

# An Evening of Un-American Poetry at Kelly Writers House

**Ammiel Alcalay, Ben Hollander, and Murat Nemet-Nejat**

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March 22, 2001

**Kerry Sherin:** Good evening and welcome everyone to the Kelly Writers House. My name is Kerry Sherin, and I'm very happy to be here tonight for An Evening of Un-American Poetry with Ammiel Alcalay, Ben Hollander, and Murat Nemet-Nejat. Soon we'll start the reading in alphabetical order, beginning with Ammiel, followed by Ben and Murat. First I just wanted to mention that tonight's program is being webcast over the internet. This means that it's broadcast live, so we're joined right now by writers and readers from Sarajevo and San Francisco and Brooklyn and, I think, Philadelphia, too. So welcome, everyone, over the internet.

Now I'd like to introduce Josh Schuster, who is a member of the Writers House planning committee and the co-organizer of tonight's program. Josh is a writer, and he's about to become a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania. He's going to do us the honor of providing the introductions, so welcome, Josh.

**Josh Schuster:** Just to recap, they'll each read for about fifteen minutes, and then we'll have a sort of free-form dialogue, and we very much encourage questions from the audience. They can ask you guys questions; you can ask them questions; we'll take questions from the internet.

Let me give you some quick autobiographical information on the poets, and then I'll introduce them periodically.

First, there's Ammiel Alcalay, who is a poet, translator, critic, and scholar: a well-known author who lives in New York. He's the author of *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture*, *Memories of Our Future*, and *the cairo notebooks*.

Benjamin Hollander was born in Israel, immigrated to New York City in 1958, and lives in San Francisco. He is the author of *The Book Of Who Are Was* (Sun & Moon Press), *Levinas and the Police, Part 1* (Chax Press), and *How to Read*, too. He is looking for a publisher for his new manuscript, *Onome*.

Murat Nemet-Nejat is a poet, translator, and essayist who was born in Turkey and lives in Hoboken. He is the author of the essays "Questions of Accent," *The Peripheral Space of Photography*, the poems *Turkish Voices* and *Io's Song* and the translation books *I, Orhan Veli* and *A Blind Cat Black and Orthodoxies*. He is presently editing *Eda: A Contemporary Anthology of Turkish Poetry* to be published by Talisman House in 2004.

An evening at the Writers House of "Un-American poetry"—a topic that flashed in the mind of Ben Hollander, Ammiel Alcalay, and Murat Nemet-Nejat, and was offered as a critique and engagement of the American tradition of poetry. It is perhaps a term for a momentary community defined by these three poets, whose major works

explore spaces not precisely defined by American security. Hollander's poetry evokes insecurity and dislocation within communities; his work is read more closely outside of America and has an audience more in translation than in the original. In Alcalay, the reinvigoration of poetry comes from a feeling of being outside the pale of security itself, giving rise to poems that consequently hallucinate and vibrate to the distortions of the total nearness of events. And in Nemet-Nejat's poetry, words take on accents they never exactly knew they had but know they can never shake off.

"Un-American" will be extremely difficult to define, for even such a term within the context of communist witch-hunts has been reinscribed within the traditionally casual American lexicon. Non-reinscription, then, will be our first un-American gesture, that is, the in(st)ability to subsume certain moments or discourses within the American whole. I won't present a model of un-Americanness, but rather some non-descriptions, half-sketches, that crisscross throughout the work of these three poets.

Un-American then is:

The restriction of freedom and liberty. But what if there is in fact a closer relationship to liberty in the understanding of liberty's limits? The U.S. exports "liberty" and "freedom" with abandon, but it does not effectively export justice and respect for uniqueness. Certain limits to freedom, under the assumption of responsibility and slow and equitable development, paradoxically stand to strengthen freedom.

In France, editors say more and more "translated from the American." This implies a specifically American style of English. Also, presumably, a style that is not American.

The world is becoming less and less Western. The coming century will be one of de-Occidentalization, as the Orient expands and moves in ways the West does not comprehend or recognize. This idea, cited by Alain Finkelkraut, sees both risk and benefit in this change; the ultimate responsibility of the intellectual is to locate and detail these changes so the collective can decide if they are for the better or worse. The last sentence of Robert Kaplan's travel narrative in America, titled *An Empire Wilderness*, explores the breakdown of the American landscape. He writes: "The U.S. is entering into its final and most difficult stage of development, which will also be its last."

Much of the world wakes up every day in a country or community that has its own existence, its nationality or identity, at stake. What kind of poetry and thought comes from this incessant impermanence, this inability to control destiny, this potential for radicalism, this daily risk?

Translation and distance. Unique in these translators' work is the understanding of distance in the work of translation, the fact that a poem must travel so far to reach a certain audience, that the poem is somehow already alienated when it reaches that audience, that there is a fundamental dislocation between the new audience and the work's former audience, and that such distance and dislocation become part of the definition of the work and the translation.

High gasoline prices are un-American. French Marxist Gilles Chatelet calls the modern world a society of "petro-nomades." Gasoline and its immolation in the service of movement, productivity, circulation: no longer the fluidity of economics but the eco-





within which the poor heart loves to keep the earnings  
of its toil a common home stains of inevitable crime  
pride built upon oblivion to rule the ages that survive  
our remains violence and wrong an unreturning stream  
the grief of many graves snow and rain on lifeless things  
this is not faith or law opinion more frail or life poisoned  
in its wells that delights in ruin as endless armies wind  
in sad procession the earth springs like an eagle even  
as the winds of autumn scatter gold in the dying flame  
we learned to steep the bread of slavery in tears of woe  
these faded eyes have survived a ruin wide and deep  
which can no longer borrow from chance or change  
what will come within the homeless future that gold  
should lose its power and thrones their glory that love  
which none may bind be free to fill the world like light  
whose will has power when all beside is gone faint accents  
far and lost to sense of outward things some word which  
none here can gather yet the world has seen a type of peace  
some sweet and moving scene returning to feed on us  
as worms devour those years come and gone like the ship  
which bears me in this the winter of the world

**Ben Hollander:** I have to thank Josh and Kerry. I keep telling everyone I see that this is an amazing thing you have here, this house of writers. It exists in no other space that I can think of in the United States. We were talking about this earlier—the question of a place for writers and translators, where poets and artists can come together and work in collaboration. It is amazing. So thank you.

I'm first going to read a poem from *The Book of Who Are Was*. Let's just say that again: *The Book of Who Are Was*, which is, in a sense, unpronounceable and incomprehensible, almost in the sense that it has to be translated into English for those who speak English. I'll be reading a poem called "Translations," and then a couple of relatively new pieces, one called "Levinas and the Police" and the other one from a long sequence of pieces called *Onome*.

[Ben reads]

Translations (from *The Book Of Who Are Was*)

1

What he overhears is the underbrush. What he  
 overhears in translation tears in this underbrush:  
 lemon grass or cloth, neither lemon grass nor cloth  
 under that music, or no one under that music by itself.

North of the acacia he points to where she sleeps.  
 At this age he is told

things like words appear or disappear:  
 sleep: music: lemon grass or cloth,

three rings of wood make the sound she can't count  
 and two letters in the bell make the numbers go away.

Once at this age he tells her  
 to point to where things

like fingers or words  
 appear to come near her,

and to count in her sleep  
 the times they disappear.

2

That is the tale which begins  
 he counts three folded rosebuds

at the mouth of the river.  
 And these are the words which fill in

milk, palms, the Japanese tongue  
 this water runs over and shreds in two

for three folded rosebuds  
 at the mouth of the river.

3

One half will tell it  
 two times over to the mouth of the river.  
 One half will tell it

two times over and overhear it  
a third at the foot of the mountain.  
Their fingers will paint it  
in the heart of the forest,  
as a heart and a forest,  
then those too will disappear with their fingers.

\*

Levinas and the Police

1

Without question  
to be  
Put in question

Listen, Lt.  
I do  
like you  
po  
lice us

Sir  
ens

Mist  
er

why here do  
they eat into

the  
one  
man's  
tur  
banned  
dread  
locked  
head

of scarves  
Do Scare Us—You do

Know

They

de  
sire  
"to get into it"

Being

barr  
en  
wombs the  
do  
ers

clo  
sing ranks

"After you"  
Thanks to you

Know

How

to

po (liferate)  
lice us

Sor  
tie

ovehead-of-us

Mist  
er

copt  
er  
blades  
fra  
i  
lize  
hum  
ans

who may I say are only crawling

On

Sir

Ground  
less what right do they have in this

Being

their bones get hummed in them  
Sir  
ens  
Come on you

Know

How

To

“Sir”

end

it

when the neo-light’s

On

You

like

itnights the echo of furytheory  
who may I answer is on

ly

O

pining the arson

pining the abduction  
pining the one man failing earthwards from a spire

Come

Down

To a

Being

whose  
 pinned  
 own  
 legs  
 and  
 spine  
 are  
 un  
 der  
 a  
 spin  
 ning  
 autowheel

On

fire

“his own down time”

Being

mum there  
 having given

him—this one man, the rouè—

the rou  
 ged

kisses on the throat

they do move

on

the gang-block  
 they mur  
 mur

“his own down time”

no question  
 sir

“No one is allowed to beat you”

on the gang-block they do  
 again-at-it-again-at-it

out of love

\*

from *Onome*

how

hold

the

lorgnon

Lt.

when

Onome

holds

the

different

one:spyglass

One spyglass on the window tells you all you want to know Lt. is howdoesonedo the anguish of perceivedness, how does one do it like Mr. Bentham built it, sir, if you please, he did—cruel—through the conversation tubes little things listen in on which could pass for kind Being dominant onBeing tant on he was, sir, so much the one to build perception on the angle of the mirrors and we knew it...taunted us...to know how to do perception on the angle of the mirrors. So we did learn. So we learn deeds to be police—that is right—and taunted right in turn. Why he saw. Why he saw we learn right who he was in the image of panopticon love. So no man, we found. So no man we found so much gnome work did as he did so much on and then some.... Man. Hid. Onerous other things, be said, he did onerous like a man who devours men (to go down) on some all day and then some—given go-passes—at night—he made the given go-passes—and may have there stamped ampersands on their skinned hands as one deed—he did, cruel, schri, to let one go do one deed the gnome work there outside his house. Be said. And you. And you. And You. Go. Do Deed. Goodbye. There House. Sir, if you please, why he saw we learn right by who he was where he hung in the octagonal brickhouse of hard labour which wanted another name to be given a chance, home—penitent, to be, a different name. He gave it—"penitent." To be kinder, he said, say "penitent," be, a different name. Go home. Be said. Be smart or be muscled—be akind.

Have friends. By love's vision out of lock-up one comes first as a man with a rose into her home—who shapes his fist around it. On her. Skinned. And then some—deed. Give a locket. One does. As he did—her mind. Shrew her, he said. Sir, she, the other half, did too—schri, cruel. Why he saw her—schri, cruel. Why he saw we learn so much who he was to cruel one's taunted love to the ground fistgripped on the knees from above—where he hung. It was lantern. It was swung. It was swung with him hid in it to do by us as he did by them in the image of panopticon love's by vision exceeded the pinholes to see with him hid in them without being seen, to name with him hid in them without being named. From above. It was lantern. Our turn—in it. Why he saw to it we learn right no shame. In us. He did tool it—today, to do by us, today. Love's by vision. It is. He knew it—taunted us, to know the same. Hold True, Be Said, For The Common Informer builds on you...an argot. It was our turn—in argot. Lock-up. Sir, if you please, all you want to know by now is how does one do love's by vision and learn by deed to be police-us like us all alike so awed to silence too—we need it. Passes. We needed passes—why rumor passes. One does move around us sir—and then some, deed. See. Sir, if you please, he did: the rule. He did: the rule governs cadres. The rule governs care. The rule governs equally upon their knees—to influence. Cadres. He did tool it—influence—on some and then some rumour passes taunted heard ones signed for kind ones. Cadres. Tant s'en faut. He did sign them. He did sign them with the tool and then took some care and then some deed of his infra shone—see infra. Argot. We saw it, argot: the common informer, one cell phone in a pocket corner. On her. And then some—deed. Go on. Listen, he said, through the teeth some deed of his infra shone—see infra. Be said. Be smart or be muscled. Be akind to name without being named, in argot. Lock-up. Go on. Be said. There is always someone smarter than you in the head, in argot. You know it—the guard said it: when the dark could almost make you blind—he said it, you know: how you go here depends on how you are Being—well at the same time—dom i nant onBeing tant on sans-soi

(who saw it—outlast)

be low  
the law  
"go on," Lt.  
"why go ahead," Lt.  
akind

Onome

codes

a different one:

"why pass"

**Murat Nemet-Nejat:** Thank you very much Kerry and Josh for inviting us, for bringing us together like this. I will first read a poem that I wrote a few years ago, and after that I will read the first third of a translation. The last year or two years I have essentially been doing translations for an anthology I am preparing, and I just finished quite a long poem, and I'll read one third of it, just the beginning. I'll start at the beginning and just stop someplace in the poem.

[Murat reads]

An/kara: My Kind Hearted Step Mother<sup>1</sup>

Ankara.

An—: moment, second.

kara: black.

Ankara:

Second black, not first.

An(a): mother.

kar: doing it.

kar: snow.

kar(a): to the snow.

kara: land.

kara: black.

K(i)r: prick.

kar(i): the snow.

kari: old crone.

Kirhane: prick house

next to our synagogue in Istanbul there was a prick house,

on wooden tables at the end of Yom Kippur

in the dark, in the intersection of our street and theirs,

the ladies of the night and their pimps left

glasses of water for us to drink

for free: Sebil.

Mysterious Cybil.

So civil-

Ized.

Realized.

thirty years later I went to the same spot.

the synagogue and its porch garden

(where I'd spent two evenings a year, the twinkling lights mixing with the stars

through the Succah)

was all in ruins,

the rusting gate ajar,

and a red rooster was strolling at home among the lunar mounds and weeds.

Red rooster: as in red light district?

Red: kizil.

(Kiz): virgin.

(Kiz): angry.

Yuzde yuz kiz: hundred percent virgin.

Yuz: hundred.

Yuz: face.

Yuz: swim.

Rooster: horoz.

Whore

and oz, as in the Wizard of O's.

<sup>1</sup> There is a Turkish expression: Ankara (the capital city of Turkey) is a wife; Istanbul (the historical Byzantium/Constantinople) is a mistress.

\*

souljam<sup>2</sup>*one*

wounded electricity complements the body,  
 whispers to it of the innocence of chimeras,  
 cinema refracts a threat, at the growing heart,  
 everyone pulls the boy into four winds,  
 puts a cock in his mouth,  
 the boy will mature, by his mouth. the bandit grows

*two*

virus: *valid*—declared—validates the *main stream*.  
 the boy leans over the cat, tells  
 the relevant. the geriatric gas positions itself  
 in a suitable lung, who would be in charge  
 of the building?  
 mystery: *lays anchor in the capillaries. each time mother nature shoots up,*  
*metal is happy. action is*  
 after this.  
 “condom is an insult, an *insult*,”  
 night begins,

the rhesus monkey having turned human on an impulse

*three*

jim morrison is sherlock holmes. dr. watson  
 pulls down his *calvin kleins*. violence, at bottom,  
 is a crack of yearning

*four*

the *great white* crosses and joins the captain's  
 log.  
 noticing its own sound,  
 the seagull panics,  
 tilts one wing in,

<sup>2</sup> The entire text of “souljam” can be found in *Eda: An Anthology of Contemporary Turkish Poetry*, edited by Murat Nemet-Nejat (Talisman House: New Jersey, 2004). “souljam” is a translation of the Turkish poet k. Iskender’s “cangüncem.”

the weak worm  
of *ionized penitence*  
in its beak,

makes *it*  
ice cream, the finicky  
gull hold the sugar  
cone.  
*boy!*  
"condom an *insult?*"  
ocean  
sunset.

*five*

the darkling cat too needs the boy. his family locks  
the pantry.

infiltration of communication by  
*mechanical insulation.*

reconnection prowls around  
defensive techniques.

*six*

contra slow time

*eight*

your face the desert shower of necessary love,  
subject to rough trade, to deposits of excess *dnas*  
long held in the mirage air

my joseph's fatal *faetal* seven year release of husbanding silo  
leaning on the coat of multi colors  
and *and* your

*ten*

beauty spot?  
"don't leave,  
me."

then someone shows up, no voice is disrupted. my arab *shimmers.*

from the heat of dirty august one ascends the throne  
of replete September

railroads *railroads* of sound

*twelve*

crystals whose majority is guerillas,  
full of refractions, whilst  
crowds are inclinations of the like. my bequeathal  
to the future as a strain  
of light.

*thirteen*

as a scientist in god forsaken solitude in the genesis of light  
awaiting you awaited lure of transparent insanity!  
I am anteing up my concentration. my *suicide*  
*is provided for.*  
my sailing bags packed expertly

*fourteen*

guerilla majority of crystals,  
with inherent fragility, *unite!*

my misfitness even  
is light

mist even light. *feather*  
*and sun*

the seagull reneges *re* realizing it has a voice weaves *re* repents

On a skin  
of sea crumbs

my mind  
sores

On a skin  
white as cream

by cock's  
havoc

violated  
in a hammock

Dream  
and mid scream  
and mid stream

*sixteen*

*am am, an ice vermin, so human goose the ice block on which i crawl  
is.*

*seventeen*

that someone's trying to kill me  
is *inlaying* my mind, as if we'd  
swapped secrets  
making a night of it *many, many* nights  
of drowse and bruise

*eighteen*

in solitude, me, full of hard ons ons and ons

*nineteen*

*horse with a broken leg in my heart  
who'll shoot you?*

how many whispered words mopped up by my fingers wandering on your lips,  
words i couldn't catch

*twenty*

which lover, whose night is immortal  
an immortal stagger shoulders the night.

*dies at once, if i have a brother.*  
burns a flower, whose burning immemorial.

*twenty-one*

*in re philosophia*: a kid defines night  
as an *étude* of comprehending life with his  
tiny cock,

like color blindness in smell blindness  
experiencing carnation as a rose,

*and me, experiencing carnation in a rose.*

*twenty-two*

*in re via dolorosa*: "this sadness above me,  
when will it stop brooding?"

*twenty-three*

"ikons broken around crystal sperms are unstealable substances  
adorning the ruby entered from the mouth,  
*the road wide open.*"

*vita dolorosa*:

"you leave or you get lost or get lost, once your voice is broken."

*twenty-four*

	Narcissus	
"i carry a zoo in me."		takes
our love: a glass castle.		narcotics
	in –	
	a –	
no tangible instant,		glass –
your eyelashes will accumulate		of
	water.	

*twenty-seven*

i bumped into them carrying confetti.  
perhaps they were a bit too willing, i a bit too out of line.

*twenty-nine*

scanning the irradiation of my puckered fire.  
on the wagon,

two night cabs heard on the low road,  
 the dream in which i saw my grandma  
 burn her koran, I interpret it as  
 my sexual freedom, the serenity and inner peace of not learning  
 one single prayer which I can recite by heart  
 dying. as I carry this bliss to the face of the youngster I dance with  
 on the dance floor and from there to the shredded documents  
 of a long forgotten cult the subversive inquiry into which faetal fate,  
 which toxic sexual authority will it not be all the skepticism of my  
 soul, which I probe into the erogenous zones  
 of prudence and silence?  
 according to some *it may be a reprehensible search for love*  
*by the planet earth.* of my poems  
 and of my not yet shot movies, the hot anti-matter

*thirty*

my identity is the befouling of what is  
 knowable, and the downward velocity  
 of becoming young.

*thirty-two*

love, of a not yet visible asia, is  
 the barely sensible skin of plants.

*grandma, entered the toilet and before taking a leak seven cups, and after five cups, she  
 emptied on the hole.*

*thirty-three*

spiritual words spinning in bodiless light  
 lightly, wishfully whistfully? whispfully -  
 whimfully, - whipfully whamfully - ? wherefully  
 wombfully whichfully whorlfully, etc.

*thirty-four*

the furthest a heart scared of nightmares  
 may reach / *nirvana* / is circumscribed  
 by the web of capillary in one's body but a system  
 of circulation ivying  
 the universe with *curiosity*  
*and longing,*  
 wouldn't it

be a big step towards *negating* the deviation  
 inherent in the deficiencies and deflations of choosing among  
 food or lovers since the vitality of  
 science and discovery illuminated  
 in *pure* orgasm  
**only?**

[*The Discussion, following general arrangement of people and microphones by Heather Starr, who explains the format briefly to the live audience.*]

**Josh Schuster:** You're influenced largely by poets not from America, poets who come from countries where poetry is integrated far more in society and at a much earlier age. I was wondering when you translate, and also when you write your own poetry, what kind of audience do you target? Is it those who move back and forth between the two kinds of societies?

**Ammiel:** Well, in my case, I wouldn't say that. I mean, I'm very involved in American poetry—and always have been. I would say I have sought after texts that I don't feel have come to consciousness in America yet. In other words, texts that haven't been able to be written for a variety of reasons: historical reasons, cultural reasons. Their moment hasn't come yet, and they've been unexpressed. I've often sought things that in some sense fulfill what I've found...not necessarily missing, but not present in the American stuff that I'm inundated with and involved in. I've tried to find some sort of correspondence, and my kind of public strategy in doing this has involved a paradoxical situation in which I've found that foreign writing which sticks in America has to pass through the smallest possible accessible mode. You have to find a way for that work to be read by poets, and it has to be read by poets in a way that will make them come to feel there's something in it that they can take into consideration in their own work or in their own language or in their own sense of, you know, the horizons of their work. And if that doesn't happen, then the work becomes expendable. It becomes a commodity. I've really thought about this long and hard, and one of the ways in which I can create certain pressures, bring certain pressures to bear on a world that I'm very familiar with is through other works. In my own particular case (and I think Murat addressed this), the work that I translate often appears to be conventional on the surface. I mean, it often appears to be the kind of work that American "experimental" writers would shun, would feel like we've already done this, this is not that interesting, etc.; and I've tried to impress upon what I bring to it the fact that the states of consciousness getting represented here are incredibly radical. And one has far fewer tools to deal with that than with something more overtly, let's say, "innovative." So I've worked in that sense, while Murat has worked with poems that are more formally very out there and has tried to bring that to English.

**Murat:** Why do I translate? I translate a piece when I feel the piece has something that I cannot say in English. I don't have a way of saying it, which answers your first question. Initially, as a translator, I function as an American poet. I work with a text to show a difference from what is in the present language, and I try to bring that quality, what is missing, into the second language—English—without compromising that quality. That is to say, the impulse is so strong to make it a good poem, to make it a correct poem, to

make it acceptable to the present traditions. Essentially when I translate a poem, I care, as a human being, whether people will like it or not, but, as a translator, I don't. I read the poem in the original, and I hear something. It's *that* which I am translating. I hear something in the poem, and I translate the idea of it into English. There's something the original language has, something I feel dispossessed of because the language in which I write doesn't have it. So essentially, my act is to make English behave itself so that it will really speak my language.

**Ben:** I agree with what both Ammiel and Murat have said. Ammiel talked about arriving at certain traditions from elsewhere and bringing them into American writing. And truly, this whole process is idiosyncratic for all of us, obviously. A parallel issue might be how, for me at least, as someone coming from elsewhere, I bring into my work different American traditions. I think some of this has to do with the kinds of reading we grew up on and, in my case, the resistance to segregating my reading of poets who, outside the U.S., could be read next to each other. When I was growing up, and when I was in college, we were told not to read T.S. Eliot (and to read in the Williams tradition instead) because Eliot would put us back into the classroom, into a sterile academicized poetry, and that his arch-conservative politics were suspect, to say the least. And I recognized this; the New American Poets were saying this. At the same time, as I was reading T.S. Eliot, though, I was reading the Boston poet Stephen Jonas, whom I suppose could have been classified as a New American Poet and who, in the 1950s and 60s, wrote in an innovative jazz idiom which, of course, had nothing to do with Eliot's poetry or poetics or politics and who (unlike Eliot) was certainly not being taught in the schools. However, what I heard in both of these very different poets—on a very fundamental level—was a music or a measure which was incredibly seductive and which attracted me to their works: in Eliot's case, *The Four Quartets*; in Jonas', *Exercises for Ear*. It was the measure of a music which encompassed poets whose works one would not usually think to put on the same reading list: from Rilke's *Duino Elegies* to John Wieners' *Hotel Wentley Poems*, from Muriel Rukeyseyer's *Speed of Darkness* to Laura Riding's *Selected Poems in Five Sets*.

Interestingly, not long ago, I discovered that the Syrian poet Adonis—who in the 1950s founded the experimental Arabic magazine *Shi'r* and who worked (and is still working) hard to break poetic and political boundaries constructed out of our assumptions of what is East and what is West—well Adonis, when he was growing up, also loved Eliot's poetry (and you can be sure couldn't bear Eliot's politics). This, in a way, didn't come as a shock to me, since I've often found that poets from elsewhere are open to reading American writers who, in the States, if you checked the reading lists of either "innovative" or "mainstream" poets, would not be read together. For example, the Israeli poet Shahar Bram has written a wonderful book on Charles Olson and Alfred North Whitehead, but he's also written on Dylan Thomas and Robert Lowell. In the States, you would be hard-pressed to find someone writing about this particular configuration of poets. My guess is that poets outside the United States, when they come to American poetry, do not have the same prohibitive assumptions or deeply embedded values about American traditions they should or should not read—partly, of course, this is political in terms of what does or does not get translated, what poets outside the States have in front of them to read in translation if they can't read the original(s). And so these poets give themselves permission to cross American traditions and cultures which, in the States, seem ghettoized, or at least were so when I was growing up.

(Maybe this has changed over the generations.) So the notion that “if you read this, well you’re in this or that American tradition,” seemed to me at least, looking at it as someone born outside this country, fairly reductive. I could allow one poet to exist next to another poet to exist next to another poet in my reading which, of course, affected my writing. And I think that’s my take on what Ammiel was talking about in relation to those writers he reads and translates who may appear to be conventional on the surface and whom “experimental” writers in the States might shun.

**Ammiel:** Yeah, I found myself—we were talking about this earlier—with more and more of a conclusion that, not to be completely deterministic about this, but a lot of things are really economic and labor issues, literally. What’s happened to writers in this country over the last thirty years or so is a certain type of academic institutionalization in which writers are often placed in the most anti-intellectual segments of the academy, the “creative” departments. And what that has done is it’s kind of jettisoned the poetics of writers, and it’s made this poetics unfit for discourse, resulting in a very limited view of what American poetics might be, taken as a whole, primarily through continental theory, with very limited kinds of reading lists. So the bottom has dropped out; it’s just not there. It’s not thought about—it’s not considered; it’s not there. Often I find that a lot of the stuff which I translate is an explicit critique of how we partition ourselves and how we think about American culture. It’s an attempt to get us to rethink some of our own categories, and some of our own blinders in terms of what we might think appears to be a conventional text or what we might think is an unconventional text: how we privilege innovation, how we privilege an almost technological approach to what writing might be. In other words, that it is “truer” or “better.”

**Ben:** In creative writing classrooms or in creative writing workshops—to call a spade a spade—well this institutionalization of “creative writing” doesn’t exist in the Middle East or in Europe, that kind of specialization of writers. So that if one thinks, as I do, of poetry as a mode of consciousness or knowledge, then unfortunately—today at least—we’re dealing in the U.S. with writing at levels of technique and technology—the desire for the perfect poem, whether “conventional” or “avant-garde” doesn’t matter—so things are amiss, I think, where students seem to be more absorbed in the values of crafting or finishing the perfect poem than in getting saturated in subjects.

**Murat:** Poetry has this very curious thing. It has absolutely zero economic value. This is something important about American poetry. An American poet is writing without a social contract. There is no person to whom this writing is being addressed. You are essentially the consumer of the poetry. This creates a very odd situation; it makes the poet absolutely miserable. But if the poet can accept that situation, then it becomes an incredibly liberating state: essentially you are not bound by your immediate surroundings, or by society. You do what you do, and the recognition of the activity is not an issue. When you are writing with a social contract, you attune yourself to it and to its tacit expectations, and there’s nothing wrong with this or the consciousness it creates. But poetry in America doesn’t possess such cultural value. Its value is different, must be of a different sort.

**Heather Starr:** I have a question from Kay Goodman, who’s watching from Albany, and it’s a beautiful question that draws on what you just talked about. First she comments on Murat’s reading, then she’s curious about the references to Judaism in the first poem:

“There’s a lot of longing in his poem. I would like him to contextualize his impulse to write his religion, such a feeling of exile. I am reminded of Edward Said’s mention of exile as a necessary condition to understand this poem correctly (so as to write such poetry). Whether Said said it or not, it’s true for these poets. What are your thoughts concerning exile as a condition of the poet?” And keeping that question in mind, I want to just add a little bit about herself: “I ask this question because I am an American Jewish poet concerned in a great number of my poems with the reactions to the Arab/Israeli and the Muslim/Jewish conflicts as they have torn hearts and lives for so many years. Perhaps someone could talk about how, at a distance, we speak these words.”

**Murat:** As for the first part of the question, I refer to a Jew who was born in Turkey and grew up in Turkey. I used to go to that synagogue where the event in the poem takes place. But I’m a Persian Jew, which is slightly different than a Sephardic Jew [Spanish Jews living in Turkey], so there are many complications regarding the question of my identity with the speaker’s in the poem. The question about art is very interesting because the long poem from which I read, which is called *souljam*, is a kind of a very radical version of Sufism. Sufism is based on these kinds of disruptions. Things are multiplied centrifugally, and simultaneously things are moving toward unity. There’s a kind of simultaneity. And Sufism is a radical part of Turkish tradition. Take this idea of yearning for union, let’s say, which is at bottom a mystical feeling. My poetry has it; my translations have it. Iskender [the poet of *souljam*], who sees himself as a god creating a chaotic universe, nevertheless yearns for unity through his own subjectivity. Though blasphemous, it is a Sufi poem. Religion is very important here, but in terms of substance the poem has an Islamic rather than Jewish ethos—unless one accepts the yearning for Jerusalem as being of a similar nature. As for exile, when I’m doing the translations, I don’t feel I’m in exile. That’s the whole concept of translation, which acts as an antidote to exile.

**Heather:** Ben or Ammiel, would you like to respond to that part of Kay’s question regarding exile?

**Ammiel:** I’ll say a couple of things. First of all, there’s a common friend of Ben’s and mine, Jalal Toufic, who lives in Beirut and wrote a book called *Forthcoming* which I have reviewed—I’ll do a little advertising here for the book. The review is coming out in the *Village Voice* in the next couple of weeks. Jalal has a theory very much related to what Murat was saying; Jalal talks about the people who undergo a “surpassing disaster.” And once this has happened, the materials of their culture, their “traditions” are withdrawn. Often, the only people who can get to those things, who can recuperate them and bring them back into circulation, appear to be completely heretical. He goes on to talk about different examples, from the Shiites to some of the Kabbalistic thought to various forms of Sufism and other things. And it’s a very important way, for me, to think about the second part of the question because he and I have been heavily involved in this issue for the last twenty years. So in terms of my own poetry and translation, political activities, scholarship, human concerns, etc., I really have come more and more to the conclusion that one has to aim one’s thoughts very, very far away from the here and now—while holding it in account, while being cognizant of it and acting about it and still refusing all the terminology that is used and that one is inundated by. That is toxic poison, and it attacks us in the deepest parts of our being without our even knowing it. And it’s very difficult to find ways to refute that and to find ways to resist that. I

think that through these various ways of transformation, of metamorphosis, there are channels that open up, that allow things...that allow terms to be broken up, that allow terms to be solved, to accrete or deplete and find new ways of approaching the definitions of what a "Jew" might be or an "Arab" might be. I think even the terms themselves have to be stood on their heads, have to be reinvested, have to be exploded in any way possible. And I think there are all kinds of ways to do that. That's my quick reaction, I guess.

**Audience Member:** What I find interesting is that when a person is in exile, he doesn't have to be elsewhere. And all three of you are internal exiles, whether you like it or not. You could be in Turkey or you could be wherever you were born, but you will each still be an internal exile because in your poetry, the others are elsewhere. And you are the observer. There is an observer observing from a distance. I wonder whether you each put music to words or words to music. I would like to know a little bit more about each and every one of you so that I'm able to understand...so that I don't jump to hasty conclusions as to why you write the way you write, and how you write the way you write. You [most likely referring to Murat] have a difficulty with language, which is not astonishing. One of my friends from the technical college—when I was in England—would go to RADA, the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, to speak British. He was Turkish. It takes courage to assume that the sensitivity of a certain language can be reproduced in another language. What you're complaining about is that there is no following, that the question of following comes down to time and space. A poet with a following addresses the correct issue at the correct time in the correct space. Bosnia, or the Yugoslav or the Shoah, whatever you call it, when it comes to genocide, it's a critical, actual subject by guilt or by experience. The way he puts it, he has a following even outside of the poetry world. You [Murat, perhaps] have the guru and...

**Ammiel:** Is there a question?

**Audience Member:** Yes. The issue is the question of social alienation between the establishment and the people. And the way you bring things up is that you're trying to be innovative without really being able to talk to someone who knows which neighborhood you come from. The neighborhood you describe I know. She doesn't; she's my wife. So you're really talking to a very tough audience. A Belgian who wouldn't know the first thing about what the heck you're talking about, and a Turk who's not been back in Turkey for years but still knows exactly the smell, the sound, the location, the relationship, the context, the problem you're addressing. How many of us are there in this room, so that you could have a following? The question: could you tell us a little bit about yourselves, your life? Why you're [Ammiel] so near in your sensitivities to that particular experience? You're really talking about a journalistic experience which is very touching, very emotive. You [Murat], why are you leaving us a huge Ottoman and Turkish tradition as a translator and going into the Dada? And you two, being in command of the American language, why are you still living in the 60s?

**Ben:** Ammiel is right: there are different ways of turning these terms on their head(s). The same with the term "exile," which Kay Goodman asked us about—that is, what do concepts of exile mean for us, as a condition of the poet? I suppose I could cite Jabes' representations of the writer and Jew, claiming that similar condition of exile (particularly as someone born in Israel and who came to the States when I was 6). But it's not

that simple. Even Celan's exile from German as the language turned barbarian is foreign to my sense of exile, if that's the word to use here. My historical circumstances are so radically different that it would be absurd for me to even begin to think in those terms when thinking about my relation to a mother tongue. Rather, the un-American-ness I can't define but which I feel has, I think, something to do with the title of Murat's amazing piece, "Questions of Accent." And, in the end, it may not be un-American-ness at all, but an ironic kind of Americanness at work in the poetry: the same kind of Americanness that is as fluent and invisible as the name "Carlos" in the name of the iconic "white American" poet, William Carlos Williams.

My work goes around with an accent. Perhaps, as with immigrants who have seamlessly assimilated, I'm the only one who notices it—although I doubt it—but there it is in the work. I've thought about it a lot. I've thought about the trajectory my writing has taken over the years and how I've come to see it and why I sense its foreignness and its being at odds with much of American poetry even as it has to absorb it, at some level. I see its signs in my poetry. I can appear, as my poetry can appear, to have a particular mastery of American English. But it's such a curious thing for me to hear people say when they see my writing: "you have command of the language." Perhaps, but...

When we came from Israel to New York City, and before that time when we were living in Haifa, my father and mother spoke German in the house, as well as Hebrew among friends. I picked up more on the German than the Hebrew, although, frankly, I don't recall what I spoke before the age of 6 (maybe I didn't speak). However, what I really picked up on was neither Hebrew nor German but a mixture of a cosmopolitan English from my father—who spoke at least six languages well, mostly picked up from when he was an apprentice cook on board ships sailing through Europe and the Levant in the 30s—and a broken English from my mother. Fluency in the midst of accentedness. Command in the midst of humility, so that I always had the feeling "yes, this is absolutely a right way of saying this; no this is absolutely wrong." It's a strange condition: you can sound articulate, the work can sound articulate, but there is always the sense that you are grasping for the true name of the thing you want to represent. Certainly, most poets will feel like that. In my case, however, as I've said, there are some clear signs that this is more than a poet's occupational hazard. In my background there really is this whole question of what it means, for example, to name something, or counter-name it, or even to overcompensate as you're trying to clarify something in writing. When I am writing something, I will overcompensate and write it another way almost as if I'm trying to be more precise, like someone from another country who tries to over-explain himself in English in order to communicate with a native speaker as directly as possible. Except the direction is oblique, excessive, roundabout. Well, that's quite strange because when you're trying to be precise, the first thing that a writing teacher, at least when I was going to school, would tell you is don't over-explain yourself. Get to the point. Be concise. So there's a kind of ambiguity that's created in, say, a poem, with this kind of overcompensation, this over-naming, this over-imprinting—one could call it over-transcribing I guess—so that the impulse to become more precise materializes as something which, on the surface, looks ambiguous yet is at the same time literal, literally over-literal. This is, perhaps, related to what Paul Celan reportedly called "an ambiguity without masks" when describing his own poetry.

So there's this amorphous vague structure of a poem in front of me that I'm al-

ways trying to “precisely” name and re-name and so on, which I assume comes from needing to get the English “right,” even when it comes out “wrong.” Recently, I heard my mother try to name the cable car wires in San Francisco, as she looked up and asked me what those “nets” are. This is how I come to English, to hearing it, and I assume it’s worked its “foreignness” into my writing. Part of this problem or condition or whatever you want to call it has to do with how I come to English. And even as I say that phrase, a colleague of mine once questioned it by asking, quizzically: “how did you say that? You come to English? Is that like how one comes to Philadelphia? We don’t say it like that here. You mean how you ‘learned’ English, right?” And I said, “no, how I come to English.” There’s nothing wrong with me saying that; at least, I don’t hear anything wrong with that, although other people—fluent native speakers I suppose—do find it odd. So this whole question of fluency or command of the language, and what is fluent and what is not in terms of how I come to English—those are issues that very strongly come up in my work. This is why Joyce’s words—“I can do anything with language that I want”—hold no sympathy for me and why Beckett’s words—“The kind of work I do is one in which I am not master of my material”—do. And that’s basically the way I feel in terms of my relationship to language and my relationship to English. I don’t know if you want to pick up on that.

**Murat:** What was the question you asked us?

**Audience Member:** [*Repeats his rambling question at length, concluding with a direct query to Murat regarding his style with respect to his inability to speak English very well.*]

**Murat:** I suppose in some way I’m obstinate, I suppose. The logic of my position.

**Audience Member:** You’re joking.

**Murat:** No, I’m not joking. I’m answering you. When you say that there is a way of translating Turkish, you are assuming that the center of Turkish culture is Ottoman poetry. I guess we have different views about it.

**Ben:** Possibly, the assumption would be—I mean, you [audience member] said it a number of times—that there is a choice in writing innovative poetry. I don’t see it as “a choice.”

**Kerry Sherin:** Do you mind if I jump in? I really think we’d like to move on. I want to ask you a question, Murat. What struck me when I was listening to you is the fact that I didn’t hear frustration. I heard someone who is making his way in a way that I haven’t heard other poets making their way. I think I see it very differently than the way you [audience member] see it. For instance, there are lots of assumptions in what you just said. One of them is that there is somehow a translation that goes from the first language to the target language, that poets can enter into a certain language or that they belong there somehow. And I don’t want to get into a debate with you. I just want to comment in a different way on the work that Murat’s doing. I was struck by the poem in which the Wizard of Oz arrives at the end, “The Translation Poem,” because the translation seems to be an autobiography in verse and also a commentary on a kind of poetry that travels from one language to the other. The poet is the Wizard of Oz; the poet is the man behind the curtain who we all know is...

**Murat:** In the text, it is the Wizard of O's, the letter "O."

**Kerry Sherin:** All the play, the fact that there is so much play in the language, I felt really very moving—an interesting recognition that there was no place to get to. There was no endpoint to get to, and this seems very important.

**Murat:** In that poem, there's no end in a way. It kind of ends. I read *souljam* in a piece-meal style because really you could start and stop at any place. Look, I mean it's not for me to decide what my work means to other people; that's other people's decision. But as for what you said about a conversation "with" language: that's why I translate; that's why I write; that's why I write essays and poems. I feel that what I have here doesn't tell my language, who I am, where I come from and everything. And essentially my strategy is making those things which are nonexistent realities in words. It is not a reality like "I am this; I am that." It's essentially the reality of a perception. This is the whole thing again. It's politics. The politics talk to you in a way. It's a kind of perceiving the world around it. And sometimes...

**Ben:** Murat, let me ask you to speak to this a little more. You once wrote me that in your translations you are adding a limb to English that it doesn't have. I would like you to speak to this a little more.

**Murat:** That's what it is: I translate, essentially, because I feel English lacks something. I live in a Turkish world. I do not translate because I'm doing a favor to Turks—honestly. I don't translate because I'm doing a favor to the Americans either.

**Ammiel:** Is it that English lacks something in what has been expressed so far as you know?

**Murat:** That's a very good question. I think it's basically that English lacks something because—and you can stop me any time you want. The anthology that I am preparing is about this lack [*Eda: An Anthology of Contemporary Turkish Poetry, edited by Murat Nemet-Nejat, Talisman House, New Jersey, 2004*]. You have Turkish and you have English. What I'm translating is not Turkish poets; I'm translating the Turkish language. I'm making English function as if it were Turkish. This is an intricate, crazy notion, and I was saying it ten years ago, and people thought I was crazy. I needed this anthology to really explain what I meant. In Turkish there's an incredible word flexibility. This gives the language an incredible ability to express nuances. In English, relationships get expressed in separate words, prepositions. I go *to* there, *from* there. This doesn't exist in Turkish. There's a tonality mode that means, more or less, the nearer the word is to the verb, the more important it is: a general rule, really, a syntax of the process of emerging perception and desire, as it occurs in real time. Every sentence can be rearranged in any order. This is the Sufi way of global sensibility, a perceptual intimacy which can reveal the experience of nearness and distance, union and loss, in exquisite detail and in all its permutations. I am trying to give a total understanding of it. I am trying to make English say that, at least to my ears. Exploring space around words in English through essentially cadences. And what you've said is very true: in some ways it is very bad writing. It kind of stops as you go through it—as perception snags—and this is the music that I am talking about. That's the music that I don't hear in English.

**Kerry Sherin:** Do you mind if I ask you [Ammiel] the same question?

**Ammiel:** Let me say this one thing and then I'll answer the question. I do a lot of different things; I write for a variety of different audiences for different purposes—journalistic things, translations that are more urgent or less urgent, etc. What I found when I was working on this book, *from the warring factions*, is that its ostensible subject is really “warring factions,” whether those are internal, in oneself, or else familial, or communal, or national, etc. It's about memory, exile, genocide, wars of different historical periods, as well as linguistic collisions of all kinds. And as I worked on the book, I realized after the first section, which is about fifteen pages, that I no longer wanted to generate or use any of my own “words.” I felt like that was almost, you know, ecologically incorrect. I mean, really—there are enough real words out there, and there's no real reason to add to the pool. I can go out and find them. So all of the parts that I read, as well as the other parts of the book, are words generated from things that I'd been reading. It's very different than a lot of the work which is generated and seems chancy in some ways (though not all ways because some poets work in that mode and do things which don't appear to have that effect of a chance operation on it). It's been very interesting to work in this manner because I found that it's almost like painting. In other words, I'm really looking at a palette and a variety of color options, and literally, I don't use a plural if it's not in the word that I've taken from somewhere else. It's all word lists generated from other readings. And of course certain things...I mean, the reading is directed. One of the sections that I read from has to do with a massacre. I read about four or five thousand pages of UN documents, and I could only use about a paragraph. I mean, literally, it was just un-useful. I ended up using words generated from Shelley's *Revolt of Islam* to comment upon this massacre, which was a very interesting, odd experience because I felt almost...I don't know if you're familiar with the work of Wilson Harris, but Wilson Harris talks about intervening in narratives, arguing that there are certain historical points at which a narrative must be cosmically intervened in, in order to change its course or in order to reflect upon it in some other way. So I found myself involved in these kinds of interesting juxtapositions in which I literally felt like I was translating because the words themselves had a very similar feeling to the words when I do translations. This was a very liberating way of working, as well. But that doesn't really answer your question.

**Murat:** May I ask you a question? Exactly how do you do this? I mean, do you take whole texts or...how do you generate words? What do you mean by that?

**Ammiel:** I generate in that I will read things and make lists of words.

**Murat:** Take words out?

**Ammiel:** Yes, words. Occasionally phrases, seldom more than two or three words. Sometimes a block quotation in quotes so that the text contains a funny kind of thing, because there are single words taken from different places and not in quotations, but there is also text within quotations—which is a kind of musical notation as well. It's a way of differentiating, offsetting, and in a sense what I've found in terms of a different rhythmical structure (but very similar to the way you're working) is that it has enabled me to find very different pressure points in the language: in other words, to gain value in rhythms and in lines that are not necessarily moving in, let's say, from the end of a

line. I'm very concerned with the line, the idea of a line and its place on a page. So I've really worked at ways of shifting the value of the line across the line as fully as possible and around it to find different points that are not. This sounds really insane, but it's not. These are very abstract notions, really musical notations and rhythms which I've realized as I'm writing. A poem needs a certain amount of time, simply, to be read or to be finished. In other words, it's not finished yet, and it's simply a question of timing. The reader hasn't been with it long enough. He or she needs  $x$  amount more time with it, but I know that it has its own cycle to be played out, and it's not there yet. I'm playing with concepts, words, ways of thinking about things that are very foreign to an English we're familiar with.

**Bob Perelman:** There are so many things to respond to. I hope I can be concise here. It strikes me that there's a really interesting issue in a lot of the questions and comments. On the one hand, experience, fluency, some sort of authenticity, malleability, and innovation or defamiliarization, as you were saying; on the other, terms of identity which are toxic, and which you want to undo—"Jew," "Arab," those kinds of social marks. And with those two sides, poetry is in a funny position because language is, by definition, conventional and social. All three of you have made many gestures toward getting away from that. There's an essential idiosyncrasy about poetry or privacy, whereas it seems very clear to me that all of your work, and everything you say about it, is very social. Your various goals are extremely well articulated, whether it's music or this kind of verbal dance that you hear in Turkish which you want to get in English. In both cases there's an extreme, exquisitely imagined effect directed toward a particular audience or convention. But, at the same time, what enables all of you to work is audibility. I thought they were extremely audible—all three readings, not that I understood everything. I don't know the synagogue in Turkey. I don't know the smells. But that's true of any poem, any writing. It's true of one's own experience. Kerouac, writing spontaneously, is just remembering smells. Artistic reproduction and sensory perception are just two different universes, unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on your point of view). We keep coming back—you sort of touched them or anti-touched them—to this experience and understandability and audience. Anyway, what is my question? The differences that I see in all three of your works don't get away from very basic questions of address and audience, not that I'm saying you need to become conventional. I'm not saying that in the slightest. You are addressing audiences, but then the question is what choices you have to make. And you each make thorough editorial choices at every word. So you're not—there's something composed about being uncompromised—about being stubborn, but word for word—everybody chooses every word—and there's a sociability to that, but the question is what kind of audience are you trying to create?

**Ben:** Bob, you know, for me it's not a problem of being inaudible or incomprehensible or whatever word you want to use. I'll make this brief. Someone comes up to me after I do a reading and says we have no reference for your work; there's no American reference for the work. I wonder: should I go back to the mother ship? Is it that alien? Where exactly is the audience? Why is it, I wonder, that my work gets read (you know, by small groups of people) in Brazil, in France, in other places, but not in the United States? It's not a complaint; it's not a problem; it's just a question that I am trying to respond to in some way. So when you say that it's perfectly audible and comprehensible—well, experience tells me just the opposite in the United States. And experience tells me that somehow it doesn't register to an American ear as easily as it does to an ear from else-

where. I frankly don't know why. I take guesses as to why that is. I say to myself, for instance, that American writing is a writing—at least to my mind, when I grew up—dominated by the image and by visual assumptions which I don't make in my work. Perhaps in other cultures, even though there are obviously image-based poetries all over the world, the measure of the music is stronger. Perhaps the measure of abstraction in music is stronger. It has more of a legitimate—what do you call it—place in that culture. Steve Dickison, the director of The San Francisco State University Poetry Center, said to me after a reading I did in San Francisco: “You know, forget about publishing this poetry. Just burn a CD because people need to hear it.” I don't know if that's a response or backing out of a response.

**Murat:** I'm thinking about the writing process: the choices you have to make while writing in America, surrounded by its values. My writing does not directly address those values—“directly” being the operative word. I prefer to focus on other references, usually coming from outside (Turkish being the biggest example, but there are other ones too). I've discovered that when I write a work, there is an acceptance of it in a few years. For example, in the 1980s I translated a Turkish poem [Ece Ayhan's *A Blind Cat Black and Orthodoxies*, Los Angeles, Sun and Moon Press, 1997]. Nobody wanted to do anything with it. They either said it was nonsense, or that it was a rehashed surrealist poem. The poem was unfamiliar to them, or incomprehensible. I couldn't go anywhere with it. About ten years later, I sent somebody the manuscript on the spur of the moment. The publisher called me—a week had not passed yet—and he called, leaving a message on the telephone that he was publishing the manuscript. What was the difference? In my opinion, it was something which took American poetry another ten years to arrive at. It's not that my work particularly had changed. They might be a simple psychological necessity, but realistically, I do not use references to “modernism” and “the avant-garde.” In a way, they are the things I struggle against. The whole—I don't want to be too general about this—but basically, the familiar assumptions of modernism and the avant-garde are an impediment to me. I don't want to write like this. It doesn't say anything to me. There are strategies to go around that sort of thing. I look at Rimbaud, for example. I want to throw Rimbaud out of the way so I can go for something else. In a way, in my bones, I don't understand mainstream modernist or avant-garde technology. It is the practice which surrounds me. I find that I have to listen to it. I have to respect it.

**Ammiel:** I'm not really sure how the question was formulated, but in response to something, I think you were implying—with my own approach, in terms of audience—that my work has a lot to do with...I mean, I'm very publicly involved. The constraints in this country, the ideological constraints and political constraints toward the rest of the world are enormous, deeply ingrained, and very difficult to bypass. It takes a tremendous amount of effort to create space for translated works or so-called “contested” (or seemingly contested) areas. When one talks about the Middle East, for instance, you're basically—you have a tiny, tiny filter through which everything passes, which is formed by the American media, Zionist assumptions about the world, America's UN policy in the Middle East, assumptions about the world, assumptions about how narrative functions, all kind of things. To find ways to combat that, to clear some space, is an enormous, enormous undertaking and involves a tremendous amount of just thinking in terms of how one can break down these barriers. When we create space for some of this work, we begin to come in. Again, like Murat, I've been doing this stuff for over twenty

years, and just now in the last three or four years coming to fruition. It says a number of things to me. Number one, it says I was on the right track. Of course, it would have been nicer if it had happened earlier, but I would have kept doing it anyway, so that's not the issue. The other thing it tells me is that I was certainly on the right track because the resistance was so strong. For example, the vehemence that I first met when I tried to get *After Jews and Arabs* published was in a way very gratifying because it showed me that this is really something that poses a threat to certain segments—miniscule segments, granted—but a segment. Once that part of the castle begins to topple, some of the other parapets will begin to sink as well. And that's not a lone effort. I look at it as a collective effort with all kinds of different approaches, methods, etc. coming into play. I think that kind of has something to do with what you're talking about.

**Murat:** In the essay "Questions of Accent" [*The Exquisite Corpse*, 1993], I essentially created a big reaction because I attack.

**Ammiel:** That's an incredible example because there's something going on right now, about native space. What has happened in the last two, three, four years is—I'm at fault to some extent—this whole effort to make these Arab Jews more Jews, which is in a sense absurd. And there's a continuity of it. And it's really Murat's essay, which I found fantastically illuminating and absolutely right, and absolutely wrong at the same time, that allowed me to completely rethink not necessarily what I was thinking, but how things were happening. It has allowed me, for instance, to think about writing a very political piece that will talk about all the Francophone writers who are not talked about because of their politics. There's Abraham Serfaty, who was a political prisoner in Morocco. When he speaks about "absence" and "exile," he's talking about being in prison for sixteen years and then being banished from the country. And again, when I say labor issue—I have a recent piece, an odd piece that was published in Vancouver, where I talk about myself as being part of a ground crew. I really feel more and more like I'm part of a ground crew; I'm a maintenance man. I'm coming to tune things up. And I've done that kind of work before so I know what I'm talking about. I feel more and more that what gets left out is so crucial in how history forms itself and how canons form themselves and how people put themselves in certain positions at the cost of other things. These issues need to be constantly interrogated and perforated and spoken about audibly, clearly, intelligently, and strategically in all kinds of contexts.

**Ben:** And interestingly, the borders that Ammiel is trying to transcend or break down are, in a sense, political and aesthetic borders or, rather, the divide between political and aesthetic borders. He talked about this earlier. He publishes and translates writers from Israel who cannot appear in Israel, Israeli writers who cannot be published for economic or political reasons. He publishes them here with a publisher in the United States, and they exist, but they exist as "political" writers. More and more they come to be known as politically based. The border that is drawn around these writers is one in which, as Ammiel said earlier, they don't look "avant-garde" enough in America. To "experimentalists" here, these Israeli writers appear conventional, which they're not. Here they don't look "innovative" enough, but in the context of what they're doing in the Middle East, they are as radical as can be. So here we are in the United States, a free country, an open country that's full of these borders and gated spaces and schedules in everything we do from day to day. And I think that kind of thinking infiltrates the art and poetry worlds, where it seems we open the field up on one level only to close it on

another—so we settle for a multi-cultural provincialism of sorts.

**Heather:** I'd like to pose this question that David Abel from Portland, Oregon sent in.

**Ammiel, Murat, Ben:** Hey, David. Hello, David.

**Heather:** And it's very much an extension of what you guys are talking about right now. He says: "Murat describes a liberation of contractlessness, Ammiel a resistance to the poisonous dominant discourse, and Benjamin a struggle to the articulate, to the still foreign tongue, all of which are poignant descriptions of interior conditions. As American poets, are you/we assigned to create in our lives and works a metaphorical image of a possible politics? And if so, is that because the possibility of a truly political life has been withdrawn by our society?" He also says that if I pose his question to "please preface it with my thanks to all the poets and the Writers House for this program."

**Ammiel:** Well, I would just like to answer: you know, politics is never withdrawn. It's always there. It's constant. It's ongoing, and it's a question of how one sometimes, in maddening frustration, figures out where to go with it, how one can effectively act. There are obviously times and periods when one feels like there's more effective and less effective action. I think we're in a period now of feeling extremely depleted and much frustration of how to act. I count myself among the frustrated, but I don't think that resignation is the way to go. I mean, a certain withdrawal, maybe, but it depends what one does when one withdraws. One can be very—well, after the destruction of the second temple the rabbis withdrew and they said, "Silence. Don't say anything. Be quiet." And that was a very wise strategy. I don't know; I have no particular answer to that. I've been seeking very particular ways to act politically (recently, in the last few months, and I regret to say that I can't give you an address of where you could go). The search continues. One has to just continue thinking, and I think also for me—for instance, my work on Bosnia, similar to Murat's work with Turkish—this is all about here, all about the here and now. For me, it was very detrimental and very stupid that many of the more prominent people who were bringing up this issue of Bosnia were doing it in what was a really intellectual way; they were talking about the fragility of civil society, which is extremely fragile. I mean, one can go fifteen blocks away from this university and be in neighborhoods that are in worse shape than Sarajevo is now. It's a question of how one acts with that knowledge and where one puts one's efforts. One has to really start where one is. If you're a writer, you start within those spaces that you're working in: a kind of literary activism, which is what I'm constantly doing, getting books published, getting things done, achieving things. There are all kinds of ways one can act. It's not always for the "big picture." There are different ways of creating viable space for other things to happen.

**Audience Member:** [*Inaudible*] get them to cross boundaries, kind of like the artists who produce on conditions of convenience, or censorship, so the audience can be with you, can understand what is between the lines.

**Ammiel:** I grew up in an environment in which it was simply a given that European artists worked primarily for themselves and then for other working artists, and anything that followed was gravy. I learned how to act under those assumptions, but to take that attitude into other arenas and to give people that artistic sensibility in other

arenas and make them understand that you can continue working this way because there's power in it. And that power is very, you know...you really need to know how powerful information is, and how not to give it away, how to reserve it and use it in the right places. I'm very happy to say that I know a lot of my audience—literally. I get calls; I get letters. I know what they're doing. I know what concrete effects certain things I've done have had. And that's incredibly empowering, although sometimes I feel like, "whoa, what's going on here?" But I incrementally see what happens. There's a large machine that one is working against, but it is effective—just one individual is effective. There's a wonderful quote from the Israeli nuclear technician Mordechai Vanunu where he talks about being a cog in the machine, then asks do you turn the screw, knowing that one more turn and you're going to blow up the world? No, you don't. You unscrew it and one person in a certain position can do that.<sup>3</sup> That's being in a particular moment, but there are other ways in which someone can act that way, I think.

**Hannah Sassaman:** I found myself thinking a lot about translations. You've invoked Derrida and the idea of a word which has meanings which conflict with each other. As a translator, do you find yourself choosing a meaning or creating two new meanings or destroying the meanings even more? I'm very interested in this because right now I'm in the process of taking a play script and trying to understand how a play works as a piece of text on a piece of paper as something spoken which grows from the eternal word to the moment. Meanings change very strangely there, and as you are all working with translation and working with structure as well, I'm wondering if you could speak about that or other translators whom you admire who are skilled at this.

**Ammiel:** I just want to say one thing: there's a tremendous mystification of translation, and I think we're constantly translating. We're translating machines. We have to translate spatial values; we have to translate visual values. All of our visual values are learned, and we know this from neurological evidence, etc. So I think that translating from one language to another simply makes more evident the process that we're constantly doing anyway. And as such, it gets mystified because it seems to be this specialized thing, but I think it's really just another aspect of this ongoing activity that we're constantly doing. I translate in ways that are very different. I have no particular doctrine.

**Hannah:** I hope not.

**Ammiel:** You know, sometimes I'll translate the way Murat does, to expose the things in what I'm doing, to estrange the things. Sometimes I'll do the opposite. It really depends. I do a lot of different types of translation, from simultaneous courtroom stuff to documents that are testimonies and human rights stuff. So just the whole gamut of registers, of language. For me, it's always helped to kind of conceptualize it in the widest possible sense, as one aspect of a process that we're already completely familiar with but haven't considered because it's so innate and natural to us. I think that once you start to think of it that way, you start to really appreciate the oddities of a particular experience as you're translating it.

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<sup>3</sup> He happened to pay very heavily for it, with seventeen years in unspeakable conditions in an Israeli prison.

**Murat:** Basically translation is—to me, at least—a change of medium. That is to say, if you take a novel and make it into a movie, you are involved in the process of translation. Coming back to language translation, the strategy always starts, for me, with a critical (in the sense of analytical) judgment: what about this text do I want to translate, which my own language lacks? Translation is not a simple transition from A to B. It starts with fragmentation, a focus on a lack: what the original has that I feel the target language doesn't have. I want to translate the idea of that absence, that distance. I try to find strategies to translate an idea, in the sense of realizing it. For that to work, as I see it, the target language also has to undergo fragmentations and disruptions. This way, both texts, both languages move to a third space called C, something to that effect.

**Ben:** It's an issue of immanence, too.

**Murat:** Starts with something missing.

**Hannah:** Well, you said before that you're translating the language and not the poet, so whenever you're working with the poems in Turkish and moving them into English, you're taking, rather than... I was reading Pablo Neruda the other day in the Spanish and then in the English, and I thought the translation was horrible. I hated it. I thought the translator didn't capture what I loved about the poems, and what you're calling the lack in English and trying to structure it anyway you can.

**Murat:** This is a very big issue, by the way: one word, and what it's going to generate in a culture, moving in its different directions. How do we deal with this? Because, essentially, those directions do not exist in the other language. You make a choice, at least I do in my case. If those specific directions are the most important things in the original, then you have to jettison everything else so as to create them. You cannot compete with total phonetic transference. You translate it, you know?

**Kerry:** I think we should wrap it up.

[*Audience applauds.*]

**Murat, Ammiel, Ben:** Thank you very much. Thanks.

[*Audio transmission ends.*]