



***Rosestrikes and Coffee Grinds* by Seyhan Erözçelik**
translated by [Murat Nemet-Nejat](#)
Jersey City, NJ, Talisman House, 2010

Reviewed by [Joseph Donahue](#)

A poetic utterance implies the beliefs that made it possible. One such belief might be, certainly once was, that a god brings the poem to the poet. In a secular and scientific world we might expect such an antique notion to readily dissolve in critique, to be washed away by reason, but poetics in the twentieth century suggests that the more secularized and rational the culture of writing that surrounds the poetic act, the more urgent and extreme the search for some version of a supernatural origin.

In modernity the theorizing, that is, the thinking aloud about where a poem comes from, what its nature is, and what effect it can have, keeps shading into theology, especially when the topic is poetic inspiration. In his essay “A Godless Sufism: Ideas on the Twentieth Century Turkish Poetry,” for example, Nemet-Nejat postulates a deep interrelations between “a poetic inspiration that disguises itself as a poetics that explores the origin of poetic texts across linguistic barriers” and “a theology without the word god in it.” Following his lead, we might take note that in modern literary culture the most daring and exact of questioning of doctrines of inspiration has been exactly around the issue of translation. To sustain the transmission of some essence of words across time and cultures and languages Ezra Pound revived the old notions of the transmigrations of souls. More recently, Jack Spicer revived the conceit of spiritual dictation. The act of translating a poem from one language to another has been the point of creedal articulation, has been the place in secular literary culture where the ritual origins of poetry and the attendant world of numinous forces can no longer conceal themselves. No contemporary has explored this moment with quite the eloquence and critical acuity of Murat Nemet-Nejat.

Poet, critic, essayist, translator, and listserve provocateur, Nemet-Nejat has worked to bring a highly refined and philosophically sophisticated version of Sufism into the forefront of contemporary poetics. His notion of Eda, which he has developed and documented in his essays, his own poetry, and in his landmark anthology of Turkish poetry, *Eda: An Anthology of Contemporary Turkish Poetry*, published by Talisman

House in 2004, has provided American poets not only with a powerful theory of inspiration akin to Lorca's duende and tooled to our cultural moment, but has reconnected Western poetry with one of the great traditions of world poetry. In the light of *eda* the contemporary lyric recovers its ritual force. While Nemet-Nejat has grounded his doctrine in the properties of the Turkish language he suggests that *Eda* can pass from the body of one language to the body of another. The power of his translations are the proof-texts of his poetic doctrine.

Several of the poets in the anthology *Eda* have already begun to find an audience in America. With the recent publication of *Rosestrikes and Coffee Grinds* Seyhan Erözçelik joins their ranks. This book presents two dazzling, deeply entwined sequences followed by Nemet-Nejat's essay on the significance of Erözçelik and on the process of translation. It would be a disservice to Erözçelik's poems to ally them too closely with their translator's purchase on the poetic world of modernity if it were not so clear their wit, passion, and vibrancy assure them ultimately their own secure place in contemporary poetry. Nemet-Nejat's terms are, however, an immense help in seeing what the American reader cannot, the deep roots these poems have in their literary historical moment, a part of poetry's response to the transformations in the very fabric of Istanbul in the 1980s and 1990s, when the city's population exploded, the urban landscape dramatically reorganized itself, and Turkish thought and culture entered on the fast track to the postmodern.

The first poem sequence in the collection, "Coffee Grinds," is an extended act of tasseography, a particularly Turkish form of divination. The ritual requires that the coffee cup once drunk be turned over on its saucer. The grinds at the bottom of the cup dry on the saucer and then the shapes -- perhaps we should say hallucinations -- seen in the grinds are interpreted. Here, as so often in modern poetry, the discredited ritual practices of superseded eras receives an uncanny new life. Anglophone readers will no doubt feel we are in "Coffee Grinds" in a café somewhat down the street from Eliot's Madame Sosostriis. The graceful lines and cool ironies of the poem strike a perfect balance between the designation of pastime and entertainment allotted such practices in modern life, and the older world of suspicion and supplication and belief that can so readily be called back around such amusements. Each section of the poem --there are twenty-four --- - offers a separate rendition of fate. There seem to be a succession of fortune seekers, but it may also be the case that the poet is continually interrogating his relation to time and the world around him. In a footnote the poet finds in this modern amusement a residual shamanism that persists from the most obscure beginnings of Turkish culture. Moreover the method of this divination establishes early on that the associative flow of shapes suggested by the shape of the grinds and the skill of the reader of the grinds result in continuous transformation. Note in the following the deft interweaving of levels of reality and tones of voice:

A mass of coffee grinds's flying to the sky. A profound sadness is getting up,
About to get up, and leave, leaving behind its space
Empty, that is, nothing to interpret
In its stead. Either for good or evil.

A portion of the universe is waiting to be filled, is what's left.
Something has ended, you're relieved, have gotten rid of a burden.
(What the load is, I can't tell.)
Inside the cup, further back, a dolphin. The greatest of luck,
The most propitious object. Both a fish, and with lungs. Besides . . .
It'll drag you with itself, to the sea . . .

One can see here also what makes the poem so marvelously effective is the different attitudes that the diviner strikes in relations to those whose fortunes he's reading. The diviner of the grinds can be wry, matter of fact, immensely imaginative, sardonic, cruel, caring, desolate, or good humored. The divinatory act remains a dinner table entertainment, but one that can suddenly dip into a personal abyss, or a complex politics that even the non Turkish reader can readily surmise to be close by: symbols from the Turkish flag keep appearing in the grinds! A light touch this poet has, but one that pointedly reminds us of the precarious place of western oriented literati in Turkish culture. "Coffee Grinds" expertly keeps us balanced between both worlds and times. An ancient, pre-Islamic Turkey is effectively evoked with each turn of the cup. The crescent reminds us of the theological and cultural world of contemporary Turkey, while the grace and imaginative flights and the sense of personal loss deep beneath the surface of the poem remind us of how modern Turkish poets continue to transform the city of Istanbul into a precinct of passion and imaginative freedom worthy of its onetime inhabitant, Constantine Cavafy.

The second sequence here, "Rosestrikes," is also an extended meditation on a single figure, in this case that richest and most challenging of figures, challenging because so deeply enmeshed in western lyric tradition, the rose. The neologism of the title "Rosestrikes," which is continued in almost every poem in the sequence, offering us such provocative coinages as might well be a nod to Celan, to his no one's rose, and it is hard not to sense the spirit of Celan lurking around these rose poems. With "Rosestrikes" the poet turns both inward and downward, displaying an intensity and forthrightness that ghosts the edges of "Coffee Grinds." The voice that is in command, as it were, if not of the future itself then at least the turns the future takes as it speaks to us through images now suffers abjection:

Thiefrose

The town is
burning the fire
in the rose.

O thou art
a thief!

A house fire
and a rose fire
are so different.

But my heart's
burning
inside the house.

These poems are brief, gnomic, psychologically extreme, in some ways the antithesis of the capacious style of "Coffee Grinds" and yet both poems are steadfast in their exploration of the interpenetration of zones of being. "Rosestrikes" is as well a poem of divination, of a continuous trancelike gaze upon an ancient figure, steeped in religious and erotic associations, until it reveals some startling, unseen likeness. "I don't believe in roses / because I am a rose," the poet tells us, but his multifoliate nature will only disclose itself in the pursuit of resemblances that cannot be perceived without a kind of ecstatic suffering.

Nailrose

everything
is slanted
towards you!

Taken together, the two sequences gathered in this volume might be seen as exemplifying Nemet'Nejat's effort, as critic and translator, to reunite the experience of lyric poetry with visionary states of being. One can only hope that further volumes, of Seyhan Erözçelik's work, and of others such as Ahmet Güntan, Lale Müldür, küçük Iskender, and Sami Baydar, will soon find their way into English. Until we can all speak Turkish, and thereby experience Eda without mediation, translation will have to do. We are lucky to have this one. *Coffee Grinds and Rosestrikes* is a moving, masterful, and quietly prophetic volume, combining, as Nemet-Nejat argues, the depiction of an historical condition and the spiritual response to it. Were the poet less a poet, Seyhan Erözçelik might have titled his work more truly and forthrightly: not "Coffee Grinds," but "Fate." Not "Rosestrikes," "The Soul."