

Nâzim Hikmet



One of the most important figures in 20th century Turkish literature, Nâzim Hikmet (1902-1963) became during his lifetime the best-known Turkish poet in the West and his works were translated into several languages. He was popularly acclaimed as the first and foremost modern Turkish poet recognizable for the themes of his lyrics and the regular use of free verses. However, in his home country Hikmet was condemned for his commitment to Marxism, remaining a controversial figure for many years after his death. A fervent nationalist patriot, a socialist whose humanistic views transcended barriers of race and country. For many years his works were banned in his native land and he himself suffered long exile, in Russia first and then in Romania and Poland, alternated with long prison terms in Turkey.

The young Nâzim started to write following the example of his grandfather, poet as well. Soon he realized that poetry was the natural way to fully express his feelings. It was a part of his way of being in the world, to live it, to know it, to tell about it. Like Withman, Hikmet speaks about himself, his country, and the world in the same breath. At once personal and public, his poetry records his life without reducing it to self-consciousness; he affirms the reality of facts at the same time in which he insists in the validity of his feelings. His human presence or the controlling figure of his personality - playful, optimistic, and capable of childlike joy- keeps his poems open, public, and committed to social and artistic change. And in the perfect oneness of his life and art, Hikmet emerges as a heroic figure. His early poems proclaim this unity as a faith: art is an event, he maintains, in social as well as literary history, and a poet's bearing in art is inseparable from his bearing in life. The rest of Hikmet's

life gave him ample opportunity to act upon this faith and, in fact to deepen it. As Terrence Des Pres observed, Hikmet's exemplary life and special vision at once historical and timeless, Marxist and mystical, had unique consequences for his art: "Simply because in his art and in his person Hikmet opposes the enemies of the human spirit in harmony with itself and the earth, he can speak casually and yet with a seriousness that most modern American poets never dream of attempting." In a sense, Hikmet's prosecutors honoured him by believing a book of poems could incite the military to revolt; indeed, the fact that he was persecuted attests to the credibility of his belief in the vital importance of his art. Yet, the suffering his faith cost him -he never compromised in this life or art- is only secondary to the suffering that must have gone into keeping that faith. The circumstances of Hikmet's life are very much to the point, not only because he continually chose to remain faithful to his vision, but also because his life and art form a dramatic whole. Sartre remarked that Hikmet conceived of a human being as something to be created. In his life no less than in his art, Hikmet forged this new kind of person, who was heroic by virtue of being a creator. This conception of the artist as a hero and of the hero as a creator saves art from becoming a frivolous activity in the modern world; as Hikmet's career dramatizes, poetry is a matter of life and death.

Reading his lyrics we get a glimpse of the synthesis of his art: his poetry appears like a conversation with the man; the consciousness of all that passes in the world; his love, true love, for life. Love intended as the ensemble of all that moves the feelings, their battle, their pain, their hope. Love as synonym of life. *On living* represents perfectly Nâzım Hikmet's poetry. Its verses fly as light as a feather on the page but, at the same time, they strike hard the attention of the reader: the joy of life is also the responsibility of the same towards the others and towards ourselves.

YASAMAYA DAİR

(1948)

*Yasamak sakaya gelmez,
büyük bir ciddiyetle yasayacaksın
bir sincap gibi mesela,
yani, yasamanın dışında ve ötesinde hiçbir şey beklemeden,
yani bütün işin gücün yaşamak olacak.*

*Yasamayı ciddiye alacaksın,
yani o derecede, öylesine ki,*

*mesela, kollarin bagli arkadan, sirtin duvarda,
yahut kocaman gözlüklerin,
beyaz gömleğinle bir laboratuvar
insanlar için ölebileceksin,
hem de yüzünü bile görmediğin insanlar için,
hem de hiç kimse seni buna zorlamamışken,
hem de en güzel en gerçek şeyin
yasamak oldugunu bildiğin halde.*

*Yani, öylesine ciddiye alacaksın ki yaşamayı,
yetmişinde bile, mesela, zeytin dikeceksin,
hem de öyle çocuklara falan kalır diye değil,
ölmekten korktuğun halde ölüme inanmadığın için,
yasamak yani ağır bastığından.*

ON LIVING

(1948)

*Living is no laughing matter:
you must live with great seriousness
like a squirrel, for example-
I mean without looking for something beyond and above living,
I mean living must be your whole occupation.
Living is no laughing matter:
you must take it seriously,
so much so and to such a degree
that, for example, your hands tied behind your back,
your back to the wall,
or else in a laboratory
in your white coat and safety glasses,
you can die for people-
even for people whose faces you've never seen,*

*even no one has forced on you
even though you know living
is the most real, the most beautiful thing.
I mean, you must take living so seriously
that even at seventy, for example, you'll plant olive trees-
and not for your children, either,
but because although you fear death you don't believe it,
because living, I mean, weighs heavier.*

(Special thanks to Burcu Demirtasoglu for her precious help in the translation of the poem)