

A TRIAL READING OF BEHÇET NECATİGİL'S POEM "ÖLÜ"

Mehmet Kalpaklı

IN THE COURSE of its passage from Ottoman to Republican, Turkish poetry experienced a cultural break and underwent a change that is often described as a rejection of the cultural heritage of the past. Nonetheless, there are numerous examples in modern Turkish literature that cast doubt on the extent of actual rejection as well as on the rejectionist attitudes of "Kemalist" and "modernist" Turks toward their past culture. For example, in a number of his poems, later collected under the title *Eski Şiirin Rüzgârıyla* (On the Winds of Old Poetry),¹ Yahya Kemal Beyatlı (d. 1958) attempted to continue the relation between modern Turkish poetry and its past (the Ottoman poetic tradition) by preserving Ottoman poetry, with its lexical universe, its tropes, forms, and content, but was only able to distinguish himself from the Ottoman poets in the originality of his use of Turkish. On the other hand, there were also a number of poets who, instead of trying to continue the traditional forms in modern Turkish poetry, linked their poetry conceptually to Ottoman poetry while remaining new and modernist in form, content, and style. The most important of these poets, Behçet Necatigil (d. 1979), pointed the way to the linking of modern Turkish poetry to the traditional when he stated:

I consider returning to original sources as a fusion of contemporary motifs with some motifs taken from the past. Repeating the motifs of *Divan* poetry with the same tired refrains cannot be *Divan* poetry. You'll take a bit, and set that ancient seed to greening in new manure in a new greenhouse. I use some *Divan* poetry motifs. Anyone who reads the anthologies of *Divan* poetry will sense this immediately. Look how beautifully Necatigil has renewed Ruhi-i Bağhdadi's couplet here! These kinds of stealings occur, if such is stealing. I don't footnote these things saying this couplet by Ruhi-i Bağhdadi inspired my poem. This is just what they call "culture."²

What Necatigil is doing is, in a sense, "re-writing" or "writing-new." He re-creates Ottoman poetry in modern structures with modern materials. While so doing, he makes use, as much as possible, of motifs, words, conceits, and sounds from the Ottoman tradition. He creates a plane of intertextuality including his poems and those of the now-dead poets. Essentially, as T. S. Eliot once said, no poet can

I would like to thank Professor Walter G. Andrews for his comments and suggestions on the first draft.

¹ Yahya Kemal (Beyatlı), *Eski Şiirin Rüzgârıyla* (Istanbul: Yahya Kemal Enstitüsü, 1974).

² "Aslı kaynaklara dönmeyi, oradan alacağımız bazı motifleri günün, çağın motifleriyle kaynaştırmak biçiminde alıyorum. . . . Divan şiiri motiflerini aynı terânelerle tekrarlamakla Divan şiiri olmaz. Bir parça alacaksın sen, o eski tohumu yeni gübrelerle, yeni seralarda yeşerteceksin. . . . Divan şiirinin bir kısım motiflerini kullanırım. Divan şiirini antolojilerde okuyan, derhal hissetmelidir onu. Necatigil, bak burada Rûhî-i Bağdâdî'nin beytini ne güzel yenileştirmiş! Böyle çalmalarla olur, bu çalmaksa! Ben bunun altına katiyyen not düşmem, bana bu şiirimi Rûhî-i Bağdâdî'nin şu beyti ilham etti diye. Kültür dediğin bu işte" (Yetkin Dilek, "Behçet Necatigil ile Konuşma," *Gerçek*, No. 11, May 1979).

be taken by himself. In Eliot's words, "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison among the dead."³

In attaching his poetry to the poetic tradition, Necatigil, is at the same time, personally enriching that cultural heritage. In the early years of the Republic, Ottoman poetry was "made invisible"⁴ as a matter of public policy and was thereby the object of a complete memory-loss in the social consciousness. The continuation of the tradition, which began first with Yahya Kemal Beyatlı was later carried on not only by Necatigil but by such poets as A. Halet, S. Karakoç, and Hilmi Yavuz and is now being represented by such young poets of the 1990s as Vural Bahadır Bayrıl, Osman Hakan A., and Ali Günvar.

When Necatigil, in the paragraph cited above, describes it as "stealing" when a modern poet alludes to earlier poets or uses a few of their conceits, I am reminded of a couplet which Şeyh Galib composed for his *Hüsn ü Aşk* (Beauty and Love) exactly two hundred years earlier.

Esrârını Mesnevî'den aldım
Çaldımsa da mîrî malı çaldım⁵

* * *

I took its essence from the Mesnevi
I stole but what I stole was public property

Galib said that he "stole" from Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi's *Mesnevi*, which he used as a source of inspiration on the plane of intertextuality. In so many words, what Necatigil did consisted only of taking poetic imagery from Ottoman poetry and using it to imagine today (or the things of today).

In an interview published in *Varlık* in 1960 Necatigil said the following:

Every new poem is the presentation in new forms of internal basic instincts and passions. You can rewrite Yunus, Karacaoğlu, Baki, and Nedim, but it does not follow that you are changing their views of the universe. What do the things you are going to squeeze in—the bus, the neon sign, the crematorium, the Agadir earthquake—change about things that happened centuries ago? Let's say, for instance, that long ago Yunus put himself to harsh testing at the retreat of Taptuk in order to annihilate his carnal soul; today a contemporary poet realizing that he cannot resist the entreaties of this world throws himself into the water off the Golden Gate Bridge. What is it that has changed? Only the narrative form and new words. The place of the ancient Bridge of Sırat is taken by the Golden Gate and its like. Otherwise everyone would be obliged to repeat the various basic instincts and conditions of a person who lived centuries earlier. Of old, the candle of the spirit's flame could not be contained by lanterns, now it shines out in projectors and headlights. The literary development of centuries does not cross over by means of the multiplying of technically parallel adornments and coverings. Even though this is change and development, can it be considered a different kind of perspective on the universe? That a thing is chaotic does not mean that it has completely lost its core character, its essence.⁶

3 T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Criticism: The Major Statements*, selected and edited by Charles Kaplan, second edition (New York: St. Martin's, 1986), pp. 429–437.

4 See Walter G. Andrews, "Ottoman Lyrics: Introductory Essay," in *Ottoman Lyric Poetry: An Anthology*, W. G. Andrews, Nejaat Black, and Mehmet Kalpaklı, eds. and trans. (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1997), pp. 3–14.

5 Şeyh Galib, *Hüsn ü Aşk*, Orhan Okay and Hüseyin Ayan, eds. (İstanbul: Dergah, 1992), p. 348.

6 "Her yeni şiir derinlerdeki içgüdülerin, tutkuların yeni biçimlerde verililişidir. Yunus'u, Karacaoğlu'nı, Baki'yi, Nedim'i yeniden yazabilirsiniz, şart değildir onların evrene bakışlarını değiştirmek. Araya sıkıştıracağınız bir otobüs, bir neon, bir krimatoryum, bir Agadir depremi neyi değiştirir yüzyıllar önce de var olandan? O zaman diyelim, Yunus, nefsi-i emmâresini yok etmek için Taptuk

In this statement Necatigil underscores how traditional poetry will be continued or more correctly how it will be rewritten and how this adding-on to the tradition will be done. He emphasizes that the old, *i.e.*, the old poetry, while being continued, can at the same time be new (by means of “narrative form” and “new words”).

My purpose in giving an example from Behçet Necatigil’s poems that connect with the Ottoman *Divan* poetry tradition is to demonstrate the existing and lasting bonds between modern Turkish poetry and Ottoman poetry. In a poem entitled “Ölü” (The Dead) which he published in 1962 in *Türk Dili*,⁷ Necatigil, reworks a theme—the water of life and the revival of a dead fish—which was used for centuries in Ottoman poetry. By means of this basic theme he alludes to the poetry of the earlier poets, especially that of the mystic poets Şeyh Galib (d. 1799) and Yunus Emre (d. ca. 1320). Necatigil creates his poem, on the one hand remaining modern in form and language and, on the other hand, using the materials of the older poetry such as conceits, rhymes, associations, and literary figures. The poem itself is as follows:

Ateş denizlerinde mumdan kayıklarla
sağlam mı tekneler aşkları geçmeye
güç.

Biri var ki pencere
pencere önlerinde ağlar duruyor
ilerde güneşte balıklar kuruyor
dirilirdi bengisu pınarlarında yunsa
güç.

Gider yol bir Galib’e, Yunus’a
ama bu ne çok ölü ağlar güç.

Biri de var gecede
saçlarından her gece kır ağlar örüyor
ötede mum yanıyor bir şeyler dönüyor
pervaneler art arda ne de çabuk ölüyor
güç.

Dirilirdi sularında bir sağlam tekne olsa
ama bu ne çok ölü ağlar güç.

* * *

In boats of wax on seas of fire
Are the hulls sound enough to pass over loves?
Hard.

dergâhında çetin sınavlara sokuyordu kendini, bugün yine dünya dayatışlarına karşı koyamayacağını anlayınca günümüz şairi kendini Golden Gate Bridge’den sulara bırakıyor. Nedir değişen? Sadece anlatım biçimi ve yeni sözcükler. Kadım Sırat köprüsünün yerini Golden Gate Bridge ve benzerleri aldı. Yoksa herkes yüzyıllar öncesinde yaşamış bir insanın çeşitli içgüdü ve hallerini tekrarlamak zorunda. Can mumunun alevi eskiden fanuslara sığmıyordu, şimdi projektörlerde, farlarda parlıyor. Yüzyıllardaki edebî gelişme, teknikte paralel süslerin, örtülerin çoğalmasından öteye geçmiyor. Bu bir değişime, gelişme dahi olsa evrene başka türlü bakış sayılabilir mi? Bir şeyin çapraşık olması, özdeki niteliğini, yalınlığını bütün bütüne yitirmesi demek değildir” (*Edebiyatçılarımız Konuşuyor*, Yaşar Nabi, ed. [İstanbul: Varlık, 1976] pp. 121–122).

7 “Ölü,” *Türk Dili*, No. 135, December 1962; reprinted in *Behçet Necatigil: Bütün Eserleri—Şiirler (1948–1972)*, Ali Tanyeri and Hilmi Yavuz, eds. (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi, 1994), p. 67.

There's someone, before window
 And window the nets are lying
 Up ahead, in the sun, fish are drying
 They'd revive if washed in the waters of life
 Hard.

The way goes to a Galib, to a Yunus
 But these nets hold so many dead—hard.

And there's someone, in the night
 Every night he weaves gray nets from his hair
 A candle burns, things whirl about it, over there
 The moths, how swiftly one after another they are dying
 Hard.

They'd revive were there a sound hull in their waters
 But these nets hold so many dead—hard.

According to legend, Hızır and İlyas, who had set out to seek the water of eternal life, sit near a spring in order to rest and have something to eat. They take out the dried fish they had brought for their meal. Hızır, while washing his hands in the spring, sprinkles some of the water onto one of the fish which immediately comes to life, dives into the spring and swims away. At that point Hızır and İlyas realize that they have found the water of eternal life. This is precisely the basic theme of Necatigil's poem. The poet takes as the central point of his poem an everyday scene, fish caught in nets and hung up to dry in the sun, something he might have seen while passing a fisherman's hut. In this way he newly employs the "water of life and the revival of the dried fish" conceit so often used in *Divan* poetry.

The first verse of the five-verse poem is inspired (or "stolen") from the following lines of Şeyh Galib:

Ol kulzüm-i âteş-i ciger-kâh
 Mumdan gemiler edip hüveydâ⁸

* * *

Ships of wax it made manifest
 And that red sea of heart-tormenting flame

and

Bin başlı bir ejder-i münakkaş
 Mumdan gemi altı bahr-ı âteş⁹

* * *

A thousand-headed ornamented dragon,
 Beneath ship of wax, a sea of flames

The poet, being a person of the modern age, emphasizes the difficulty of crossing seas of flame in boats of wax; whereas a mystical poet would certainly stand up to this difficulty and not be overcome by hopelessness. Exactly as Eşrefoğlu Rumi (d. 1469) said in a famous couplet—the mystic would gladly throw himself in:

8 Şeyh Galib, *Hüsni ü Aşk*, p. 272.

9 Şeyh Galib, *Hüsni ü Aşk*, p. 220.

Bu âlem sanki oddan bir denizdir
Ana kendini atmaktadır adı aşk¹⁰

* * *

This world is as though a sea of fire
To cast oneself into it, this is love

In the second verse of "Ölü," Necatigil makes a direct allusion to the water of life and revival of the fish story. The expression "ağlar duruyor" can mean either (or both) "fish-nets stand (or lie or hang) there" or "(someone) keeps on crying" (*ağlayıp duruyor*). Here he creates the figure called *tevriye* (double meaning) much used in Ottoman *Divan* poetry. The ancient poets took pains to choose words for a couplet that could be read with two meanings, both of which made sense in the couplet. Also Necatigil creates a *cinas* (connection by letter similarity) between the word *yunsa* (he washes himself) in the second verse and *Yunus'a* in the third (where the letters y, u, n, s, and a are all the same and the two words differ by only one letter). This too is one of the rhetorical figures favored by the Ottomans.

In the third stanza Necatigil mentions the names of two of the early poets, Şeyh Galib and Yunus Emre. The first is a Mevlevi poet close to the Ottoman palace and a dear friend of the sultan, the latter is a dervish who wandered among the common people. The similarity between them is that both poets were mystics and both paid considerable attention to the themes of love and death in their poetry. In this verse the theme of "death" carries more weight. In the line "ama bu ne çok ölü ağlar güç" (but these nets hold so many dead—hard) the poet seems to intend the poets who died from the time of Yunus Emre and Şeyh Galib down to the present (or those who died from Yunus Emre to Şeyh Galib). We realize that these dead fish (or those poets) can be revived by being washed in springs of the water of life, which is to say that like being washed in the water of life, the poets are revived by Necatigil not only by alluding to their poetry, but also by writing their poetry in a new variety of ways.

The fourth verse of the poem concerns one of the most commonly used images in all of *Divan* poetry: the candle and the moth. The moth flying about the candle and finally yielding fatally to the attraction of the flame has been employed for centuries as a mystical symbol. The moth symbolizes the lover, and the candle, the beloved. For the moth to be saved from the attraction of the flame, or for human beings to distance themselves from death is difficult.

The line "saçlarından her gece kır ağlar örüyor" (every night he weaves gray nets from his hair) also picks up the theme of death in the sense that every night adds gray to the hair, that every night a person comes one day closer to death. Necatigil also uses the expression *kır ağlar* (gray nets) with the hint of the figure *tevriye* or double meaning. If we read it as *kırağılar* (frost) we are reminded that during the night the frost covers the earth with a whiteness similar to the graying of the hair.

In this section, Necatigil uses yet another of the rhetorical figures of *Divan* poetry, one he frequently uses. In this figure, which the Ottomans called *irsâd*, the poet "prepares" the reader for a word by saying something that explains it or alludes to it in advance. Before he uses the word *pervane* (moth) in the fourth line of the verse, he says (in line three), "ötede mum yanıyor bir şeyler dönüyor" (a candle burns, things whirl about it, over there), preparing the reader for the name of the things (the moths) that whirl about.

¹⁰ *Eşrefoğlu Divanı*, (Istanbul, n.d.), p. 118.

In addition, this verse emphasizes rhyme, which can be seen as a continuation of an age-old rhyme system of the Ottomans. For example:

duruyor–kuruyor (verse 2)
yunsa–Yunus’a (verses 2 and 3)
örüyor–dönüyor–ölüyor (verse 4)

Likewise, the repetition of the word *güç* (difficult, hard) at the end of each verse clearly alludes to the common Ottoman practice of including *redif* (an exactly repeated element following the rhyme). The effect of this repetition is compounded by other repetitions—for example, *pencere/pencere*, *gecede/gece*, *ağlar/ağlar*—which again mirrors the tone of Ottoman poems.

In the final verse of the poem, the poet ends by combining the “water of life” and “boat” images in a single line. Combining two unrelated conceits to produce a new conceit can certainly be considered another continuation of Ottoman practice.

In conclusion, employing direct allusions as well as motifs that he has taken from old Turkish poetry—the sounds (rhymes and words), the rhetorical figures, the conceits of *Divan* poetry—Behçet Necatigil writes a new and contemporary poetry. He both continues the tradition and remains modern. Today a number of poets, following the path opened by Necatigil, are continuing to write poetry which leans on the Ottoman tradition. I would like to end with some lines from a poem entitled “Teselli” from Vural Bahadır Bayrıl’s first book of poetry published in 1992.¹¹ In these lines the poet alludes both to the Ottoman tradition and to Behçet Necatigil.

Ah çocuk, bilmeliydin. Ateş denizine
İnmezdi mum kayık. Yazmaksa pişmanlıktır.

* * *

Oh child, you should have known. The boat of wax would not go
Down to the sea of flame. And to write is regretfulness.

¹¹ Vural Bahadır Bayrıl, *Melek Geçti* (Istanbul: Şiir Atı, 1992), p. 32.