GARDENS OF THE DEAD IN OTTOMAN TIMES

The world is decrepit and will not last. Today I am called. Tomorrow will be your turn.

From the Fiftieth Discourse of Jalaladdin Rumi, trans. Arberry.

Gardens of the Dead in Ottoman Times

The Ottoman approach to death was influenced by a Turkic Shamanist past and by the many faiths of Central Asia during the period of Mongol dominance. The gardens of death are the heroes of this tale at a time when a garden was more an orchard or a grove of trees, watered by a pool and perhaps endowed with a view. It was not a colorscape of flowerbeds. If in Ottoman society they were altogether freer and more informal than in Persia, formal gardens did exist, and architecture and garden, including burial stones and retreats for prayer, were interwoven as much in Anatolia and the Balkans as anywhere else in Islam.

The burial of the Prophet in the house of one of his wives established the concept of the mausoleum, and so of the türbe, as a distinct element in Islamic and Ottoman architecture. But for every one of these memorials, myriad humbler stones were raised. A man is a speck among many, which makes ambition foolish, yet paradoxically creates a mystical sense of selfhood deriving from God’s unity. The worshiper knows that the great will also perish and that therefore he must not cringe, for he is bound to God alone to Whom he totally submits. It is for this reason that the date of a human birth is insignificant, but that of a death is important.

Avicenna believed that the soul existed in its own right and would survive death. Yet sura 36 of the Quran may be felt to contradict this philosophy, and it is of course this sura that is recited at the last possible moment by the imam just before the sick man confesses the faith for the last time. When life is done, camphor should be inserted in the orifaces, and the corpse ensnouled in a white sheet. The cries of woe which are such a humane relief for the grief-stricken also serve to frighten away the forces of evil. Meanwhile, the nearest relative closes the eyes of the dead and, if a soldier, lays his sword upon his stomach.

Then the body is washed, and it is noteworthy that there is a special room set aside at the hospital of Bayazit II at Edirne, as there is in the household hospital at Topkapı Sarayi, for this task. That burial is performed next day is a rule deriving from a hot climate and is not simply due to tradition. Indeed, in Central Asia a sacred burial ground might involve a journal of thirty to sixty days. Traveling in the desert, Vámbéry encountered terrible cries and a growing stench that terrified his companions. Out of the evening shadows loomed the ghastly sight of the caravan of the dead with some forty horses and mules, each with a coffin on either flank, looking wild-eyed and deeply distressed. Their drivers were three wretches, compelled by poverty to take on the task and then branded for life and unable to get any other job, who tried to drive on their beasts by cries and keep at a distance from the terrible stench. It was a foul journey in summer, and the sight was nightmare-provoking when seen by moonlight.

An Ottoman funeral had to be simple with the turban placed on the body on a stretcher, which was covered by a simple piece of cloth or by robes brought back from the hajj if the man had made the pilgrimage. The dead man was carried in silence by relays of four friends, while others made their last farewells by touching the bier. There were to be no lamentations, and women were excluded from the burial procession, as were all foreigners and unbelievers. It was permitted to rest if the walk to the burial place was long, and one can still see bearers in Turkey pausing for a glass of tea on the way to the cemetery, while the stretcher rests across two chairs. It rests again outside the mosque, often on the capitals of columns, while short prayers are uttered inside.

Initially, there were to be no stones or masonry on
a grave, which was covered in flowers and sometimes was planted with a myrtle as is the case with a baba's tomb in a niche in a wall of a house in the Citadel at Bursa. But such strict rules were disregarded. With the very poorest, the porters might lift off the sheet with their teeth and bury the dead naked. But the rule that no two bodies might be buried in the same grave is still observed, and it is taboo to walk or sit on a grave. Nor may a corpse be cut open, even to recover gemstones. It will be appreciated that these rules are older than Islam and emerge from a shamanist past, as may the curious tradition that men’s graves can be as deep as they were tall in life, but those of women need only be breast high.

The place of the dead is a garden, and its dominant feature is the cypress tree. It is also planted in Christian cemeteries, but Ottoman poets make clear that they do not see these trees as dark or mournful, for they often refer to them as striding and cavorting cheerfully, calling to each other, as indeed their tops do if there is a breeze. An engraving by Coecke van Aelst of an Edirne burial in the sixteenth century also shows the curious custom, at least in the Balkans, of climbing the tree planted by a grave after a year. The deceased whose tree has grown tallest is said to be the nearest to Heaven and so the noblest soul in the garden.

It is no more an ordinary garden than is the courtyard of a mosque. There is the splendid mosaic garden of the Great Mosque of Damascus to light the way from the earliest days of the Faith to those superb flower tiles from Iznik which make gardens of the interiors of the grander Ottoman mosques. One has only to think of the soaring qibla wall of the Sokollu Mehmet Paşa Cami in Istanbul or the humber dados of faraway provincial mosques such as that of Bayram Paşa at Diyarbakır to know that these are attempts to re-create the Garden of Paradise. But whereas at Damascus the great rivers were depicted together with the Pavilions of the Blessed, in Ottoman mosques the gardens are more symbolic than realistic, consisting of stylized flowers and leaves.

Burial places are equally reflections of Paradise, the ultimate destination of a believer, and they were more so when the tombstones were painted. The men’s tall tombstones topped with the turban of their rank have a floral quality because of the inscriptions (figs. 1, 5): for calligraphy has been compared to flowers. The women’s headstones, of course, were extensively carved with blooms, and the miniature stones of the children have all the charmed melancholy of lives cut off in the bud.

Memorial stones last long, but often longer than they ought, for whereas it is impious to set them up again according to tradition, for they fall by God’s will, the recent restoration of the immense Süleymaniye Külliye in Istanbul has resulted in the cleaning and re-erection of the patrician tombstones there. All such grandeur is far removed from the fields of poor Anatolian villages scattered with stones seemingly at random where the only flowers are wild.

The traveler and ambassador, Busbequius, journeying from Istanbul to Amasya in the 1550’s, reported the custom of dragging columns or slabs of marble from a distance so as to cover tombs of relatives which would otherwise be exposed, because Turks did not fill graves with earth so that the corpse would be