in Uzbekistan. *Uzbekistan Republikasya*

cooked and sugared to reveal its succulence. *Sevdalinkas*, the eastern-flavored laments trilling from the walls of the former Yugoslavia's Kavanas, sing more yellow quinces than they could ever eat, their Persian-style melancholy slowly traveling in from the east, like the *ghazals* of Rumi and Hāfez, and the wallflowers who harmonize with the fading day understand that the longing to be beautiful is itself beauty.

But little does the Slavonian baby know that the tree planted in honor of her birth gives way to the fruit that sits atop old Serbian ladies' wardrobes —

perhaps it will be hers. Grandma's room is always the coldest, they say, but it also smells the most



Album cover of *sevdalinka* songs by Dr. Himzo Polovina, a singer-songwriter who happened to also be a neuropsychiatrist.

pleasant. The quinces are there to sweeten the fragrance of the sheets and the feather-filled covers (in the Balkans



Slavs and Tatars, *Dunjas, Donyas, Dinias*, photo Oliver Ottenschläger/Secession, 2012

called *dunje*): The sly fruits know the bed might be a cold poem of fall and winter, but they also know that the summer is the season of rot.

THE FIG

The fig, plucked from trees not schooled to be cultivated by the cultured, has spread to the far reaches of the continents through force of will (and lack thereof). Intensively farmed, yet still abundant in the wild, eaten by rich and poor, sedentary people and nomads alike, this pitiless entity has been meditatively chewed on – as a fruit of intelligence, knowledge, and enlightened evolution (or shall we call it Intelligent Design?) by tastemakers of the Book(s) from Adam & Eve to Mohammed.

The Israelites remarked on their way to the Promised Land, that the wilderness was no place of figs. The Greeks (aka the *psychopants* =

fig-eaters) of the time of Croesus accused



A fig tree outside the shrine of Mahmoud al-Anjir (or 'of the Fig') al-Faghnavi, one of the seven masters of the Naqshbandi Golden Chain. According to legend, al-Faghnavi's nickname originates from an episode where a capricious and incredulous visitor asked the wise man to demonstrate his other-worldly powers by producing a fig in the dead of winter. Al-Faghnavi, annoyed by the nature of such a trivial request, nonetheless obliged and picked a fig from the frosted bushes.



Khwaja Shamsu d-Din Muhammad Hafez-e Shirazi, aka simply Hafez, by C. Immodinova

Persians of a lack of culture for not eating



"Adam and Eve and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil!" *The Lubok: Russian Folk Pictures 17th to 19th Century*, 1984

them: Barbarians know no wine or figs. But as the Persians began to usurp empires themselves, they too became the people of the fig – qualifying species into taxonomies of pejorative vernacular appellations due to particular fruits' inherent lack of maturity: *kā/ayə-anjil* (Gilān; lit. "testis fig"), *dīv-anjīr* (Rāmsar; lit. "dīv [demon] fig"), *kaškāl* (Rāmsar, Rūdsar), *vā-anjīr* (Nūr; lit. "wind fig"), *šāl-anjīr* (Āmol; lit. "jackal fig"), *dīna-anjīl* (Bābol; lit. "fool's/foolish fig"), *č/tesen-anjīr* (Sārī; indecent), Luristan).

After reading the ninety-fifth Sura, *Al-Tin* (التين), The Fig), "[I Swear] By the fig and [by] the olive (1) [...] We have certainly created man [and woman] in the best of stature; (4) Then We returned [him/her] to the lowest of the lowest, (5) Except those who believe [in the oneness of Allah] and do righteous

deeds, for they will have a reward uninterrupted (6)," a question begins to form like an edible bud. Could identity be as temporal as intrinsic? In a Talmudic parable of the fig tree, its owner knows when to pick: failure to do so at the right time means that the sun will render the figs rotten and worm-eaten.

That is, a fig is still essentially a fruit – and a perfect one at that – despite, or even perhaps because of, its lack of center. One might bite through any part of its character: Obstacles to digestion or to the path to paradise are just a matter of ripeness.



"A life full of vigor and fun spent working in the sun of Socialist Soviet Georgia", *Советские Сибиряки*, 1934. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, NY.

THE (HAMI) MELON

In the peaks and dips between the roadside bazaars stretching from Kashgar to Ashgabat, melon rinds provide the bookends to every reclining meal on the *tapchan*. The netting design on its inedible exterior are the trauma scars from its formative period in the hanging-melon house, where its starchy-potato-tasting interiors are cultivated and mutated into sweet, mellow pulp. A savory thirst-quencher cupped in a chastity belt of weird webbing, the Hami



Slavs and Tatars, *The Fragrant Concubine*, (installation view), photo Oliver Ottenschläger/Secession, 2012

melon is a sturdy, fragrant emissary from just beyond the Great Wall.

"Here you can penetrate anywhere, only not with the Gospels under your arm, but with money in your pocket, a carbine in one hand and a whip in the other."² The explorer and proto-imperialist Przhevalsky (Stalin's mom's fabled baby daddy), who charted the nineteenth-century Hami oasis and everything around it, was hoping to froth up unrest among the Muslims of the area against those "feckless Asiatics" – in the name of extending them Russian prosperity, mowing down the Mongolians and Tibetans along the way, and replacing them with Cossacks. The Kyrgyz town of Karakol – where he died of Typhoid contracted from the river – became Przhevsk in 1888, Karakol in 1921, Przhevsk in 1939, and Karakol in 1991. Przhevalsky never penetrated very far, it seems, except (so to speak) eponymously, with every last wild horse species and plant genus from there to the Caspian bearing his consonant-rich tongue twist. Meanwhile, the



A melon vendor, en route to Mokhi-Khosa, the emir of Bukhara's summer palace, Uzbekistan, 2011

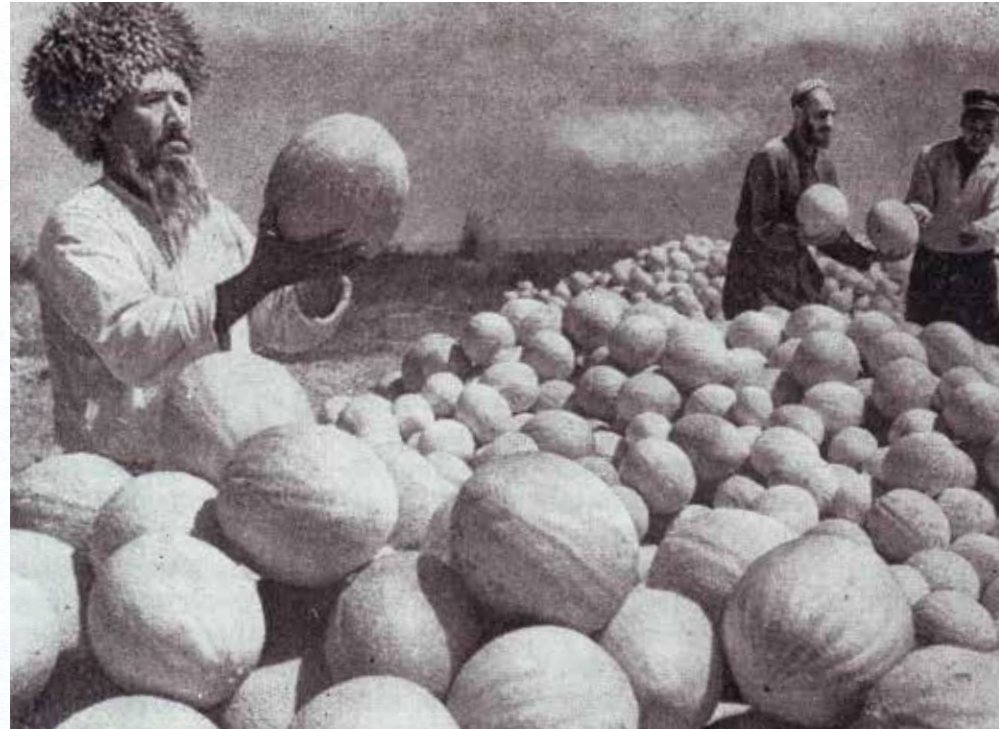
Hami Melon continued to sprout on both sides of the Heavenly Mountains, with vowel-like levels of grace and softness. At its most fragrant before its death throes – Hami melon was simply a synonym for the best melons of Xinjiang.

Another China-hater – with a Qur'an under her arm and razor blades up her sleeves – was just as musky and mellow as the melons of her homeland; her olfactory prowess was the whiff of resistance. Xian Fe/Iparhan, the so-called Fragrant Concubine, became the most famous Uighur outside of Central Asia – precisely for never giving up the fruit.

Kidnapped by the Qianlong Emperor, Xian Fe was showered with delectably named living quarters (like the Precious Moon Hall – where she could see



Khoja Iparhan, aka the Fragrant Concubine. Source: <http://hafif.org/yazi/gelinlerin-anasi-cariye-iparhan-1>



Triage of the melon sort known as "golabi" (Persian for pear) in the Sakarsky Region of the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic. Source: *Soviet Central Asia Encyclopedia*, 1963



Przewalsky's horse. Source: warhorsegazette.blogspot.com

fellow Muslims outside the castle with a giant mirror, ostensibly assuaging her homesickness and her unwillingness to put out) and juicy Hami melons,

a court tribute from the northern regions that often went straight to the ladies of the palace. But, like a version of Norman Bates' mother in reverse,



the Empress Dowager put an end to the girl when she continued to refuse to budge on her chastity. Her legendary, mysterious scent apparently lingers around her and her celebrated resting place in Kashgar to this day.

2.
Cited in Robert Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 35.

THE POMEGRANATE



Sergei Paradjanov's 1968 cult classic *Sayat Nova* (*Color of Pomegranates*)

XXXI/32

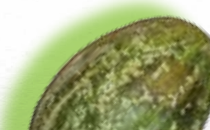
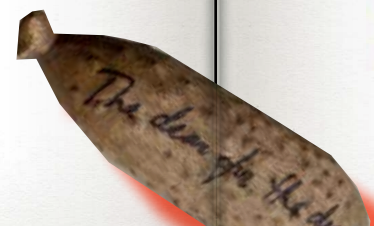
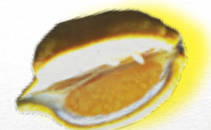
THE FRUIT OF FUNDAMENTALISM

Of late the pomegranate runs a similar risk to the foreigner who 'passes' as a local: integration often means emasculation. Originally from the Caucases, the pomegranate has been embraced by hordes of the health-conscious in the extreme West (California) for its particularly high concentration of antioxidants. We accuse the contraction: the pomegranate has become the pom or, thanks to a particularly exploitative trademark, Pom. Regrettably, this is a tried and true tradition amongst immigrants: Pavel becomes Paul, Hossein becomes Henry, but we would petition to leave the Pomegranate alone.

Via a turn of linguistic fortune, we can redeem the aesthetic and atavistic violence of the pomegranate. In French, the word for pomegranate and grenade are one and the

same. If we look to its explosive nature—surely the only fruit to require a change of attire for fear of its irreparable stains—it is for another health benefit: namely, its anti-Occident character.

(from Slavs and Tatars, *A Thirteenth Month Against Time*, artist book, mimeograph and offset hand-pasted color stickers, 2008)



The hand holds a pomegranate, the mouth starts to water



Slavs and Tatars, *How-less*, photo Oliver Ottenschläger/Secession, 2012



Man in fur-lined coat, Isfahan. Masterpieces from the Department of Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011



Nodira, famed poetess and de-factor ruler of the Kokand Khanate in the early 19th century

THE CUCUMBER

A Caucasian proverb recorded in the nineteenth century says, "If I had known that my

father was going to die, I would have traded him off for a cucumber."³ Filial ingratitude? Economic pragmatism? Oedipal masturbation? Bad translation? Perhaps the idea that a phallus saved is a phallus earned really is the wacky-working credo of a host of Eurasian subalterns. That is, tradition has not left the building, it has simply syncretized, camouflaged, and

euphemized itself, sneakily slithering from its origins, still intact, into the present. Perhaps someone learned the idea from the Mongol hordes – who were known to carry fermented vegetables as provisions during their twelfth-century Eastern European invasions – and was smart enough to pickle it and store it for the ages (once in a while even using it as a hangover cure).



Slavs and Tatars, *The Dear for the Dear* photo Oliver Ottenschläger/Secession, 2012



Ivan Kupala Day (St. John the Baptist), Ukraine.

Life is like a cucumber:
one day in your hand,
one day in your ass.
— Egyptian Arabic
proverb



Mongol hordes. The sacking of Suzdal by Batu Khan, 1238. Source: Wikipedia

xatak, has crept in to represent a cucumber. But what if a cigar is just a pipe, and a cucumber is just a cucumber?

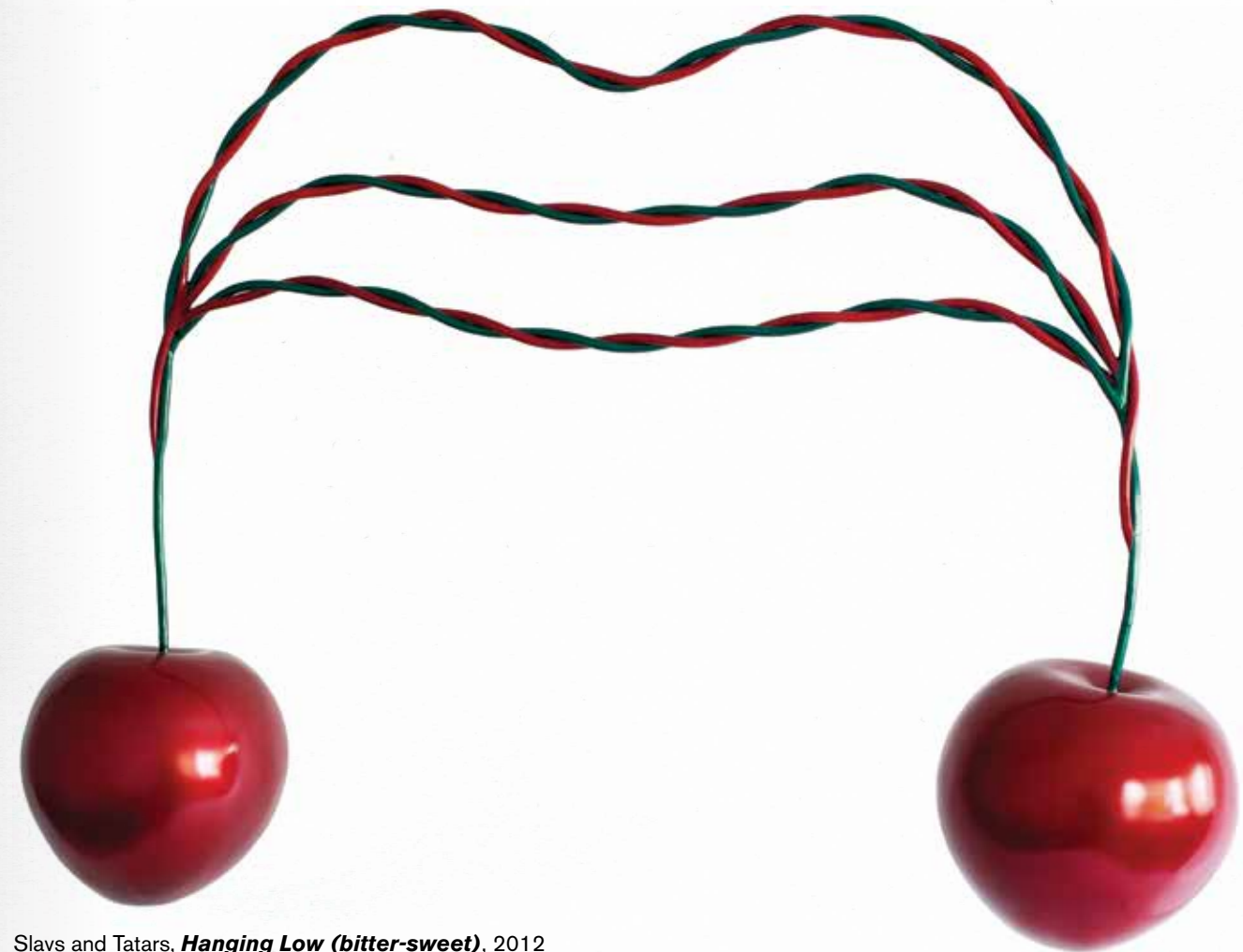
3. George Kennan, of New York 15 (1883): 289-318. "A Journey through Southeastern Russia," Journal of the American Geographical Society



Half-salted and full-salted pickles, Dorogomilovsky Market, Moscow. Source: Flickr, NeelC1

The central Ukraine continued to feed tradition and the cucumber patch as part of the Ivan Kupala fertility rite — a celebration of the nativity of St.

John the Baptist, which conveniently coincides with the summer solstice — for a good seventy years under Soviet-tilled ground. And that might not be so different from the ritual that the (sort of) Kurdish Yezidi girls carry out on their wedding night, wearing what they call a "cucumber" around their neck. It hearkens back to one of the Seven Mysteries that aren't mysterious at all, the *Yezidi Milyāk'atE-qanj* that — unlike the Greek god Priapus, who personifies an erect penis — simply is one. In Lomavren, the secret language of the Armenian gypsies, the Pashto word for melon,



Slavs and Tatars, *Hanging Low (bitter-sweet)*, 2012 photo Oliver Ottenschläger/Secession, 2012

THE SOUR CHERRY

It has been rumored that the people of the steppe have a higher tolerance for sour tastes. Whether it is the tart fruits that make up *lavashak*, a Persian proto-fruit roll, or the various curdled



Cherry lavashak, Iran. Source: Flickr, Peteshep

dairy products impossible to translate into any but the neighboring tongues

(kashk كَشِك), the sour is a gustatory shibboleth of sorts. A disposition toward the in-between lip-smack of complexity is a warm-dead giveaway.

Józef Wittlin's *Mój Lwów* (My Lvov) laments the loss of the plural identities, languages, and affinities of a city that was Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, and German and warns of memory's selective, if unstated, agenda. He speaks (bittersweetly, of course) of the essence of "'Lwówness' — that



Lavashak stand, Tehran. Source: Flickr, Mozhan

strange mix of the sublime and the street urchin [*tobuz*], of wisdom and cretinism, of poetry and the mundane – as a special indefinable taste (as of a *czereha*, neither cherry nor sour cherry).⁴ Retrospection, soiled (or scrubbed) by nostalgia, tends to turn the desperate into the disparate; that is, in the (old) version of time that charts past to future: Sweet and sour tend to crystallize, like sugar cane, into their own camps. Only a mended version of the present can savor the two as one.

Despite epic historic rivalries, like the one that ravaged Lvov, almost all the Eurasian names for the sour cherry – be they Lithuanian or Turkish, Russian, or Polish – hover around *visnja*. Its name deriving from the root verb *vesit'* (to hang),



Seal of Giresun, Turkey. Source: Wikipedia

the sour cherry burdens the delicate branches that help it grow, with its accumulated weight, if not with its complexity of taste.

4. Cited in George G. Grabowicz, "Mythologizing Lviv/Lwów: Echoes of Presence and Absence," in "Lviv:

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THE SWEET LEMON

Like the satellite television stations in Tehrangeles beaming so much saccharine for the Iranian diaspora community, the sweet lemon, aka citrus limetta, is more émigré than immigrant. Where its more mundane cousins go by the kilo, the sweet lemon goes for prices more dear.

The fruits with a subtle *je ne sais quoi* taste have recently made their presence known in California, but unlike those escaping the stale revolutionary ideology of the regime, these



Советские Субтропики, 1934. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, NY.

seeds wander east not west: tony Manhattanites can have a kilo of sweet lemons delivered straight to their doormen for a low three figure price. Alternatively known as moosambi in India,



Советские Субтропики, 1934. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, NY.

Palestinian sweet lime, or ليمو شیرین, the sweet lemon is coveted from the eastern Mediterranean to Greater Khorasan, in particular Iran and Tadjikistan, as a natural antibiotic during the winter months. It has however a peculiar, defining aspect: as if resistant to the very air it breathes, the sweet lemon's taste goes bitter after a couple minutes of being opened. Permanently temporary.

The citrus fruit in general is a big-tent crop: it invites any and all into to its yurt-like camp to claim it as their own. Grapefruit, the Floridians' pride, finds its echoes in sanguinello, the

Sicilians' honor, if not in lemons, the Georgians' prize. The Jewish etrog, an idiosyncratic citron carefully bred to Kosher perfection, travels into the present from antiquity and takes shelter under the *sukkah*, a ritual, symbolic dwelling constructed from wood, brush and greenery that stands for only three days in autumn. The holiday of *Sukkot* is yet another commemoration in the Jewish tradition to wandering, and the etrog – for some – represents Jews who have maintained both knowledge of Torah and performance of mitzvot (commandments) after all this time. Roots planted far and wide, branches brought along on a journey to give shelter wherever one may set down. The citrus is the eternal nomad whose taste forever recalls home.



Slavs and Tatars, *Not Moscow Not Mecca*, (installation view), photo Oliver Ottenschläger/Secession, 2012

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**Ах! мой Мурза? – как нужны знания,
Которы странник почерпает
Из разных душ иноплеменных? –
Конечно, - должно быть пчелой,
И брать сок чистый из всего...
Мы все пришельцы, - ты, - и Я;
Вселена – поприще для нас;
Отечество не здесь, - но там -**

**Природа резвая дотолле
На сих горах, на сих лугах
Оцепенела, - побледнела
Под бледной сению луны...
О сколь ужасна перемена
Во всем была во дни их буйств! –
Тогда ни виноград, ни смоквы,
Ни персики, ни абрикосы
Природных вкусов не имели. –**

**Прощайте! - и пребудьте - верны -
Алле - и белому царю! -
Никто другой, - лишь он один
Да будет вашею главой!**

Семён Сергеевич
Бобров "Таврида, или мой летний день в Таврическом Херсонесе"

Ah! my mirza? How necessary is the knowledge, / Which the traveler draws / From various foreign souls? / Of course, one should be a bee, / and take clean juice from everything. / We are all strangers, you and me; / The universe is our walk of life; / The fatherland is not here, but there.

Frisky nature / On these mountains, on these meadows / Froze, turned pale / Under the faint light of the moon. / Oh how terrible the change / In everything in the days of the Tatars' riots! / Neither grapes, nor figs, / Neither pears, nor apricots / Had any natural taste.

Farewell! and remain faithful / To Allah and to the white Tsar! / No one else, let only him / Be your head! / Learn that his shield / Protects tolerance of faiths.

Semen Bobrov, "Tavrída, ili moi letnii den' v Tavricheskom Khersonise"

