To my beloved family

Contents

Beyoğlu'nun sayısız sokaklarının herbirinde görüldüğü, görülebileceği gibi, burada da kediler. . .

> sokağa inerler, balıkçının ardından yürüyen kediler ordusuna katılırlar sessizce. Hiçbiri saldırgan değildir. Balıkçı bir kapının önünde durdu mu hepsi durur, kıçını yere kor, sıralandığı çembersel çizgiden balıkçının ellerine diker gözlerini.

(As they are seen, can be seen in each of the countless streets of Beyoğlu, so here, too, cats. . .

> they go down the street, they join quietly the army of cats walking behind the fish vendor. None is aggressive. When the fish vendor stops at a door they all stop, put their ass down, forming a circle they fix their gaze on the fish vendor's hands.)

—Bilge Karasu, "Beyoğlu Üzerine Metin" ("Text on Beyoğlu")

So zittert durch durch die schmetterlingserfüllte Luft das Wort "Brauhausberg." Auf dem Brauhausberg bei Potsdam hatten wir unsere Sommerwohnung. Aber der Name hat alle Schwere verloren, enthält von einem Brauhaus überhaupt nichts mehr und ist allenfalls ein von Bläue umwitterter Berg, der im Sommer sich aufbaute, um mich und meine Eltern zu behausen. Und darum liegt das Potsdam meiner Kindheit in so blauer Luft, als wären seine Trauermäntel oder Admirale, Tagpfauenaugen und Aurorafalter über eine der schimmernden Emaillen von Limoges verstreut, auf denen die Zinnen und Mauern Jerusalems vom dunkelblauen Grunde sich abheben.

(Thus, through air teeming with butterflies vibrates the word "Brauhausberg," which is to say, 'Brewery Hill.' It was on the Brauhausberg, near Potsdam, that we had our summer residence. But the name has lost all heaviness, contains nothing more of any brewery, and is, at most, a blue-misted hill that rose up every summer to give lodging to my parents and me. And that is why the Potsdam of my childhood lies in air so blue, as though all its butterflies—its mourning cloaks and admirals, peacocks and auroras—were scattered over one of those glistening Limoges enamels, on which the ramparts and battlements of Jerusalem stand out against a dark blue ground.)

—Walter Benjamin, "Schmetterlingsjagd" ("Butterfly Hunt")

Acknowledgments

This study grew out of my interest in the representation of "lost places." I was was especially intrigued by narratives of Istanbul's Beyoğlu, penned by its Turkish, local minority, and Levantine authors, and depicting a culturally diverse past. Walter Benjamin's evocation of the vanished bourgeois culture under the motto "a past become space" inspired me to employ a cross-cultural framework, which would include memory narratives in both German and Turkish contexts. Benjamin's construction of memory, based on a topographical model and largely informed by psychoanalysis, became the guide for exploring Bilge Karasu's unique expression of an ethno-culturally repressed past in his Beyoğlu collection.

From the initial concept of a broader "Beyoğlu project" to the publication of the present book on Karasu and Benjamin, colleagues, students, family members, and friends have supported my research and writing. I am indebted to the editors at Academic University Press, to Senior Editor Alessandra Anzani for walking me through the publication process from the beginning to the end, to Hakan Karateke, Editor of Ottoman and Turkish Studies, for his insightful comments and collaboration on the final manuscript, and to Stuart Allen for his meticulous copy edits. I would like to express my gratitude to Nigel Nicholson, Dean of the Faculty and Walter Mintz Professor of Classics, Reed College, who made the publication of this book possible by his generous support through the Stillman Drake Foundation Awards. I am also thankful to staff members at the Dean of the Faculty's Office for their assistance.

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Finally, I would like to honor the memory of Füsun Akatlı as the editor of Bilge Karasu's posthumous writings. It is due to Akatlı's untiring work that the reader holds today the Beyoğlu collection in book form.

Esin, Lukas, Defne, thank you for being the joy of my life.

Ü.G.
Portland, Oregon, 2020

Introduction

Reminiscences of Karasu

I became acquainted with Bilge Karasu in 1973 in Ankara. At the time, our friendship was on the warmer side of polite: he addressed me with "siz," the formal "you" in Turkish. Karasu's social circles included a small group of rising poets and writers. These disciples had great respect for Karasu and his authorship, and they admired his approach to writing. Rather than following the prevalent trend of the day—social realism—they found inspiration in Karasu's hermetic prose, rich in experimental narrative techniques.

Like those young friends who venerated Karasu, I used to feel slightly nervous when going up the stone stairway of that old apartment building in Tunus Street. The author lived there with his mother, Madam Aspasya, a displaced native of Istanbul's Greek-Orthodox (or *Rum*) community. Karasu's tomcat, Bibik, used to show up for guests. However, following Karasu's warnings, we did not dare to touch this big cat that seemed to be an altogether different creature from all the cats we knew.

One day, Madam Aspasya invited me, with my infant daughter, for tea. The year must have been 1975. I recall that Madam gave me the recipes for the cake and the savory pie she had prepared for us. Since then, so much has been lost and vanished. Strangely, however, the two recipes of Madam Aspasya have survived many a move and are still in my possession. At tea, she responded to my questions about her son's childhood in Istanbul by offering up some fragmented memories: they used to live in Taksim Square; Bilge started his piano lessons at the age of three. Madam spoke Turkish with the melodic accent of Istanbul's *Rums*, thus evoking her lost home. Unlike Madam Aspasya's native Pera-Beyoğlu district of Istanbul, a place of diverse languages and cultures, as the cultural center and capital of the nation state, Ankara signified the homogeneous space

of "Turkishness."[1] Thus, as I will show in this study, like the mother figure in Karasu's Beyoğlu narratives, moving to the steppe of Ankara from her native Pera meant for the author's Greek-Orthodox mother a dislocation. Her nonbelonging constituted her alterity, pointing her entire being to an elsewhere.

I last saw Bilge Karasu in the spring of 1994 when he extended a lecture tour in the US to Portland, Oregon. Karasu had recently been awarded the Pegasus Prize for Literature; his novel *Night* (*Gece*) had just been published by Louisiana State University Press with Güneli Gün's translation.[2] Having accepted an invitation by Reed College, where I was a faculty member, on May 4 the author presented his narrative "A Medieval Monk" to a small audience.[3] After his previous experiences of crowded and intense reading events during his US visit, Karasu seemed to welcome this more relaxed atmosphere. I recall that he remained engaged in the question and answer session and did not mind responding to the usual, cliché-ridden comments, such as comparisons of "A Medieval Monk" to Kafka or Borges.

Those who knew Bilge Karasu are also well aware that, contrary to the deep philosophical dimensions of his oeuvre and the piercing gaze he directed toward the individual psyche, Karasu avoided such weighty topics in everyday life. The darkness defining his fiction did not enter his conversation, which remained life-affirming, gentle, and sunny. During his visit to Portland I witnessed again how he avoided the weightiest matters, preferring instead to focus lovingly on everyday life. On a May morning, we bid farewell at the airport. Karasu was on his way to Boston, where he was to give a seminar at Harvard University. He left Portland looking happy and youthful, just as he had on arrival. I didn't know that

1 This study introduces the hyphenated designation Pera-Beyoğlu, in order to convey, both the former, Levantine, designation, and the common Turkish name of the neighborhood. I use the dual form alternatingly with the Turkish designation, Beyoğlu, and the old name of the district, Pera.

2 The Pegasus Prize for Literature was given to authors whose works were seldom translated into English. It was founded by the Mobil Corporation in 1977. The award-winning works were translated into English and published by Louisiana State University Press.

3 This narrative, titled in the original "Bir Ortaçağ Abdalı," is included in *Göçmüş Kediler Bahçesi* (1991), *The Garden of Departed Cats* (2003).

this would be the last time I would see him. Karasu died in the summer of 1995.[4]

Questions, Themes, and Method

This book brings into dialogue two representative writers of the twentieth century—Walter Benjamin and Bilge Karasu—traversing their distance in time and space. Given their respective cultural and historical contexts, they seem to be unlikely partners at first. Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) grew up in the Wilhelmine Empire and Weimar Germany as the son of a wealthy, assimilated German Jewish family and died in Portbou, Spain, while trying to escape Nazi-occupied France. He is regarded as one of the most important philosophers and critics of modernity. Bilge Karasu (1930-95), on the other hand, was a child of the new Turkish Republic. Primarily a fiction writer, and celebrated as a master of Turkish prose, Karasu is revered for the philosophical depth and formal innovation of his art. He lived in Istanbul and Ankara and was never forced to leave his home country. Yet, although Karasu did not experience exile like Benjamin, his writing is permeated with a sense of displacement and difference.

My inquiry follows this pervasive mood of displacement, or evocation of alterity, in Karasu's writings, through a particular example—his constellation of narratives depicting the Istanbul neighborhood Beyoğlu. This predominantly non-Muslim enclave was also called Pera (in Greek "beyond," "on the other side") in its bygone cosmopolitan days. *Excavating Memory* moves Karasu into a new critical arena by exploring the poetics of memory—as well as the formal and thematic manifestations of difference—that inform the Beyoğlu narratives. Several of the stories contained in the volume, which was published posthumously by Füsun Akatlı under

4 Among many personal reminiscences with Bilge Karasu, Deniz Göktürk's essay "Imagining Europe as a Realm of Transfiguration" resonates well with my above personal account. As the translator into German of Karasu's *The Garden of Departed Cats*, Göktürk met the author in Ankara in the early 1990s to discuss her translation. They also participated in a bilingual reading at the German Consulate in Istanbul. She states that their plans to meet in Berlin again were cut short by Karasu's death. In reference to Murathan Mungan's portrayal of Karasu at the conference "Reading Bilge Karasu," Göktürk emphasizes not only Karasu's sense of humor, but also "his meticulousness in all realms of work—while he was plucking parsley leaves or editing a translation" (2014, 131).

the title *Lağımlaranası ya da Beyoğlu* (*Mother of Black Waters or Beyoğlu*, or literally, *Mother of Sewage or Beyoğlu*, 1999), previously appeared in literary journals.[5] In Karasu's conception they were the building blocks of a larger book on Beyoğlu, a work in progress that extended over Karasu's career. However, the "magnum opus" never materialized, leaving Karasu's discourse on the neighborhood where he spent his childhood years incomplete. The reception of Karasu's Beyoğlu narratives in Turkish literary criticism has been next to nonexistent, except for Turkish author and literary critic Enis Batur's illuminating comments, based on his conversations with Karasu (1997, 160-63). As I will discuss in greater detail in chapter 3, Batur pinpoints two aspects of the projected Beyoğlu book; first, that it is, due to its nature, bound to remain unfinished; and second, that the author's hesitation to bring the book to completion may be related to Karasu's secret minority background.

Batur's comments shed light on the framework of my analysis. The concept of incompleteness is the decisive starting point insofar as it connects Karasu's unfinished, open-ended model of memory with Benjamin's paradigm of remembering. By employing Benjamin's theory of memory, as laid out in his "autobiographical" work, as a heuristic tool, I examine how Karasu conjures up differential or minority identities through a nonchronological rendering of remembering, marked by disruptions and silences. The major tenets of identity that shaped the author's life and work, his homosexuality and his minority background, indicate Karasu's conflict with the norms of the mainstream Turkish culture of his time. My reading of *Black Waters* in light of the category of alterity situates the Beyoğlu book in the context of the author's continuing treatment of this overarching subject. I argue that sexually and ethno-culturally defined indicators of otherness are actually dispersed all over Karasu's oeuvre, even if the author officially withheld autobiographic references from public perception. While same-sex male desire is represented more explicitly in Karasu's writings, ethno-cultural difference remains as a hidden theme. It is inscribed in Karasu's works but not yet sufficiently explored in literary criticism.

Hercules Millas' essay, titled "Constructing Memories of 'Multiculturalism' and Identities in Turkish Novels" is an exception, in that he includes

5 I have abbreviated the title to *Black Waters*. All translations from *Lağımlaranası ya da Beyoğlu* are mine.

Karasu among the Turkish novelists who portray multiculturalism. This critical approach has provided inspiration and a strong ally for the argument presented in *Excavating Memory*, even if Millas' reference pertains to *Uzun Sürmüş Bir Günün Akşamı* (*A Long Day's Evening*), with its narratives set in Byzantium. Millas proposes several categories to describe the representation of multiculturalism and non-Muslim identities in Turkish novels, both prior and after 1980: the "Ottomanists," the "Nationalists," the "Marxists," the "Anatolianists," and the "Humanists," among others. In Millas' framework, Karasu belongs to this last group. Drawing on discourse analysis and ideology critique, Millas illustrates how the depiction of minority identities are determined by various standpoints, how affirmative and negative connotations are established, and how the concept of nostalgia for the lost diversity differs according to the novelist's perspective.[6] However, along with differences, Millas points out affinities and transitions between the groups. Thus, Millas' reflection on Karasu in the context of multiculturalism deserves critical attention. Further aspects of the "Humanists" and their treatment of multiculturalism will be addressed in my conclusion.

The central position that the trope Beyoğlu occupies in Karasu's intellectual biography has remained largely neglected. This may be due to the incomplete nature of Karasu's collection of Beyoğlu stories, to the meticulous yet unavoidably tentative editorial compilation of the pieces after the author's death, or to the obscure rendering of remembrance in *Black Waters*. As mentioned earlier, Karasu is celebrated today for his avant-gardism in Turkish prose fiction, but not as a major chronicler of Beyoğlu. This is all the more surprising because a close examination of his output reveals that the role of childhood remained a continuing subject for Karasu. The author revisits this theme again and again, beginning with his early fiction of the 1950s and 60s, such as *Troya'da Ölüm Vardı* from 1963 (*Death in Troy*, 2002), up to his last prose fragments *Altı Ay Bir Güz* (*Six Months One Autumn*, 1996). Why did Karasu persistently, even if in a fragmented way, return to the representation of this enclave of Istanbul? I argue that the author's perpetual involvement with a particular cityscape is related to the question of selfhood, albeit projected in Karasu's work through the filter of multilayered distortions.

6 Millas 2009, 88.

Karasu's hermetic rendering of oppression and desire has drawn particular attention in Turkish literary criticism and among his international readership (see Parla 2011, Seyhan 2008).[7] Thus, while these themes have been sufficiently addressed in scholarship, another essential tenet of Karasu's oeuvre, the construction of ethno-cultural identities still requires critical assessment. Do Karasu's Beyoğlu narratives attest to the author's own minority identity as the son of a mixed marriage of non-Muslim parents, a Jewish father and a Greek-Orthodox mother? Considering the ideological climate in the early decades of the nation-building process in the Turkish Republic, it is likely that Karasu had to construct his public persona from the multiple differences in his "identity," including his non-Muslim background and his homosexuality.

How can Karasu's Beyoğlu as a mnemonic space, construed through such narrative strategies as displacement, distortion, and a nonchronological rendering of childhood scenes, be placed in an historical reading? Exactly how does *Black Waters* evoke Beyoğlu's vanished community of ethnic and religious minorities through narrative silences? As will be discussed in chapter 1, "Reading Historically," the method that critic Gerhard Richter explores with regard to Benjamin, proves useful in thinking through this question. Reflecting on *Black Waters* in light of Benjamin's interrelated categories of "now-time" (*Jetztzeit*) and "dialectical image" (*dialektisches Bild*) will illustrate how we can discern concrete historicity in Karasu's non-referential narrative.

The present study unpacks the Beyoğlu texts neither as autobiographical documents nor solely as fiction, but as a practice of writing and reading memory. In this regard, my approach does not fully comply with the remark Karasu once made on his Beyoğlu project: objecting to biographical interpretations, he insisted that what he was writing was a novel (Mungan 2008, 237). My reading brings to the center the configurations of difference, (non-)identity, and belonging, as they emerge from Karasu's representation of Beyoğlu as a site of otherness. By mediating between two methodological frameworks, one based on the formal-rhetorical tenets of inscribing memory, as displayed in Benjamin's model, and the other on historicity, my analysis aims at approximating

7 Deniz Göktürk notes that "Karasu was said to be a difficult and mysterious author." To counteract this cliché, she refers to Akşit Göktürk's statement "that Karasu's text resists the expectations of lazy readers who are looking for linear causality in a story" (2014, 130).

the subject matter of Karasu's place-based memory fragments. In the literary medium of *Black Waters*, this "truth-content" (*Wahrheitsgehalt*), to use a term from Benjamin, transpires not in referential relations but in the network of fragments presented. Thus, Karasu's Beyoğlu narratives offer a unique ground for simultaneously validating a postmodernist *and* a historical-critical reading.

Bilge Karasu in the Context of World Literature

English translations of Karasu's major works are available in the award-winning renderings of Aron Aji. Karasu has also been translated to other languages, such as German and French. Yet, he hasn't reached the global fame that, for example, the Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk has enjoyed. While the two authors have different artistic projects, they are the foremost representatives of modern Turkish literature. It has been argued that Western readers have been attracted to Pamuk because of his treatment of questions pertaining to Turkish identity, whereas such thematization in Karasu is missing. My critical intervention aims at underscoring precisely this allegedly absent dimension in Karasu. In my view, it is time to present Karasu to the world readership as an equally intriguing master of identity construction as his fellow novelist Pamuk. Through his nonreferential and ambiguous renderings of memory in *Mother of Black Waters or Beyoğlu*, Karasu gives unique expression to Turkish ethno-cultural difference.

In her assessment of the changing reception of Karasu's fiction among the Western readership, Deniz Göktürk offers pertinent insights into the shifting interest in modern Turkish literature in general. Referring to the difficulties of finding a publisher for her German translation of *The Garden of Departed Cats*, Göktürk states that in the 1990s Turkey was primarily associated in the reading public's imagination with a mosque or a Turkish bath (2014, 129-30). Despite the interest in migrant literature from the same decade, foreign readers were still relatively unaware of the rich literary corpus of Turkish modernity. Göktürk pinpoints the emergence of German publishing's increasing interest in Turkish literature at 2006, the year in which Pamuk won the Nobel Prize; and, furthermore, at 2008 at the Frankfurt Book Fair where Turkey was honored as the guest country (132). This analysis of the recent reception and circulation history of Turkish literature in the

West well explains the growth in numbers of Karasu's fiction in English translation. Actually, Aji's translations start at the outset of the millennium, earlier even than the above dates. Likewise, Göktürk's translation, *Der Garten entschwundener Katzen,* was published in 2002. However, the fact that Aji's latest translation of *Uzun Sürmüş Bir Günün Akşamı*, Karasu's book of three interrelated narratives, came out in 2013 under the title *A Long Day's Evening* indicates the continuing interest of publishers and readers in Karasu's output.

It is important to note that other prime examples of modern Turkish literature—such as Sait Faik's short stories and poems, compiled as *Sleeping in the Forest* in Talat S. Halman's translation, and Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar's *A Mind at Peace* (*Huzur*), translated by Erdağ Göknar—were also released in the first decade of the millennium. Turkish Jewish writer Mario Levi's epic saga *Istanbul was a Fairy Tale* (*İstanbul Bir Masaldı*), depicting the lives of a Jewish family over generations, became available to English-speaking readers with Ender Gürol's translation in 2012. At the same time, Pamuk continued to sell, and scholars repeatedly wrote about his work. Each of his texts has appeared in English translation shortly after publication of the Turkish edition. In light of this growing attention to Turkish writing as a whole, this study aims to contribute to commentary on modern Turkish literature, especially, but not only, in translation. My comparative analysis of Karasu and Benjamin offers a differentiated critical reading, thereby widening the scope of scholarship on Karasu at the intersection of Turkish and German Studies.

The Evocation of Mnemonic Places

Looking at Karasu through the lens of Benjamin's writings amplifies the significance of the German Jewish philosopher's paradigm of remembering. Through a comparative framework, I demonstrate the ways in which Benjamin's memory model can be transposed to narratives outside the Western canon. In his Berlin memoirs, including his unfinished *A Berlin Chronicle* (*Berliner Chronik*, 1932), its transformed version, *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (*Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert*, 1932-38), and his seminal work, *The Arcades Project* (*Das Passagen-Werk*, 1928-40), Benjamin explores the intrinsic relationship between memory and cityscapes, especially architectural relics of nineteenth-century bourgeois culture. His archeological allegory of remembering-as-excavation evades

mimetic-historicist reconstruction, accentuating instead the process of remembering. By uncovering the fragments of meaning in the remains of a recent past, Benjamin evokes departed eras. Space functions as a repository of memory; Benjamin's profound interest in reading and writing the past thus centers on sites as containers of mnemonic traces. The following chapters address the sense of displacement which governs Benjamin's construction of remembering, and the way he conveys the contents of memory through interruptions, gaps, and absences more than presence.

Recent Benjamin scholarship has emphasized the importance of Sigmund Freud's memory model for Benjamin's representation of remembering. In Freud's paradigm of memory, what is remembered resurfaces in consciousness as a "trace" that is legible but incomplete and distorted. Benjamin's memory fragments in his Berlin texts seem to display a kindred process of remembering, presented as a self-reflexive writing of memory. In my analysis, I draw on exemplary psychoanalytic readings of Benjamin's memoirs. These approaches focus especially on the incomplete nature of memory in Freud's theory. Thus, critics working with rhetorical-poststructuralist methods find an engaging approach to reading Benjamin in Freud's view that it is impossible to fully reconstruct memory.

Along with these more abstract readings, I also discuss historical interpretations that contextualize Benjamin's Berlin writings in multiple temporal frameworks. By bringing Benjamin's topographically defined concept of remembrance into dialogue with Karasu's poetics of memory, I establish a surprising intercultural simultaneity pertaining to the representation of two disparate moments of twentieth-century modernity—one at its very outset, around 1900, the other in the early to mid-twentieth century. My comparative approach aims at mapping out the interconnectedness between place, memory, selfhood, and literary representation. To unravel Karasu's memory work in his Beyoğlu book, I draw on the critical vocabulary that informs Benjamin's theories of memory and history. These include concepts such as "dialectical image," "sudden illumination," memory as "snapshot," "now-time," "past become space," remembering as "excavation," "threshold," and "redemption." The notion of a "rescuing critique," or "redemptive criticism" (*rettende Kritik*), that underlies Benjamin's thinking from his early work in literary criticism to his last writings on the philosophy of history, and that is closely related to the above-mentioned terms, offers a further critical tool for exploring the narratives of memory (Habermas 1979; Weigel 1997, 59, 95; Isenberg

1999, 131). These categories will help clarify how Benjamin and Karasu configure historical knowledge in their recall of the past.

Benjamin's historico-critical terminology has been interpreted in diverse directions in scholarship, including the reading of his thought in light of Jewish tradition, and in particular, the Jewish messianism that inspired his perception of the past. Noah Isenberg's insightful study on the philosopher-critic's construction of memory in relationship to his Jewish identity offers a good example of this approach. By way of connecting Benjamin's notion of memory to the Jewish commandment to remember (*zakhor*), Isenberg argues that Benjamin's search for redemption in the past places his project of remembering in the context of messianic thought (1999, 125). While Isenberg reads *Berlin Childhood* in light of the Jewish concept of remembrance, he emphasizes the tension between Jewish motifs and the experience of modernity, as represented through the big city, in Benjamin's Berlin narratives (132-39). The examination of Benjamin's memory model through the question of Jewish identity constitutes an engaging critical background and points to affinities between Karasu's and Benjamin's texts of remembrance, which manifest various modes of displacement in their formal and thematic fabric. Although the integration of the Jewish element in Benjamin's autobiographical work transcends the scope of my analysis, it is a compelling point of reference for exploring the ethno-cultural component as alterity in Karasu.

The trope of "lost places" in Benjamin and Karasu's narratives remains an ongoing concern of my investigation. In *Black Waters*, Karasu enacts a childhood that spans the 1930s and 1940s (the early era of the Turkish Republic) spent in the culturally diverse enclave Beyoğlu. Benjamin's autobiographical Berlin writings, while bearing witness to an individual childhood, reflect on the lost world of the assimilated Jewish bourgeoisie in the imperial capital. The borough of was the former center of *Frenk* (European), that is, Levantine, culture and commerce and home for the local Christian and Jewish minorities of the Ottoman Empire. Although distant from Benjamin's Jewish Berlin, Beyoğlu shares a similar predicament with Berlin's West End, the affluent neighborhood in the Charlottenburg district at the turn of the twentieth century. Like the latter, Beyoğlu too lost its previous cultural signification through radically transformative events of twentieth-century history. The policies and civic ideals of the new Turkish Republic, founded under the leadership of Kemal Atatürk in 1923, aimed above all at the formation of a new,

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