TOUCHED BY THE PAST: NECATİGİL AND THE OTTOMANS

Dr. Mehmet Kalpaklı, Bilkent University

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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 including a rejection of the cultural heritage of the past. Nonetheless, there are numerous examples throughout the history of modern Turkish literature that cast doubt on the extent of actual rejection and the attitudes of "Kemalist" and "modernist" Turks toward past culture. For example, in a number of his poems later collected under the title "Eski Şirin Rüzgârıyla" (On the Winds of Old Poetry) Yahya Kemal Beyatlı 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 forms of the tradition 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, (died, 1979) showed the way to linking modern Turkish poetry to the tradition when he said:

"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 a 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 Ruhşâ Baghdaş's couplet here! These kinds of occur, if such is stealing. I don't footnote these things saying, this couplet by Ruhşâ Baghdaş inspired my poem. This is just what they call "culture,"

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 Ottoman 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 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."

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" 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 Beyati was later carried on by such
poets as Necatigil, A. Halet, S. Karakoç and Hilmi Yavuz and is now being
represented by such young poets of the 90s as Vural Bahadir Bayrıl, Osman Hakan

When Necatigil, in the paragraph cited above, describes as "stealing" a
modern poet's making allusions to the ancient poets or using a few of the ancient
poets' conceits, I am reminded of a couplet which Seyh Galip composed for his "Hüsni ü Aşık
"Beauty and Love" exactly two hundred years earlier.

Esrârını Mesnevi'den aldım
Çaldım veli mürri mai çaldım

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

Galip said that he "stole" from Rumi's (Mevlana'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 a conversation published in Varlık Journal in 1960 Necatigil said the following:

"Every new poem is the presentation in new forms of internal basic instincts and passions. You can re-write Yunus, Karacaoğlan, Baki, Nedim; 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 Sirat 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."

In this statement Necatigil underscores how traditional poetry will be continued or more correctly how it will be re-written and how this adding-on to the tradition will be done. The thing he emphasizes is that the old (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" which he published in 1962 in the Türk Dili Journal, 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 ancients, especially that of the mystic poets Şeyh Galip (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:

ÖLÜ

Ateş denizlerinde mumdan kayıklarla
sağlam mi 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 sağlıklı tekne olsa
ama bu ne çok ölü ağlar güç.
The Dead

In boats of wax on seas of fire
Are the hulls sound enough to pass over loves?
It's hard.

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
It's hard.

The way goes to a Galip, to a Yunus
But these nets hold so many dead—it's hard.

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

They'd revive were there a sound hull in their waters
But these nets hold so many dead—it's 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 Galip:

Ol kulzüm-i âteş-i ciger-kâh
Mumdun gemiler edip hüveydâ

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

and

Bin başlı ejder-i münakkaş
Mumdun gemiler altı bahr-i âteş

(A thousand-headed ornamented dragon,
Beneath ships 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 said in a famous couplet:

Bu âlem sanki oddan bir denizdir
 Ana kendini atmakdir âdi aşk

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

the mystic would gladly throw himself in.

In the second verse, the poet makes a direct allusion to the water of life and revival of the fish story. The expression "ağlar duruyor" can mean either (and both)
"fish-nets stand (or lie or hang) there" or "(someone) keeps on crying" (ağlayıp duruyor). Here he creates the figure called "tevriye" (or "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 (or 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, 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 section Necatigil mentions the names of two of the ancient poets: Şeyh Galib and Yunus Emre. One is a Mevlevi poet close to the Ottoman palace and a dear friend of the sultan. The other is a dervish who wandered among the common people. The point of 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—it's 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 writing their poetry a new variety of way.

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 kir ağlar örtüyor (Every night he weaves grey nets from his hair) also picks up the theme of "death" in the sense that every night
adds grey to the hair which is to say that every night a person comes one day closer to death. Necatigil also uses the expression "kır ağlar" (grey 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 greying of the hair.

In this section, Necatigil uses yet another of the rhetorical figures of Divan poetry, a figure he often uses. In this figure, which the Ottomans called ırsăd, 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" 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.

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

duruyor-kuruyor (verse 2)
yunsa-Yunus'a (verse 2-3)
örüyor-dönuyor-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 he has taken from old Turkish poetry—the sounds (rhymes and words), the rhetorical figures, the conceits of Divan poetry—Behcet Necatigil writes a new and contemporary poetry. He both continues the tradition and remains thoroughly 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 my presentation with some lines from a poem entitled "Teselli" from Vural Bahardır Bayrıl's first book of poetry published in 1992. In these lines the poet alludes both to the Ottoman tradition and to Behcet Necatigil.

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

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

Ateş denizlerinde mumdan kayıklarla
sağlam mı tekleler aşkları geçmeye
gücü.

Biri var ki pencere
pencere önlerinde ağaçlar duruyor
ilerde güneşte balıklar kuruyor
diniirdi bengisu pınarlarında yunsa
gücü.

Gider yol bir Galib’e, Yunus’a
ama bu ne çok ölü ağaçlar gücü.

Biri de var gece
darajanın her gece kir ağalar örtüyor
ötede mum yanıyor bir şeyler dönüyor
perçineler art arda ne de çabuk ölüyor
gücü.

Diniirdi sularında bir sağlam tekne olsa
ama bu ne çok ölü ağaçlar gücü.

Behçet Necatigil, Türk Dili, 135, Aralık 1962

The Dead

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Are the hulls sound enough to pass over loves?
It's hard.

There's someone, before window
And window the nets are lying
Up ahead, in the sun, fish are drying
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