

TURKISH POETRY - 20th Century

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Reforms When the Ottoman state collapsed after nearly 625 years and gave way to the Turkish Republic in 1923, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk devoted his prodigious energies to the creation of a homogeneous nation-state dedicated to modernization in all walks of life, vowing to raise Turkey to the level of contemporary civilization (meaning the West) and higher. In image, in aspiration, in identification, the official and cultural establishment became largely Europeanized. Education was made secular, and reforms were undertaken to divest the country of its Muslim orientation. The legal system adapted the Swiss Civil Code, the Italian Penal Code, and German Commercial Law. Perhaps the most difficult of all reforms, the Language Revolution, was undertaken with lightning speed in 1928, and since then it has achieved a scope of success unparalleled in the modern world. The Arabic script, considered sacrosanct as Koranic orthography and used by the Turks for a millennium, was replaced by the Latin alphabet. This procrustean reform sought to increase literacy, to facilitate the study of European languages, and to cut off the younger generations from the legacy of the Ottoman past. Atatürk also launched a “pure Turkish” movement to rid the language of Arabic and Persian loanwords and to replace them with revivals from old Turkish vocabulary and provincial patois as well as neologisms. Reform and all, the single common denominator of Turkish identification has significantly been the language. It has provided for social cohesion, cultural continuity, and national allegiance.

Traditions. Today’s Turkey is homogeneous in population (more than 99 percent Muslim) and integral in political and administrative structure, yet it is diversified, full of inner tensions, a battleground for traditionalists versus revolutionaries, fundamentalists versus secularists. In its reorientation, Turkey seems to have traded the impact of Islamic civilization for the influences of Western civilization—at least in the urban areas. During its *vita nuova*, Turkish culture was influenced by Europe, but it was not European as such. It is no longer predominantly Islamic, but certainly has little kinship with the Judeo-Graeco-Christian world despite the concepts, forms, and values it has adopted from that tradition. It has become a new amalgam of traditions—ancient Turkic, Anatolian, Selçuk, Ottoman, Islamic, Arabic, Persian, European, American—a bridge between two continents, like the two dramatic bridges in Istanbul that now link Europe and Asia. This synthesis, its culture and literature are enchorial, an original creation of modern Turkey. Whatever its strengths and weaknesses of this synthesis might be, there is no other like it.

Poets

Five Syllabist Poets. In the early part of the Republican era, poetry served primarily as a vehicle for the propagation of nationalism. Younger poets branded Divan forms and meters as anathema. Native verse forms and syllabic meters gained popularity. Intense efforts were systematically undertaken to purify the language. The group *Beş Hececiler* (Five Syllabist Poets)—Faruk Nafiz Çamlıbel (1898–1973), who was equally adept at *aruz*; Orhan Seyfi Orhon (1890–1972); Enis Behiç Koryürek (1893–1949); Halit Fahri Ozansoy (1891–1971); and Yusuf Ziya Ortaç (1895–1967)—produced simple, unadorned poems celebrating love, the beauties of nature, and the glories of the Turkish nation. Many poets, however, shied away from chauvinism and evolved individualistic worldviews and styles.

Beyatli. Neoclassicism gained considerable popularity under the aegis of Yahya Kemal Beyatlı. A supreme craftsman, Beyatlı was the much-acclaimed neoclassicist who produced, in the conventional forms and meters, meticulous lyrics of love, Ottoman grandeur, and the beauties of Istanbul in poems memorable for their refined language and melodiousness.

Early Authors

Tanpınar Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar followed in the steps of Beyatlı, about whom he produced a sophisticated critical study and whose aesthetics he distilled into crystalline poems written in syllabic verse.

Diranas Ahmet Muhip Dıranas, one of Turkey's best lyric poets, wrote all of his poems in the traditional syllabic meters. His agility in molding his lucid ideas and tender sentiments into these meters is most impressive. So is his ingenuity in finding rhymes.

Kısakurek Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (1905–1983), who started out as a poet of romantic agony and spent the latter part of his career as a confirmed Islamic fundamentalist, made an impact with his polished verses, which express suffering as a literary conceit. His major poem "Anguish" stands as a tantalizing poetic experience of the soul's vicissitudes, as evinced by this excerpt:

Celebi Asaf Hâlet Çelebi (1907–1958) introduced his own iconoclasm in surrealistic poems that give the impression of somnambulistic writing with intimations of erudition. "Apoem," he declared, "is nothing but a long word made up of syllables joined together. Syllables by themselves have no meaning. It is therefore futile to struggle with meaning in a poem. . . Poetry creates an abstract world using concrete materials—just like life itself."

These theories and movements continued to exert varying degrees of influence on the literature of the later decades, but the themes and the tenor of Nazım Hikmet's verse probably had the widest impact. Effective voices were being raised among poets, dramatists, fiction writers, essayists, and journalists against the established order and its iniquities, oppression of the proletariat, and national humiliation suffered at imperialist hands. The poetry of social realism concentrates on the creation of a just and equitable society. It is often more romantic and utopian than rhetorical, containing sensual strains, tender sentiments, and flowing rhythms, but also occasionally given to invective and vituperation.

Hikmet One of Turkey's earliest progenitors of free verse was Ercüment Behzad Lâv (1903–84). Ahmet Oktay (b. 1933), an astute critic, defined Lâv's aesthetic strategies as "surface modernism"—an observation that has considerable validity in view of the fact that Lâv was virtually an innovator for innovation's sake. There are few affirmations in what he wrote, little of what made other poets appealing to those who seek pleasure, and certainly none of the easy communicability of the ideological rhetoric that turned some of his contemporaries into heroes. One tends to concur with the brilliant scholar-critic Orhan Burian (1914–53), who observed in the late 1940s that Lâv is "committed to the cause of creating a new type of poetry out of half-baked ideas and hidden sound structures." "There is a dryness in his poems," Burian continued. "His short poems, which give voice to momentary emotions are more attractive."

Early Movements

Poetic realism A frontal thrust for modernization took place in the early 1940s when Orhan Veli Kanık (1914–50), Oktay Rifat (1914–88), and Melih Cevdet Anday (1915–2002) launched their "Poetic Realism" movement. Their urge for literary upheaval was revolutionary, as expressed in a joint manifesto of 1941 that called for "altering the whole structure from the foundation up... dumping overboard everything that traditional literature has taught us." The movement did away with rigid conventional forms and meters, reduced rhyme to a bare minimum, and avoided stock metaphors, stentorian effects, specious embellishments. It championed the idea and the ideal of "the little man" as its hero, the ordinary citizen who asserted his political will with the advent of democracy. Kanık's "Epitaph I" is precisely this type of celebration:

Garip Movement The Garip (Strange) Group, as the Kanık–Rifat–Anday triad is referred to, endeavored to write not only about the common man, but also for him. In order to communicate with him, they employed the rhythms and idioms of colloquial speech, including slang. With their movement (later dubbed "The First New" movement), the domination of free verse, introduced in the 1920s by Nazım Hikmet, became complete. They proclaimed with pride: "Every moment in the history of literature imposed a new limitation. It has become our duty to expand the frontiers to their outer limits, better still, to liberate poetry from its restrictions."

Orhan Veli Kanik Orhan Veli Kanik presided over this demise of strict stanzaic forms and stood squarely against artifice, hackneyed metaphors, and a variety of clichés and literary embellishments that had rendered much of Turkish poetry sterile. His poems dealt with everyday life expressed in direct terms. Although the use of free verse had been established earlier, it was Orhan Veli who made vers libre and the French modernists relevant to contemporary Turkish poetry. His iconoclasm paved the way for a poetry steeped in the vernacular and stripped of adornments. By liberating his contemporaries from the stultifying weight of the past, he made them conscious of the life and values of Everyman. Any and all topics could be treated poetically and poets were free to use all the expressive resources of the Turkish language.

Orhan Veli's first book, *Garip*(1941), which included the work of his best friends Oktay Rifat and Melih Cevdet Anday, was also his most controversial and influential. Their joint manifesto with which it begins was influenced, according to Oktay Rifat, by André Breton's *Manifeste du Surréalisme*, and marked a turning point in the modernization of Turkish poetry. It declared:

The literary taste on which the new poetry will base itself is no longer the taste of a minority class. People in the world today acquire their right to life after a sustained struggle. Like everything else, poetry is one of their rights and must be attuned to their tastes. This does not signify that an attempt should be made to express the aspirations of the masses by means of the literary conventions of the past. The question is not to make a defense of class interests, but merely to explore the people's tastes, to determine them, and to make them reign supreme over art.

We can arrive at a new appreciation by new ways and means. Squeezing certain theories into familiar old molds cannot be a new artistic thrust forward. We must alter the whole structure from the foundation up. In order to rescue ourselves from the stifling effects of the literatures which have dictated and shaped our tastes and judgments for too many years, we must dump overboard everything that those literatures have taught us. We wish it were possible to dump even language itself, because it threatens our creative efforts by forcing its vocabulary on us when we write poetry.

There are no stentorian effects in Orhan Veli's verse, no rhetoric, no bloated images. In most of his poems, he strikes a vital chord by offering the simple truth, and he is usually so sincere as to seem almost sentimental. He never wrote a complex line nor a single perplexing metaphor. His verse was a revolt of a purist against facile meters, predetermined form and rhythm, pompous diction. Style, in his hands, became a vehicle for the natural sounds of colloquial Turkish.

Rifat In a poetic career that spanned half a century until his death in 1988, Orhan Veli's friend Oktay Rifat also stood at the vanguard of modern Turkish poetry—first as an audacious, almost obstreperous rebel, then as an eclectic transformer of styles and language who was writing from a self-enforced privacy, and finally, as a reclusive elder statesman who was creating a unique synthesis. One could say that these three stages in his writing corresponded roughly to movements elsewhere in world literature—to the socialist surrealism of the 1930s and 1940s, the obscurantism of the French poets Apollinaire, Supervielle, Aragon, Éluard, Soupault and Prévert; and, finally, what one can only call “pure poetry.”

Oktay Rifat's poetry is, in fact unique—the result of a very personal development. It defies critical analysis in terms of literary schools or influences. Although in the early phase of his career he seemed to belong to an emerging school, he stood squarely against any school that confined a poet's aesthetic taste. In 1941 when he became a member of *Garip*, he insisted that the text of the manifesto include the following statement: “The idea of literary schools represents an interruption or pause in the flow of time. It is contrary to velocity and action. The only movement that is harmonious with the flow of life and does not thwart the concept of dialectics is the “no-school movement.”

Although most of his output from the mid-1960s on was either spontaneously or consciously universal, Rifat occasionally returned to Ottoman history. In a number of poems, he evokes Byzantium and the Ottoman Empire in masterful terms. He remarkably he utilizes for most of these poems the sonnet form and some light rhymes. The synthesis becomes more encompassing with fascinating returns to roots, not the least of which is that his surprising turns of phrase and paradoxical concepts have their parallels in his predecessors' imagination.

Anday “I am,” wrote Melih Cevdet Anday, the third member of the Garip triumvirate, in an early poem, “the poet of happy days.” This was the tongue-in-cheek, sardonic opening line of a poem entitled “Yalan” (Lies), which laments that life’s cruelties make it impossible for a poet to bring beauty and good tidings to his people. From his first appearance on the Turkish literary scene in 1936 until his death in 2002, Anday felt this ironic frustration as he oscillated between the poetry of commitment to social causes and pure poetry. His earliest poems were simple romantic sentimental lyrics. From the early 1940s until the late 1950s, he wrote for and about the oppressed man in the street, protesting social injustice.

After their innovations of the 1950s ground to a halt, both Oktay Rifat and Melih Cevdet Anday abandoned their earlier insistence on simplicity, the vernacular, concrete depiction, epigrammatic statement, and so on, which had been the hallmark of the Garip group. Oktay Rifat took up a fertile type of neosurrealism, proclaiming that “poetry tells or explains nothing because beauty explains nothing.” He produced subtle abstract poems, some of which are notable for intellectual architectonics, mostly devoid of social or political engagement. Anday’s work moved toward lucid philosophical inquiry: his new aesthetic formula was, in his own words, “thought or essences serving as a context for arriving at beauty.” His long poems of the 1960s and 1970s—Kolları Bağlı Odysseus (Odysseus Bound), “Troya Önünde Atlar” (“Horses at the Trojan Gates,” also published as “Horses before Troy”), Göçebe Denizin Üstünde (On the Nomad Sea) — sought a synthesis of universal culture, and endeavored to construct superstructures of ideas, myths, and legends. Although he never abandoned his humanism, his affirmation of life, and his lucid diction, everything else about his poetry—substance, style, syntax—changed radically. His final break with his past came with the 1962 publication of Kolları Bağlı Odysseus, a long poem consisting of four parts that might well be Anday’s magnum opus. In it, his preoccupation is not with social causes, but with modern man’s philosophical predicaments. Here Anday avoids a stark-naked style and explores expressive resources precisely attuned to the complexities of human existence. Deviating from his concept of man as a cog in the unjust and heartless wheel of society, he adopts Homo sapiens as his hero. Claiming Odysseus as his aggrandized Everyman and leaving Homer alone until the fourth and last part, Anday creates a modern universal mythology. This cerebral work, one of the few excellent long Turkish poems written in the twentieth or any other century and certainly a landmark in Turkish philosophical poetry, shows a piercing mind.

Reactions to Poetic realism. In the late 1950s, a strong reaction set in against “Poetic Realism.” Literature of commitment came under fire in some circles.

Necatigil Behçet Necatigil (1916–79) was Turkey’s foremost intellectual poet who enjoyed a well-deserved reputation for his subtle, indefatigably inventive poems. Necatigil severed himself from sentimental romanticism, which was the umbilical cord of all of his predecessors and most of his contemporaries. He carried depersonalization farther than any Turkish poet and banished all subjective intrusions, value judgments, didacticism, and moralizing from his poetry. Necatigil made poetry itself reign supreme. He regarded all things and all phenomena as being possible or at least plausible. This approach granted him the freedom to look beyond the physical state and enabled him to discover distant and seemingly paradoxical relationships among objects, actions, emotions, and concepts.

This brand of poetry is not allied with surrealism: Necatigil never strayed from the plane of consciousness. Nor is it akin to symbolism, for he used no symbols with traceable referents. Nor is it “poetry of abstraction” à la Paul Valéry or Wallace Stevens because it does not distill essences or recognize abstraction as the supreme reality. The term obscurantist does not apply, either: for all his opaque references and unidentified insights, Necatigil made no effort to forge an aesthetics of the obscure. One might call his poetry “Cubism” and his creative approach “extraspection.” He consciously explored external reality, disintegrated it, and then, out of the disjointed ingredients, recreated a new synthesis. His art derived its creative energy from transforming visions and revisions of reality.

Necatigil is among the few independent poets who refused to be pigeonholed. Uncompromising in his aesthetic views, he stands unique. His poetry has a shape and a voice unlike anyone else’s. No other Turkish poet is so thoroughly original or so staunchly individualistic.

He may well be to Turkish poetry what Wallace Stevens has been to American poetry, although there is virtually no resemblance between them in terms of style or substance. It is futile to look for influences when analyzing the basic features of Necatigil's art. He may have found a few themes and devices in the stark abstractions of post-World War II German poetry, but they are all subtle and elusive, as is his entire poetic approach.

Necatigil's "intellectual complexity" is a functional creative process that starts with visual and conceptual concentration on an object or phenomenon, places it into a web of distant relationships, distills from it the ultimate abstractions and expresses it in terms and idioms that stretch the resources of the language to its outer limits. No single poetic voice in modern Turkey is as spare and esoteric or as precise in expressing a vision or a speculation. Although Necatigil is the modern poet par excellence, his creative strategy, based as it was on the proposition that language is the supreme intellect, tends to reaffirm the aesthetic values of classical Ottoman poetry, about which he was fully knowledgeable. Verbal richness, subtle imagery, assonances, visions, and abstractions—the ultimate values of Turkey's bygone poetic tradition—find their ultramodern *vita nuova* in Necatigil's work. His poetry reconstructs the external world as well as the world of imagination through the prospects of language. He proves, by means of his explorations, that poetry can re-create our inner and outer life.

The Second New In the mid-twentieth century, an energetic new movement emerged often identified as İkinci Yeni, "The Second New."

Berk İlhan Berk (1918–2008), perhaps Turkey's most daring and durable poetic innovator, acted as spokesman for the movement, especially at the outset, pontificated: "Art is for innovation's sake." Berk's aesthetics occasionally strove to forge a synthesis of Oriental tradition and Western modernity. In his *Şenlikname* (The Festival Book, 1972), for instance, he conveys through visual evocations, old miniatures, engravings, and subtle sonorities the vista of Ottoman life and art; yet the poetic vision, throughout the book is that of a modern man, neutral rather than conditioned by his culture, in a sense more European than Turkish. Berk is the most protean of Turkey's modern poets. In the 1930s he launched his career with smooth, mellifluous lyrics, but in the 1940s he became socially engaged and produced many excellent verses that were stark in their realism. By the mid-1950s he had published *Köroğlu*, one of modern Turkey's best adaptations of folk themes. He was soon afterward in the vanguard of obscurantism, of which he produced several notoriously extreme specimens.

From the 1940s to the early 1960s, Berk often exposed his art to the impact of contemporary French poetry. In the mid-1960s, he announced his resounding departure from European influences and embraced the norms and values of Turkish classical poetry. *Âşıkane* (double entendre: Like a Lover or Like a Minstrel, 1968) embodies the last group of Berk's French-oriented sonnets and his first collection of verses with a classical flavor. The lyrics in the latter category are in the form and spirit of the gazel, which was the most popular verse form in Islamic Middle Eastern literatures.

Berk's aesthetics later strove to forge a synthesis of visual art and sound effects, of spatial and temporal realities, of history and man's higher consciousness. On a different level, it created admixtures of the past and the present, and cultural fusions of Oriental tradition with Western modernity. One of his best-known poems idealizes love:

Among the daring, and quite impressive, explorations into Turkey's own literary heritage have been those undertaken by Turgut Uyar (1927–85), Attilâ İlhan (1925–2005), and Hilmi Yavuz (b.1936);

Yavuz, Hilmi the latter remains are the forefront of modern innovators who absorbed and revitalized many of the salient features of classical aesthetics, Islamic culture and beliefs, and traditional Turkish values. Although these three major figures are highly individualistic and their works drastically different from one another, they have all acknowledged the need for coming to terms with the viable and valuable aspects of the Ottoman-Turkish elite poetry. They have used not its stringent forms and prosody, but its processes of abstracting and its metaphorical techniques.

Uyar Much of Turgut Uyar's output has conveyed a sense of discontent, if not disgust, with humanity and a firm conviction of man's inherent evil, which Uyar seems to blame—in poetic rather than moral terms—for the past vicissitudes of human history and for its present tragic state. Human society, according to his work's basic philosophical premise, is bent on destroying itself: it inflicts conflagrations upon itself and rejoices in the ashes. Yet miraculously it arises, phoenix like, out of those ashes to perpetuate its existence, albeit in near chaos and in banishment from immortality. Aesthetically, Uyar has a sharp aptitude for recognizing bad habits in creative efforts—in particular, his own.

Quiet reflection alternates with eruptions of anger and nausea; moves on to nightmarish abstract depictions; then resolves into an ontological probe wherein Uyar masterfully fuses the concrete and abstract elements of reality.

At its best, Uyar's poetry is a well-wrought blend of senses and action with ingenious metaphor. In "Terziler Geldiler" (And Came the Tailors), which is arguably one of the best poems of his entire career, he achieves a summation of creation and its attendant anarchy: life's warp and woof constantly restoring itself and disintegrating into death. It is a theme of Herculean dimensions, and Uyar does justice to it by eliciting meaningful abstract formulations out of imaginative juxtaposition of images, allusions, and philosophic lunges into the diverse aspects of reality. Death became dominant in Uyar's poetry as a concomitant of his pessimism. He was preoccupied with death as the inescapable end and therefore as an end in itself: in "Övgü, Ölüye" (In Praise of the Dead) he evoked death's sundry aspects by dint of perhaps the most striking delineation of a corpse in all of Turkish literature.

İlhan Attilâ İlhan, Turkey's most successful neoromantic poet as well as a major novelist and essayist, attempted to recapture the milieu and moods prevailing during the slow death of the Ottoman Empire. Known also as a creator of imaginative and touching love poems, he introduced a vigorous new style.

This type of self-serving aestheticism represents a "supreme fiction" at its best and sterile confusion at its worst. A leading critic, Rauf Mutluay, deplored its egocentricity and narcissism as "the individualistic crisis and this deaf solitude of our poetry." The language is usually lavish, the poetic vision full of inscapes and instresses; ambiguity strives to present itself as virtuosity; metaphors are often strikingly original but sometimes run amuck. Euphuistic and elliptical writing is a frequent fault committed by the practitioners of abstract verse. The best specimens, however, have an architectonic splendor, rich imagination, and human affirmation.

Sureyya Cemal Süreya (1931–90), a major figure of "The Second New" started out in the mid-twentieth century with bold innovations, wild thrusts of imagination, and distortions of language. In time, he would move away from the esoteric to the lucid.

Ayhan Ece Ayhan (1931–2002), a confirmed maverick from his emergence in the 1950s on, was a member of "The Second New." He championed anlamsız şiir, meaningless or absurd poetry. The best of this brave new poetry has as its hallmarks vivid imagination, an enchanting musical structure, and an intellectual complexity that dazzled with its audacious metaphors.

Asik Veysel In sharp contrast to urban elite *littérateurs*, village poets, standing *media vitae*, serve their rural communities by providing enlightenment as well as live entertainment. The minstrel tradition, with its stanzaic forms and simple prosody, is alive and well. Particularly since the 1950s, many prominent folk poets have moved to or made occasional appearances in the urban areas. Âşık Veysel (1894–1973), a blind minstrel, produced the most poignant specimens of the oral tradition.

Daglarca, Fazil Husnu The most encompassing poetic achievement of contemporary Turkey belongs to Fazıl Hüsni Dağlarca (1914–2008), the winner of the Award of the International Poetry Forum (Pittsburgh) and the Yugoslav Golden Wreath (Struga), previously won by W. H. Auden, Pablo Neruda, and Eugenio Montale, and later by Allen Ginsburg and others. His range is

bewilderingly broad: metaphysical poetry, children's verse, cycles about the space age and lunar ventures, epics of the conquest of Istanbul and of the War of Liberation, aphoristic quatrains, neomystical, poetry of social protest, travel impressions, books on the national liberation struggles of several countries, and humorous anecdotes in verse. Dağlarca has published only poetry—more than a hundred collections in all. "In the course of a prestigious career," writes Yaşar Nabi Nayır, a prominent critic, "which started in 1934, Fazıl Hüsnü Dağlarca tried every form of poetry, achieving equally impressive success in the epic genre, in lyric and inspirational verse, in satire, and in the poetry of social criticism. Since he has contributed to Turkish literature a unique sensibility, new concepts of substance and form, and an inimitable style, his versatility and originality have been matched by few Turkish literary figures, past or present." Dağlarca's tender lyric voice finds itself in countless long and short poems:

In Turkish poetics, the quatrain holds a significant and time-honored place both as a stanzaic unit and as an independent verse. In classical poetry, its dominance was second only to the couplet, and most of the prominent poets produced—in the tradition of Omar Khayyam—an impressive body of rubais, four-line epigrammatic verses (a a b a). The Turks also evolved the four-line *tuyuğ*, also in the **a a b a** rhyme pattern, but composed in a special quantitative meter and usually confined to philosophical comments. In folk poetry the quatrain was—and still is—the essential stanzaic unit, and among its most memorable achievements are the enchorial *manis*, quatrains by anonymous poets, written in syllabic meters.

With the advent of modernism, many structural changes, including the complete breakdown of stanzaic forms, came about. As a consequence, very few of the leading modern poets have used the quatrain. One major exception is Fazıl Hüsnü Dağlarca. In most of his multitudinous poems, Dağlarca has used the quatrain in all its aspects—rhymed, unrhymed, scanned and free, intact and fragmented.

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