

Erje Ayden 1936 – 2013

By B O D Y · October 12, 2013 | In Memoriam

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Lisa and Erje, 1985.

Erje Ayden died on Thursday, October 10, 2013, in the company of his wife Lisa – 9 minutes before their 28th anniversary.

I met Erje Ayden when he was already sick. It was two years ago at the Performing Garage in New York, at a benefit reading to help support – both financially and psychically – him and his wife, Lisa. Not that they would have asked for help. But I suspect that their close friends Jim Fletcher and Kate Valk insisted on the event, knowing that the experience of an author hearing his words performed by such a talented lot (including Scott Shepherd and Sibyl Kempson, as well as Kate and Jim) would give him perhaps enough power to make it a little further along in what I learned was a very painful and terrifying journey. I walked into the theater and saw Erje lying on a couch on stage, with Lisa close by and surrounded by friends, and a larger audience of the downtown community. His body was ravaged by a particularly vicious form of Parkinson's, and he could barely move. On a table by the wall lay his life's work: dozens of books – novels, novellas, collections of short stories, other texts that defied classification – all printed, it seemed, by hand. I was intrigued by the reading and bought as many books as I could.

In December, Sibyl and Kate and I had Christmas dinner with Lisa and Erje at their 1-bedroom apartment in the West Village, where Lisa had lived since 1968. It was then that I realized how special a world I had entered – an amalgam of Finnish and Turkish heritage steeped in decades of old New York, a hospitality and humility that defied the commercial bloodbath out the window, a traditional Scandinavian menu and a bottle of Fundador immune to the concerns of presentation. We had just finished a whirlwind of projects, and it was a lovely, calm, and healing occasion. As Sibyl said later, "They've dedicated their lives to the art," and had done so in a fashion that, if not practical, could only have happened at a time when the city had a fundamentally different relationship to its artists.

Over the last year there was another reading, and we visited them many more times, often bringing along our dog, Rey, who helped Erje find some moments of peace. The disease stripped Erje, in time, of the ability to read and to write, and eventually, to talk. It's hard to fathom how frustrating it must have been for "a man of words," as Lisa said, "to lose his words." And it's equally difficult to fathom her own patience and strength in countering the

rage and toil of such a fight. But despite the rebellion that was occurring inside his body, Erje's sense of humor and mischief would rally. As I packed up his car for what would be his final trip out to his old home in East Hampton – where many years ago he had befriended Willem de Kooning and Frank O'Hara – his eyes gleamed and he raised a finger and said, "If anything happens to me, tell them it was my wife who did it."

As Lewis Lapham writes this month in his Quarterly, "Men die not because they are sick but because they are alive." And what Erje created in his life will live with us in ours.

-Ben Williams

ERJE AYDEN was born in Istanbul to a Turco-Russian family. In the 1950s he worked as spy in Paris. He moved to New York in 1957 where he started writing performance and prose pieces and befriended, among others, Willem de Kooning and Frank O'Hara. In the 1960s and 70s his novels *The Crazy Green of Second Avenue*, *Sadness at Leaving*, and *From Hauptbahnhof I Took a Train* became cult bestsellers, and he has since published over two dozen books, including *Lost Cloud*, a collection of short stories from the last 50 years.

More about Erje Ayden:

Personal Essay as Performance Text by Erje Ayden
<https://bodyliterature.com/2013/05/17/erje-ayden/>

Essay by Frank O'Hara on Erje Ayden

By B O D Y · May 17, 2013

Source: <https://bodyliterature.com/2013/05/17/frank-ohara-on-erje-ayden/>



from A PREFACE TO SADNESS AT LEAVING

Erje Ayden is the traditional "foreigner," perhaps no more foreign to our language and ways than was D. H. Lawrence, perhaps as foreign to them as Joseph Conrad was to English at the beginning of his great labors. Like Lawrence he has the advantage of viewing our morés and our verbal locutions from alien and strong tradition; like Conrad he would like to have a rhetorical hero of undeniable strength and certitude appear in his writings, but life cannot reveal one. Like so many who refreshed the languages of the world in the 20th century, he is an alien wherever he is, probing and disfiguring ordinary reality with a sense of popularity,

and accepting its most peculiar and neurotic aspects as quite unexceptional. Like most writers of power and vivid interest, Ayden is able to transform his miscalculations and misunderstandings into personal expressive advantages. We must admire this unless we are to give up William Carlos Williams' dictum that the American language is distinct from the English, and lapse into a long development of Mandarin style which would be indistinguishable from the tiring mistake of the English, of the French, and the German.

Because of the moral ambivalence of another tradition, Ayden is one of the sexiest writers we have; because of his struggles with acquired language he has a vigor uncommon among our novelists; without the mannerist inclinations of Salinger, Pynchon, Barth, or Updike, he is able to convey the real trouble underneath the bizarre and the banal. In adopting Fitzgerald as his model, Ayden links himself with other off-shoots of that germinal stylist's attitude: Nathanael West, Horace McCoy and even Dashiell Hammett. He has the same brevity, the same swift pace, the same tendency of observation and impatience with analysis. Neither daring nor caring to make a beautiful English sentence, he is able to get some of that marvelous Fitzgerald quickness and pointedness, which in the latter's case made Hemingway's most machine-gunned sentences seem rather studied. As with Gatsby and Rosemary, Ayden's characters are quickly fixed by events in an airy space which belongs to no one, least of all them. Through Ayden's eyes we see an "Amerika," as odd as Kafka's; as funny as absurdly sad. Nobody thinks that things are as they seem, but Ayden makes the gap between seeming and being considerably wider. Operating in this gap his people (Elliott in *Crazy Green*, "I" in *Confessions of a Nowaday Child*, the hero of *From Hauptbanhoff I Took a Train* who keeps changing his name) are always on the go, whether their destination is set or not, in order to keep alive.

— **Frank O'Hara**

FRANK O'HARA (March 27, 1926 – July 25, 1966) was an American writer, poet and art critic. He was a member of the New York School of poetry, a group that included John Ashbery, Barbara Guest, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler. *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, edited by Donald Allen (Knopf, 1971), the first of several posthumous collections, shared the 1972 National Book Award for Poetry. Read more by and about Frank O'Hara at The Poetry Foundation [<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/frank-ohara>].