

“It Might Be All One Language”¹:

Narrative Paradox in *Birds Without Wings*

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¹ Spoken by a young Karatavuk (de Bernières 82).

Louis de Bernières' novel *Birds Without Wings* employs paradox as the governing rhetorical trope that both drives and critiques the events of the novel. The unsettling feeling of unity in spite of narrative difference pervades the text, surfacing in the religious and ethical composition of the novel's setting, as well as within the very structure of the narrative. The small town of Eskibahçe provides a community of Ottoman citizens, some Muslim and some Christian, living together in harmony, at times even sharing beliefs and customs. The age-old rivalry between these two religions, while not absent from this village, finds a balancing point where the two can exist peacefully even as historical precedent and social norms dictate hostility. The story of Philothei and Ibrahim, a Christian/Muslim couple, allegorizes the ways that religious identities flex to fit life in places that permit paradox, and conversely the horror that can be wrought by imposing strict boundaries upon those accustomed to grey spaces. The narrative of *Birds Without Wings* balances two seemingly oppositional or incongruent ideas with natural ease, while implicitly commenting on the multiplicity and beauty of such paradoxes in the real world. The novel resists the temptation to mark clear boundaries, or present an absolute truth, preferring to explore the ways that language limits and constructs identity, power and self. Paradox shapes the unwieldy narrative in *Birds Without Wings*, revealing the fluidity that can exist in the balance between clearly demarcated identities; the text demonstrates the power of paradox in its narrative structure, through localized moments that re-inflect the power of writing in a largely illiterate community, and through a diasporic perspective struggling to define self in multiple ways.

The novel not only performs paradox and fluidity, but it also recognizes the necessity of language in discussions of identity, hybridity and self by overtly focusing on its production. A diverse group of scholars help shape and inform this discussion of language

and paradox. In *The Writing of History*, Michel de Certeau's discussion of the way that written history shapes concepts of the "other" in colonial discourse will help illuminate some of the conflicts between writing and orality that permeate *Birds Without Wings*. Paul de Man and Azade Seyhan in "The Rhetoric of Temporality" and *Writing Outside the Nation* respectively, also provide valuable theoretical tools to help understand the integral relationship between perceptions of self and language, identifying specific processes by which individuals create a sense of self. Their theoretical frameworks nuance and support the arguments that Katherine Pratt Ewing makes about the complexities involved in negotiating identity, specifically with respect to hybridity in immigrant communities. Reading these theorists in concert with one another will help deepen the argument that liminal spaces are necessary in order for multiple truths to exist simultaneously, including the idea that each person negotiates several identities, performing each in different contexts. This fluidity emerges as a practical survival technique in a drastically changed world after World War I.

De Bernières sets his novel in the tumultuous period between the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of an independent Turkish state, approximately the years 1900-1925. Long-standing tensions exist between Greece and the Ottoman Empire over lands that both claim. The Sultan, more a figurehead than a flesh and blood leader, does not provide tangible leadership over the immense and extremely diverse empire. Instead, the citizens feel emotionally attached to their villages and the lives of their neighbors. In Eskibahçe, even friends of different faiths can depend on some level of blood connection:

In fact, they were related, but in a manner tenuous enough for everyone to have forgotten how it came about. A great-great-grandfather had changed faith and married into the other family... In any case, and in one way or another, if one traced it back far enough, there was no one in that town who was not in some way a relation of everybody else. (de Bernières 31)

The strict division between faiths has blurred in these small, removed contexts, as immediate relationships and everyday village interactions elide doctrinal mandates. The town, home to Christians, Muslims, Armenians, and Jews has settled into a comfortable rhythm of low-level prejudice of one group against the other, but always with an understanding that they belong to an insular community that allows for a grey area in such distinctions. Even imam and priest engage in friendly banter and ideological debate:

The two men had for many years enjoyed the pleasantries of greeting each other as ‘Infidel Efendi,’ the one in Turkish and the other in Greek, and had struck up a cordial relationship based upon mutual respect, somewhat tempered by an awareness that there were many of both faiths who would look askance at such a friendship. (35)

The joking manner in which the two religious leaders pair the insulting title “infidel” with the honorific “Efendi” illustrates nicely the ease with which traditional enemies cohabit peacefully in Eskibahçe. Their friendship, however, never fully escapes the underlying animosity that history has embedded in their culture, and while the harmony of village life effaces their difference, it always waits just below the surface, ready to erupt when global issues remind them of imposed loyalties.

Birds Without Wings juxtaposes the fluid identities of the citizens of Eskibahçe alongside a world trend of nationalism spreading throughout the Ottoman Empire and the world, which will force the villagers into limited identities that they have never known before. The narrative progresses piecemeal, each chapter offering a framed vignette of village life interspersed with the biography of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey. His linear storyline allows the reader to watch as world events begin to impinge on the delicate balance enjoyed in Eskibahçe. The narrative voice in these biographical chapters assumes a more objective tone, invoking historical facts to convey the events of this famous figure. And yet, there are moments when the impression of impersonal historical narrative

fissures, and the personality of the narrator shows through. The narrator questions the authenticity of a prophetic dream Atatürk's mother claims convinced her to allow her son to go to military school: "One is tempted to imagine Mustafa whispering into the ears of the righteous matriarch as she slumbers" (27). This interjection challenges a previous description that marks the same episode as a "marvelous veridical dream," instead suggesting the manipulative, conniving quality to the young founder of Turkey (27). While the narrative voice for these chapters is distinct from the omniscient narrator in other vignettes, the occasional transgression of a more personal tone into the cadence of a seemingly objective biography questions a singular historical voice. This narrative treatment places Kemal, a man who would be the hero of most other narratives about Turkey, on fairly equal footing with the more mundane narratives of the villagers of Eskibahçe. Thus, the novel establishes a variety of narrative registers early on: an omniscient narrator who playfully digs into the thoughts and feelings of the villagers while commenting upon the relationship between small town developments and world events; an ethnographic voice delivered in direct address as though being spoken by individual characters; and the purportedly more objective, historical narrative of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, that upon closer examination proves similarly inflected with nuance and subjectivity. Together these many narrative modes comprise a fragmented tale that miraculously coheres into a cogent whole.

Mustafa Kemal, a military man stationed all over the Ottoman Empire, has been credited with founding the modern Turkish state, a dream that began during his life as a soldier. As a young man in Salonika, he listens to the increasing clamor among ethnic groups for independence from the Ottoman Empire and begins to "conceive the notion of a Turkish state within secure borders, with the accretions of empire permanently removed" (de Bernières 100). His drive to establish a homeland for the Turks will affect every Ottoman

citizen, including the inhabitants of Eskibahçe. This small village will finally feel the global changes happening far away as their community divides itself along religious lines in a polarization never known before. Ironically, Atatürk hated religion, and originally envisioned a secular Turkish state. However, religion's power to divide became all too clear to him after World War I, and he compromised on the religious makeup of his new state in return for secularism, thus implicitly defining ethnicity upon religious lines rather than linguistic ones. Turkey has wrestled with this paradox continually since its inception, with devout Muslims pushing for an Islamic state that would violate the constitutional foundation of secularism. In this tumultuous context of shifting national boundaries and ethnic identities, de Bernières finds space to experiment with issues of language, history, orality, and the written word.

As world powers move to delineate national boundaries more strictly, taking notice of ethnic and religious differences that seemed less consequential before, the tenuous balance that existed begins to falter. Just as defining a paradox too stringently destroys the implausible truth that results from two seeming oppositional components, so too does the world's harmony disintegrate with over-determination. *Birds Without Wings* toys with magic realism and its many voices, as well as with the power mythology has to construct local versions of history, while simultaneously providing a clear social commentary on the human cost of nation-building and boundary drawing. At moments, the omniscient narrator that dominates the novel takes on a particularly sarcastic and opinionated voice as he details world events:

Almost all Turkish Christians, regardless of what language they speak, will be removed to Greece. Another provision is that almost all Greek Muslims, whether of Greek or Turkish origin, and regardless of which language they speak, will be removed from Greece and sent to Turkey. The criteria are explicitly religious rather than ethnic, and in the interests of preventing future strife it looks like a good idea, until one takes into account the innocent people concerned. (de Bernières 461)

The narrator describes historical events, but his tone betrays a critique of the disregard for human lives in the political chess game taking place after World War I, which moves entire populations between countries without a thought to the actual lives affected. In his attempt to give voice and nuance to a silenced population, de Bernières personifies several local voices, interspersing them with a more conventional omniscient narrator, although one with a distinct personality and political opinion. The assumption of voices to which de Bernières has no personal connection merits closer scrutiny, especially from a post-colonial perspective.

Although *Birds Without Wings* attempts to address many of the same issues of empire, displacement, and identity confusion that many post-colonial works attend to, de Bernières does so with a different political agenda. The setting, while ripe for exploration of boundaries, identity, and language is also not native to de Bernières, who grew up in Britain.

² Many post-colonial authors write as native voices from formerly colonized lands, calling political and social attention to the inequalities and racism that exist where colonialism once thrived. Their personal experiences within the colonial and post-colonial contexts give their voices a particular type of poignant authenticity. De Bernières, as an outsider, does not fit this model of post-colonial writing. His writing politicizes a macro view of colonialism as an institution that affects the entire world, although he chooses to approach the issue through a

² De Bernières' non-native status while writing about the Middle East raises red flags for anyone familiar with Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Said challenges readers to think carefully about the ways that texts written in the West represent and construct the people of the Orient. De Bernières as a British citizen probably grew up reading the texts that Said finds most egregious, and so he must be suspected of partaking in an Orientalist discourse if only through acculturation. Indeed, the novel feels like a travel narrative at times, and often portrays stereotypical images of Oriental beauty, sexuality and exoticism with a suspiciously familiar tone to Burton, Renan, and Flaubert. While it is necessary to be aware of this Orientalist discourse, and the mythical and often erroneous constructions of Oriental character, sexuality, religion and morality that it produces, it is also important to recognize that de Bernières' use of the discourse is quite different from nineteenth century writers. While it is important to note the traces of Orientalist discourse in *Birds Without Wings* it does not hold a central place in the discussion of this paper about paradox and identity construction through language manipulation.

Turkish lens. The novel does not focus on atrocities committed by Western powers against colonial subjects, but rather documents the great events of history from a village perspective. Rather than exploring the explicit relationship of colonizer to colonial subject, de Bernières illuminates more fully the conflicts of the Middle East, dwelling on local ethnic and power struggles. As the global community inches towards World War I, the colonial project comes in direct contact with the Ottoman Empire, and its citizens begin to realize that isolation is no longer an option. De Bernières eloquently dramatizes these issues within the framework of a small town, carefully nurturing the parallel narratives of world and village until they collide in more than ten years of bloodshed.

The fragmentary narrative style that de Bernières employs in *Birds Without Wings* allows the structure of the novel to open space for multiple truths to exist simultaneously, a theme that emerges throughout the novel. Several characters address the reader directly from within the text, a style reminiscent of oral traditions. These moments of direct address immediately establish distance between the reader and the speaker, but they also nuance what one might take to be an omniscient narrator, lending the novel the texture of local lore. The narrator's voice reaches further than the direct address chapters, entering the minds of many characters; but despite its predominance, it does not monopolize "truth" in the text. The two narrative styles coexist, sometimes offering disparate perspectives on the same event, but never excluding the possibility of multiple interpretations or understandings. The many local voices also demonstrate multiplicity, as exemplified by the different variations and myths that various characters tell about the birth of Philothei, a beautiful Christian girl. Her life cuts a line through this otherwise circuitous narrative, and her death in particular becomes important to the novel, its title and the overarching theme of broken paradox that both embody. Iskander the Potter went to visit the baby immediately after her birth and

recalls, “Then [the imam] put Philothei down, and bent over, and raised her hand to his lips, and kissed it. Later, her mother found a small crimson blemish on the child’s right hand, which she believed to be the exact place where the imam had placed his lips. Even the Christians, you see, believed that the imam was a saint” (de Bernières 13). Drosoula, Philothei’s childhood friend, corroborates this myth as she remembers her life in Turkey from exile in Greece: “I remember hearing so many times about how Abdulhamid Hodja, the imam, came to visit her when she was born, and left a saintly stigma on her hand where he kissed it. I can’t remember seeing it exactly, but I feel as though I did. I picture it as being red and blotchy, like those stains that you sometimes see on people’s faces” (19). Here are two accounts of the same event separated by more than sixty years, revealing the power that myth and orality have in the tightly knit community of mostly illiterate villagers. Drosoula’s memory is constructed through orality; her emphasis on hearing the story, and feeling as though she had seen the stigma herself indicate how powerful such oral traditions become in shaping personal narratives. This passage brings into focus a conflict between the oral and the written in the narrative structure of the novel, as well as the cultural production of myth and history, and the greater question of what is remembered locally and what gets archived into cultural memory.

In “Ethno-Graphy: Speech, or the Space of the Other: Jean de Léry,” Michel de Certeau discusses the interplay between writing and speaking, positing the ability to write as one of the key elements of domination during the colonial era. Colonists were able to not only use the written word as a sign of superiority, but they recorded and archived their perceptions of the people and places they visited with no input from the speaking voices of the colonial subjects. While de Certeau theorizes in much the same way as Edward Said about the construction of “the other” through historical texts, he also discusses the contrast

between the speaking subject and the written character, a central tension in *Birds Without Wings*:

At least in this way appears one of the rules of the system which was established as being Occidental and modern: the scriptural operation which produces, preserves, and cultivates imperishable 'truths' is connected to a rumor of words that vanish no sooner than they are uttered, and which are therefore lost forever. An irreparable loss in the trace of these spoken words in the texts whose object they have become. Hence through writing is formed our relation with the other. (de Certeau 212)

De Certeau acknowledges that the spoken word, a transient and unstable type of language can be easily co-opted by text, which has the power to re-inscribe the spoken word within historical texts that reflect particular Occidental and colonialist frameworks. His discussion about the ways that the spoken can be manipulated by the written becomes salient in a discussion of narrative style in *Birds Without Wings*. While some characters address the reader directly, invoking an ethnographic model of documentation associated with oral truth, the reader must remember that these voices only mimic true ethnography. These voices, then, which lend an air of authenticity to the text must be challenged in their claim to witness status. After recognizing the fiction of orality performed in the novel, however, the reader can move on to assess the ways in which the multiple voices undermine a single history, or narrative of "truth." Indeed, de Certeau's analysis of Léry eventually leads him to the conclusion that the only constant to truthfulness is that it means; it has a meaning, but that does not make it universal (236).³ Here, de Certeau's analysis collides with what *Birds Without*

³ The extended argument that de Certeau makes in this chapter of *The Writing of History* pertains to a specific context of colonial expansion and domination. In this text, de Certeau examines the ways that natural speech becomes reinscribed as the literary, but always within a relationship to Occidental understandings of the world. Thus, both the writer and those written are reinscribed within particular discursive frameworks meant to reify the ideals of colonialism, while denigrating the integrity of the native. He maintains that writing creates the relationship with the "other" for all who read it, and thus written texts become extremely important in the power struggle between colonized and colonizer. Because the spoken word of the "Other" is always reinscribed within the historical and cultural frameworks of those with the power to write, the colonizers maintained a monopoly over truth as shown through translation. While de Certeau's specific argument about the powerful interplay between speech and writing in a colonial context does not directly relate to this paper,

Wings demonstrates—truth constructs meaning from particular discursive frameworks; thus, multiple truths exist. Similarly, there is no one definitive version of history, for history merely narrativizes one group’s particular worldview; many versions of history can and do exist side by side. Thus, the chapters of direct narration present the illusion of many voices with different perspectives coming together in a circuitous way that often feels to be out of time. The kaleidoscope of voices, though fragmentary, produces a unified whole that coheres nicely as a novel. A paradox exists then, in the way that seemingly unrelated voices, bearing different perspectives and agendas, can still produce unified narrative.

The production of history becomes a central issue in the novel, and one that relates not only to the presence of many simultaneously truthful narratives, but also to de Certeau’s theories about the production of history for specific audiences, and the systematic exclusion of certain voices from those textual, archived, historical narratives. In the tumultuous historical moment in which the novel is set, certain aspects of life and politics make it into “history” while others, most often the parts pertaining to the experiences of real people, are forgotten. While the Atatürk biography chapters feel like a documentary on his life, the documentarian also shines through, reminding the reader to question the presentation of a particular narrative and the ways one’s perception of truth might be shaped by tone and style. De Bernières insists that the reader acknowledge the artifice of history through the narrative decision to use mimetic ethnography—he literally constructs personal histories and a version of world events for each character. Towards the end of the novel, the narrator engages in a fairly explicit discussion of the false notion of one history through a discussion about the naming of a town:

his observations about the power of writing, and the natural quality of speech, as well as his complex understanding of how historical meaning is produced is relevant more abstractly.

The identity and manner of death of Fethi Bey, aerial, intrepid and unfortunate, are concealed forever behind the tangled contradictions of multiple and congenial myth, and he lives on solely in the name of a pleasant and modest town that may not indeed be named after him, having existed, it seems, solely for the purpose of demonstrating the impossibility of history. (de Bernières 552)

De Bernières' closing comment on history further reifies de Certeau's assertion that history inherently comes from one's cultural framework and constructs "the other" in particular ways that then become archived and mythologized as the truth, a notion further complicated by the power of the written word (212). The tension between oral and written narratives, always present in the fragmentary structure of *Birds Without Wings*, becomes a motif, as the characters attempt to navigate a quickly changing world in which most of them are illiterate and thus marginalized in the production of history.

The tension between the written and the spoken comes back to the conflict in the novel between Christians and Muslims. The Muslims are forbidden to learn to read and write, instead attending schools that reinforce memorization of the Koran. The Christians on the other hand, learn to read and write the Greek alphabet, but since most of the children only speak Turkish they write Turkish in Greek. This division and its corresponding economic gap is apparent even to the children, as illustrated in Karatavuk's comments to his Christian friend Mehmetçik:

'You Christians are always richer than us, and my father says it's all because of reading and writing and adding up and taking away, and that's why you're so good at deceiving us, and he says that we Muslims only learn what we need to get us into paradise, which is all that matters in the end, but you Christians get all the advantages on earth because you learn about all the other things as well. I want those other things too.' (82)

Karatavuk swiftly recognizes the discrepancy in his education from that of his friend, and enlists Mehmetçik as his teacher, learning to read and write Greek. Mehmetçik helps Karatavuk become the first Muslim boy from Eskibahçe to learn to read and write,

knowledge that both gives him power and gets him in trouble as a person who blurs the distinctions that prevail around him.

As world events draw the Ottoman Empire and its citizens into World War I, Karatavuk enlists in its “holy war,” where he fights and survives the famously bloody battle of Gallipoli. While at war, Karatavuk learns many things about religion, friendship, nationalism, and God, but his initial reaction to war is admiration for a beautiful countryside so different from his home village. He writes a letter home to his mother sharing all his joy at the beauty around him. When his parents receive the letter they cannot read it, nor can they tell that it has been written in Greek script, which even the imam cannot read. In the end, they must enlist the help of the cranky Christian schoolteacher, Leonidas, no easy task considering his ideas about a Greater Greece and the inferiority of all Turks. Yet Karatavuk’s letter manages to touch even the stony heart of Leonidas:

Leonidas, on the other hand, was engaged in an inner struggle; he had spent so many years and expended so much energy on cultivating his sense of superiority to the Turks that it came as a shock to disencrypt the tender soul of Karatavuk. Much as he despised the young man’s faith, he could not but be affected by its beauty and sincerity. ‘It’s a fine letter,’ he said at length, ‘it has poetry. A fine letter indeed.’ (295)

The inner conflict that Karatavuk’s letter inspires in Leonidas marks his power to cross boundaries and distort previously demarcated lines. Leonidas never engages in town life, preferring to spend his days hating his neighbors because of a perceived wrong inflicted hundreds of years ago when the Ottomans took lands once held by Alexander the Great, a Greek. For Leonidas to categorize Karatavuk’s letter as poetry is to admit that a Turk is not only intelligent, but also an artist. Karatavuk’s letter penetrates Leonidas’ racist world view, shaking his beliefs for a brief moment and allowing him to glimpse what the world would be like if he relaxed his rigid notions of identity based around religion and nationality. The letter binds Leonidas, Karatavuk and his parents together in a moment of shared appreciation for

beautiful expression. In Eskibahçe, where such occurrences were not uncommon before ethnic and religious tensions became more fraught, Karatavuk's letter brings unlikely parties together. On the war front, however, a letter written by a Turkish Muslim soldier in Greek script holds a very different meaning.

When Karatavuk tries to write a second letter to his mother, the military censors detain it, his officers suspecting him of espionage: "He said, 'The characters are Greek.' I said, 'The words are Turk.' The commander looked at me and said, 'Not long ago the Greeks were at war with us, and before long they may well be again. They did terrible things to us in Thrace... We don't want Greeks among us here, not in the army. The danger of espionage is obvious'" (305). Karatavuk's ability to write Turkish in Greek script challenges the strict lines that divide Turks and Greeks, Muslims and Christians. His unique ability, which itself represents the paradox of two cultures wedded in language, threatens the established military power and makes those in charge question Karatavuk's identity as a Turk. The ability to write is revealed as both powerful and dangerous; it helps to reduce embedded divisions in some contexts, but it marks Karatavuk as one of the troublesome few who cannot be easily placed in clearly bounded groups. Lieutenant Orhan who takes Karatavuk's side throughout this altercation remarks upon the outdated nature of his knowledge: "And the odd thing about it is that what you have learned is almost useless. To write Turkish with Greek letters is like growing a new fruit that is partly a lemon and partly a fig, which no one will ever eat" (307). His comment reflects upon a new age of modernity in which paradoxes like Karatavuk will no longer have a place. His fruit metaphor foreshadows a post-war period in which all things Greek are separated from Turkey.⁴

⁴ After World War I, Atatürk mandated that Turkish would be written in Roman script. Karatavuk describes this problem eloquently, "now no one can read what was written in the old Ottoman script, and no one can read what was written in Greek script either, except for a few people like me, and then only if the language is

A fruit that “is partly a lemon and partly a fig” perfectly articulates Karatavuk’s unique ability and ethnic experience as an example of hybridity. The various labels that apply to him—literate, Muslim, Turk—do not align in the polarizing social context that surrounds him, so he must negotiate each aspect of his identity depending on the spaces he inhabits. Katherine Pratt Ewing problematizes the concept of hybridity in her article “Migration, Identity Negotiation, and Self-Experience,” arguing, “The experience of identities—the specific ways and the extent to which they are taken on as ‘self’—depends in part upon the positioning of the individual as subject within a discourse that constitutes a specific identity such as ethnic minority” (Ewing 119). She wants to move away from the notion of a fixed identity as the “cornerstone of self-experience,” instead allowing for a fluidity of identity that escapes some of the pitfalls inherent in the popular notion of “hybrid” identities (119). She finds hybridity, the notion that a person can simultaneously inhabit more than one identity, limiting: “hybridity is no more a totalized, fully inhabitable or fully adequate form of identity than are the ill-fitting labels of “Turk”, “immigrant”, or ‘German.’ If and when one identity or another is taken up and experienced as ‘self’, is always a matter of social context, goals and constraints” (128). Ewing’s analysis corroborates Karatavuk’s inability to inhabit the hybrid role of literate Turk while in the army, as well as his desire for a relaxation of such fixed notions that would allow for the fluidity, ambiguity and space for political articulation of “self” that Ewing emphasizes.

Ewing also allows for something instinctual to come from self that permits slippage from set identities. Her critique of hybridity reminds us that people assume identities in order to exist in a complex world that forces them to play different roles in different

Turkish and not Greek” (546). There are entire archives that few people can understand, a fact that emphasizes the way that power impacts archival history. This mandate privileges the history of the new Turkish state, over that of the old territory forever marked as part of Empire.

contexts. The position from which one utters often shifts, influencing the identity one inhabits at any given moment. A hybrid identity is not flexible enough; Karatavuk needs an understanding of himself that allows fluid movement from one identity to another without essentializing any single self. Ewing's insistence that self-representations change, sometimes matching up to fixed "identities" in the global sense, and sometimes being articulated in different ways, demands an ambiguous space for identity. In her conclusion she writes, "It is in polarized situations when individuals are perceived, not in terms of a complex array of potential identities and relationships, but rather as embodying a single, fixed identity—an ethnicity or a race—that the potential for discrimination and even violence is greatest" (139). Karatavuk's life exemplifies this conclusion as he fights a war based upon religious and national identities even as he begins to doubt all the boundaries he has been told exist between himself and the enemy: "We had realized that they, too, were men whose hearts had been left behind in the fields about their homes, and after this the war became less holy" (de Bernières 330). Ewing argues for the subversion of discrete identities, a recognition that people do not fall into strictly demarcated categories assigned by nation-states, concluding that ambiguous spaces are more productive and ultimately safer. Karatavuk's experience working alongside his Frankish enemies to collect and bury the dead in the liminal space between battle lines breaks down the importance of nationality and reduces the hatred he once felt towards the "infidels" (327-330). This moment provides a spatial example of a productive and safe ambiguity within the extremely polarized and unsafe context of war.

In addition to challenging the military and his hometown racist, Karatavuk's experiences at Gallipoli present an interesting example of a closed text within the novel. The chapters that describe his military service are all entitled "Karatavuk at Gallipoli: Karatavuk Remembers," and are written in the first person. The chapter titles frame this narrative

through the eyes of the narrator, who archives the various fragments of memory and history that compose the novel's narrative. It appears as if the narrator found Karatavuk's memoirs and included them in the book. Significantly, the "Karatavuk at Gallipoli" chapters give the experience of one young soldier, whom he befriended, and the horrible things he saw, but he does not include many of the personal things in this closed narrative that the reader learns about him from other characters. These chapters reflect the public image that Karatavuk wants remembered. The letter that he writes to his mother, only figures in his public narrative, the "Karatavuk at Gallipoli" chapters, within the shameful context of having to share with his officers something distinctly personal: "When I wrote to my mother, the thought of her made me inspired, and I wrote more tenderly than when I write this, and I told her no bad things that would make her concerned. I read it from start to finish, knowing the terrible shame of having a private thing exposed to strangers, and then I handed it back to the major" (305). Karatavuk learns the power of written language, not only because his writing gets him in trouble, but also because of the shame he feels when something private is made public, the inevitable trajectory of a written text. He deliberately keeps sentiment, and the poetry that so moved Leonidas, out of his public narrative. The fragmentary style of *Birds Without Wings*, however, allows the reader to hear the contents of the letter in the chapter entitled "Karatavuk's Letter" and later to hear things that Karatavuk left out of his written self-history when he addresses the reader directly, a style the reader has become accustomed to in other characters. Thus, Karatavuk as a character, becomes the site of multiple levels of hybridity, demonstrating the interaction between public and private narrative, as well as that between oral and written history.

In the epilogue, Karatavuk's voice returns in an oral style more akin to the direct address that peppers the rest of the text, as he explains his desire to write himself into

history: “As it is, I wish only the fine things I have done to be remembered, and these are things that I can tell to my sons by word of mouth, and to my friends in the coffeehouses, and I would write them in the new Roman letters so that I will be remembered for them” (547). He recognizes that both an oral history and a written one are important to being remembered in the way that he desires. While cognizant of his power as author to write a selective history, he also heavily emphasizes the oral component of constructing his memory. His two-pronged approach mimics the narrative structure of the novel itself, which seems to insist that both the oral and the written must be given equal consideration in order to make space for a diverse set of truths. If the reader only read Karatavuk’s self-history, she would have no concept of the power that his poetry embodies, and conversely, without the “Karatavuk at Gallipoli” chapters an important part of history and experiential truth would be lost. His insistence on investing his story in his immediate community challenges the assumption that only that which is recorded will be remembered, and validates the narrative structure of *Birds Without Wings* for including both spoken voices and third person written narrative. Karatavuk adapts easily to changes in the world after the war, embracing the new alphabet fluidly, while retaining an appreciation for the old ways.

Karatavuk does not stop using the Greek alphabet, even though it has very little practical use in modern Turkey. He recognizes that the imposed Roman script is more efficient:

This new way of writing, with Frankish letters, is a good one. I can write knowing that I will be understood. Not all writing, however, is done so that other people may understand. If I write in Greek letters, as I used to, then it amounts to a very good code that only I can read, and the only other people who will ever understand it will be those who will take the trouble to work it all out with great sweat and labor. The reason to write like that would be if I had things to say that I did not wish to become common knowledge. (546-7)

Karatavuk has already had one bad experience revealing private thoughts to the wrong authorities; thus, he writes Turkish in Greek script as a kind of therapeutic code. This archaic method of writing binds the languages of enemies together in a complex dance that perfectly contains the paradox of Eskibahçe before the war, a time that for many was much more comfortable. This hybrid, paradoxical language provides a comforting space for Karatavuk: “I sometimes write to make myself feel better about the things that I experienced, because it is better to confide to a piece of paper than not to confide at all and to feel the dishonorable things eating at your guts like a rat in the night” (547). It also recalls the memory of his childhood friend, Mehmetçik, who taught him to write as a boy and who he still misses. The final words from Karatavuk are in the form of a letter, written to Mehmetçik, in what I must assume is the hybrid Turkish in Greek lettering, for this is the language they both speak. In his letter, Karatavuk describes his new life and their mutual acquaintances with the poetry of one who loves his subject matter, while also referring to the closed text already discussed: “I have decided that I will not write my story as a long letter to you. ... What I will do instead is to imagine that I have readers that I do not know, and so I will begin my story again, with the words ‘I will not relate what happened during my training.’ This will be left for my children to read, and anybody else who may have an interest” (549). The inter-textuality that Karatavuk introduces functions in several narrative registers. Not only does he subtly acknowledge the presence of the reader, and the fact that he wrote his experience in war for her, but a clear difference exists between that prose and the content of his letter to Mehmetçik. Once again, the omniscient narrator becomes an important factor as the agent by which these various fragments coalesce. Within *Birds Without Wings*, the meta-narrative purposefully allows the interplay of many voices and narrative styles; Karatavuk is written about by the narrator, writes his experience at war, addresses the reader as though speaking,

and writes private letters to his mother and to his best friend respectively that the narrator allows the reader to access. This wide range of expression permitted one character, throughout his lifetime, provides the reader with a more comprehensive view of the way that personal truths can change for an individual over a lifetime, and the many ways that individual truths speak to more collective understandings of the world.

The many resonances of Karatavuk's voice help focus a discussion of the paradox between written and spoken information in *Birds Without Wings*. The spoken voices lend a measure of authenticity to the text in the real-life tone that they add, while the narrator provides a different kind of truth that does not contradict the direct narrative address, but provides other perspectives and nuance. This dynamic interplay creates space for many versions of truth to exist; it refuses to shut down meaning into one narrative strand, preferring to show, through a variety of voices, the diversity that makes life beautiful. At the beginning of the novel, Iskander the Potter feels the loss of this diversity as he speaks retrospectively of a pre-war time: "I miss the old life of my town, and I miss the Christians. Without them our life has less variety, and we are forgetting how to look at others and see ourselves" (7). Iskander expresses a longing for a past that allowed for paradox, permitted the unlikely, and found beauty in ambiguity. His insight into the fleeting ability to see the self in others articulates the danger of homogenizing, or accepting one narrative, one version of history. Iskander's prophetic observation opens a discussion of the way that language, both written and spoken becomes the most important manifestation and articulation of identity.

Humans fabricate a sense of self primarily through language. Within the narrative, however, de Bernières plays with the importance of identity construction within language by focusing important plot events around linguistic issues. Iskander muses about a new identity dictated to him by a constantly changing political landscape:

'I am a Turk,' he thought, rolling the idea around in his mind, remembering the days when the word 'Turk' implied something almost shameful, barbarian out of the East. ... How strange that the world should change because of words, and words change because of the world. 'Iskander the Turk,' he said to himself, internally scrutinizing the strange and novel sensation of possessing a deeper identity, of something beyond him. (286-7)

While Iskander willingly accepts the labels the world gives him, he articulates awe for the power of language to create identity, and also the separation he feels between an imposed national identity and "himself." He separates them, deeming one subject to the constant changes of the world, and the other a more constant sense of self connected to his work, his home and his neighbors. Examples of tension between languages, and thus national identities, and perhaps even hazy notions of discrete selfhood, abound within the text, none more notable than in the story of Leyla, Rustem Bey's mistress.

After condemning his adulterous wife to the town brothel, Rustem Bey travels to Istanbul in search of a Circassian beauty. He purchases Leyla, a woman he deems extremely beautiful and whom he believes is Circassian, and thus Muslim, but who is actually Greek, and Christian. Leyla does not feel tied to Christianity, which alienates her from the traditional Turkish/Greek split along religious lines: "She has never bothered much about her faith. She was born a Christian, something that she must henceforth conceal, but she knows nothing about it, and her beliefs have never consisted of anything more than the usual superstitions.... She is sure that religion has nothing at all to do with life" (179). She was kidnapped from Greece when she was young, and spends her life in the service of men throughout the Ottoman Empire. She does not ground herself in an identity through place the way that other characters do, but rather constructs herself through language, a point of tension between her and Rustem Bey—her ability to speak Greek disturbs him. When Leyla is presented with a chance to return to Greece she seizes upon it, even though she has led a happy life with Rustem Bey and loves him. In a farewell letter, she explains to him that her

reasons for leaving are based on returning to the only basis for selfhood that she knows, language: “I am longing to hear Greeks call me by my real name, to speak my own language, and to hear the sweet melody of it in my ears. I was disappointed when I arrived here and found that the Greeks did not speak Greek. Now they will have to learn it” (484). As a transient person, language defines self for her; she travels into uncertainty for the chance to reconnect with the linguistic identity that she feels most defines her. Her disappointment in the “Greeks” of Eskibahçe suggests that if she had felt known by anyone in her new home through her own language, that she might have been content to stay there. Instead, she joins the exiles, demanding respect and power through her command of the Greek language, which astounds the Christian Turkish exiles: “I am more Greek than any of you. I was born in Ithaca, and you are nothing but a pack of mongrel Turks” (486). Leyla, who has always been looked down upon as Rustem Bey’s prostitute, now assumes the power of one fluent in the new dominant language. She addresses her ex-neighbors, soon-to-be compatriots, condescendingly, firmly placing them beneath her as migrant, and thus less legitimate, Greek people.

The displacement of the entire Turkish Christian population for resettlement in Greece ruptures life in Eskibahçe more profoundly than war or death. Not only does the composition of the country change, but society also divides itself along religious lines; the removal of close to half the population leaves gaping holes in the economic structure and cultural capital of the country. For the Muslims who remain, like Iskander and Karatavuk, life seems less cheerful, less diverse. The Christians forced to migrate arguably face the more difficult task of reconstructing life and identity within a completely new and primarily hostile cultural context that immediately categorizes them as inferior, “mongrel Turks.” Drosoula articulates the experience of migration and identity reconstruction as an old woman telling

her life story from exile in Cephalonia. While she seems to have adapted to her new life reasonably well, her remembrances of Turkey are not only nostalgic, but also reflect an aspect of self tied to the Turkish language that she cannot escape:

Well, you should think before you spit, because I may be Greek now, but I was practically a Turk then, and I'm not ashamed of it either, and I'm not the only one, and this country's full of people like me who came from Anatolia because we didn't have any choice in the matter. When I came here I didn't even speak Greek, didn't you know that? I still dream in Turkish sometimes.
(20)

Despite her almost complete assimilation into Greek life, she still dreams in Turkish—it is the language of her unconscious. She can neither exist entirely in Greece or in Turkey, for although she may no longer be outwardly identifiable as a Turk, she clearly still feels loyalty to her past. Her forced migration splits Drosoula in two. Part of her will always be identified with Eskibahçe and her life there; but the trauma of her forced removal separates her from that person irrevocably, and now she must also be Greek. Philothei, a young village girl and a central character, articulates the inconceivability that one's identity might be detached from the language one speaks:

We didn't think we would be deported anyway, because we didn't speak Greek. ... And we said, 'We aren't Greek, we are Ottomans,' and the committee said, 'There's no such thing as an Ottoman any more. If you're a Muslim you're a Turk. If you're a Christian and you're not Armenian, and you're from round here, you're Greek.' We said, 'We ought to know who we are,' and they just ignored us and carried on valuing our property. (480)

The Christians are arbitrarily assigned political identities that do not align with personal understandings of self; a concept that for many people is primarily defined through language, the medium by which humans express self to the world. The officials show their ambivalence to the important distinction between personal and political notions of identity when they ignore the Christians' attempts to reclaim the right to define themselves. They lose the sense of a unified self that they always believed that they had by being citizens of

Eskibahçe and Ottoman subjects who speak Turkish. The loss of a discrete sense of self forever divides these individuals into people who have a particular identity before the “exodus” and a different one upon arrival in Greece, one that must be actively constructed.

Paul de Man and Azade Seyhan corroborate the importance of language as a tool for identity construction and expression. In “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” Paul de Man theorizes a level of irony tied intrinsically to a self constructed and understood through language—a model that might help illuminate some of the trauma that the Christians of Eskibahçe experience through their exile. De Man sees reflective distance as necessary to the ability to see the self:

The reflective disjunction not only occurs by means of language as a privileged category, but it transfers the self out of the empirical world into a world constituted out of, and in, language—a language that it finds in the world like one entity among others, but that remains unique in being the only entity by means of which it can differentiate itself from the world. Language thus conceived divides the subject into an empirical self, immersed in the world, and a self that becomes like a sign in its attempt at differentiation and self-definition. (de Man 196)

The rupture in identity that the exiled Eskibahçe Christians experience provides the “reflective disjunction” of which de Man writes. They can no longer attach their identities to the language they speak, but rather are forced into new political and cultural contexts about which they know nothing. Thus the empirical self is the one that treks towards Greece in search of a new home, while the Turkish self that once represented discrete personhood, becomes the other against which any new construction must define itself. Thus, self has split irrevocably, forever denied unification. The subject gains awareness that the notion of a discrete self is a myth, and that in fact, self is poly-valenced and continually recreated through language. De Man goes on to describe the anxiety that this state of inauthenticity produces: “The ironic language splits the subject into an empirical self that exists in a state of inauthenticity and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge

of this inauthenticity” (197). The two selves that now exist through the ironic split question each other’s authenticity, for each has a claim to the title of self at different temporal moments. The self that exists in language mocks the inauthenticity of any new attempt to fashion a newly unified sense of self. De Man says that this process could potentially repeat itself indefinitely with the sign self moving ever further from a sense of meaning. This understanding of the ironic split allows for no totality—after the initial split, the epiphanic moment when selfhood is understood to be pure construction, self can never again be united, forever doomed to exist in a narrowing spiral away from meaning and self-definition (de Man 203). However, de Man also allows for moments in literature when, “the two selves, the empirical as well as the ironic, are simultaneously present, juxtaposed within the same moment but as two irreconcilable and disjointed beings” (207). Drosoula’s ethnographic self-articulation of identity strengthens the sense that two disjointed selves coexist, sharing one space.

Drosoula’s contribution to the novel consists of memories marking temporal distance. She remembers as an old Greek woman, the identity she was forced to assume through the diaspora. She uses temporal and geographical distance to clarify the ways that she differentiates between versions of herself, but at times that clear delineation becomes hazy as when she admits to dreaming in Turkish. She narrates this story to a Greek person, as demonstrated by the scolding she gives him for racism, “And why are you screwing up your face like that, and spitting? Because I mentioned the imam? Because I mentioned a Turk?” (20). Thus, the language of articulation in the present moment is Greek, her adopted language, but Turkish still surfaces from the sub-conscious in her dreams. The exodus reveals the existence of multiple selves and she cannot completely efface the Turkish self from her daily interactions as a Greek. In a sense, Drosoula has become “the other,” for she

has not realized the power in recognizing that a concept of self can never be unified. Instead she tries to relocate a discrete self in a Greek identity. Her attempt to claim a new unified self in exile coincides with de Manian irony in that one can only know self through distance and differentiation: “Irony divides the flow of temporal experience into a past that is pure mystification and a future that remains harassed forever by a relapse within the inauthentic. It can know this inauthenticity but can never overcome it” (de Man 203). De Man recognizes that his conception of irony reveals an inorganic temporality, in which there is no origin and thus no authentic self. Yet, he argues that one increasingly gains consciousness about the state of inauthenticity that self occupies, without ever overcoming it or applying the knowledge of inauthenticity to the empirical world (203). The nostalgic way that Drosoula remembers the past returns to confuse her Greek identity. Those around her do not know she came from Anatolia or that she still feels allied with it. She has successfully elided that part of herself from public perception, but she remains loyal to her Turkish roots, defending them to Greeks who dare prejudice. Both selves are inauthentic in her attempt to be unified; they can only naturally exist in a tentative, disjointed proximity.

In her book *Writing Outside the Nation*, Azade Seyhan modifies de Man’s theoretical elaboration on self, grounding a similar discussion within a discourse of migrant writers claiming a self through writing. The majority of Seyhan’s book addresses the positioning of exiled others within the literary and cultural landscapes of their new homes. To explain the ways she thinks about self throughout her book she quotes the German author Friedrich von Hardenberg Novalis. Her explanation of him nuances a de Manian understanding of self:

Novalis understands the self-positing of the self and its op-positing of the object as an activity of signification, of naming, of language. If selfhood is the ground of language, then it should also represent the principle of highest diversity that is not the not-self but *Du* (thou). ...Furthermore, the principle

of all self-understanding is the encounter with our otherness: ‘naturally we understand everything foreign only by *making* ourselves *foreign*.’ (24-25)

While much of her rendering of Novalis sets up her later argument about the ways that minor literary works can challenge ideas of genre and national character, she also takes de Man’s emphasis on differentiation to an extreme by arguing that one can only know oneself by becoming other. At first the phrase, “our otherness” seems nonsensical: how can oneself be other? And yet, that is exactly what happens to Drosoula within the realm of national and ethnic identity. While she lived in Eskibahçe, she considered herself an Ottoman, and perceived the Greeks as other, the enemy. After being exiled and divided from her previous identity, she assumes the role of Greek, becoming the other she once disdained. Seyhan’s assertion that one must become the other completely to understand self represents the furthest one can be from a single self. Drosoula enacts a greater understanding of her Turkish self in her willingness to stand up against racism and own, at least partially, her past identity.

De Man and Seyhan complement each other well, with Seyhan positing the most extreme version of de Manian difference exemplified through a distinctly political rendering of identity, one that values the experience of being “othered” as important to understanding ones previous state. This figuration still implies an original self that moves into identification as the “other”; two distinct points and a linear move can be mapped. In contrast, de Man pushes away from any notion of original selfhood or final otherness, insisting that the differences in self are constantly deferred, and therein lies the power of recognizing self as a constructed concept. The difference in these theorists arises on the practical level, with Seyhan discussing actual political identities while de Man theorizes self in language. Both are important in understanding how one constructs identity through language, and how that process functions in *Birds Without Wings*. As a novel concerned with

the lives of everyday people in a time of world upheaval, political identities are important. It is precisely their malleable nature, however, that indicates how little they apply to an individual's sense of a deeper self. That more innate sense remains tied to place, like Iskander the Potter, or to language, as Leyla's letter suggests. Political identity is just another manifestation of performed selfhood.

Birds Without Wings leaves the reader with lingering questions about the inauthenticity of living with multiple identities. Drosoula seems to compromise between dueling selves by indulging in nostalgia and savoring the odd Turkish dream that reminds her of where she grew up. But no matter how allied she feels to her Turkish roots, her identity as a migrant Turk in Greece forces her into new identities to survive, ones that distance her from complete Turkish identification. Katherine Pratt Ewing's discussion of the inadequacy of hybridity, and the necessity of fluid identities that allow for different modes of self-articulation depending upon context becomes important for an understanding of Drosoula's attempts at self-construction that includes multiple identities. Drosoula wants to return to a sense of unification that she had before the diaspora, but she is left with disparate identities that never quite mesh into a discrete whole.

While de Man insists that there is no unified self, and that irony divides self in irrevocable ways, he finds potential for productive lingual play in ambiguous space, which he discusses in reference to Friedrich Schlegel, with whom he agrees:

The positive name he gives to the infinity of this process is freedom, the unwillingness of the mind to accept any stage in its progression as definitive, since this would stop what he calls its 'infinite agility.' In temporal terms it designates the fact that irony engenders a temporal sequence of acts of consciousness which is endless. (202)

While the image of self as sign spiraling ever further from meaning may sound hopeless, for de Man the ambiguity in this instability represents freedom. If one were to accept a fixed

identity without questioning its inauthenticity, one would effectively negate all possibility for further discovery. While de Man's theory of irony operates on a highly theoretical level, it aligns with Ewing's more practical approach in that both see the necessity of allowing for fluid identities and for the abdication of a notion of stable selfhood. Both imply that self is constructed through language and context, and cannot be essentialized. These theories emphasize the dangers of over-determined categories, a reality demonstrated throughout *Birds Without Wings* as the world shifts into new, stricter divisions, forcing those who refuse to choose a single identity into madness.

The love story of Philothei and Ibrahim, one that crosscuts the circuitous narrative with a chronological progression through Philothei's life, demonstrates the horror that results from an unbalanced paradox. Philothei, a Christian girl, has been betrothed to Ibrahim, a Muslim boy, for almost her entire life. In Eskibahçe, where religion is fluid before the war, this difference did not pose an obstacle:

She was happy to marry Ibrahim because they had always loved each other, it had been arranged since childhood... The only disadvantage was that she would have had to change her religion, but in that place back then, it never amounted to much for a Christian woman to change to a Muslim if she married one. The beliefs were all mixed up anyway... It wasn't like now, when everyone has to be one thing or the other. (491)

When the Christians are forced to leave Eskibahçe, Philothei has to choose between her Christian family and her Muslim betrothed (she is waiting for him to overcome the trauma he suffered fighting in the war so that they can marry). The choice between two kinds of love leaves Philothei feeling "torn in half" and in the process of arguing with Ibrahim about whether to stay or go, she falls off the top of a cliff to her death. The choice between identities literally kills her; she has too much to lose with either choice, and death provides an avenue out of the decision. Philothei, referred to by Ibrahim as "my little bird," gives the already paradoxical title *Birds Without Wings* new meaning, as she falls to her death, ill

equipped to adapt to the rapidly changing and narrowing world around her—she is a bird without wings. Philothei plays an important organizing role in the book, although she herself has little substance or action. The story starts with her birth, emphasizing her importance in the community as a beauty, and follows her life until it ends. Her centrality to the old way of life in Eskibahçe reinforces the importance of her death, which also becomes emblematic for the end of the old way.

Philothei's death allegorizes the end of beauty when ambiguity is no longer allowed to exist. Life in Eskibahçe before the Christians leave is paradoxically happy despite the diversity of people, beliefs, and traditions that reside there. In fact, the text implies that it is precisely the delicate balance between unlike things, the blurring of lines and the tolerance of ambiguity that engenders contented life. The text reveals this need for multiplicity in crafting nuanced historical narratives, allowing different types of voices and writing to be heard, and negotiating multiple identities within a shifting global context. *Birds Without Wings* insists that nothing occupies a static position or meaning, but that within the movement of signification great beauty is possible.

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