

Writings from Turkey:

Rıfat Ilgaz and Sunay Akın

Introduction and translations by Burcu Alkan

Modern Turkish literature has produced much politically and socially committed writing, with proponents such as Rıfat Ilgaz (1911-93) and Sunay Akın (b.1962).

Rıfat Ilgaz was among the second generation of socially-committed poets, following the internationally known poet Nazım Hikmet (1902-63). Unlike Hikmet, he was not interested in political ideologies like Communism. His social writings were born from his own experiences as a teacher and a writer. While he was writing about the sufferings and inequalities of the people, he was not aiming for the partisanship of any ideology. He clearly states this in his semi-autobiographical novel *Karartma Geceleri*:

I do not know if I am exactly a leftist or not yet. If there is one thing I know, it is that I am on the side of the oppressed people. That the troubles people suffer exactly fit mine. And that I see my salvation in the salvation of the people. If these little crumbs of ideas are enough for me to be a leftist, I am not going to try and acquit myself at all.¹

Ilgaz is a humanist as well as a social realist writer. Both as a teacher and a writer, he felt the repercussions of World War II and the 1960, 1971 and 1980 coups in Turkey. His literature, reflecting such difficult times in the lives of people, made him a primary “criminal of thought” in the eyes of the

police and the military – the exponents of the governing ideologies in Turkey.

Ilgaz's poems presented here are taken from his collection of poetry, *Bütün Şiirleri 1927-1991 (Complete Poems 1927-1991)*. The first one is "In Poetry" (*Şiirde*) in which he defines himself and sets his priorities.² Ilgaz believes that his identity as a poet should come before anything else, so that, for him, life can gain meaning in poetry. Poetry is used not only as his way of expressing himself as an individual, but also as a catalyst of things to come. His fight for a better world starts in poetry, while his sufferings, the exiles and imprisonments, come as a result of it. And as a poet who is aware of his responsibilities, he does not seem to complain much about these sufferings – neither in the poems included in this study, nor in his other works.

The second poem is his last ever written, dated November 19, 1991. This very short poem is a farewell, hence the title "My Last Poem."³ Even as a last poem, there is a wish to be good in something or for somebody. The unselfish goodwill of a poet, who has spent his life striving for a better future for everybody, prevails.

The case with "My Last Poem" was an interesting one. On the inside cover of the book, the poems was rendered as:

Elime eline değsin
Isıtayım üşüdüyse

Let my hand touch yours
Let me warm it if it's cold

However, the original manuscript – published in the collection as a facsimile – reads:

Elime birine değsin
Isıtayım üşüdüyse

Let my hand touch somebody
Let me warm him/her if s/he is cold

The Turkish language does not have gender-specific nouns or pronouns, but gender specification is required for English. This problem arose in the second version cited above. Thus, in the end, the version on the cover of the book was preferred, in order to bypass the problem of the pronouns.

Sunay Akın is one of the contemporary Turkish writers, who follow in the footsteps of Hikmet and Ilgaz.⁴ While his preferred genre, creative non-fiction, differs from his predecessors', he maintains the same line of socio-

political writings. The 1980-coup in Turkey influenced him immensely as a young man. In his poetry and prose, he criticizes any kind of fanatic ideology which takes away human rights. The politics of the United States is one of the many themes that Akin reflects upon in his works. His opposition to the invasion of the lands of Native American people is the same as his opposition to what happened to the Africans, who were forced out of their lands and brought to the Americas as slaves. His desire for fairness, equality and liberty made him a supporter of “the coloured men” against “the white men.” Akin’s reactions to political “mistakes” are not limited to those of American political leaders. He is a political satirist who stands against all real “evil-doers.” His humour and his poetical sensitivity put into question conventional “truths.”

“Beating Around the Bush” was published in *Onlar Hep Oradaydı* (*They Have Always Been There*), a collection of creative non-fiction about the Native Americans. “Beating Around the Bush” begins with an anecdotal story about an old Native American’s lesson to a youngster and ends with the attack on the two towers of the World Trade Center in New York.⁵ *Kızılderili*, the word used for “Native Americans” in Turkish, literally means “red skinned,” and is, actually, a neutral term. Although, in the original, it compliments the writer’s discussion of “white man vs. red man,” a translation without derogatory connotations had to be found. “American Indian” is the most common term in English. However, in another story appearing also in *Onlar Hep Oradaydı*, Akin sarcastically talks about the “mistake” that Columbus made, calling the natives of the newly found land “Indians” due to a geographical miscalculation. Therefore, the term “Native American” was chosen as the most suitable phrase, even though it is not colloquial English usage. One should also point out that the term “Native” better fits Akin’s ideas, since he strongly believes that “Natives” are the righteous native inhabitants of those lands.

The title “*Bush’u Bush’una Bir Savaş Daha*” sounds in Turkish as if it means “Another War in Vain.” The phrase “*Boşu Boşuna*” means “in vain,” while the letter “ş” in the original spelling of “*boşu boşuna*,” is pronounced as “sh.” So, the writer, instead of writing “*Boşu Boşuna Bir Savaş Daha*,” preferred to write “*Bush’u Bush’una Bir Savaş Daha*,” referring to the two presidents of the USA, George Bush Sr. and George W. Bush. How could this little pun be translated without losing the context? After several trials, “Beating Around the Bush,” a phrase that became a joke among friends at İstanbul University after the doubtful election of George W. Bush in 2000, was chosen. Literally, the idiom does not have a direct relationship with the passage or title; however, it provides a pun similar to that used by Akin. “Beating Around the Bush” is a transformed version of “beating about the

bush,” which literally means “not coming to a point.” However, we are *coming to a certain point* by using the words *Bush* and *beating* in the title, which provides an idea of what is coming up in the text.

The translation of Ilgaz’s poems is published courtesy of Aydın Ilgaz and Çınar Yayıncılık, İstanbul. The translation of “Beating around the Bush” is published courtesy of Sunay Akın and Çınar Yayıncılık.

Rifat Ilgaz

IN POETRY

I loved the fight, in poetry first
The freedom word by word, in poetry
Line by line I loved to live
So I loved anger and bliss...
Your bright days,
My optimistic friends,
All, all in poetry.
Whatever I've lost...
Everything I've found, in poetry.
Is it our love only,
That precedes rhyme,
There's also exile,
And imprisonment as well.

MY LAST POEM

Let my hand touch yours
Let me warm it if it's cold
My last warmth shall not be wasted!

Beating Around The Bush

Sunay Akin

The old Native American is sitting in front of his tepee watching his dogs fight. He says, "Look, my boy" to his grandson who approaches him, "the name of that white dog is Good and the black one is Evil." And when the boy asks which one would win, the old man replies, "Whichever one I feed!"

Peace is the only garment that looks good on humanity. It has many buttons: democracy, human rights, equality, fellowship... That's why it can not be slipped off like a shirt, from the body that wears it.

The United States of America is seen in this garment in the scenes of the 1990s. The US, which becomes the apostle of peace and democracy, takes off this peace costume with the attack on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York, on September 11, 2001... And suddenly so, with no hesitation, in the blink of an eye! Actually, the garment is not taken off, but wantonly abandoned. President Bush yells out: "We'll find 'em, hunt 'em, shoot 'em, crusade 'em!"

The costume of Peace didn't fit The Sheriff. The love of democracy, peace and fellowship was too tight for the model that made the United States what she is... The father of Bush was the same Bush who was enthroned president and whose first decree was to start the Gulf War...

From Father Bush to Son Bush... Basically it's just another war drum beating around the bush.

It wasn't the first time, after September 11, that humankind faced a war. But it was the first time a war was declared without knowing against whom. The enemy could be anywhere the United States pointed. No one could oppose that because the US was hit at home. The people of America, whose support couldn't be counted on for the Vietnam, Korea and Gulf Wars, said "yes" to the politics of war for the second time, after the bomb-

ing of Pearl Harbor in 1941. Nevertheless, with the help of Osama bin Laden, the servant of the USA in Afghanistan, they managed to portray all the Asian Muslims as “terrorists.” And the Shari’a Organizations, who are the subcontractors of the US, promoted this. The meaning of Bush in Turkish is “Çalı.” So is the meaning of Laden. Apparently, at the outset of the 2000s, humanity is stuck between thickets... And we are a nation that knows what to do very well behind the bushes!

Spit-shinin’ his badge, Bush doesn’t wait too long to show his first target: Afghanistan! However, before his presidency, this man called “Bush” when asked on TV, where Afghanistan was, was not able to answer correctly!...

On the television screen, the scenes of the people hopelessly waiting to be saved in the buildings that were hit by the hijacked Boeings and the scenes of people talking about Turkey gaining importance merged into each other. On one side there was the matter of life and death in the towers that were attacked and, on the other side, there was the stock market... The stock market was gaining value against the stock of humanity.

Imperialism advances across the whole world like moves on a chess board. That’s why the outbreak of the economical crisis in Turkey before the attack on the World Trade Center can’t be seen as a coincidence. The ones who can’t figure out that bringing Kemal Derviş from the US and seating him as a minister is one of the moves that bound our arms, are the ones that perceive politics as checkers rather than chess.⁶

One of the documents that showed how Turkey was being sold to the United States with the politics of 1950s was revealed in the Turkish Parliament on July 7, 1966, at 15:00, by Haydar Tunçkanat.⁷ In the report, which was written by an unknown “statesman” and given to Colonel Dickson, a Representative of the CIA in Turkey working in the American Embassy, the obstacles facing the exploitation of the country are itemized as follows: “Tough One, by putting forward, as he used to do, annoying ideas like Atatürk’s national policy, bilateral treaties, military bases etc., is increasing his transgressions against the government.”⁸

In his book, *America within Turkey*, Nevzat Üstün, after revealing that the “Tough One” mentioned in the report is İsmet İnönü, adds the following: “The traitor that wrote the report is shameless enough to describe Atatürk’s national policy as ‘annoying.’”⁹

The two skyscrapers of the World Trade Center in New York stood behind the Statue of Liberty, who holds a torch in her hands. We witnessed the US attack Asia after September 11. Everything that happened was written in a poem years ago:

A woman who lit the way for centuries

Is ready to cry on the shore.
 Anger on her cheeks,
 Blood on her skirt,
 Fallen off her waist
 Her rainbow.

In a sunny clime
 Skyscraper has closed its curtains.
 A flag is fluttering
 In a timeless tempest
 That sweeps the Asian shores.

The tempest began
 Even before the Books foretold;
 Stars would fall
 On a hopeless flag fold.

Let us listen to Orhan Kemal in order to learn who the writer of this poem is: "I was with Nazım. I was under his strong influence. Nazım shouted, 'Find your own voice', and showed examples from Rifat Ilgaz and Celal Sılay..."¹⁰ The person who wrote the poem about September 11 and its aftermath in a way that would make Nostradamus jealous, whom Nazım holds up as an example, who with the honor like that of a Native American Chief has never given up and from whose smiling photo we take our strength is our valued teacher, Rifat Ilgaz. The title of the poem is "Skyscraper" and the year it was written is 1968.

Exactly 40 years to the day of the attack, on September 11, 1961, Nazım writes his famous poem, "Autobiography", in Berlin:

At thirty they wanted to hang me
 At forty eight they wanted to give me the medal of Peace
 And so they did¹¹

The United States' attack on Afghanistan to catch bin Laden did not convince any sensible person. The real target was the Middle East. And so it happened. The Israeli tanks invaded Palestine with the excuse of "hunting down terrorists." While I was watching the candle lit press conference held in the shelter where the Palestinian leader, Arafat, was hiding, I had the following question in my mind: if it weren't for the September 11, would the world leave Arafat, who had won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1994, alone and hopeless like this?

In the first years that White Man started to spread in America, a Native American was killed in the market place where he brought the furs of the

animals he hunted. The others couldn't understand the murder of their friend whose furs were stolen. Why did the White Man do that? He came to the market place to give his furs to the White Man anyway.

The market place is cursed and named "the place of the great drunk"...

The name of that place in their language is "Manhattan," the place where the World Trade Center that was destroyed on September 11 used to stand!

University of Manchester

Burcu.Alkan@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

NOTES

All notes are by Burcu Alkan.

¹ Rifat Ilgaz, *Karartma Geceleri* (Istanbul: Çınar, 1999), p. 29.

² Rifat Ilgaz, "Şiirde", ed. Aydın Ilgaz, *Bütün Şiirleri 1927-1991* (Istanbul: Çınar 2002), p. 161.

³ Ilgaz, "Son Şiirim", *Bütün Şiirleri*, p. 335.

⁴ Akın looks up to, and often references in his writings, both Hikmet and Ilgaz. A poem by Ilgaz, and a small part of another poem by Hikmet, appear in "Beating Around the Bush," Akın's piece translated here.

⁵ Sunay Akın, *Onlar Hep Oradaydı* (Istanbul: Çınar, 2002), p. 48-52.

⁶ Former World Bank economist, he was invited to Turkey to become the Minister of Economy.

⁷ Former Captain, member of the Parliament and writer, an important character of 1950-60s Turkey.

⁸ Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-38) was the founder and the First President of Modern Turkey (1923).

⁹ Nevzat Üstün (1924-79) was a populist-realist writer and poet. İsmet İnönü (1884-73) was Atatürk's close friend, soldier and statesman, the second President of the Republic of Turkey.

¹⁰ Orhan Kemal (1914-70) was a populist-realist writer. Celal Sılay (1914-74) was a poet known with his mystic and philosophical style.

¹¹ In 1950, Hikmet shared the International Peace Prize with Pablo Neruda.