Turkish Delight

They Burn the Thistles
By Yashar Kemal.
Translated from the Turkish by Margaret E. Platon.

By Paul Theroux

It strikes me as unfortunate that Turkey's neighbors, Greece and Iran, get such attention, while Turkey itself is pretty much disregarded. Perhaps it has something to do with the humiliation Europeans feel when they reflect that the Turkish Empire once included a large section of Europe. Or is it that whiff of Asiatic barbarity that Alexander Kinglake mentions at the beginning of his great travel book "Eothen" (1844), as he heads towards Constantinople? In our century, Lord Kinross and Freya Stark—to mention but two—have described this astonishing country, but there is also a native witness who, in the half-dozen books of his that have been translated, has depicted his country with a close attention to detail and yet with a majestic, almost epic sweep.

Yashar Kemal has been compared to Thomas Hardy and Tolstoy, and has several times been short-listed for the Nobel Prize. This is interesting news, no doubt, but hardly illuminating. The author with whom Kemal feels a special kinship (he told me this when I met him a few years ago in Turkey) is William Faulkner. This strange pairing-off becomes less strange once you know how closely the cotton-growing plains of Chukurova in South Anatolia resemble those in Yoknapatawpha County, and how similar are the blood-feuds, rural past-times, barn burnings, old time religion and incidents of local heroism.

Kemal was born in 1922 and after a period of journalism published a volume of short stories. His first novel, "Memed, My Hawk" achieved enormous success of "Deita of Venus.":

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killed the villainous Agha Abdi. And the village is in turmoil, for the tyrant Ali Safa Bey is in the process of taking over. Ali Safa has dispossessed one farmer, whose horse—which everyone believed had been burned to death—has escaped. Ali Safa sends a sharpshooter, Adem, out to kill the horse, and in the meantime plots to gain control of the village.

Memed tries to rouse the peasants, but is himself soon on the run. Adem shoots at the horse, Ali Safa shoots at Memed, but both horse and man are elusive and strangely powerful. "Could it be that a . . . djinn or some good spirit has taken on the shape of this horse?" the sharpshooter wonders, as he continually misses; and a hundred pages later, a policeman in pursuit of Memed mutters that his quarry is "not like a brigand at all. More like a djinn . . . an angel. He should have been a saint, not a brigand."

Time passes. Memed hides and is plagued by doubts about the rightness of this revolt against the landlords, and at his lowest point—he has been on foot all this time—he sees the stallion galloping towards him. He mounts the horse for the first time and rides towards the inevitable conclusion, the gunning down of Ali Safa and his henchmen, the liberation of the village. It is like myth, but the mythic quality is given concreteness in the distinct personalities of the villagers: they are real people, not aspects of political argument—and one sees in Blind Ahmet, Lame Ali, Bald Hamza and Earless Ismail all the individuality of Mink and Flem Snopes or the Varners.

The landscape, the seasons, the wildlife, the flowers: Kemal works on a huge canvas but there is interest in every inch of it. This novel is a worthy successor to "Memed, My Hawk" and ought to send readers swiftly to "The Legend of the Thousand Bulls" "Anatolian Tales" or "The Wind From the Plain." The translation is fluent and only occasionally marred by such clangers as "You'd upset the applecart, old man." This translation is by Margaret Pliaton, but Yashar Kemal's more recent books have been translated by his wife Thilda. I doubt that anyone who reads "They Burn the Thistles" will hesitate in seeking these out and concluding that Kemal is an important literary figure. ■