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Constantinopolitan Modernities: Leonard Woolf, Virginia Woolf and Halide Edib
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This is a polemical paper about how a city may be perceived in different registers. Istanbul as a bartering piece in peace negotiations, as in the case of Leonard Woolf's *The Future of Constantinople* (1917), and Istanbul as a space that evokes modernist responses by two female writers- one of them a young British novelist on her tour of the continent before WWI, and the other a Turkish novelist writing about her experience of the British Occupation in 1918, a year after Leonard Woolf's tract (Brits occupied Istanbul from late Nov 1918- Sep 1923).[1] Gathering these modern responses to Constantinople's geographical and symbolic location, I try to formulate aspects of 'Constantinopolitan modernities' that engage with the meanings that the city has taken on and generated.

Leonard Woolf's *The Future of Constantinople* is a very good example of how a modern and anti-imperialist vision of the future may be founded on the exclusion of local subjectivities. In it Leonard Woolf, in a sense, pits internationalism against cosmopolitanism, arguing for an international body to rule Istanbul. His is a capitalist 'reading' of the Bosphorus where the city itself is obliterated, and becomes the strait that should facilitate the transportation of goods. I pit his narrative of Istanbul against both Halide Edib's memoir *The Turkish Ordeal* in which she details local resistance, and Virginia Woolf's account of Istanbul in her 1906 diary, in which she depicts a 'sense of life being lived successfully' in a multilayered city. Not only does Constantinople come out of Virginia Woolf's writing as an irreducible city, but also, as an inspiration for modern urban polyphony.

The following, however, is how Leonard Woolf's 1917 Keynesian tract the *Future of Constantinople* begins: 2

> Europe in her last ditch has fought the last battle of the Great War, we shall find that what we have again been fighting about is really Constantinople. And when the last ditch has been filled in to form the last grave for the victims of this war, we want to know that the question of Constantinople has, in international politics, […] been finally settled so that it will no longer be the breeding ground of hatred and covetousness and war. The object of this book is to analyze the causes of the position of this city in the past, as a fomenter of international unrest, to examine and to suggest proposals for a settlement which may finally remove those causes.

Like Keynes's *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* which would be published two years later, Leonard Woolf views the aftermath of the Great War in economic terms. Curiously, Woolf's tract starts with a description of the improvement of navigation on the Danube River, and his argument meanders towards the Bosphorus. In this passage in particular, Woolf seems to make Constantinople into an abstraction, some kind of *objet a* all European powers gravitate towards. It is as if Leonard has read one of the letters that have been lying on Virginia's desk for three years- for three years is indeed a long time to leave a

[1] Halide's second representation of the English for public consumption would come with the second part of her memoirs, *The Turkish Ordeal*, detailing the conditions of British occupation of Istanbul *and* the war of independence in Anatolia. Having already given an account of this in fiction, Halide seems to have been moved to write a 'factual' version of events after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's *Nutuk* in 1927, in 1928.

letter unanswered- and taken it upon himself to answer it 'How, in your opinion, are we to prevent war?' Solve the question of Constantinople, you have solved the question of war, Leonard Woolf seems to be saying. And shouldn't Constantinople answer as Virginia Woolf does when she tries to explain how it is hard for Woman (capital W) to stop war, and say that Leonard Woolf 'must credit her with powers that might almost be called divine'?

But what is Constantinople that it should be the Key to All Peaces? According to Leonard, Constantinople is the stage where internationalism should at last beat imperialism. (12-13) Constantinople should be the city that should cease to live and breathe and be stripped down to its economic activity, so that all other European cities should live in peace. The *homo sacer*[2] of cities, if you like. And now I quote at length: 3

> The prima facie arguments for internationalizing, if possible, Constantinople, and a strip of land both sides of the Bosphorus, Sea of Marmora and the Dardanelles are very strong. The city itself is not national but international 'a city of not one nation, but of many, and hardly more of one than of another.' The Turks entered Constantinople as alien conquerors and though they have been there now for 464 years 'with their Zaptiehs, and their Mudirs, their Bimbashis and their Yusbashis, their Kaimakams and their Pashas' they remain nothing but alien conquerors. Constantinople today is not a Turkish but a cosmopolitan city. Only 44 per cent of the population are Moslems, and, as Mr Arnold Toynbee has pointed out, if the Turkish seat of government moved or were removed from it to Asia Minor, most of the Turks would move with it. Another fifty percent of the population is composed in almost equal proportions of Greeks, Armenians and foreigners. The problem here therefore is complicated so far as population is concerned, not so as in the Balkans, Alsace, Poland and Bohemia, *by nationalism*, but by cosmopolitanism. And if a national autonomous government is prima facie the solution of the problem of territory where the population is predominantly and consciously national, then it may be fairly argued that prima facie the solution of the problem of a cosmopolitan area is international government p. 18-19[3]

4

Leonard Woolf, as all visitors to Constantinople at the beginning of the 20th century would, acknowledge the cosmopolitanism of the city. To him, the city is cosmopolitan by nature, independent of the 464 years laws and settlements prescribed by the Ottoman government. A brief look at the city's history would quickly reveal, however, the city was *engineered* as a

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[2] Ancient Greek Agamben claims is crucial for understanding the trajectory of Western politics: the difference between *zoē* and *bios*, or natural and political life. Agamben argues this distinction was crucial for setting up the *polis* as a properly political space, because it excluded natural life from its sphere of concerns, confining it to the sphere of the *oikos*, or home. In a characteristic move, however, he claims that this act of exclusion, because it founds the *polis*, also implicates natural life in it.

[3] https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-13638937/the-significance-of-constantinople-in-orlando-virginia

https://londonist.com/london/books-and-poetry/mapped-all-virginia-woolf-s-novels

file:///Users/nagihanhaliloglu/Downloads/1393-3415-1-PB.pdf

multicultural city by the Ottomans, the Sublime Porte repopulating the decaying city after the conquest with peoples from different denominations. The cosmopolitanism of Constantinople, *is* actually the work of the alien conqueror that Leonard Woolf speaks of. And well after the Turks did found a new capital in Ankara, Turks failed to move with it, in fact, Turks and Kurds have kept moving to Constantinople to this day.

One Turkish daughter of Constantinople, Halide Edib, writing about the Allied Forces attempt at internationalizing the already cosmopolitan city – and here we seem to have an opposition between international and cosmopolitan- describes the sense of loss as follows:

> My own condition – physical and mental – at that time might be taken as typical of the general feeling in my country after the armistice was signed and the Allied troops had entered. I felt stupefied, tired, and utterly sick of all that had happened since 1914. […] That the years of elaborate political work carried out by the different powers in Turkey among the minorities, and the series of atrocities committed by all the racial units, were going to bear fruit no one doubted. As Russia was hors de combat, it was evident that England and France – and perhaps Italy would take the largest share of the spoils of war. Italy naturally would be compensated in Austria, but the other powers would spread their jurisdiction over a great part of the Ottoman Empire, dividing it into "mandates," or "zones of influence." […] With the entry of the Allied armies the insolence of the Greeks and the Armenians and the treatment of the peaceful Turkish citizens in the streets became scandalous. […] Large numbers of Turks were continually arrested on some pretext, fined, and sometimes badly beaten at the Allied headquarters. The requisitioning of the houses, the throwing out of the inhabitants without allowing them to take their personal belongings – those were the mildest forms of bad treatment. […] The tearing of the fezzes or the tearing of the veils of women were common sights, and all these things were borne with admirable dignity and silence by the townspeople[4]

A city, then, looks very different when it is seen on a map as a thoroughfare between Asia and Europe, and when experienced on the ground.[5]

6

It is Virginia Woolf herself who, in her 1906 memoir,[6] attests to Constantinople's, again, what I like to refer to as it *irreducibility*, speaking about it in relation to cities for whose safety

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[4] a series of murders verging on massacre started in the Turkish quarters, especially in the Ak-Serai and Fatih regions, where the streets are dark and covered over with lonely ruins of past fires.

[5] This, more than anybody else, the modernists would have been aware of. The fezzes and veils that decorate European travel writing as fun, exotic markers become, in the Istanbulite's narrative, sites of occupier violence.

[6] -*The Years*. 1917. Maggie' silver dress came from a man here.

-*To The Lighthouse*. Chapter 14. Is that the Golden Horn? Asks Nancy when Minta takes her hand.

-*Orlando*. Chapter 3. The chapter opens with Orlando serving as ambassador to Constantinople. -The morning mists are so dense that the dome appears to float.

Leonard Woolf thinks Istanbul must be internationalized, and settled as a Question. To Virginia Woolf however Constantinople is a self-sufficient metropolis, mother city, to be reckoned with:

> Remembering Athens, you felt yourself in a metropolis; *a place where life was being lived successfully* […] For you also realised that life was not lived after the European pattern, that it was not even a debased copy of Paris or Berlin or London [...] you knew yourself to be the spectator of a vigorous drama, acting itself out with no thought or need of certain great countries yonder to the West (Turkey, 1906)

Virginia is very much taken with this vigorous drama, and is, in her usual way, very much interested in the light in which this drama unfolds. In this 1906 Constantinopolitan diary, one can already see Virginia Woolf's fascination with the play of light, shadow, mist, and how they influence one's vision:

> For in the morning, a mist lies like a veil that muffles treasures across all the houses and all the mosques; then as the sun rises, you catch hints of the heaped mass within; then a pinnacle of gold pierces the soft mesh and you see shapes of precious stuff lumped together. And slowly the mist withdraws and all the wealth of gleaming houses and rounded mosques lies clear on the solid earth and the broad waters run bright as daylight through their mist (351)

There is a modernist emphasis on the way vision is refracted by light; the Bosphorus becomes an aesthetic/light effect filter through which Istanbul is viewed. The Thames also has a similar light and mist filter that shapes vision in Woolf's *The Voyage Out*. In it we see the city through Mrs. Ambrose's eyes as she looks at the river and the town from Waterloo Bridge: Sometimes the flats and churches and hotels of Westminster are like the outlines of Constantinople in a mist; sometimes the river is an opulent purple, sometimes mud-coloured, sometimes sparkling blue like the sea.'

Virginia Woolf is interested in the way light shapes our understanding of both London and Constantinople. Orlando is a character who experiences both cities, and Virginia Woolf imagines him responding to Istanbul's mist as follows:

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-To The Lighthouse. Chapter 14. Is that Santa Sofia? Asks Nancy when she takes her hand. Part 3, Chapter 11. Cam thinks of Constantinople while on the way to the island.

-*Orlando*. Chapter 3. One of the sights that slowly emerges from the morning mist. Orlando likes to mingle with the crowds here. Rosina's mother sells old iron near the (Galata) bridge.

-*Mrs Dalloway*. A location where Clarissa feels she might have failed Richard. Hugh had briefly lived in Constantinople.

-*The Voyage Out*. Chapter 1. Westminster is compared to Constantinople in the mist.

-*Orlando*. Chapter 3. Pera, Former name of Beyoglu. The smell of spices would rise to these heights.

**Eight novels**: Paris, Rome, Venice
**Five novels**: Constantinople (Istanbul)
**Four novels**: Athens
**Three novels**: Berlin, Madrid, New York

> About seven, he would rise, wrap himself in a long Turkish cloak, light a cheroot, and lean his elbows on the parapet. Thus he would stand, gazing at the city beneath him, apparently entranced. At this hour the mist would lie so thick that the domes of Santa Sofia and the rest would seem to be afloat.
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Woolf's diaries reveal that she was very much influenced by St. Sophia, and not just by its mystical appearance in the mist, but also, in fact contrarily, by its **secularity**. By Islamizing the building, the Turks have secularized it, also managing to strip the Cross of its meaning:

> It is so large and so secular, so little the precinct of an awful religion that this miscellaneous worship did not offend it. Nor did the great place strike one as 'beautiful'; for though there are patches of mosaic left upon the arches, the zeal of the Turks has stripped the temple bare of ornament. A Turk may not see the sign of the Cross at his prayer or that prayer fades into mist said our guide, with a wave […] Crosses have become safe patterns without meaning; sacred heads have been obliterated from the wall and shields of wood proclaim the true faith where Christian angels used to spread their wings […] 10 If it is not a temple of religion as we understand the word it is surely a temple of something (350)[7]

This description suggests that though some crosses have been covered, some remain, but have been desacralized through a particular way of seeing, in which the devout Muslims look and see nothing but a pattern without meaning. The light in Constantinople, then, has bent so much that it makes the Cross, and a whole tradition that Modernism is trying to come to terms with, invisible. Many historians take the fall/conquest of Constantinople as the start of the modern era: a rupture that manages to Islamize and secularize at the same time. **The heap of metaphorically and physically broken images of Hagia Sofia, then, is one of the indices of Constantinopolitan modernity.** Constantinople, where the modern age started, provides the stage and the analogies for the modernist narratives of Virginia Woolf and Halide Edib at the start of the 20th century.

We have left Orlando looking at the unreal city, whose domes seem to float on air. The city then slowly materializes for Orlando, becomes visible and real, first in outline, and then its diverse detail. He watches the Constantinopolitan, **polyphonic** drama unfold under his window:

11

> Gradually the mist would uncover them; the bubbles would be seen to be firmly fixed; there would be the river; there the Galata Bridge; there the green-turbaned pilgrims without eyes or noses, begging alms; there the pariah dogs picking up offal; there the shawled women; there the innumerable donkeys; there men on horses carrying long poles. Soon, the whole town would be astir with the cracking of whips, the beating of gongs, cryings to prayer, lashing of mules, and rattle of brass-bound wheels, while sour odours, made from bread fermenting and incense, and spice, rose even to the heights of Pera itself and seemed the very breath of the strident multi-coloured and barbaric population. Nothing, he reflected, gazing at the view which was now sparkling in the

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7

> sun, could well be less like the counties of Surrey and Kent or the towns of London and Tunbridge Wells.

While the terms in which Woolf describes Constantinople is redolent of her descriptions of London, say, in *Mrs. Dalloway*,[8] with various subjectivities jostling past one another, there remains, she wants the reader to know, an essential difference.

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The view of Istanbul in *Orlando*, a 1928 text in which Woolf imagines the resplendent 16th century Istanbul, is sparkling under the sun, and is very unlike Surrey and Kent. In 1918 Halide Edib experiences, in a way, the intrusion of these other towns in Istanbul in the shape of occupying officers who claim not only the space, but the light of the city. In the following passage, she describes how she is called on to speak on behalf of the Turks at an international fair:

> The hall was crammed and the representatives of all the nationalities had spoken, amid wild cheers. […] The blazing blue light of the Bosphorus flooded the somber middle space, through the high gallery windows, in the slanting gold light showers, and those light showers flew over the faces of the audience like some mysterious gold fluid. The brilliant uniforms of the French and the English seemed to receive an abundant flow of the light. Their faces looked unconsciously proud with the pride of the victors […] All eyes were concentrated on the little shabby black figure which moved slowly up the five steps of the platform.

The internationalization of Constantinople, as suggested by Leonard Woolf, then, is manifested, in Halide Edib's modernist sensibility, as the monopolization of the light of the Bosphorus by the Allied officers. On or about October 1918, the light in Constantinople changes, because of war**. Constantinopolitan modernity, is the war coming to the cosmopolitan city, rearranging its light and aesthetics**.

In TS Eliot's *The Waste Land*, London's landscape is forever changed by the knowledge of the trenches, and here, the guns become part of the city's furniture among which Constantinopolitans navigate their city. War shapes the movement in the city:

> These ferryboats, upon which I came into silent contact with the people, used to wind their way through the gigantic warships of the Allies anchored in the waters of the Bosphorus. Sometimes the deck of the ferryboat almost touched the mouths of the cannon which shone from the decks of those warships. It was then perhaps that a labor-worn hand would search for and reach my own, and a woman's pair

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[8] There are few experiences more exhilarating than the first dive into a new town— Even when your plunge is impeded—as ours was this morning by a sleek Turkish Dragoman' (f. 68r). Woolf's characterisation of the 'dive' and 'plunge' into a city can be seen to echo her depiction of the city in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), which opens with Dalloway stepping out onto a London street to 'buy the flowers herself', full of anticipation for not only the day ahead but the city itself:

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air.

> of eyes would gaze at me with an expression of silent appeal, while I would pat the hand, answering invariably with the popular Turkish saying, "Buda Gecher." (This also will pass.)

Leonard Woolf's prescription of internationalization is implemented through hard military means, and it is the ships that will leave Istanbul point, and the labour worn hands will resist rushing to the Anatolian capital as foreseen by Toynbee. With occupation and warships come an integral part of the modern city, mass protests, one of which Halide Edib describes as follows:

> the medical students in Haidar Pasha, together with the residents of KadiKeuy, organized another protest meeting at which they wanted me to speak. It was a stormy and rainy day, but that did not prevent a large crowd gathering on the quay of Haidar Pasha. I addressed them from the balcony of the big town hall. There was a sea of umbrellas in slow and perpetual movement under a drear, watery atmosphere. The faces looking up through the gray and drifting mist seemed sometimes very near and sometimes distant and blurred. A wild wind swayed *the human sea*, and the Marmora looked far away, strange, its brilliant blue toned to a dull and colorless expanse and its white foam undulating in large and rhythmic motion. The populace stood in the rain nearly three hours.[9]

The human sea in Constantinople is offset by the literal sea, the Marmora, whose light has been sucked out by the rain. Human and water currents systematically act as metaphors for one another in modernist writing, not least in Woolf and Eliot. In her 1906 memoir Woolf already considers the Constantinopolitan mass flowing over bridges:

> You must begin at the beginning and confess that the Turk himself is the riddle; a tough, labyrinthine riddle by which wise heads- the Times newspaper even- are still constantly confounded. […] Constantinople is a place of live nerves and taut muscles […] The streets and **bridges** are crowded with men and women, horses and carriages; here is an English diplomat and here a lean native, who proposes to start a pilgrimage in a fortnight's time for Mecca. A sleek merchant hustles him on his way to his office; but nevertheless he understands; the two may meet on the same praying rug at sundown. […] There is faith enough; and business enough; and life enough to keep both **eddying** swiftly along the **stream**. No one who has visited the Mosques and the bazaars can doubt the force of the **current**. But at the same time no one knows exactly where it tends 357

With its crowd flowing over the bridge so many, Constantinople, itself is a narrative to be deciphered. Remembering Mrs. Ambrose on Waterloo Bridge, this potamic bond, this modernist moment of being attuned to and trying to read the various currents in the city, bring narratives of London and Constantinople together. They are revealed as spaces where encounter between currents, people and things happen and itineraries interact. **Another way of thinking of Constantinopolian modernities is then, the inclusion of various subjectivities, the nodes of consciousnesses- taut nerves, as Woolf will have it- that populate the city that excites modernists, and that transform unreal cities to real ones.**

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[9] The hall was crammed and the representatives of all the nationalities had spoken, amid wild cheers. It is rather a beautiful hall, a harmony of soft cream, gold and green. The blazing blue light of the Bosphorus flooded the somber middle space, through the high gallery windows, in the slanting gold light

Constantinople conjures these modern forms of narrative sensibility with its already cosmopolitan fabric. In historical terms, Orlando's Constantinople is already the modern, post-fall/post-lapsarian one, the city already of broken images, a city of rearranged loyalties, a city of jostling subjectivities. It is within this modern space, so to speak, the most dramatic rearrangement in *Orlando* happens, he changes sex, and Woolf's narrative comes to its full modernist bloom towards the end of the novel:

> Behold, meanwhile, the factory chimneys and their smoke; behold the city clerks flashing by in their outrigger. Behold the old lady taking her dog for a walk and the servant girl wearing her new hat for the first time not at the right angle. Behold them all. Though Heaven has mercifully decreed that the secrets of all hearts are hidden so that we are lured on forever to suspect something, perhaps, that does not exist; still through our cigarette smoke, we see blaze up and salute the splendid fulfilment of natural desires for a hat, for a boat, for a rat in a ditch; as once one saw blazing--such silly hops and skips the mind takes when it slops like this all over the saucer and the barrel-organ plays--saw blazing a fire in a field against minarets near Constantinople.

The unknowability of Istanbul, 'the riddle of the Turk' that Woolf has experienced in 1906 is expanded here- 'secrets of all hearts are hidden', and it is this that give the modernist her creative tension and London's tricks of light are once again coupled with Constantinople's. Constantinopolitan modernity then, is one that pays attention to light, and that is nourished by subjectivities that appear like riddles to the author, riddles she never the less will try to narrate. The people themselves, their frustrations and desires become tectonic plates of the city- as they are in Halide Edib. The future of the city is also enscribed in these frustrations and desires, rather than the grand scheme of things Leonard Woolf proposes naively to impose on Constantinople. In Virginia Woolf, Constantinople asserts itself a living breathing city, a city that houses the broken image of the St Sophia which has now turned into a 'temple of something'. Halide Edib, in her turn, experiences modernity in her home town as the arrival of war, and as a decaying cosmopolitanism she laments through her own modernist writing. Thus the writers' perception of Constantinople and its uses are an integral part of their understanding of modernity, and indeed their own divergent modernist styles.