

Today We Took in Many Travelers: Hotels of the Prison and the Palace in Contemporary Istanbul

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Today we took in many travelers.

In this time: Customs thieves, heroine gangs,

And the Topkapi murders have come.

Present: Seven hundred and twenty seven, not counting the women.

Today again we passed the compulsory time

Like this, in the evening light, Sultan Ahmet

Stands, as if made not of stone, but of colored glass.

The famous leftist poet Nazim Hikmet wrote this poem from his prison cell, imagining the prisoner not as somebody bound by space, time, and force, for a moment as a traveler, passing through a large stone prison as if a guest and thinking only of the colorful world outside. Through this prison, the guests came from many causes as travelers through life, passing through the gates of the prison perhaps as a result of a criminal act, perhaps through the act of misjudgment, perhaps, although he doesn't mention it here, through the fault of bravely illegal thought — like him. These prisoners must conceive of themselves as travelers through the space of bondage in order to live one more day in spite of the enemy who keeps them in restricted space for seemingly endless time — time not only compulsory, *vakt-i keraheti*, but also disgusting, containing the feeling of having committed a venal sin and suffering the consequences. Perhaps as a salve to his disgust, Nazim Hikmet imagines the walls of his prison melting in the evening light, and changing to colored glass — a glass that allows him to imagine outside the walls of the Sultan Ahmet prison into the variegated light pouring through the stained-glass windows of the nearby Sultan Ahmet mosque and out again into the vast Sultan Ahmet square that lies between them — a space of freedom and a space of fantasy.

Is this a fantasy? Half a century later, this prison has become a five-star luxury hotel in the heart of Istanbul, a city long famed as the gateway to the exotic, fantastic Orient.

Where is the fantastic? A space of inversion: not simply of normal expectations, environments, and events, but also of sequentiality. As in a dream, fantasy allows for the extremes of gratification to instantly transmute into the extremes of horror. Under construction as a luring place of conquest since the nineteenth century, the Orient has provided the Occident with a fantastic other world of transmutation, inviting imaginings of luxurious palaces dripping with sensuous, nymphic slaves made even more enticing by the possibility of sudden danger destroying the reverie with a jewel encrusted dagger or with long languishing

years in a bottomless dungeon. It is no accident that popular imaginings of the Orient from Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus* to Alan Parker's *Midnight Express* have focused on the palace and the prison, the polar sites of fetishist fantasies that occupy exotic spaces.

And so the traveler today ventures not into prison, but into exotic lands, and arrives in Istanbul, a modern city composed of the swirling, milling, sitting bodies of fifteen million tightly packed souls passing through arteries and capillaries growing, decaying, and regenerating over seventeen centuries. Seldom do these non-fantastic city-zens find themselves in either palace or prison. Nobody lives as an 'other' in exciting fantasy space and staccato fantasy time. They live within a global market, in pursuit of participation in an international economy of goods and services that requires the acquisition of globally communally civilized signs, including, of course, the provision of luxury hotels for the business traveler or the well-heeled guest who comes searching for the exotic but wants to live in the safely mundane. For them, the city must provide a constant duality: the lure of exotic fantasy contained in its very name and mystified history of Orient, and the comforts of modern living.

During the 1990s, Istanbul experienced a boom of luxury hotels that sprang up all over the city in the hope of enticing untold legions of conventioners and high-end tourists to gaze on the cooling waters of the Bosphorus between ventures into the city's legendary historic hotspots. Among them, both a palace and a prison took shape as modern institutions of temporary domicile. Both the Kempinsky-Çiragan Palace Hotel and the Four Seasons Istanbul Hotel transform the classic spaces of Orientalist fantasy into arenas of contemporary global consumption, rewriting histories and masking memories for the production of a marketable modern experience of tamed exotic fantasy.

As a site with no places to correspond to the fictions of the imaginary, the idea of the palace constructs a utopia balanced by the dystopic vision of the prison, where the order of the positive society embodied by the palace becomes inverted into a place where pleasures and liberties become turned upside down into pain and restriction. In their real incarnations, both prisons and palaces serve as Foucauldian heterotopias of deviation, spaces set aside from communal public space for the use of individuals who deviate from the norm. Transmuted into hotels, both sites become heterotopias of crisis, spaces set aside for times of transition, by catering to individuals in the state of travel. As heterotopic spaces, all of these sites represent the spaces around them — normal, public, repeated, non-institutional spaces — by simultaneously reflecting and excluding them. As Foucault explains, the heterotopia functions as a mirror in that

"it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there."

The hotel is such a mirror, an invisible point of passage between the continuous present tense of living and the enacted fantasy of tourism which allows one to experience places and spaces beyond the mundane. As a site where one arrives in a city, registers at the desk, opens ones luggage, washes, sleeps, and rests, a hotel is certainly a very real part of the experience of travel — an oxymoronic home away from home. Still, as the container of ones continuing private life, it sits outside of the experience of travel, allowing the hotel to exist as a separate space into which one enters, on the other side of the looking glass — perhaps the doors to the hotel, perhaps the views from the window, perhaps the vistas of the Bosphorus to which one must turn one's back in order to walk onto the real streets of the city. No matter what adventures are promised by the exotic city, the hotel remains a space that promises comfort and practicality, and yet at the same time must include signs that constantly refer the guest to the fantasy that he is enacting through the act of tourism.

As such, the hotel acts as a sign for the world that it excludes. Through a select coterie of symbols — through decorative flourishes on the walls, perhaps; through menus that include everything from exotic Turkish coffee to comfort-food hamburgers; through evil eye beads sold in the giftshop; through comely waitresses who conveniently speak English; and through costumed shoe-shine men in the lobby — the hotel offers clean signs of the city as an imagined space where traffic and dust, mud and poverty, decay and, above all, concrete and plastic modernity don't threaten the fantasies that motivate tourism. As a sign, the hotel finds its referents more in the imaginations of the West about the East as in the urban spaces outside the hotel. While everyday people might experience their Turkish quintessence more in inflationary Turkish Lira and in balletically erratic Mediterranean driving than in quaintly dressed polite shoe-shiners and historically accurate Iznik tiles, these are the realities that tourists spending dollars and riding in tour busses try to avoid rather than to experience. These would be the referents for a modern city, which is not how one markets a city as thick with history as Istanbul.

Thus the production of historical spaces whose histories can be carefully groomed to accommodate the signage between comfort and fantasy markets the historical cache of the city. The transformation of imagined spaces of the palace and prison into the hotel allow for the spaces of fantasy to be laid open to experience. Rather than imagining the experiences of what it might be like to live in a palace, the traveler who arrives at the Çiragan-Kempinski is invited to experience Istanbul in Palace Suites "fit for Sultans." Similarly, Condé Nast Magazine invites the guest of the Four Seasons Istanbul to become a "prisoner of pleasure." Both of these plays on the generalized, flattened histories of the sites stem from popular imaginings of the Orient and elude the histories of each hotel. Such promises actively erase memory into a practice of forgetting implicit in the act of renovation that writes renovated histories in renovated buildings.

Completed in 1871 during the reign of Sultan Abdülaziz, the Çiragan Palace was built during a period of ostentatious imperial architectural programs designed to hide the increasing financial distress of the Ottoman Empire under the veneer of architectural, sartorial, and institutional modernizing reforms. The second in a series of European-style palaces built for year-round use, the Çiragan Palace was designed to impress European dignitaries through its lavish use of imported materials, magnificent waterfront view, and elaborate staterooms. Unlike the traditional pavilion-style Topkapi Palace, the first palace of the empire, which included both the living quarters of the royal family and the working quarters of the government, the Çiragan Palace relied on a uniform, Western-style floor-plan with different rooms appointed for a variety of living and entertainment tasks. In contrast to its Western-style predecessor the Dolmabahçe Palace, Çiragan Palace's Armenian architect Nigogos Balian eschewed Western-style interior design in favor of Orientalist themes such as those in vogue in Europe. It was designed to outdo the Orient of Istanbul proper, exemplified by the decrepit and

outmoded Topkapi Palace, by producing a conscious simulacrum of the oriental palace reconstructed by European fantasy and subsequently recreated in the Orient in fulfillment of that fantasy. The building was used as a palace primarily by Sultan Murad V, who continued to live in it under house arrest after his 1876 deposition until his death in 1904. The palace was reopened to house the Ottoman Parliament, reconvened after the reformist and Ottoman-nationalist Young Turk Revolution of 1908, in November of 1909, only to burn to the ground two months later because of an leak in the radiator system. In 1946, the ruins became the property of the Municipality of Istanbul, which did nothing with them until 1986, when Kempinsky Hotels International leased the property for a renewable term of forty-nine years.

The imagined history of the palace-hotel features the idea of luxury passing from the palatial incarnation of the structure into the touristic one. Like the palace, the hotel features a magnificent waterfront view, beautiful gardens, and an attentive staff. The reconstructed palace, which includes only the most elite suites of the hotel, also features lavish materials and interior design that made the original palace distinctly Oriental — not Turkish, per se, but using a pastiche of Oriental motifs culled from Europe's colonial experiences and developed into a decorative vocabulary that represented the Orient in nineteenth century Europe, and continues to do so in the popular Western imagination. Thus rather than featuring Ottoman-style tiles, the palace features North Africa-inspired *muquarnas* and horse-shoe arches learned by the French in their North African forays. As a pan-Oriental space, the palace-hotel provides a theater in which one can imagine Oriental intrigues, belly dancers and harems with all the contemporary five-star hotel amenities. While the fantasies of the Orient (slave girls in the rooms guarded by blood-thirsty eunuchs) may never materialize in the lavish rooms of the hotel, the stage is set for exotic experiences of the imagination. The prolonged use of the palace as a prison for a deposed ruler would contradict the myth of omnipotence surrounding the Eastern despot; it becomes erased. Similarly, the parliamentary associations with the building suggest a democratic appeal which contradicts the elitist fantasies implicit in staying in sultanic suites that, perhaps tellingly, house visiting presidents and prime ministers. In the absence of a specific late-nineteenth century history of the empire, the history of the hotel becomes a flat, teleological and mythical backdrop for the present. Certain non-narrative histories of the site remain constant: its address, its walls, and the dates of its construction and usage. Beyond these physically inscribed histories, the memory of the palace becomes flexible in its staging as a hotel, where collective associations become re-inscribed on the site through the processes of living in real space.

The irony here is that for seventy-five years Turkey has slaved to erase its Oriental image. First the transition from the Arabic to the Latin alphabet transformed the way Turks read; then the transition from the Muslim to the European calendar changed the way that they perceive religious as opposed to secular time; and finally, men shaved their beards and mustaches, discarded their baggy pants and fezzes in favor of suits and brimmed hats, and women threw aside their veils in the act of looking and acting like the peoples of Europe. To this day, the issues of facial hair on men and head covering on women remain potent symbols of the politics that divide groups in favor of acquiring a European identity from those who prefer to hearken to an Islamic or Turkic nationalism. The same political forces that opened Turkey to the global market during the past thirty years, which have allowed this hotel and its counterparts to flourish in contemporary Istanbul, support Turkey's rapid-paced integration into European patterns of consumption, business, and lifestyle. Yet in producing an interface between the traveler and the modern city, they reach to the mythical, exoticized history of Ottoman Turkey and utilize its Oriental mystique as a lure for contemporary interaction. By emphasizing the distinction between the fantasy world of the hotel-palace and the real world of cars and modernity outside, the hotel packages Turkey as a place that has already dropped

its Oriental face into a puddle of history that lies at its feet, a history that it wears only as an occasional, fantastic costume in order to entertain its guests.

Like the Kempinsky-Çiragan Palace Hotel, the Four Seasons Hotel uses the objectified other of history to create an exotic backdrop for the construction of new, touristic memories built through the act of historical forgetting. Built in 1919 in neo-Ottoman style by the famous architect Mimar Kemalettin, who also built the modern Istanbul Post Office, the *Dersaadet Cinayet Tevkifhanesi*, or Palace-District Murder Prison, was constructed as an institution of modernist disciplinary correction, in which prisoners would become regulated and reformed through spatial restriction rather than through bodily deprivation. Its architecture pasted design elements that represented the Ottoman on a structure that was essentially European in its plan. While the new prison was conceptually in tune with contemporary European models of discipline through physical restriction rather than through corporal punishment, like the Çiragan Palace its Europeanate structure wore 'Oriental' garb. The Ottomanness of the prison was reduced to a superficial veneer. Thus the entryway featured traditional Ottoman tiles and an inlaid marble floor with geometric designs, both of which have survived in the modern hotel.

Unlike earlier Ottoman prisons, the modern prison had high ceilings and tall windows opening onto the central courtyard, and was thus designed to allow light and air to circulate through the fifty barracks-style rooms housed in three blocks of prison buildings, each of which had three floors. The original prison was designed to house approximately a thousand inmates, but this number often rose to as many as two thousand. As new prisons were built in the Republican period, the prison increasingly came to house political prisoners, including writers and poets such as Nazim Hikmet, Kemal Tahir, Aziz Nesin, Rifat Ilgaz, Orhan Kemal and Necip Fazil Kısakürek. As a result, although atypical of Turkish prisons, this building became immortalized not only in Turkish writing, but also in Western fiction, specifically Graham Greene's *Stamboul Train* and Alan Parker's film rendition of Billy Hayes' memoir, *Midnight Express*. Although the prison was closed in 1969, with the increase in political crimes under the martial law announced in 1978, the prison was reopened in 1979 and only closed for good in 1982, after the reinstatement of civil government. Both men and women lived in the prison, separated by a high wall that divided the open courtyard which served as the focal point of the prison.

The open courtyard allowed for a view to the top of the Aya Sofya Mosque/Museum nearby, thus adding a psychological component to the incarceration. While the prisoner was allowed glimpses of the outside, this view also served as a constant reminder that the outside was unattainable. In contrast, the views of the outside world afforded by the modern hotel act as temptations towards the outside, from which the hotel provides temporary shelter. Thus the same window that once framed the disciplinary view of the prisoner has become transformed into the recreational view of the tourist. In both cases, the architecture of the structure serves as a frame for viewing and imagining the building in a city site that it is both simultaneously within and outside. Similarly, while the reminder of the site's proximity to the beautiful views of Istanbul could only act as psychological torture to the political prisoners often incarcerated in the prison, today they act as a temptation to the rooftop terrace that sits in front of the former prison's towers, affording a breathtaking view of the cityscape. In having an option between the panoramic view of the terrace and the intimate setting of the courtyard, the tourist transforms the repressive memory of the

prison into the liberating act of travel, a concept never far from the minds of the prisoners once held within it. As a result of the shift from a heterotopia of deviation to a heterotopia of crisis, the referent of nearby minarets signs diametrically opposed experiences of bondage and travel.

As in the case of the Çiragan-Palace Hotel, the memory of this hotel as an Ottoman prison forgets its history. This hotel of sixty-five rooms was not simply a prison of fantasy from centuries ago, some kind of medieval dungeon, it served as a prison under a military coup only thirty years ago — a coup that ushered in Turkey's current government, and which ultimately opened the way for the extensive economic growth that Turkey has experienced since. There are no historically accurate rooms at the hotel, no museum-like reminders of the prison through which to remember its decrepit, stone-sweaty dank walls or narrow cells with cold modern metal amenities. The 'Turkish Prison' provides an image and stereotype vivid in the Western mind which the Turkish government would be so eager to erase especially in light of the current need to reduce human rights violations in order to enter the European Union. This hotel allows that image of horror to mutate into one of luxury. It is as if the 'Turkish Prison' of old has not simply been opened to the public and rendered visible, but it has been transformed in contemporary Turkey into a palace — as can only happen in fantasy. The erasure of this prison acts as a sign for the imagined erasure of all of Turkey's supposedly evil prisons, for which this prison once itself acted as a sign.

Through the fantasies produced in the heterotopic spaces of prison and palace that prismically mutate into hotels, contemporary Turkey produces a modern face with which to impress the luxury traveler. Utilizing the Occident's ongoing love-affair with a mythical Orient, these hotels lure the tourist into a Disneyland of the past, safe from danger and yet replete with fantasy. In doing so, they flatten the complex and painful histories of these sites into sweet memories of bygone days, where the pain of murder, of house arrest, of prison becomes like the fantasy pain of sexual bondage and discipline, a brief interlude that only heightens the pleasure of visiting a modern luxury hotel. As Christine Boyer points out,

*"The contemporary arts of city building are derived from the perspective of white, middle-class architectural and planning professionals who worry in a depoliticized fashion about a city's competitive location in the global restructuring of capital, and thus myopically focus on improving a city's marketability by enhancing its imageability, livability, and cultural capital."*²

In reproducing the fantasy of Orient as cultural capital, the city that rents its historic spaces to international hotel corporations utilizes the often perilous associations with Orientalist fantasy that produces discrimination against Turks and Turkey to its benefit. The city thus turns the tables on those who critique Turkey as a backwards or violent nation by using their fantasies of the irredeemable East in order to garner their international capital and funnel it into the Turkish economy.

NOTES

¹Michel Foucault. "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* (Spring, 1986) 22-27.

²Christine Boyer. *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996.