REFLECTIONS

FLIGHT FROM BYZANTIUM

1

BEARING in mind that every observation suffers from the observer's personal traits—that is, it too often reflects his psychological state rather than that of the reality under observation—I suggest that what follows be treated with a due measure of skepticism, if not with total disbelief. The only thing the observer may claim by way of justification is that he, too, possesses a modicum of reality, inferior in extent, perhaps, but conceding nothing in quality to the subject under scrutiny. A semblance of objectivity might be achieved, no doubt, by way of a complete self-awareness at the moment of observation. I do not think I am capable of this; in any event, I did not aspire to it. All the same, I hope that something of the sort took place.

2

MY desire to get to Istanbul was never a genuine one. I am not even sure whether such a word—"desire"—should be used here. On the other hand, it could hardly be called a mere whim or a subconscious urge. Let it be a desire, then, and let's note that it came about partly as the result of a promise I made to myself in 1972, on leaving my hometown, that of Leningrad, for good—to circumnavigate the inhabited world along the latitude and along the longitude (i.e., the Pulkovo meridian) on which Leningrad is situated. By now, the latitude has been more or less taken care of; as to the longitude, the situation is anything but satisfactory. Istanbul, though, lies only a couple of degrees west of that meridian.

The aforementioned motive is only marginally more fanciful than the serious—indeed, the chief—reason, about which I will say something a bit later, or than a handful of totally frivolous secondary or tertiary ones, which I'll broach at once, it being now or never with such trivia: (a) it was in this city that my favorite poet, Constantine Cavafy, spent three momentous years at the turn of the century; (b) I always felt, for some reason, that here, in apartments, shops, and coffeehouses, I should find intact an atmosphere that at present seems to have totally vanished everywhere else; (c) I hoped to hear in Istanbul, on the outskirts of history, that "overseas creak of a Turkish mattress" which I thought I discerned one night some twenty years ago in the Crimea; (d) I wanted to find myself addressed as "effendi;" (e)— But I'm afraid the alphabet isn't long enough to accommodate all these ridiculous notions (though perhaps it's better if you are set in motion precisely by some such nonsense, for it makes final disappointment so much easier to bear). So let us get on to the promised "chief" reason, even though to many it may seem deserving of at best the "f" in my catalogue of bêtises.

This "chief" reason represents the pinnacle of fancifulness. It has to do with the fact that several years ago, while I was talking to a friend of mine, an American Byzantinist, it occurred to me that the cross that Constantine beheld in his dream on the eve of his victory over Maxentius—the cross that bore the legend "In this sign, conquer"—was not in fact a Christian cross but an urban one, the basic element of any Roman settlement. According to Eusebius and others, Constantine, inspired by his vision, at once set off for the East. First at Troy and then, having abruptly abandoned Troy, at Byzantium he founded the new capital of the Roman Empire—that is, the Second Rome. The consequences of this move of his were so momentous that, whether I was right or wrong, I felt an urge to see this place. After all, I spent thirty-two years in what is known as the Third Rome, about a year and a half in the First. Consequently, I needed the Second, if only for my collection.

But let us handle all this in an

"Whose birthday did I not forget?"

orderly fashion, so far as this is feasible.

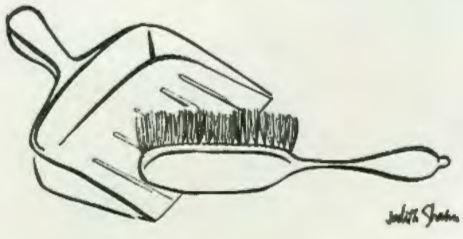
3

I ARRIVED in Istanbul, and left it, by air, having thus isolated it in my mind like some virus under a microscope. If one considers the infectious nature of any culture, the comparison does not seem irresponsible. Writing this note in the Hotel Aegean in the little place called Sounion—at the southeast corner of Attica, forty miles from Athens, where I landed four hours ago—I feel like the carrier of a specific infection, despite constant inoculations of the "classical rose" of the late Vladislav Khodasevich, to which I have subjected myself for the greater part of my life. I really do feel feverish from what I have seen; hence a certain incoherence in all that follows. I believe that my famous namesake experienced something of the sort as he strove to interpret the pharaoh's dreams—though it's one thing to bandy interpretations of sacred signs when the trail is hot (or warm, rather) and quite another a thousand and a half years later.

4

ABOUT dreams. This morning, in the wee hours, in Istanbul's Pera Palace, I, too, beheld something—something utterly monstrous. The scene was the Department of Philology of Leningrad University, and I was coming downstairs with someone I took to be Professor D. E. Maxjmov, except that he looked more like Lee Marvin. I can't recall what we were talking about, but that's not the point. My attention was caught by a scene of furious activity in a dark corner of the landing where the ceiling came down extremely low. I saw there three cats fighting with an enormous rat, which quite dwarfed them. Glancing over my shoulder, I noticed one of the cats ripped apart by the rat and writhing convulsively in agony on the floor. I chose not to watch the battle's outcome—I recall only that the cat became still—and, exchanging remarks with Marvin-Maximov, I kept going down the staircase. I woke up before I reached the hall.

To begin with, I adore cats. Then it should be added that I can't abide low ceilings; that the place only seemed like the Department of Philology, which is just two stories high anyway; that its grubby gray-brown color was that of the façades and interiors of Istanbul, especially the offices I had visited in the last few days; that the streets there are crooked, filthy, dreadfully cobbled, and piled up with refuse, which is constantly rummaged through by ravenous local cats; that the city, and everything in it, strongly smells of Astrakhan and Samarkand; and that the night before I had made up my mind to leave — But of that later. There was enough, in short, to pollute one's subconscious.



5

CONSTANTINE was, first and foremost, a Roman emperor—in charge of the Western part of the Empire—and for him "In this sign, conquer" was bound to signify, above

FOR NOW AND ALWAYS

I would like to hold you bell that chimes in the underground
Bell wrapped in the vines of the afterlife
Made of smoke and hair
And dresses of pretty girls who would not undress for the commandant
But I can't my hands have been cut off and are running away

I would like to hold you in my arms
Bell that waltzes in air the way bare feet touched these cold floors
I promise never to forget the sound that makes blood what it is
That icepick in the ear
I don't think that sound will ever melt

I would like to speak to you sack of flour slung over a prisoner's shoulder
Powder-face of the dead in the baker's window
I would like to speak to you about large bodies of water
Breathing in and out ornate fans that keep them alive
About skyscrapers tossing stars around in the heavens
Before falling asleep at the edge of town
I promise never to turn away though my eyes are burning

And cloud bright furnace of sunlight
Swinging back and forth in the sky as inside a great nightshirt
Like one large lung gasping for breath
I would like to see you again
Rather than go down to the sea and unlock icebergs
I have thought about it a long time
And that is what I want

Your silence is so peaceful so restful
Any number of hats contain that silence and go flying off in the wind
Any number of faces reflect its emptiness
That has escaped into the bones of sparrows already dead or still living on rooftops
It pushes a little flower cart across the prison grounds
Chases away bees that ring in the shadows

Starless night I promise never to burn your photograph
My legs and feet are cold
Wire fences go travelling through my eyes as no travellers ever managed to before
Windmills tangle in my hair long into morning
Ashes here is a kiss from the living
Impossible to see against the sky

(*Dachau, West Germany, 1979.*)

—GARY MYERS

"Jonathan is associate professor of soups and salads at our local culinary institute."

• •

all, an extension of his own rule, of his control over the whole empire. There is nothing novel about divining the most immediate future by roosters' innards, or about enlisting a deity as your own captain. Nor is the gulf between absolute ambition and utmost piety so vast. But even if he had been a true and zealous believer (a matter on which various doubts have been cast, especially in view of his conduct toward his children and in-laws) "conquer" must have had for him not only the military, sword-crossing meaning but also an administrative one—that is, settlements and cities. And the plan of any Roman settlement is precisely a cross: a central highway running north and south (like the Corso in Rome) intersects a similar road running east and west. From Leptis Magna to Castricum, an imperial subject always knew where he was in relation to the capital.

Even if the cross of which Constantine spoke to Eusebius was that of the Redeemer, a constituent part of it in his dream was, un- or subconsciously, the principle of settlement planning. Besides, in the fourth century the symbol of the Redeemer was not the cross at all; it was the fish, a Greek acrostic for the name of Christ. And as for the Cross of the Crucifixion itself, it resembled the Russian (and Latin) capital "T," rather than what Michelangelo depicted on that staircase in St. Peter's, or what we nowadays imagine it to have been. Whatever Constantine may or may not have had in mind, the execution of the instructions he received in a dream took the form in the first place of a territorial expansion toward the East, and the emergence of a Second Rome was a perfectly logical consequence of this eastward expansion. Possessing, by all accounts, a dynamic personality, he considered a forward policy perfectly natural. The more so if he was in actual fact a true believer.

Was he or wasn't he? Whatever the answer might be, it is the genetic code that laughed the last laugh. For his nephew happened to be no one else than Julian the Apostate.

6

ANY movement along a plane surface which is not dictated by physical necessity is a spatial form of self-assertion, be it empire-building or tourism. In this sense, my reason for going to Istanbul differed only slightly from Constantine's. Especially if he really did become a Christian—that is, ceased to be a Roman. I have, however, rather more grounds for reproaching myself with superficiality; besides, the results of my displacements are of far less consequence. I don't even leave behind photographs taken "in front of" walls, let alone a set of walls themselves. In this sense, I am inferior even to the almost proverbial Japanese. (There is nothing more appalling to me than to think about the family album of the average Japanese: smiling and stocky, he/she/both against a backdrop of everything vertical the world contains—statues, foun-

• •

tains, cathedrals, towers, mosques, ancient temples, etc. Least of all, I presume, Buddhas and pagodas.) *Cogito ergo sum* gives way to *Kodak ergo sum*, just as *cogito* in its day triumphed over "I create." In other words, the ephemeral nature of my presence and my motives is no less absolute than the physical tangibility of Constantine's activities and his thoughts, real or supposed.

7

THE Roman elegiac poets of the end of the first century B.C.—especially Propertius and Ovid—openly mock their great contemporary Virgil and his Aeneid. This may be explicable in terms of personal rivalry or professional jealousy or opposition of their idea of poetry as a personal, private art to a conception of it as something civic, as a form of state propaganda. (This last may ring true, but it is a far cry from the truth, nonetheless, since Virgil was the author not only of the Aeneid but also of the Bucolics and the Georgics.) There may also have been considerations of a purely stylistic nature. It is quite possible that from the elegists' point of view the epic—any epic, including Virgil's—was a retrograde phenomenon. The elegists, all of them, were disciples of the Alexandrian school of poetry, which had given birth to a tradition of short lyric verse such as we are familiar with in poetry today. The Alexandrian preference for brevity, terseness, compression, concreteness, erudition, didacticism, and a preoccupation with the personal was, it seems, the reaction of the Greek art of letters against the surplus forms of Greek literature in the Archaic period: against the epic, the drama; against mythologizing, not to say mythmaking itself. A reaction, if one thinks about it—though it's best not to—against Aristotle. The Alexandrian tradition absorbed all these things and fitted them to the confines of the elegy or the eclogue: to the almost hieroglyphic dialogue in the latter, to an illustrative function of myth (*exempla*) in the former. In other words, we find a certain tendency toward miniaturization and condensation (as a means of survival for poetry in a world less and less inclined to pay it heed, if not as a more direct, more immediate means of influencing the hearts and minds of readers and listeners) when, lo and behold, Virgil appears with his hexameters and gigantic "social order."

I would add here that the elegists, almost without exception, were using the elegiac distich, a couplet combining dactylic hexameter and dactylic pentameter; also, that they, again almost without exception, came to poetry from the schools of rhetoric, where they had been trained for a juridical profession (as advocates: arguers in the modern sense). Nothing corresponds better to the rhetorical system of thought than the elegiac distich, which provided a means of expressing, at a minimum, two points of view, not to mention a whole palette of intonational coloring permitted by the contrasting metres.

All this, however, is in parentheses. Outside the parentheses lie the elegists' reproaches directed at Virgil on ethical rather than metrical grounds. Especially interesting in this regard is Ovid, in no way inferior to the author of the Aeneid in descriptive skills, and psychologically infinitely more subtle. In "Dido to Aeneas," one of his Heroides—a collection of made-up correspondence from love poetry's standard heroines to their either perished or unfaithful beloveds—the Carthaginian queen, rebuking Aeneas for abandoning her, does so in approximately the following fashion: "I could have understood if you had left me because you had resolved to return home, to

your own kinfolk. But you are setting out for unknown lands, a new goal, a new, as yet unfounded city, in order, it seems, to break yet another heart." And so on. She even hints that Aeneas is leaving her pregnant and that one of the reasons for her suicide is the fear of disgrace. But this is not germane to the matter in hand. What matters here is that in Virgil's eyes Aeneas is a hero, directed by the gods. In Ovid's eyes, he is an unprincipled scoundrel, attributing his mode of conduct—his movement along a plane surface—to Divine Providence. (As for Providence, Dido has her own teleological explanations as well, but that is of small consequence, as is our all too eager assumption of Ovid's anti-civic posture.)

8

THE Alexandrian tradition was a Grecian tradition: one of order (the cosmos), of proportion, of harmony, of the tautology of cause and effect (the Oedipus cycle)—a tradition of symmetry and the closed circle, of *return to the origin*. And it is Virgil's concept of linear movement, his linear model of existence, that the elegists find so exasperating in him. The Greeks should not be idealized overmuch, but one cannot deny them their cosmic principle, informing celestial bodies and kitchen utensils alike.

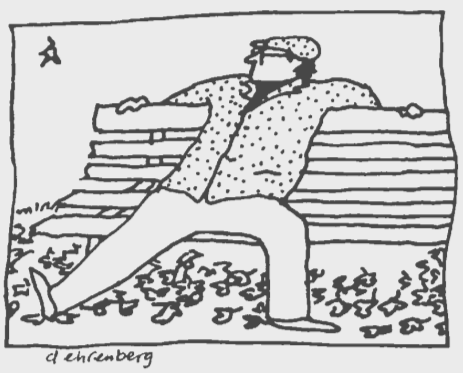
Virgil, it appears, was the first—in literature, at least—to apply the linear principle: his hero never returns; he always departs. Possibly, this was in the air; more likely, it was dictated by the expansion of the Empire, which had reached a scale in which human displacement had indeed become irreversible. This is precisely why the Aeneid is unfinished: it must not—indeed, could not—be completed. And the linear principle has nothing to do with the "feminine" character of Hellenism or with the "masculinity" of Roman culture—or with Virgil's own sexual tastes. The point is that the linear principle, detecting in itself a certain irresponsibility vis-à-vis the past—irresponsibility linked with the linear idea of existence—tends to balance this with a detailed projection of the future. The result is either a "retroactive prophecy," like Anchises' conversations in the Aeneid, or social utopianism or the idea of eternal life—i.e., Christianity. There is not much difference between these. In fact, it is their similarity, and not the "messianic" Fourth Eclogue, that practically allows one to consider Virgil the first Christian poet. Had I been writing "The Divine Comedy," I would have placed this Roman in Paradise: for outstanding services to the linear principle, into its logical conclusion.

9

THE delirium and horror of the East. The dusty catastrophe of Asia. Green only on the banner of the Prophet. Nothing grows here except mustaches. A black-eyed, overgrown-with-stubble-before-supper part of the world. Bonfire embers doused with urine. That smell! A mixture of foul tobacco and sweaty soap and the underthings wrapped around loins like another turban. Racism? But isn't it only a form of misanthropy? And that ubiquitous grit flying in your muzzle even in the city, poking the world out of your eyes—and yet one feels grateful even for that. Ubiquitous concrete, with the texture of turd and the color of an upturned grave. Ah, all that nearsighted scum—Corbusier, Mondrian, Gropius—who mutilated the world more effectively than any Luftwaffe! Snobbery? But it's only a form of despair. The local population in a state of total stupor whiling its time away in squalid snack bars, tilting its heads as in a *namaz* in reverse toward the television screen, where somebody is permanently beating somebody else up. Or else they're dealing out cards, whose jacks and nines are the sole accessible abstraction, the single means of concentration. Misanthropy? Despair? Yet what else could be expected from one who has outlived the apotheosis of the linear principle? From a man who has nowhere to go back to? From a great turdologist, sacrophag, and the possible author of "Sadomachia"?

10

A CHILD of his age—that is, the fourth century A.D., or, better, P.V. (Post-Virgil)—Constantine, a man of action, if only because he was emperor, could regard himself as not only the embodiment but also the instrument of the linear principle of existence. Byzantium was for him not only symbolically but literally a cross, an intersection of trade routes, caravan roads, etc.—both from east to west and from north to south. This alone might have drawn his attention to the place, which had given to the world (in the seventh century B.C.) something that in all tongues means the same: money.



Money certainly interested Constantine exceedingly. If he did possess a measure of greatness, it was most likely financial. A pupil of Diocletian, having failed to learn his tutor's high art of delegating authority, he nonetheless succeeded in a by no means inferior art: to use the modern term, he stabilized the currency. The Roman solidus, introduced in his reign, played the role of our dollar for over seven centuries. In this sense, the transfer of the capital to Byzantium was a movement of the bank to the mint.

One should perhaps also bear in mind that the philanthropy of the Christian Church at this time was, if not an alternative to the state economy, then at least a recourse for a considerable part of the population, the have-nots. To a large extent, the popularity of Christianity was based not so much on the idea of the equality of souls before the Lord as on the tangible—for the have-nots—fruits of an organized system of mutual assistance. It was in its way a combination of food stamps and the Red Cross. Neither Neoplatonism nor the cult of Isis organized anything of the kind. In this, frankly, lay their mistake.

One may muse at length on what went on in Constantine's heart and mind with regard to the Christian faith, but as an emperor he could not fail to appreciate the organizational and economic effectiveness of this particular church. Besides, the transferring of the capital to the extreme rim of the Empire transforms that rim into the center, as it were, and implies an equally extensive space on the other side. On the map, this is equivalent to India: the object of all imperial dreams known to us, before and after the birth of Christ.

11

DUST! This weird substance, driving into your face! It merits attention; it should not be concealed behind the word "dust." Is it just agitated dirt, incapable of finding its own

place but constituting the very essence of this part of the world? Or is it the earth striving to rise into the air, detaching itself from itself, like mind from body, like the body yielding itself to the heat? Rain betrays the nature of this substance when brown-black rivulets of it go snaking beneath your feet, beaten back to the cobbles and away down the undulating arteries of this primeval *kışlak*, and yet unable to amass themselves enough to form puddles, because of the countless splashing wheels, numerically superior to the faces of the inhabitants, that bear this substance off, to the sound of blaring horns, across the bridge into Asia, Anatolia, Ionia, to Trebizond and Smyrna.

As everywhere in the East, there are vast numbers of shoe shiners here of all ages, with their exquisite brass-bound boxes housing their kit of boot creams in round, thinnest-of-copper containers with cupola lids. Like little mosques without the minarets. The ubiquity of the profession is explained by the dirt, by that dust which covers your dazzling, reflecting-the-entire-universe-just-five-minutes-ago loafer with a gray, impenetrable powder. Like all shoe shiners, these people are great philosophers. Or, better, all philosophers are but shiners of great shoes. For this reason, it isn't so very important whether you know Turkish.

12

WHO these days really examines maps, studies contours, reckons distances? Nobody, except perhaps vacationers or drivers. Since the invention of the push button, even the military don't do it anymore. Who writes letters listing the sights he has seen and analyzing the feelings he had while doing so? And who reads such letters? After us, nothing will remain that is worthy of the name of correspondence. Even young people, seemingly with plenty of time, make do with postcards. People of my age usually resort to those either in a moment of despair in some alien spot or just to kill time. Yet there are places examination of which on a map makes you feel for a brief moment akin to Providence.

13

THERE are places where history is inescapable, like a highway accident—places whose geography provokes history. Such is Istanbul, alias Constantinople, alias Byzantium. A traffic light gone haywire, with all

three colors flaring up at once. Not red-amber-green but white-amber-brown. Also, of course, blue: for the water, for the Bosporus-Marmara-Dardanelles, which separates Europe from Asia—or does it? Ah, all these natural frontiers, these straits and Urals of ours! How little they have ever meant to armies or cultures, and even less to non-cultures—though for nomads they may actually have signified a bit more than for princes inspired by the linear principle and justified in advance by an entrancing vision of the future.

Did not Christianity triumph precisely because it provided an end that justified the means, because it temporarily—i.e., for the whole of one's life—absolved one from responsibility? Because the next step, any step at all, in any direction, was becoming logical? Wasn't it—Christianity—in the spiritual sense, at least, an anthropological echo of nomadic existence, its metastasis in the psychology of man the settler? Or, better still, hasn't it simply coincided with purely imperial needs? Pay alone could hardly be enough to stir a legionary (whose career's meaning lay precisely in a long-service bonus, demobilization, and getting a farm plot) from the spot. He should be inspired, too; otherwise, the legions turn into that wolf which only Tiberius could haul back by the ears.

14

A Consequence can rarely look back at its cause with anything like approval. Still less can it suspect the cause of anything. The relations between effect and cause lack, as a rule, the rational, analytic element. As a rule, they are tautological and, at best, tinged with the incoherent enthusiasm the latter feels for the former.

It should not be forgotten, therefore, that the belief system called Christianity came from the East, and, for the same reason, it shouldn't be forgotten that one of the ideas that overpowered Constantine after the victory over Maxentius and the vision of the cross was the desire to come at least physically closer to the source of that victory and that vision: to the East. I have no clear notion of what was going on in Judaea at that time, but it is obvious, at least, that if Constantine had set off by land to go there he would have encountered a good many obstacles. In any event, to found a capital overseas would have contradicted plain common sense. Also, one

shouldn't rule out a dislike of Jews, quite possible on Constantine's part.

There is something amusing, and even a bit alarming, isn't there, in the idea that the East is actually the metaphysical center of mankind? Christianity had been only one of a considerable number of sects within the Empire—though, admittedly, the most active. By Constantine's reign, the Roman Empire, in no small measure because of its sheer size, had been a veritable country fair or bazaar of creeds. With the exception of the Copts and the cult of Isis, however, the source of all the belief systems on offer was in fact the East.

The West was offering nothing. Essentially, the West was a customer. Let us treat the West with tenderness, then, precisely for its lack of this sort of inventiveness, for which it has paid quite heavily, that pay including the reproaches of excessive rationality one hears to this day. Is this not the way a vender inflates the price of his wares? And where will he go once his coffers are overflowing?

15

IF the Roman elegists reflected the outlook of their public in any way at all, one might suppose that by Constantine's reign—i.e., four centuries after the elegists—arguments like "The motherland is in danger" or "Pax Romana" had lost their spell and cogency. And if Eusebius' assertions are correct then Constantine turns out to be neither more nor less than the first Crusader. One should not lose sight of the fact that the Rome of Constantine was no longer the Rome of Augustus, or even that of the Antonines. It was, generally speaking, not ancient Rome anymore: it was Christian Rome. What Constantine brought to Byzantium no longer denoted classical culture: it was already the culture of a new age, brewed in the concept of monotheism, which now relegated polytheism—i.e., its own past, with all its spirit of law, and so forth—to the status of idolatry. This, to be sure, was already progress.

16

HERE I should like to admit that my ideas concerning antiquity seem somewhat wild even to me. I understand polytheism in a simple, and therefore no doubt incorrect, fashion. For me, it is a system of spiritual existence in which every form of human activity, from fishing to contemplating the constellations, is sanctified

by specific deities. An individual possessing appropriate will and imagination is thus able to discern in his activity its metaphysical, infinite lining. Alternatively, one or another god may, as the whim takes him, appear to a man at any time and possess him for a period. The only thing required of the latter, should he wish this to happen, is for him to "purify" himself, so as to enable the visit to take place. This process of purification (catharsis) varies a great deal and has an individual character (sacrifice, pilgrimage, a vow of some kind) or a public one (theatre, sporting contests). The hearth is no different from the amphitheatre, the stadium from the altar, the statue from the stewing pan.

A world view of this kind can exist, I suppose, only in settled conditions: when the god knows your address. It is not surprising that the culture we call Greek arose on islands. It is no surprise, either, that its fruits hypnotized for a millennium the entire Mediterranean, including Rome. And it is not surprising, again, that, as its Empire grew, Rome—which was not an island—fled from that culture. The flight began, in fact, with the Caesars and with the idea of absolute power, since in that intensely political sphere polytheism was synonymous with democracy. Absolute power—autocracy—was synonymous, alas, with monotheism. If one can imagine an unprejudiced man, then polytheism must seem far more attractive to him than monotheism, if only because of the instinct of self-preservation.

But there is no such person; even Diogenes, with his lamp, would fail to find him in broad daylight. Bearing in mind the culture we call ancient or classical, rather than the instinct of self-preservation, I can only say that the longer I live the more this idol worship appeals to me, and the more dangerous seems to me monotheism in its pure form. There's little point, I suppose, in laboring the matter, in calling the spade the spade, but the democratic state is in fact the historical triumph of idolatry over Christianity.

17

NATURALLY, Constantine could not know this. I assume he intuited that Rome was no more. The Christian in him combined with the ruler in a natural and, I am afraid, prophetic manner. In that very "In this sign, conquer" of his, one's ear discerns the ambition of power. And it

was "conquer" indeed—more even than he imagined, since Christianity in Byzantium lasted ten centuries. But this victory was, I am sorry to say, a Pyrrhic one. The nature of this victory was what compelled the Western Church to detach itself from the Eastern. That is to say, the geographical Rome from the projected one, from Byzantium. The Church the bride of Christ from the Church the spouse of the State. And it is quite possible that in his drive eastward Constantine was in fact guided by the East's political climate—by its despotism without any experience of democracy, congenial to his own predicament. The geographical Rome, one way or another, still retained some memories of the role of the senate. Byzantium had no such memory.

18

TODAY, I am forty-five years old. I am sitting stripped to the waist in the Lykabettos Hotel, in Athens, bathed in sweat, absorbing vast quantities of Coca-Cola. In this city, I don't know a soul. In the evening, when I went out looking for a place to have supper, I found myself in the thick of a highly excited throng shouting something unintelligible. As far as I can make out, elections are imminent. I was shuffling along some endless main street blocked by people and vehicles, with car horns wailing in my ears, not understanding a word, and it suddenly dawned on me that this, essentially, is the afterlife—that life had ended but movement was still continuing; that this is what eternity is all about.

Forty-five years ago, my mother gave me life. She died the year before last. Last year, my father died. I, their only child, am walking along the evening streets in Athens, streets they never saw and never will. The fruit of their love, their poverty, their slavery in which they lived and died—their son walks free. Since he doesn't bump into them in the crowd, he realizes that he is wrong, that this is not eternity.

19

WHAT did Constantine see and not see as he looked at the map of Byzantium? He saw, to put it mildly, a tabula rasa. An imperial province settled by Greeks, Jews, Persians, and such—a population he was used to dealing with, typical subjects of the eastern part of his Empire. The language was Greek, but for an edu-

cated Roman this was like French for a nineteenth-century Russian nobleman. Constantine saw a town jutting out into the Sea of Marmara, a town that would be easy to defend if a wall was just thrown around it. He saw the hills of this city, somewhat reminiscent of Rome's, and if he pondered erecting, say, a palace or a church he knew that the view from the windows would be really smashing: on all Asia. And all Asia would gape at the crosses that would crown that church. One may also imagine him toying with the idea of controlling the access of those Romans he had dropped behind him. They would be compelled to trail across the whole of Attica to get here, or to sail around the Peloponnesus. "This one I'll let in, that one I won't." In these terms, no doubt, he thought of his version of the earthly Paradise. Ah, all these excise man's dreams! And he saw, too, Byzantium acclaiming him as her protector against the Sassanids and against our —your and my, ladies and comrades— ancestors from that side of the Danube. And he saw a Byzantium kissing the cross.

What he did not see was that he was dealing with the East. To wage wars against the East—or even to liberate the East—and actually to live there are very different things. For all its Greekness, Byzantium belonged to a world with totally different ideas about the value of human existence from those current in the West: in—however pagan it was—Rome. For Byzantium, Persia, for example, was far more real than Hellas, if only in a military sense. And the differences in degree of this reality could not fail to be reflected in the outlook of these future subjects of their Christian lord. Though in Athens Socrates could be judged in open court and could make whole speeches—three of them!—in his defense, in Isfahan, say, or Baghdad such a Socrates would simply have been impaled on the spot, or flayed, and there the matter would have ended. There would have been no Platonic dialogues, no Neoplatonism, nothing: as there wasn't. There would have been only the monologue of the Koran: as there was. Byzantium was a bridge into Asia, but the traffic across it flowed in the opposite direction. Of course, Byzantium accepted Christianity, but there this faith was fated to become Orientalized. In this, too, to no small degree lies the root of the subsequent hostility of the Roman Church toward the Eastern. Certainly

Christianity nominally lasted a thousand years in Byzantium, but what kind of Christianity it was and what sort of Christians these were is another matter.

Oh, I am afraid I am going to say that all the Byzantine scholastics, all Byzantium's scholarship and ecclesiastical ardor, its Caesaro-papism, its theological and administrative assertiveness, all those triumphs of Photius and his twenty anathemas—all these came from the place's inferiority complex, from the youngest patriarchy's grappling with its own ethnic incoherence. Which in the far end, where I find myself standing, has spawned its dark-haired, levelling victory over that incredibly high-pitched spiritual quest which took place here, and reduced it to a matter of wistful yet reluctant mental archeology. And—oh, again—I am afraid I am going to add that it is for this reason, and not just because of mean, vengeful memory, that Rome, which doctored the history of our civilization anyway, deleted the Byzantine millennium from the record. Which is why I find myself standing here in the first place. And the dust stuffs my nostrils.

20

HOW dated everything is here! Not old, ancient, antique, or even old-fashioned, but dated. This is where old cars come to die, and instead become *dolmuşlar*, public taxis; a ride in one is cheap, bumpy, and nostalgic to the point of making you feel that you are moving in the wrong, unintended direction—in part, because the drivers rarely speak English. The United States naval base near here presumably sold all these Dodges and Plymouths of the fifties to some local entrepreneur, and now they prowl the mud roads of Asia Minor, rattling, throttling, and wheezing in evident disbelief in this so taxing afterlife. So far from Dearborn; so far from the promised junk yard!

21

AND also Constantine did not see—or, more precisely, did not foresee—that the impression produced on him by the geographical position of Byzantium was a natural one. That if Eastern potentates should also glance at a map they were bound to be similarly impressed. As, indeed, was the case—more than once—with consequences grievous enough for Christianity. Up until the seventh century, friction between East and West in By-

zantium was of a standard, I'll-skin-you-alive military sort and was resolved by force of arms, usually in the West's favor. If this did not increase the popularity of the cross in the East, at all events it inspired respect for it. But by the seventh century what had risen over the entire East and started to dominate it was the crescent of Islam. Thereafter, the military encounters between East and West, whatever their outcome, resulted in a gradual but steady erosion of the cross and in a growing relativism of the Byzantine outlook as a consequence of too close and too frequent contact between the two sacred signs. (Who knows whether the eventual defeat of iconoclasm shouldn't be explained by a sense of the inadequacy of the cross as a symbol and by the necessity for some visual competition with the anti-figurative art of Islam? Whether it wasn't the nightmarish Arabic lace that was spurring John Damascene?)

Constantine did not foresee that the anti-individualism of Islam would find the soil of Byzantium so welcoming that by the ninth century Christianity would be more than ready to flee to the north. He, of course, would have said that it was not flight but, rather, the expansion of Christianity which he had—in theory, at least—dreamed of. And many would nod to this in agreement: yes, an expansion. Yet the Christianity that was received by Rus from Byzantium in the ninth century already had absolutely nothing in common with Rome. For, on its way to Rus, Christianity dropped behind it not only togas and statues but also Justinian's Civil Code. No doubt in order to facilitate the journey.

22

HAVING decided to leave Istanbul, I set about finding a steamship company serving the route from Istanbul to Athens or, better still, from Istanbul to Venice. I did the rounds of various offices, but, as always happens in the East, the nearer you get to the goal the more obscure become the means of its attainment. In the end, I realized that I couldn't sail from either Istanbul or Smyrna for two more weeks, whether by passenger ship, freighter, or tanker. In one of the agencies, a corpulent Turkish lady, puffing a frightful cigarette like an ocean liner, advised me to try a company bearing the Australian—as I at first imagined—name Boomerang. Boomerang turned out to be a grubby office smelling of stale tobacco, with two tables, one telephone, a map of—naturally—The World on the wall, and six stocky, pensive, dark-haired men, torpid from idleness. The only thing I managed to extract from the one sitting nearest the door was that Boomerang dealt with Soviet cruises in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, but that that week there were no sailings. I wonder where that young Lubyanka lieutenant who dreamed up that name came from. Tula? Chelyabinsk?

23

DREADING a repetition, I will nonetheless state again that if Byzantine soil turned out to be so favorable for Islam it was most likely because of its ethnic texture—a mixture of races and nationalities that had neither local nor, moreover, over-all memory of any kind of coherent tradition of individualism. Dreading generalizations, I will add that the East means, first of all, a tradition of obedience, of hierarchy, of profit, of trade, of adaptability: a tradition, that is, drastically alien to the principles of a moral absolute, whose role—I mean the intensity of the sentiment—is fulfilled here by the idea of kinship, of family. I foresee objections, and am even willing to accept them, in whole or in part. But no matter what extreme of idealization of the East we may entertain we'll never be able to ascribe to it the least semblance of democracy.

And I am speaking here of Byzantium before the Turkish domination: of the Byzantium of Constantine, Justinian, Theodora—of Christian Byzantium, anyway. Still, Michael Psellus, the eleventh-century Byzantine historian, describing in his "Chronographia" the reign of Basil II, tells us about Basil's prime minister, also Basil, who was the Emperor's uncle and, because of that, was simply castrated in childhood to eliminate any

possible claim to the throne. "A natural precaution," comments the historian, "since as a eunuch he would not attempt to usurp the throne from the legitimate heir." Psellus adds, "He was completely reconciled to his fate, and was sincerely dedicated to the ruling house. After all, it was his family." Let's make a note that this was written about the time of the reign of Basil II (A.D. 976-1025), and that Psellus mentions the incident very much in passing, as a routine affair—as, indeed, it was—at the Byzantine court. If this was A.D., what, then, of B.C.?

24

AND how do we measure an age? And is an age susceptible to measurement? We should also note that what Psellus describes takes place before the arrival of the Turks. There are no Bajazet-Muhammad-Suleimans about, none of that. For the time being, we are still interpreting sacred texts, warring against heresy, gathering at universal councils, erecting cathedrals, composing tracts. That's with one hand. With the other, we are castrating a bastard, so that when he grows up there will be no extra claim to the throne. That, indeed, is the Eastern attitude toward things—toward the human body in particular—and whatever era or millennium it is is irrelevant. So it is hardly surprising that the Roman Church turned its nose away from Byzantium.

But something needs to be said here about that church, too. It was natural for it to shun Byzantium, both for the reasons given above and because Byzantium—this new Rome—had abandoned Rome proper completely. With the exception of Justinian's short-lived efforts to restore imperial coherence, Rome was left solely to its own devices and to its fate, which meant to the Visigoths, the Vandals, and whoever else felt inclined to settle old and new scores with the former capital. One can understand Constantine: he was born, and spent his entire childhood, in the Eastern empire, at Diocletian's court. In this sense, Roman though he was, he wasn't a Westerner, except in his administrative designation or through his mother. (Believed to be born in Britain, she was the one who was interested in Christianity first—to the extent that she travelled later in her life to Jerusalem and discovered there the True Cross. In other words, in that family it was the mom who was a believer. And although there is am-

ple reason to regard Constantine as a true mama's boy, let's avoid the temptation—let's leave it to the psychiatrists, as we don't hold a license.) One, let's repeat, can understand Constantine.

As for the attitude of the subsequent Byzantine emperors toward the genuine Rome, it is more complex and rather less explicable. Surely, they had their fill of problems right there in the East, both with their subjects and with their immediate neighbors. Yet the title of Roman emperor, it would seem, should have implied certain geographical obligations. The whole point, of course, was that the Roman emperors after Justinian came for the most part from provinces farther and farther East, from the Empire's traditional recruiting grounds: Syria, Armenia, and so on. Rome was for them, at best, an idea. Several of them, like the majority of their subjects, knew no word of Latin and had never set foot in the city that even by then was quite Eternal. And yet they all regarded themselves as Romans, called themselves so and signed themselves as such. (Something of the sort may be observed even today in the many and varied dominions of the British Empire, or let's recall—so that we don't twist our necks looking for examples—the Evenki, who are Soviet citizens.)

In other words, Rome was left to itself, as was the Roman Church. It would be too lengthy a haul to describe the relations between the Eastern and Western Churches. It may be noted, however, that in general the abandonment of Rome was to a certain degree to the Roman Church's advantage, but not entirely to its advantage.

25

I DID not expect this note on my trip to Istanbul to expand so much, and I am beginning to feel irritated both with myself and with the material. On the other hand, I am aware that I won't have another chance to discuss all these matters, or if I do I will consciously miss it. From now on, I do promise myself and anyone who has got this far a greater compression—though what I would like to do right now is drop the whole business.

If one must resort to prose, a procedure utterly hateful to the author of these lines, for the very reason that it lacks any form of discipline aside from that generated in the process—if one must use prose, it would be better to concentrate on details, descriptions of

places and character: i.e., on things the reader presumably may not have a chance to come across. For the bulk of the aforesaid, as well as everything that follows, is sooner or later bound to occur to anybody, since we are all, one way or another, dependent on history.

26

THE advantage of the Roman Church's isolation lay above all in the natural benefits to be derived from any form of autonomy. There was almost nothing and nobody, with the exception of the Roman Church itself, to prevent its developing into a defined, fixed system. Which is what indeed took place. The combination of Roman law, reckoned with more seriously in Rome than in Byzantium, and the specific logic of the Roman Church's inner development evolved into the ethico-political system that lies at the heart of the so-called Western conception of the state and of individual being. Like almost all divorces, the one between Byzantium and Rome was by no means total; a great deal of property stayed shared. But in general one can insist that this Western conception drew around itself a kind of circle, which the East, in a purely conceptual sense, never crossed, and within whose ample bounds was elaborated what we term, or understand as, Western Christianity and the world view it implies.

The drawback of any system, even a perfect one, is that it is a system—i.e., that it must by definition exclude certain things, regard them as alien to it, and as far as possible relegate them to the nonexistent. The drawback of the system that was worked out in Rome—the drawback of Western Christianity—was the unwitting reduction of its notions of evil. Any notions about anything are based on experience. For Western Christianity, the experience of evil was the experience reflected in the Roman law, with the addition of firsthand knowledge of the persecution of Christians by the emperors before Constantine. That's a lot, of course, but it is a long way from exhausting the reality of evil. By divorcing Byzantium, Western Christianity consigned the East to nonexistence, and thus reduced its own notion of human negative potential to a considerable, perhaps even a perilous, degree.

Today, if a young man climbs up a university tower with an automatic rifle and starts spraying passersby, a judge—this is assuming, of course,

that the young man has been disarmed and brought to court—will class him as mentally disturbed and lock him up in a mental institution. Yet in essence the behavior of that young man cannot be distinguished from the castration of the royal by-blow as related by Psellus. Nor can it be told apart from the Iranian Imam's butchering tens of thousands of his subjects in order to confirm his version of the will of the Prophet. Or from Dzhugashvili's maxim, uttered in the course of the Great Terror, that "with us, no one is irreplaceable." The common denominator of all these deeds is the anti-individualistic notion that human life is essentially nothing—i.e., the absence of the idea that human life is sacred, if only because each life is unique.

I am far from asserting that the absence of this concept is a purely Eastern phenomenon; it is not, and that is what's indeed scary. But Western Christianity, along with developing all its ensuing ideas about the world, law, order, the norms of human behavior, and so forth, made the unforgivable error of neglecting, for the sake of its own growth and eventual triumph, the experience supplied by Byzantium. After all, that was a shortcut. Hence all these daily—by now—occurrences that surprise us so much; hence that inability on the part of states and individuals to react to them adequately, which shows itself in their dubbing the aforementioned phenomena mental illness, religious fanaticism, and whatnot.

27

IN Topkapi, the former palace of the sultans, which has been turned into a museum, are now displayed in a special chamber the objects, most sacred to every Muslim's heart, associated with the life of the Prophet. Exquisitely encrusted caskets preserve the Prophet's tooth, locks from the Prophet's head. Visitors are asked to be quiet, to keep their voices down. All about hang swords of all kinds, daggers, the moldering pelt of some animal bearing the discernible letters of the Prophet's missive to some real historical character, along with other sacred texts. Contemplating these, one feels like thanking fate for one's ignorance of the language. For me, I thought, Russian will do. In the center of the room, inside a gold-rimmed cube of glass, lies a dark-brown object, which I was unable to identify without the assistance of the label. This, in bronze inlay, read, in Turkish and English, "Impress of the Prophet's footprint." Size 18 shoe minimum, I thought as I stared at the exhibit. And then I shuddered: Yeti!

28

BYZANTIUM was renamed Constantinople during Constantine's lifetime, if I am not mistaken. So far as simplicity of vowels and consonants goes, the new name was presumably more popular among the Seljuk Turks than Byzantium had been. But Istanbul also sounds reasonably Turkish—to the Russian ear, at any rate. The fact is, however, that Istanbul is a Greek name, deriving, as any guidebook will tell you, from the Greek *stin poli*, which means simply town. *Stin*? *Poli*? A Russian ear? Who here hears whom? Here, where *bardak* (brothel in Russian) means glass, where *durak* (fool) means stop. *Bir bardak çay*—one glass of tea; *otobüs durağı*—a bus stop. Good thing "*otobüs*," at least, is only half Greek.

29

FOR anyone suffering from shortness of breath, there's nothing to do here—unless he hires a taxi for the day. For anyone coming to Istanbul from the West, the city is remarkably cheap. With the price converted into dollars, marks, or francs, several things here actually cost nothing at all. Those shoe shiners again, for example, or tea. It's an odd sensation to watch human activity that has no monetary expression: it cannot be evaluated. It feels like a sort of heaven, an ur-world; it's probably this otherworldliness that constitutes that celebrated "fascination" of the East for the northern Scrooge.

Ah, this battle cry of the graying blonde: "Bargain!" Doesn't it sound guttural even to an English ear? And, ah, these "Isn't that cute, dearie?"s in a minimum of three European languages, and the rustle of worthless banknotes under the scrutiny of dark, apprehensive eyes, otherwise doomed to the TV set's interference and the voluminous family. Ah, this middle age dispatched all over the world by its suburban mantelpieces! And yet, for all its vulgarity and crassness, this quest is markedly more innocent, and of better consequence for the locals, than that of some talkative smart-ass Parisienne, or of the spiritual lumpen fatigued by yoga, Buddhism, or Mao and now digging into the depths of Sufi, Sunni, Shia "secret" Islam, etc.

No money changes hands here, of course. Between the actual and the mental bourgeois, one is better off with the former.

30

WHAT happened next everybody knows: from out of who knows where appeared the Turks. There seems to be no clear answer to where they actually came from; obviously, a very long way off. What drew them to the shores of the Bosporus is also not terribly clear. Horses, I guess. The Turks—more precisely, *tuyrks*—were nomads, so we were taught at school. The Bosporus, of course, turned out to be an obstacle, and here, all of a sudden, the Turks made up their minds not to wander back the way they had come but, instead, to settle. All this sounds rather unconvincing, but let's leave it the way we got it. What they wanted from Byzantium-Constantinople-Istanbul is, at any rate, beyond argument: they wanted to be in Constantinople—i.e., more or less the same thing that Constantine himself wanted. Before the eleventh century, the Turks had no shared symbol. Then it appeared. As we know, it was the crescent.

In Constantinople, however, there were Christians; the city churches were crowned with the cross. The *tuyrks'*—gradually becoming the Turks'—love affair with Byzantium lasted approximately three centuries. Persistence brought its rewards, and in the fifteenth century the cross surrendered its cupolas to the crescent. The rest is well documented, and there is no need to expand upon it. What is worth noting, however, is the striking similarity between "the way it was" and "the way it became." For the meaning of history lies in the essence of structures, not in the character of décor.

31

THE meaning of history! How, in what way, can the pen cope with this aggregation of races, tongues, creeds: with the vegetative—nay, zoological—pace of the crumbling down of the tower of Babel, at the the end of which one fine day, among the teeming ruins, an individual catches himself gazing in terror and alienation at his own hand or at his procreative organ, not in Wittgensteinian fashion but possessed, rather, by a sensation that these things don't belong to him at all, that they are but components of some do-it-yourself toy set: details,

shards in a kaleidoscope through which it is not the cause that peers at the effect but blind chance squinting at the daylight. Unobscured by the blowing dust.

32

THE difference between spiritual and secular power in Christian Byzantium wasn't terribly striking. Nominally, the Emperor was obliged to take the views of the Patriarch into account, and, indeed, this often happened. On the other hand, the Emperor frequently appointed the Patriarch and on occasion was, or had grounds for supposing himself to be, a superior Christian vis-à-vis the Patriarch. And, of course, we need not mention the concept of the Lord's anointed, which of itself could relieve the Emperor of the necessity of reckoning with anyone's metaphysics at all. This also happened, and, in conjunction with certain mechanical marvels, of which Theophilus was greatly enamored, played a decisive role in the adoption of Eastern Christianity by Rus in the ninth century. (Incidentally, these marvels—the throne ascending into the air, the metal nightingale, the roaring lions of the same material, and so on—were borrowed by the Byzantine ruler, with minor modifications, from his Persian neighbors.)

Something very similar also occurred with the Sublime Porte, which is to say the Ottoman Empire, alias Muslim Byzantium. Once again, we have an autocracy, heavily militarized and somewhat more despotic. The absolute head of the state was the Padishah, or Sultan. Alongside him, however, existed the Grand Mufti, a position combining—indeed, equating—spiritual and administrative authority. The whole state was run by a vastly complex hierarchical system, in which the religious—or, to put it more conveniently, staunchly ideological—element predominated.

In purely structural terms, the difference between the Second Rome and the Ottoman Empire is accessible only in units of time. What is it, then? The spirit of place? Its evil genius? The spirit of bad spells—*porcha* in Russian? Where, incidentally, do we get this word *porcha* from? Might it not derive from *porte*? It doesn't matter. It's enough that both Christianity and *bardak* with *durak* came down to us from this place where people were becoming converted to Christianity in the fifth century with the same ease

with which they went over to Islam in the fifteenth (even though after the fall of Constantinople the Turks did not persecute the Christians in any way). The reason for both conversions was the same: pragmatism. Not that this is connected with the place, however; this has to do with the species.

33

OH, all these countless Osmans, Muhammads, Murads, Bajazets, Ibrahims, Selims, and Suleimans slaughtering their predecessors, rivals, brothers, parents, and offspring—in the case of Murad II, or III (who cares?), eighteen brothers in a row—with the regularity of a man shaving in front of a mirror. Oh, all these endless, uninterrupted wars: against the infidel, against their own but Shiite Muslims, to extend the Empire, to avenge a wrong, for no reason at all, and in self-defense. And, oh, those Janissaries, the élite of the Army, dedicated at first to the Sultan, then gradually turning into a separate caste, with only its own interests at heart. How familiar it all, including the slaughter, is! All these turbans and beards, that uniform for heads possessed by one idea only—massacre—and because of that, and not at all because of Islam's ban on the depiction of anyone or anything living, totally indistinguishable from one another! And perhaps "massacre" precisely because all are so much alike that there is no way to detect a loss. "I massacre, therefore I exist."

And, broadly speaking, what, indeed, could be nearer to the heart of yesterday's nomad than the linear principle, than movement across a surface, in whatever direction? Didn't one of them, another Selim, say during the conquest of Egypt that he, as Lord of Constantinople, was heir to the Roman Empire and therefore had a right to all the lands that had ever belonged to it? Do these words sound like justification or do they sound like prophecy, or both? And does not the same note ring four hundred years later in the voice of Ustryalov and the Third Rome's latter-day Slavophiles, whose scarlet, Janissary's-cloaklike banner neatly combined a star and the crescent of Islam? And that hammer, isn't it a modified cross?

These non-stop, lasting-a-thousand-years wars, these endless tracts of scholastic interpretation of the art of archery—might not these be responsible for the development in this part of the world of a fusion between army

and state, for the concept of politics as the continuation of war by other means, and for the phantasmagoric, though ballistically feasible, fantasies of Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, the grandfather of the missile?

A man with imagination, especially an impatient one, may be sorely tempted to answer these questions in the affirmative. But perhaps one shouldn't rush; perhaps one should pause and give them the chance to turn into "accursed" ones, even if that may take several centuries. Ah, these centuries, history's favorite unit, relieving the individual of the necessity of personally evaluating the past, and awarding him the honorable status of victim of history.

34

UNLIKE the Ice Age, civilizations, of whatever sort, move from south to north, as if to fill up the vacuum created by the retreating glacier. The tropical forest is gradually ousting the conifers and mixed woodland—if not through foliage, then by way of architecture. One sometimes gets the feeling that baroque, rococo, and even the Schinkel style are simply a species' unconscious yearning for its equatorial past. Fernlike pagodas also fit this idea.

As for latitudes, it's only nomads who move along them, and usually from east to west. The nomadic migration makes sense only within a distinct climatic zone. The Eskimos glide within the Arctic Circle, the Tartars and Mongols in the confines of the black-earth zone. The cupolas of yurts and igloos, the cones of tents and tepees.

I have seen the mosques of Central Asia, of Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva: genuine pearls of Muslim architecture. As Lenin didn't say, I know nothing better than the Shah-i-Zinda, on whose floor I passed several nights, having nowhere else to lay my head. I was nineteen then, but I retain tender memories of these mosques not at all for that reason. They are masterpieces of scale and color; they bear witness to the lyricism of Islam. Their glaze, their emerald and cobalt get imprinted on your retina, not least because of the contrast with the yellow-brown hues of the surrounding landscape. This contrast, this memory of a coloristic (at least) alternative to the real world, may also have been the main pretext for their birth. One does, indeed, sense in them an idiosyncrasy, a self-absorption, a striving to accomplish, to per-

fect themselves. Like lamps in the darkness. Better: like corals in the desert.

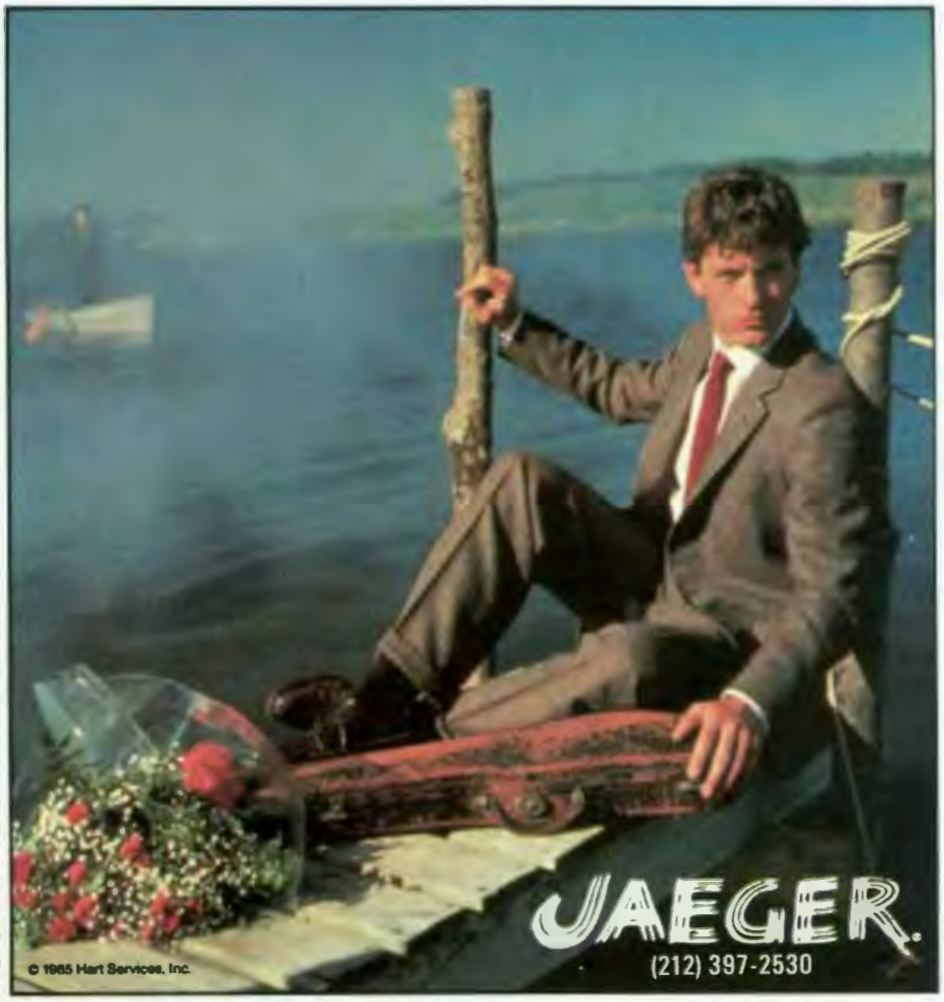
35

WHEREAS Istanbul's mosques are Islam triumphant. There is no greater contradiction than a triumphant church—or greater tastelessness, either. St. Peter's in Rome suffers from this as well. But the Istanbul mosques! These enormous toads in frozen stone, squatting on the earth, unable to stir. Only the minarets, resembling more than anything (prophetically, alas) ground-to-air batteries—only they indicate the direction the soul was once about to take. Their shallow domes, reminiscent of saucepan lids or cast-iron kettles, are unable to conceive what they are to do with the sky: they preserve what they contain, rather than encourage one to set eyes on high. Ah, this tent complex! This complex of spreading on the ground. Of *namaz*.

Silhouetted against the sunset, on the hilltops, they create a powerful impression: the hand reaches for the camera, like that of a spy spotting a military installation. There is, indeed, something menacing about them—eerie, otherworldly, galactic, totally hermetic, shell-like. And all this in a dirty-gray color, like most of the buildings in Istanbul, and all set against the turquoise of the Bosporus.

And if one's pen does not poise to chide their nameless true-believing builders for being aesthetically dumb it is because the tone for these ground-hugging, toad- and crablike constructions was set by the Hagia Sophia, an edifice in the utmost degree Christian. Constantine, it is asserted, laid the foundations; it was erected, though, in the reign of Justinian. From the outside, there is no way to tell it from the mosques, or them from it, for fate has played a cruel (or was it cruel?) joke on the Hagia Sophia. Under Sultan Whatever-His-Redundant-Name-Was, our Hagia Sophia was turned into a mosque.

As transformations go, this one didn't require a great deal of effort: all the Muslims had to do was to erect four minarets, one on each side of the cathedral. Which they did; and it became impossible to tell the Hagia Sophia from a mosque. That is, the architectural standard of Byzantium was taken to its logical end, for it was exactly the squat grandeur of this Christian shrine that the builders of Bajazet, Suleiman, and the builders of



the Blue Mosque, not to mention their lesser brethren, sought to emulate. And yet they shouldn't be reproached for that, partly because by the time of their arrival in Constantinople it was the Hagia Sophia that loomed largest over the entire landscape; mainly, however, because in itself the Hagia Sophia was not a Roman creation. It was an Eastern—or, more precisely, Sassanid—product. And, similarly, there is no point in blaming that Sultan What's-His-Name—was it Murad?—for converting a Christian church into a mosque. This transformation reflected something that one may, without giving the matter much thought, take for profound Eastern indifference to problems of a metaphysical nature. In reality, though, what stood behind this, and stands now, in much the same way as the Hagia Sophia, with her minarets and with her Christian-Muslim décor inside, is a sensation, instilled by both history and the Arabic lace, that everything in this life intertwines—that everything is, in a sense, but a pattern in a carpet. Trodden underfoot.

36

IT is a monstrous idea, but not without a measure of truth. So let us try to grapple with it. At its source lies the Eastern principle of ornamentation, whose basic element is a verse from the Koran, a quotation from the Prophet: sewn, engraved, carved in stone or wood, and graphically coincident with this very process of sewing, engraving, carving if one bears in mind the Arabic form of writing. In other words, we are dealing with the decorative aspect of calligraphy, the decorative use of sentences, words, letters—with a purely visual attitude to them. Let us, disregarding here the unacceptability of this attitude toward words (and letters, too), point out only the inevitability of a literally spatial—because conveyed by distinctly spatial means—perception of any sacred locution. Let us note the dependence of this ornament on the length of the line and on the didactic character of the locution, often ornamental enough in itself. Let us remind ourselves: the unit of Eastern ornament is the sentence, the word, the letter.

The unit—the main element—of ornamentation that arose in the West was the notch, the tally, recording the passage of days. Such ornament, in other words, is temporal. Hence its rhythm, its tendency toward symmetry, its essentially abstract character,

subordinating graphic expression to a rhythmic sense. Its extreme non-antididacticism. Its persistence—by means of rhythm, or repetition—in abstracting from its unit, from that which has already been once expressed. In short, its dynamism.

I would also remark that the unit of this ornamentation—the day, or the idea of the day—absorbs into itself any experience, including that of the sacred locution. From this follows the suggestion that the natty little bordure on a Grecian urn is superior to a pattern in a carpet. Which, in turn, leads us to consider who is more the nomad, the one who wanders in space or the one who migrates in time. However overwhelming (literally, too) the notion that all is interwoven, that everything is merely a pattern in a carpet, trodden underfoot, it frankly yields to the idea that everything gets left behind—the carpet and one's own foot upon it included.

37

OH, I foresee objections! I see an art historian or an ethnologist preparing to wage battle, figures or potsherds in his hands, over everything stated above. I can see a bespectacled someone carrying in an Indian or Chinese vase with a meander or epistyle just like the natty little Greek bordure and exclaiming, "Well, what about this? Isn't India (or China) the East?" Worse still, that vase or dish may turn out to be from Egypt or elsewhere in Africa, from Patagonia, or from Central America. Then out will gush a downpour of proofs and incontrovertible facts that pre-Islamic culture was figurative, that, thus, in this area the West simply lags behind the East, that ornament is by definition nonfunctional, and that space is greater than time. Or that I, for no doubt political reasons, am substituting anthropology for history. Something like that, or worse.

What can I say to this? And need I say anything? I'm not sure, but, all the same, I will point out that if I hadn't foreseen these objections I wouldn't have taken up my pen—that space to me is, indeed, both lesser and less dear than time. Not because it is lesser but because it is a thing, while time is an idea about a thing. In choosing between a thing and an idea, the latter is always to be preferred, say I.

And I also foresee that there will be no vase, no potsherds, no dish, or bespectacled someone. That no objections will be issued, that silence will

reign supreme. Less as a sign of assent than as one of indifference. So let us nastify our conclusion somewhat and add that an awareness of time is a profoundly individual experience. That in the course of his life every person sooner or later finds himself in the position of Robinson Crusoe, carving notches and, having counted, say, seven of them, or ten, crossing them out. Such is the origin of ornament, regardless of preceding civilizations, or of that to which this given person belongs. And these notches are a profoundly solitary activity, isolating the individual and forcing him toward an understanding, if not of his uniqueness, then at least of the autonomy of his existence in the world. That is what the basis of our civilization is, and that is what Constantine walked away from to the East. To the carpet.

38

A NORMAL hot, dusty, perspiring summer day in Istanbul. Moreover, it is Sunday. A human herd loitering about under the vaults of the Hagia Sophia. Up there aloft, inaccessible to the sight, are mosaics representing either kings or saints. Lower down, accessible to the eye, yet not to the mind, are circular metallic-looking shields with lacelike quotations from the Prophet in gold against dark-green enamel. Monumental cameos with coiling characters, evoking shadows of Jackson Pollock or Kandinsky. And now I become aware of a slipperiness: the cathedral is sweating. Not only the floor but the marble of the walls as well. The stone is sweating. I inquire, and am told it is because of the sharp jump in temperature. I decide it is because of my presence, and leave.

39

TO get a good picture of one's native realm, one needs either to get outside its walls or to spread out a map. But, as has been remarked before, who looks at maps nowadays?

If civilizations—of whatever sort they are—do indeed spread like vegetation in the opposite direction to the glacier, from south to north, where could Rus, given her geographical position, possibly tuck herself away from Byzantium? Not just Kievan Rus but Muscovite Rus as well, and then all the rest of it between the Donets and the Urals. And one should, frankly, thank Tamerlane and Genghis Khan for retarding the process somewhat, by somewhat freezing—or, rather, tram-

pling—the flowers of Byzantium. It is not true that Rus played a shielding role for Europe, preserving the West from the Mongol yoke. It was Constantinople, then still the bulwark of Christendom, that played that role. (In 1402, incidentally, a situation developed under the walls of Constantinople which pretty nearly turned into a total catastrophe for Christianity and, indeed, for the whole of the then known world: Tamerlane encountered Bajazet. Luckily, they turned their arms against each other: interracial rivalry, it would seem, made itself known. Had they joined forces against the West—that is, in the direction both were moving—we would now be looking at the map with an almond-shaped, predominantly hazel eye.)

There was nowhere for Rus to go to get away from Byzantium—any more than for the West to get away from Rome. And, just as the West in age after age became overgrown with Roman colonnades and legality, Rus happened to become the natural geographical prey of Byzantium. If in the way of the former stood the Alps, the latter was impeded only by the Black Sea—a deep but, in the final analysis, flat thing. Rus received, or took, from Byzantine hands everything: not only the Christian liturgy but also the Christian-Turkish system of statecraft (gradually more and more Turkish, less vulnerable, more militarily ideological), not to mention a significant part of its vocabulary. The only thing Byzantium shed on its way north was its remarkable heresies—its Monophysites, its Arians, its Neoplatonists, and so on—which had constituted the very essence of its literary and spiritual life. But then its northward expansion took place at a time of growing domination by the crescent, and the purely physical power of the Sublime Porte hypnotized the North in far greater measure than the theological polemics of dying-out scholiasts.

Still, in the end Neoplatonism triumphed in art, didn't it? We know where our icons are from, we know the same about our onion-domed churches. We also know that there is nothing easier for a state than to adapt to its own ends Plotinus' maxim that an artist's task must be the interpretation of ideas rather than the imitation of nature. As for ideas, in what way does the late M. Suslov, or whoever is now scraping the ideological dish, differ from the Grand Mufti? What distinguishes the General Secretary from the Padishah—or, indeed, the Em-

peror? And who appoints the Patriarch, the Grand Vizier, the Mufti, or the Caliph? What distinguishes the Politburo from the Great Divan? And isn't it only one step from a divan to an ottoman?

Isn't my native realm an Ottoman Empire now—in extent, in military might, in its threat to the Western world? Aren't we now by the walls of Vienna? And is not its threat the greater in that it proceeds from the Easternized, to the point of unrecognizability—no, recognizability! —Christianity? Is it not greater because it is more seductive? And what do we hear in that howl of the late Milyukov under the cupola of the short-lived Duma: "The Dardanelles will be ours!" An echo of Cato? The yearning of a Christian for his holy place? Or still the voice of Bajazet, Tamerlane, Selim, Muhammad? And if it comes to this, if we are quoting and interpreting, what do we discern in that falsetto of Konstantin Leontiev, the falsetto that pierced the air precisely in these parts, where he served in the Czarist Embassy: "Russia must rule shamelessly"? What do we hear in this putrid, prophetic exclamation? The spirit of the age? The spirit of the nation? Or the spirit of the place?

40

God forbid we delve any further into the Turkish-Russian dictionary. Let us just take the word "*çay*," meaning "tea" in both languages, whatever its origins. The tea in Turkey is wonderful—better than the coffee—and, like the shoe-shining, costs almost nothing in any known currency. It's strong, the color of transparent brick, but it has no overstimulating effect, because it is served in a *bardak*, a fifty-gram glass, no more. Of all things I came across in this mixture of Astrakhan and Stalinabad, it's the best item. Tea—and the sight of Constantine's wall, which I would not have seen if I hadn't struck it lucky and got a rogue taxi-driver who, instead of going straight to Topkapi, bowled around the whole city.

You can judge the seriousness of the builder's intent by the wall's height and width and the quality of the masonry. Constantine was thus extremely serious: the ruins where gypsies, goats, and young people trading in their tender parts may be found could withstand even today any army, given a positional war. On the other hand, if civilizations are granted vegetative—

in other words, ideological—character, the erection of the wall was a sheer waste of time. Against anti-individualism, to say the least, against the spirit of relativism and obedience, neither wall nor sea offers a protection.

When I finally reached Topkapi and, having surveyed a good part of its contents—predominantly the *kaftans* of the Sultans, which correspond linguistically and visually to the wardrobe of the Muscovite rulers—headed toward the object of my pilgrimage, the seraglio, I was greeted, sadly, at the door of this most important establishment in the world by a notice in Turkish and English: "CLOSED FOR RESTORATION." "Oh, if only!" I exclaimed inwardly, trying to control my disappointment.

41

THE quality of reality always leads to a search for a culprit—more accurately, for a scapegoat. Whose flocks graze in the mental fields of history. Yet, a son of a geographer, I believe that Urania is older than Clio; among Mnemosyne's daughters, I think, she is the oldest. So, born by the Baltic, in the place regarded as a window on Europe, I always felt something like a vested interest in this window on Asia with which we shared a meridian. On grounds perhaps less than sufficient, we regarded ourselves as Europeans. By the same token, I thought of the dwellers of Constantinople as Asians. Of these two assumptions, it's only the first that proved to be arguable. I should also admit, perhaps, that East and West vaguely corresponded in my mind to the past and the future.

Unless one is born by the water—and at the edge of an empire at that—one is seldom bothered by this sort of distinction. Of all people, somebody like me should be the first to regard Constantine as the carrier of the West to the East, as someone on a par with Peter the Great: the way he is regarded by the Church itself. If I had stayed longer at that meridian, I would. Yet I didn't, and I don't.

To me, Constantine's endeavor is but an episode in the general pull of the East westward, a pull motivated neither by the attraction of one part of the world for another nor by the desire of the past to absorb the future—although at times and in some places, of which Istanbul is one, it seems that way. This pull, I am afraid, is magnetic, evolutionary; it has to do, pre-

sumably, with the direction in which this planet rotates on its axis. It takes the forms of an attraction to a creed, of nomadic thrusts, wars, migration, and the flow of money. The Galata Bridge is not the first to be built over the Bosporus, as your guidebook would claim; the first one was built by Darius. A nomad always rides into a sunset.

Or else he swims. The strait is about a mile wide, and what could be done by a "blond cow" escaping the wrath of Jupiter's spouse could surely have been managed by the dusky son of the steppes. Or by lovesick Leander or by sick-of-love Lord Byron splashing across the Dardanelles. Bosporus! Well-worn strip of water, the only cloth that is properly Urania's, no matter how hard Clio tries to put it on. It stays wrinkled, and on gray days, especially, no one would say that it has been stained by history. Its surface current washes itself off Constantinople in the north—and that's why, perhaps, that sea is called Black. Then it somersaults to the bottom and, in the form of a deep current, escapes back into Marmara—the Marble Sea—presumably to get itself bleached. The net result is that dusted-bottle-green color: the color of time itself. The child of the Baltic can't fail to recognize it, can't rid himself of the old sensation that this rolling, non-stop, lapping substance itself is time, or that this is what time would look like had it been condensed or photographed. This is what, he thinks, separates Europe and Asia. And the patriot in him wishes the stretch were wider.

42

TIME to wrap it up. As I said, there were no steamers from Istanbul or Smyrna. I boarded a plane and, after less than two hours' flight over the Aegean, through air that at one time was no less inhabited than the archipelago down below, landed in Athens.

Forty miles from Athens, in Sounion, at the top of a cliff plummeting to the sea, stands a temple to Poseidon, built almost simultaneously—a difference of some fifty years—with the Parthenon in Athens. It has stood here for two and a half thousand years.

It is ten times smaller than the Parthenon. How many times more beautiful it is would be hard to say; it is not clear what should be considered the unit of perfection. It has no roof.

There is not a soul about. Sounion is a fishing village with a couple of

modern hotels now, and lies far below. There, on the crest of the dark cliff, the shrine looks from a distance as if it had been gently lowered from Heaven rather than been erected on earth. Marble has more in common with the clouds than with the ground.

Fifteen white columns connected by a white marble base stand evenly spaced. Between them and the earth, between them and the sea, between them and the blue sky of Hellas, there is no one and nothing.

As practically everywhere else in Europe, here, too, Byron incised his name on the base of one of the columns. In his footsteps, the bus brings tourists; later it takes them away. The erosion that is clearly affecting the surface of the columns has nothing to do with weathering. It is a pox of stares, lenses, flashes.

Then twilight descends, and it gets darker. Fifteen columns, fifteen vertical white bodies evenly spaced at the top of the cliff, meet the night under the open skies.

If they counted days, there would have been a million such days. From a distance, in the evening haze, their white vertical bodies resemble an ornament, thanks to the equal intervals between them.

An idea of order? The principle of symmetry? Sense of rhythm? Idolatry?

43

PRESUMABLY, it would have been wiser to take letters of recommendation, to jot down two or three telephone numbers at least, before going to Istanbul. I didn't do that. Presumably, it would have made sense to make friends with someone, get into contact, look at the life of the place from the inside, instead of dismissing the local population as an alien crowd, instead of regarding people as so much psychological dust in one's eyes.

Who knows? Perhaps my attitude toward people has in its own right a whiff of the East about it, too. When it comes down to it, where am I from? Still, at a certain age a man gets tired of his own kind, weary of cluttering up his conscious and subconscious. One more, or ten more, tales of cruelty? Another ten, or hundred, examples of human baseness, stupidity, valor? Misanthropy, after all, should also have its limits.

It's enough, therefore, to glance in the dictionary and find that *katorga* (forced labor) is a Turkish word, too. And it's enough to discover on a Turkish map, somewhere in Anatolia,

or Ionia, a town called Niğde (Russian for nowhere).

44

I'M not a historian, or a journalist, or an ethnographer. At best, I'm a traveller, a victim of geography. Not of history, be it noted, but of geography. This is what still links me with the country where it was my fate to be born, with our famed Third Rome. So I'm not particularly interested in the politics of present-day Turkey, or in what happened to Atatürk, whose portrait adorns the greasy walls of every last coffeehouse as well as the Turkish lira, unconvertible and representing an unreal form of payment for real labor.

I came to Istanbul to look at the past, not at the future—since the latter doesn't exist here: whatever there was of it has gone north as well. Here there is only an unenviable, third-rate present of the people, industrious yet plundered by the intensity of the local history. Nothing will happen here anymore, apart perhaps from street disorders or an earthquake. Or perhaps they'll discover oil: there's a fearful stench of sulfureted hydrogen in the Golden Horn, crossing whose oily surface you get a splendid panorama of the city. Still, it's unlikely. The stench comes from oil seeping out of rusty, leaking, nearly hole-ridden tankers passing through the Strait. One might squeeze out a living from refining that alone.

A project like that, though, would probably strike a local as altogether too enterprising. The locals are rather conservative by nature, even if they are businessmen or dealers; as for the working class, it is locked, reluctantly but firmly, in a traditional, conservative mentality by the beggarly rates of pay. In his own element, a native finds himself only within the infinitely intertwining—in patterns akin to the carpet's or the mosque walls'—web-like, vaulted galleries of the local bazaar, which is the heart, mind, and soul of Istanbul. This is a city within a city; it, too, is built for the ages. It cannot be transported west, north, or even south. GUM, Bon Marché, Macy's, Harrods taken together and raised to the cube are but child's babble compared with these catacombs. In an odd way, thanks to the garlands of yellow hundred-watt bulbs and the endless wash of bronze, beads, bracelets, silver, and gold under glass, not to mention the very carpets and the icons, samovars, crucifixes, and so on, this bazaar in Istanbul produces the

impression of—of all things—an Orthodox church, though convoluted and branching like a quotation from the Prophet. A laid-out version of the Hagia Sophia.

45

CIVILIZATIONS move along meridians; nomads (including our modern warriors, since war is an echo of the nomadic instinct) along latitudes. This seems to be yet another version of the cross that Constantine saw. Both movements possess a natural (vegetable or animal) logic, considering which one easily finds oneself in the position of not being able to reproach anyone for anything. In the state known as melancholy—or, more exactly, fatalism. It can be blamed on age, or on the influence of the East, or, with an effort of the imagination, on Christian humility.

The advantages of this condition are obvious, since they are selfish ones. For it is, like all forms of humility, always achieved at the expense of the mute helplessness of the victims of history, past, present, and future; it is an echo of the helplessness of millions. And if you are not at an age when you can draw a sword from a scabbard or clamber up to a platform to roar to a sea of heads about your detestation of the past, the present, and what is to come; if there is no such platform or the sea has dried up, there still remain the face and the lips, which can accommodate your slight—provoked by the vista opening to both your inner and your naked eye—smile of contempt.

46

WITH it, with that smile on the lips, one may board the ferry and set off for a cup of tea in Asia. Twenty minutes later, one can disembark in Çengelköy, find a café on the very shore of the Bosporus, sit down and order tea, and, inhaling the smell of rotting seaweed, observe without changing the aforesaid facial expression the aircraft carriers of the Third Rome sailing slowly through the gates of the Second on their way to the First. —JOSEPH BRODSKY

(Translated, from the Russian, by Alan Myers and the author.)

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BLOCK THAT METAPHOR!

[Dr. Billy Greer quoted in the Brevard (N.C.) Transylvania Times]

This college is "sitting on a launching pad, ready to really flex its muscles and be a dynamo."