Book Review

Translating the Counterculture: The Reception of the Beats in Turkey. Mortenson, Erik. Carbondale, Ill: Southern Illinois UP, 2018. 278 pp.

Erik Mortenson is a Beat scholar who taught at Koç University, İstanbul, Turkey, from 2006-7 to 2016. Mortenson was invited to Koç University to help establish English and comparative literature curricula, interrupting a Fulbright position in Germany. It so happened that one engineering student in his class, upon learning his scholarly interest in the Beats, introduced Mortenson with a Beat-inspired underground journal, *Underground Poetix*, published by 6:45, and this began the quest he was to pursue for the next few years. Call it coincidence or not (remembering William S. Burroughs on coincidence in *The Adding Machine*), events such as obscenity trial of Burroughs' *The Soft Machine* (2011) and the Gezi Park protests (2013) were key moments for Mortenson's deeper understanding of the Beat scene in Turkey. As he acknowledges in his book, Mortenson made this research a collaborative one, rather than the traditional independently designed individual work, for he needed connections to reach the publishers, editors, writers and translators, and also he needed guidance in the command of language. By the end of this journey, his command of Turkish advanced and those interested can read his translations in the online journals such as *Talisman*, *Asymptote* and *Two Lines*. Unfortunately Mortenson's departure from Turkey was unplanned, necessitated by the uneasy feelings that the reaction against the failed coup attempt in 2016 might target the U.S. citizens in Turkey.

In the introduction, he convincingly answers the three vital questions, "Why the Beats? Why Turkey? Why Now?" Since the term "transnational" is central to the study, Mortenson explores several definitions and explains its significance: "Although the Beats are very much a product of the American society that produced them, their dissemination outside the U.S. borders challenges the foundational myths ascribed to them by providing a glimpse of other possible trajectories for their interpretation and deployment" (4). Such a consideration has the potential to carry the discussion beyond parochial and monolingual terms. This must be the force of literature which, when treated off the page, is able to move the masses. The legacy of Beat literature as a catalyst for an American countercultural

movement of the 1960s is very obvious, especially retrospectively. At this point, Mortenson puts Beat literature/legacy/spirit to test to see if it has the same function outside of U.S. borders. He finds out that it has, consciously trying to avoid "result[ing] in a reification of the very exceptionalism" that American myths promote (5). The existing scholarship on the transnational element in the Beat culture usually pays attention to the non-U.S. settings and references such as the obvious Morocco, India, and Japan. The originality of Mortenson's approach lies both in its geographical focus and his focus on the other end of the literary spectrum – a reading community, provided with interesting statistics in the appendices.

One of the topics in the introduction is, naturally, history, for any foreigner interested in "the reception of the Beats in Turkey" would like to learn more about the place. The generalized summary covers the late Ottoman period, the transition into the modern republic and the turbulent, recent history of Turkey, marked by several military coups. When it comes to culture wars, Turkey is arguably the most contradictory country on this planet. In this sense, terminology such as Islamicist, conservative, fundamentalist, democrat, progressive, liberal and Kemalist, are barely helpful, especially when treated as frozen in time. A person may begin by discussing Islam and end in revolutionary Kemalism; likewise another may justify military coups with a particular notion of Kemalism. Each term may turn out to be its opposite. Nor can the party discourse be safely taken at its word; it might be abstract, uninformed, reactionary and downright misleading. Under these circumstances, counterculture is one of the modes of expression that can give an insider's perspective.

One critical fact Mortenson works on is the belatedness of Beat literature in Turkey. Unlike the situation in the U.S., in Turkey, Beat is not a passé but a phenomenon that still has the power to inspire those who define themselves as countercuntural. In Chapter 1, Mortenson unearths the shift from the practical political struggle of the 1960s and 1970s towards a subtler cultural critique that came after the 1980 coup. The oppression censored and punished any kind of political engagement so that resistance found its way in arts and literature: "… after the 1980 coup, [the Beats] took on added resonance. As a later Turkish public began to take interest in the cultural as the sphere of critique, the Beats reemerged as perfect models for this 'new' type of dissent" (31). To examine this cultural dissent Mortenson

investigates literary and non-literary factors, such as the responses of students reading Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* or the obscenity trial of William S. Burroughs' *The Soft Machine*. One very interesting approach is the reception of the road metaphor by Turkish students, in Chapter 3. Depending on their responses, Mortenson provides a very large panorama of this understanding from the Turkcell "Free Girl" advertisement campaign (2001) to the rape and murder of the Italian "peace bride," Pippa Bacca (2008), one of Turkey's stained chapters. The symbolism and associations around the road, the figure of the rebel and freedom do not seem to be compatible with the American context. The reading community is aware of it, as much as the double standard when it comes to gender.

The Soft Machine trial in Chapter 4 provides an image of an anachronistic climate of censorship in the 21st century, denying homosexuality or avant-garde poetics as elements of basic human or artistic experience. I was personally very much interested in the irony where Burroughs, being excluded from the queer literary tradition in the U.S., "finds himself an inadvertent activist for gay rights" in Turkey in 2011 (127). There is more in Chapter 4, such as the comparison of several obscenity trials of literary works, and interviews with the translators and editors. Chapter 5 explores Allen Ginsberg in Turkey and in the Turkish literary imagination. Mortenson surveys several translations and understandings, and registers how the spiritual element in Ginsberg's poetry corresponds to the Sufi tradition in this geography. Two other topics are the contemporary poet küçük iskender's acknowledgment of Ginsberg as a muse/mentor and Ginsberg's Istanbul visit which serves as a historical record. Mortenson concludes that, unlike the fetishizing aura around Kerouac, the Ginsberg image is highly adaptable and multifaceted and that "By offering such a broad range of possibilities, Ginsberg has made himself useful for several generations of Turkish writers, intellectuals, and activists" (193).

Mortenson sets out to explore the ways in which the Beat legacy informs the social, political and cultural lives of several generations of readers, editors, poets and artists in Turkey, and accomplishes precisely that. Coming back to the political instability of 2016, which forced him to return to the U.S. as he finished writing the book, Mortenson further wonders if the Beats could "be useful in challenging today's repressive and despotic regimes?" (197) At its best, for an American scholar, such an examination opens up new ways of thinking about this

homegrown cultural phenomenon. For American Studies scholars and students in Turkey, the Beats are studied in a disciplined and informed context. Still, even the academic circle might need to know more about the conscious activities of the commercial publishers. Outside of this controlled context, however, the stakes are high. An illustration of this is the Turkish translation of *Howl*, on the cover of which was a Buddha with sunglasses on, holding an American flag. Ginsberg's response was: "The Turkish cover Buddha—Moloch with a flag will mislead any young kid reading for understanding" (218n). This is an example of the danger of reification as mentioned above; the danger of the reader's naively falling prey to cultural imperialism, and the poem tragically misinterpreted.

My further personal thoughts after reading Mortenson's study are that scholarly articles on the Beat connection in Turkey are sorely missing, which is to criticize academics, like myself, of not publishing enough on the issue. There is considerable discussion on Beat literature in our curricula, which, unfortunately, does not get outside of the classroom. Another point is the absence of a larger organization of primary sources on the web, a medium that is highly accessible for enthusiasts and academics alike. Mortenson slightly raises this issue as a contrast between the way literature by/on the Beats is organized in the U.S. and in Turkey (90; 197). These could be taken as assignments for Turkish scholars interested in the subject, though Mortenson probably did not intend as such. Mortenson's *Translating the Counterculture: The Reception of Beats in Turkey* precisely contains what its title promises, and fills a vital part with diligent scholarship.

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