

Some Reflections on Poetry*

Őiir Hakkında Bazı Mülâhazalar

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Makale Türü Çeviri Makale • Translated Article

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When the poem “Desire at the End of a Day,” which the reader will read in this book, was first published, its meaning was considered overly cryptic by some, and much was said and written about the notions of “meaning” and “clarity” in poetry. None of this comes to mind at this moment. How could it? For some of what was said and written was profanity and insults, and some was merely the nonsensical content of daily newspapers. Insults on the grounds of differing viewpoints are a well-established tactic, one that has been used by us for ages, a dishonorable legacy passed down from generation to generation among the same kind of penmen. Hence, no generation of writers can boast of being unacquainted with such debates. Especially since, in the fields of science and literature, disgraced and despicable people, sometimes disguised as scholars, sometimes as critics, sometimes as artists, can run their donkeys freely, it would be childishly naive to hope that a courteous conduct will be observed in the exchange of ideas.

Since neither overused statements nor insults can serve as a basis for a discussion, we¹ will not resort to what we have read and heard before, and we will content ourselves with expressing our individual perspectives and opinions regarding the significance of “meaning” and “clarity” in poetry.

First of all, we must acknowledge that we do not know what is meant by meaning in poetry. Is “thought” a heap of vulgar opinions, a story, a metaphor, and does “clarity” imply that these are understood in accordance with everyday understanding? Those who think that these things are necessary for poetry are those who confuse poetry with “figures of speech,” like history, philosophy, rhetoric, eloquence, and so forth, failing to truly grasp its essence. This perception of poetry arises from the distinction that, unlike the arts of painting, music and sculpture, which have their own tools such as brushes, paints, scores, and pencils, and require skillful application, poetry lacks such specific tools and must draw its expression from spoken language. That is why

* “Őiir Hakkında Bazı Mülâhazalar” from *Piyâle* (İstanbul: İkdâm Printing Press, 1928, second edition, 4-13).

¹ Translator’s Note: Here and elsewhere in the essay, the author refers to himself in the editorial “we” as was common practice at the time.

incompetent people, who are timid and respectful towards the brush that their fingers do not know how to hold and the scores that their eyes do not know how to read, regard poetry – something that they perceive as being made up of the words they use – to be ordinary “language.” Simply looking from this viewpoint and without feeling the need for any further preparation, they feel entitled to judge it with arrogant flippancy.

However, the poet is neither a messenger of truth, nor an eloquent speaker, nor a lawmaker. The poet’s language exists not to be understood like “prose,” but to be heard; it is an intermediary language between music and speech, closer to music than to speech. None of the components essential for the formation of style in “prose” can be applied to poetry. In this respect, poetry and prose are two separate structures with no affinity or mutual interest. They rely on separate orders and arise from separate areas, dimensions, and forms. Prose is born of reason and logic; poetry, on the other hand, is a sacred and nameless wellspring that is buried in the night of mysteries and the unknown residing beyond the realm of perception, and occasionally, only the glimmers of its radiant waters cast reflections upon the horizons of our senses.

Only the pitiful nakedness of a shadowless poem that borrows the comprehensibility and smoothness of prose can attain the falsity of a prose that strives to imitate the states and movements of poetry. One can argue that “poetry” is verse that defies translation into prose. As Father Brémond remarked a few months ago in a debate with a renowned critic about “essential poetry,” a matter that concerned the whole civilized intellectual world, a “sentence” is but ordinary prose unless judgment, logic, eloquence, coherence of expression, analysis, simile, metaphor, and all these qualities are transmuted by the enchanting power of poetry, which, like the light of dawn, imbues everything it touches with a rosy hue. Moreover, when the current of poetry, which is like an electric current in verse, is interrupted for a moment, all these qualities immediately fall into their inherent ugliness. Poetry is not a story, but a silent song.

Sırr-ı men ez nâle-i men dür nîst
Lîk çeşm ü gûşra an nur nîst

My secret is not far from my moaning
Alas, in their gaze, in their ear, light is absent.²

Digging into poetry in search of “meaning” should be no different from slaughtering a poor bird whose song makes the stars of summer nights shiver merely for its meat. Can a morsel of meat truly replace the captivating voice that has been silenced?

In poetry, what matters above all is not the meaning of the word, but the value of its utterance within the sentence. The aim of the poem is to determine the placement of each word in the sentence based on the sweet, concealed, soft or harsh sound that emerges from the relationship and collision with other words and mysterious fusions. It involves arranging various word harmonies to match the overall flow of the verse. Beyond the word’s meanings, it seeks to discover an

² Mevlâna Jalal ad-Din Rumi, “The Song of the Reed” (from *Masnâvi*, Book 1).

unlimited and compelling narration for the undulating and flowing, dark or bright, heavy or swift emotions through the rhythmic fluctuations of the verse.

If “meaning” becomes obscured amidst lexical shifts and concerns for harmony, “spirit” fills its place with the flavor of harmony. To tell the truth, what is “meaning” if not a hint of harmony? The “subject” in poetry is merely a pretext for the poet to weave verses and wander in dreams. Like a porcelain jar full of honey left in the middle of a dense laurel forest, meaning is hidden within the foliage of the poem, not visible to every eye, allowing only halos and phrases, like buzzing bees flying outside and around it. The poet takes pleasure in making the reader, who has not seen the porcelain jar, hear the awe-inspiring music of the bees’ wings. This is because the whole secret of the red-flowered black laurel forest resides in the sound of these silver wings.

There is no poetry outside this definition. If there exists a poem that could be disputed as not conforming, it is not a poem, and those who call it “poetry” are mere strangers to poetry.

Although we wish that the vain dreams of those who want poetry to become a common language could come true, we are of the opinion that no great poet has ever been understood beyond a limited circle of people. Among Hamit’s³ thousands of admirers, those who have read him are not even ten percent, while those who understand him are not even one-thousandth of one percent. “Fame” is achieved when the currents of excitement overflowing from two or three perceptive souls sweep along the less discerning ones. Otherwise, fame is a source of disgrace for a noble and honorable soul.

It can be asserted without exaggeration that poetry accessible to all is solely the creation of inferior poets. The gates of great poetry, like solid city gates with bronze wings, are firmly shut; not every hand can thrust those wings open, and those gates at times remain closed to people for centuries. Only in recent years, after the arms of one of our historians opened the wings of the fortress that shielded Nedîm⁴ against obtuseness, did the dwarfs manage to enter the gardens of that poem. But the comprehension of many who ventured in, like dirty handprints on a tiled wall, has only tainted Nedîm. What more compelling evidence is needed to affirm that every poem has varying degrees of meaning depending on the levels of the soul?

The poet has many other concerns before being deemed “meaningful” and, in relation to them, meaning and clarity constitute only the exterior façade and wall of the poem, built according to what proves inadequate. When faced with any form of artwork, the individual who poses questions such as “What is it? What does it signify? Is such a concept possible? It looks like it! It doesn’t look like it!” and expresses opinions accordingly is a disgusting parasite from whom the artist can learn nothing and whom they will carefully avoid interacting with, as this person gets ensnared in the artist’s inner world. This parasite, which finds no nourishment for its own obtuseness in works of art and is ubiquitously prevalent throughout the world, has been the bitter enemy of the artist throughout history and across nations. In life, because of it, the artist is

³ Abdülhak Hamit Tarhan (1852-1937), Ottoman playwright and poet.

⁴ Ottoman lyric *poet* of the Tulip Period (1718-1730).

sometimes a vile sycophant, sometimes an innocent victim. In addition to these scattered art parasites, there is also an art official who makes the concept of art even more incomprehensible – its literary equivalent being the “literature teacher.” It is astonishing that this man, whose title and qualifications are reassuring at first glance, is not considered to be as empty as the term “literature class.” The literature teacher, an expendable instructor manufactured by the present flawed education system, teaches students the sense and appreciation of aesthetics through a secondary education curriculum, similar to the myth peddlers who sell air and fabricate moonlight. Neither can the poet interpret and explain poetry, nor can the artist define art. Thus, a literature teacher in any country - except for in rare instances - is neither a poet, nor a prose writer, nor a person who is in any other way related to art. Since poetry in the eyes of this person, who mostly comes from a background as a teacher of reading, spelling and grammar, is no more than reading material with questions and answers. Any poetry that cannot be neatly transposed into prose and is not suitable for grammar exercises is dangerous and a bad example for impressionable young minds. For the literature teacher, the works of a master and of an aspiring novice are, provided they are understood, equally beautiful writings that rank among the laudable works of a language. The teacher, who lacks even the most rudimentary sensory apparatus to hear poetry that is understood spontaneously, without explanation – much like the gaze of a black eye and the smile of a fresh mouth – will have nothing more to say from the lectern the day he cannot explain poetry as a problem of spelling and grammar.

However, even if one accepts for a moment the necessity of “clarity” in poetry, one must first understand what clarity means. What kind of intellect should be taken as the measure of clarity? A poem that is clear to one person may not necessarily be so to another. There are intellects that are dim mirrors thrown into the center of the universe. It is not only this or that poem that they do not understand; dense forests of the unknown surround their minds and souls on all sides. Like a fire that burns in the night, what could be more imperative than the meaning that is clear to the one standing on the hill, but invisible to the one on the cliff? As the poet forges a distinct lexicon extracted from the general language and infused with novel significance, with each letter resonating with new harmonies and its progression and utterance arranged according to a different scale, full of beauty, color and imagination, the clarity of their work begins to change. This change is contingent on the reader because clarity hinges as much on the reader’s intellect and soul as it does on the composition itself.

In our country, as elsewhere, readers who are habituated to the ease of daily newspapers cannot easily find pleasure in poetry. Yet, in order to be understood, poetry demands not only the engagement of one’s soul and intellect, but also a rigorous preparation, and even the assistance of some challenging external factors such as light, weather, and time conditions. There are poems that take on the hues of evening like waters and shaded by the moonlight like trees. In the sunlight, these very poems dissipate into thin air. Is our soul on summer nights, when we yearn to weep at the sound of a distant shepherd’s flute or a gardener’s song, the same heavy and faint soul we carry in the heat of the afternoon?

The most exquisite poems are those that draw their meaning from the soul of the reader. The presence of uncertain and ambiguous elements within a poem is not an error or shortcoming; rather, it is an essential aspect that contributes to the poem's beauty. A blinding clarity of style leaves nothing for the imagination to do, as the English aesthete Ruskin said, and then the artist loses the help of his most precious "ally," the reader's soul. The paramount goal of a work of art is to captivate the imagination. All the other virtues and merits of a work that fails to achieve this cannot save it from being labeled as anything but a work of art.

If the subject is left to linger, like roses in the night, in the harmonious darkness and fragrant excitement of the sentence, taking on a semi-defined form that is barely discernible, the imagination steps into complete the missing parts and bestows upon it a truly exhilarating presence once again. Hence the beauty of ruins, echoing voices from afar, unfinished paintings, unrefined sculptures. No face is as beautiful in reality as it appears in imagination. Haven't we all experienced the jarring disillusionment when the daylight reveals the cities we first encountered under the cloak of night, disrupting the flights of our imagination? Like a bat at dusk, the imagination soars most freely in the twilight of poetry.

In short, poetry, much like the words of prophets, must have a breadth of meaning that lends itself to varied interpretations. As long as the meaning of a poem has the potential to transform into another, each reader can imbue it with meaning in their own life. In this way, poetry can evolve into a shared language of emotions that bridges the connection between poets and people. The richest, the most profound, and emotionally resonant poetry is that which can be comprehended by everyone in whatever manner they desire, and is therefore broad enough to encompass boundless sensibilities. How can poetry, confined within the circle of a solitary interpretation, be compared to that elusive and flowing poetry that encircles the multitude of human emotions?

** Translator's Note:

Ahmet Haşim (1887-1933) is a renowned poet in early twentieth-century Turkish literature. Born in 1887, he spent his childhood years in Baghdad, Iraq, before relocating to Istanbul in 1896. Recognized for his pioneering role in the Symbolist movement within Turkish literature, he drew inspiration from French poets like Remy de Gourmont, Henry de Regnier, Paul Verlaine, and Stéphane Mallarmé.

Graduating from Galatasaray High School in 1907, he briefly worked as a French teacher in Izmir. After that, he explored various vocations, including translation and government service. Alongside his eclectic occupation, he published in newspapers and journals, showcasing his diverse literary talents. His teaching journey eventually led him to a position at the Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul, where he taught classes on mythology and aesthetics.

Some of his poems, skillfully translated into English by Aysel Basci, have appeared in journals such as the *Bosphorus Review of Books* (<https://bosporusreview.com/ahmet-haim-and-his-poems>). The translation featured below is the introduction written by Hařım for his second poetry collection “The Wine Cup,” in which he passionately elaborates on and defends his poetic philosophy. In this second collection, Hařım departs completely from traditional Divan Poetry, opting instead for a stylistic approach that prioritizes imagery and rhyme over meaning and coherence – a choice that was met with skepticism and criticism from his contemporaries and critics alike. In the introduction, added as an afterthought, he addresses the criticism that he faced with a tone that is both defensive and confident. He emphasizes the importance of poetry’s musicality over its meaning, alluding to a contemporary debate about whether poetry is meant for visual or auditory appreciation.