

PERSONIFICATION OF THE NON-HUMAN AS SYMBOLS OF LOVE IN ATTLA İLHAN'S POETRY

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Abstract: *The purpose of this study is twofold: first, to introduce the renowned Turkish poet Attila İlhan to foreign readers and to highlight İlhan's significance as a uniquely modernist, social realist and an eclectic poet who managed to bring into Turkish poetry innovative styles, language use, romanticism and creative expressions; secondly, to display how a poet of such qualities used symbols in his poetry by the help of language, to evoke sensations, states of mind, individual troubles and fears and love, along with a subtle presentation of social awareness and the dilemmas of the modern man in this chaotic and misty universe.*

Keywords: *Attila İlhan, symbols, personification, Turkish poetry*

Attila İlhan is one of the forerunners of modernism in the Republican era modern Turkish poetry. Turkish poetry started to undergo a change during the Reformation period in the 19th century under the cultural and political influence of the West and mainly of France, due to the increase in contacts. However, as the modernization efforts and cultural and literary relations gained momentum especially by way of translations, a new approach and appreciation in Turkish poetry became visible among the intellectual and artistic circles during the early years of modern Turkish Republic. This new approach and thinking in poetry and in arts in general, was represented by the İkinci Yeni movement (Second New). As the name suggests, this new movement initiated arguments and discussions about the form and content of Turkish poetry and the importance of doing away with the old and outdated forms and formal and thematic restrictions. İkinci Yeni movement marked a radical change by 'its objection to aesthetic autonomy' (Armağan 2007: iv) which dominated poetry until that time, and as a contrast, 'drew upon an autonomous poetical language' (Armağan 2007: iv) and an emphasis on the individuality of the poet; and hence, 'characterised the poem as a structure independent from politics and morality' (Armağan 2007: iv).

Under these conditions and during these discussions, Attila İlhan was introduced to the world of poetry in his early years by his father and mother who were artistically oriented persons. He started writing poetry during his primary school years and he came across with Nazım Hikmet, the world renowned Turkish poet who is regarded as the initiator of contemporary Turkish poetry. İlhan met, during the early years of his poetic career, classical Turkish poetry called the court poetry of the Ottomans as well, and produced some poems under its influence. Actually, İlhan aspired from, and was influenced by various old and new sources of Turkish poetry. Court poetry was one them, also the İkinci Yeni movement which he did not totally approve of. The main influence was going to be the

modernist French poetry which he met during his travels to France, first in 1949 and consistently several times after that date.

İlhan received his first prize in Poetry, leaving behind a number of famous and more experienced poets, when he was a lycee student, in a national poetry competition. His first poetry book “Duvar” (The Wall) was published in 1946 at the age of 21. According to Yakup Çelik (2016) the book comprised 7 poems bearing similarities in terms of themes and narrative technique. The landscape of these poems is the Gavur Mountains in southern Anatolia where he spent his early childhood, with an extended time span going back to the pre-war of liberation, during the war of liberation after WWI, and the Republican period. According to Yakup Çelik, the poems speak in a social realistic manner, the lifestyles of local people entwined and connected with the landscape they lived in (Çelik 2016). According to İlhan himself, these poems narrate war by a youth who has not experienced it in flesh and blood, but who has experienced its ruthlessness and meanness through hearing about it on the radio or through queues for bread, blackouts, and mobilisations, in flesh and blood (Alkan 2015).

His interest in social realism thriving on traditional forms of court poetry and the Anatolian folk poetry reflects hints of Nazım Hikmet’s influence on his art in his early years. Çelik writes that the early period of Attila İlhan poetry is devoted to the socially- concerned themes and motifs such as the people, myths, folk tales as well as the poverty and unfavourable living conditions of the villagers (Çelik 2016).

Attila İlhan’s poetic evolution into the margins of modernist poetry did not happen overnight. According to Kahraman, İlhan’s breakaway from socially-conscious poetry started around 1950’s before his going to France, and his transformation into modernist poetry happened in the manner of a unique consciousness (Kahraman 2000: 7). As mentioned above, İlhan’s political and poetical affinities with Nazım Hikmet around his socialist views led him to join a campaign in Paris to plead release for Nazım Hikmet from prison. This confrontation with Nazım Hikmet and with Hikmet’ s poetical focus comprising social- realist and folk- tradition themes and style influenced the poetry of Attila İlhan’s early period. However, this influence was not going to last long and İlhan was soon to turn to modernist poetica under the influence of French modernists and imagists, especially Plehanov himself became a solid model for İlhan whom he met during his time in Paris in early and mid 1950’s. In his own words from his preface from his poetry collection “Sisler Bulvarı” (Boulevard of Mist):

Meeting Plehanov in Paris, witnessing the different attitude of French socialist poets opens new horizons before me. I regard my ‘inek toplumculuğumu’ as a child’s disease for my art. Dealing with natural and social dialectics iç içe, I melt the winds of poets and schools which I had considered as harmful until now in the unique composition of my personality. Who are these poets, what are these schools, you ask. Baudelaire to Rimbaud, Apollinaire to Mallarme, to name a few. A variety of schools from existantialism to surrealism, to lettrism! Our

toplumcu poetry masters in 1940's İstanbul had banned these bourgoise poets, whereas in Paris, I had heard from Aragon's mouth that French poetry started with Baudelaire. Indeed, he himself and Eluard, as well as Tristan Tzara were poets of two schools, they came down from dadism and surrealism. (Alkan 2015: 2) (translation mine)

Kahraman, on the other hand, asserts that İlhan's urban poetry embellished with a flavor of folk poetry did not come into being during his time in Paris. He traces that period back to 1948 when his collection of poems "Duvar" (The Wall) was published. (Kahraman 2000: 7). He goes on to say that İlhan was going to put this style behind and begin to adopt and reproduce a style comprising a new understanding of the style of traditional court poetry (ibid.). Kahraman concludes that İlhan, similar to a degree to Nazım Hikmet, when taking up local themes adopted a traditional approach, while, when he tried to produce the poetry of a cosmic issue, opted for a totally innovative and unique structure (Kahraman 2000).

Çelik (2016) puts forward that İlhan's initiation into modernist and imagist poetry happened through Plehanov in Paris. Nevertheless, following his move towards modernist poetry, İlhan began to include topics such as the city, industrial problems, international capital, the problems of the self amid the depressing city life, man's impossible love, and eventual loneliness amid the problems brought about by industrialism and development in his poetry in an imagist and symbolic style, loaded with heavily ornamented vocabulary and figures of speech. Symbols for İlhan became an important poetical device used as an 'evocative power of words to express the feelings, sensations, and states of mind that lie beyond everyday awareness' (<http://www.textetc.com/modernist.html>).

The French poet Charles Baudelaire, for instance, created 'open-ended symbols which brought the invisible into being through the visible, and linked the invisible through other sensory perceptions, notably smell and sound' (ibid.). Likewise, for İlhan, symbols enabled him to express his inner self in a language he created originally in his poems, which was not seen in Turkish poetry before. The striking quality of his love symbols focused around their availability to create the space for İlhan to perform his socially-concerned topics under the guise of these symbols of love in the form of personifications of objects or mental images and concepts, which will be discussed in this study. To begin with, these comments about İlhan and his symbols can be studied in his poem "The Fine Rover" as a first example:

...
...

Once you take to the road it's for life,
searching for lunch and wine,
following the cranes,
deserting great cities, great loves
In tears and sadness.

I have loved like a child, have suffered like a giant.
 all the worlds are in my veins,
 despite wars, starvation, loneliness.
 ... (transl. by McKane in Kayacan 1992: 115)

Manifestly, the excerpt from the poem displays İlhan's modernist poetical tendencies in the poem. The poem, in the first place, whirls around the topic of "I" reflecting the foregrounding of the speaker with his feelings, regrets and longings. Now, İlhan's social realism is understated behind the "I", showing a steady tendency towards the modernist tradition of highlighting the "I" as opposed to the social and general topics of social realism, together with folk poetry colours. The used symbols are particularly important from then on in İlhan's poetry. It has been argued by his critics such as Çelik, Kahraman, Alkan and many more, that the influence of the modernist French poets on İlhan beginning from 1949 to mid 1960s is heavily felt especially in his reliance upon the use of symbols, imagery and closed and archaic vocabulary for the sake of obscurity and ambiguity. In the above excerpt from his poem "The Fine Rover", the "road" is a symbol of man's eternal quest for something not openly stated, which may be stability, love, happiness, self-fulfillment, or even, an indefinite nostalgia. On the other hand, the word "child" is the symbol of pure and innocent love which also symbolises the pathetic outcome of this love which resulted in his suffering like a giant. Here, the "giant" can stand for a symbol of endurance or perseverance. The words "lunch" and "wine", symbols of avantgardism and bohemianism in modernist poetry accentuate the search for the self-fulfilment of the "I".

Considering the line "Following the cranes", the crane is the most significant symbol in this poem. As a non-human object, so much is attached to it as it is a symbol in classical Turkish poetry and folk poetry of Anatolia. According to Kara and Teres (2012: 194), the crane is the symbol of fidelity, sack, profusion, welfare, pureness, patience, honour, love and freedom in Turkish culture. On the other hand, it is the messenger of enthusiasm, sadness and well-being' (ibid.). Another important significance of crane as a non-human symbol is that they are migratory birds, who do not stay only in one place forever. In the poem, the crane symbolises the journey the speaker sets out to seek the concepts the crane symbolises. Although the speaker mentions about his experience of great loves, apparently, leaving these behind and following the route of cranes point out his search for true love and loyalty as well.

Attila İlhan's non-human personifications as symbols of love as seen in the above instances can be elaborated on in one of his most famous poems, Sisler Bulvarı (Boulevard of Mists). Sisler Bulvarı was published in 1954, in a collection of poems published under the same name. According to Erol and Özer (2012) in their study 'Attila İlhan' in Sisler Bulvarı Şiiri Üzerine Bir Tahlil Denemesi' (An analysis of Attila İlhan's poem Sisler Bulvarı); İlhan's social realist stance does not display itself in this poem where the 'I' and the themes of 'tension, escape from the landscape and love' seem to be domineering the whole of the poem. They

add that, however, the 'I' and the above themes do not signify a total cut off or alienation from the everyday tensions and the realities of city life. On the contrary, "the themes and the foregrounding of 'I' is a manifestation of the concerns, anxiety and the isolation of the 'I'" (transl. mine) (Erol, Özer 2012) in a heavily imagist and symbolical style which at times, tends towards melancholy and a depressive mood, a stylistic device which is uniquely Attila İlhan's. The reliance on heavy images and non-human personifications as symbols of love, escape and tension is Attila İlhan's adaptation of the characteristics of Modernist poetry to the qualities and flavor of modern Turkish poetry. Indeed, as quoted by Erol and Özer (2012), from Aliye (1999), Attila İlhan himself, in an interview, says that the theme of 'evasion' was introduced to Turkish poetry for the first time in Sisler Bulvarı.

When Sisler Bulvarı is analysed as an distinct instance of a modernist Turkish poem in terms of the occurrence of the non-human personification as symbols of love, the following might be deduced even in the first sentence of the first stanza:

elinin arkasında güneş duruyordu	the sun was standing behind his hand
aylardan kasımdı üşüyorduk	it was November we were cold
ağacın biri bulvarda ölüyordu	a tree was dying on the boulevard
şehrin camları kaygısız gülüyordu	the windows of the city were recklessly laughing
her köşe başında öpüşüyorduk	we were kissing at every corner
(İlhan 2014: 55)	(transl. mine)

The sun standing behind the beloved's hand is the symbol of warmth, hope and happiness that come with love, which is obstructed and unable to warm the personae. It is a non-human object, yet capable of emitting warm feelings unfortunately not strong enough, in these lines. The tree in the third line is also a non-human personification symbolising, according to Erol and Özer (2012) the speaker himself, who, in the following stanzas, will dramatise and visualise his own death and fears of dying in a cinematographic narration. The tree is, in this line, dying in a symbolical way because of the chilling landscape of the boulevard which is preventing the lovers to warm in each others arms.

Another non-human personification is the city windows that recklessly laugh, most probably they are laughing at the lovers who kiss at every corner. Kissing at every corner is a manifestation of the deepest love, the lovers are cold and obstructed by the city to receive the glimpse of sun rays. Sadly, the windows of the city, unaware that they are obstructing the sun, are reckless towards the lovers and do not care for the sun or the looming death of the speaker. The personification of the city windows is also a symbol indirectly related to love but used as a destructive effect in the stanza.

The poem in its entirety is actually dominated by the mist, as the title suggests. The mist is the non-human personification of many things at once. It is the symbol of cold and destined love; it is the obscurity of the personae amid

the alienating conditions of the city life; it is the ruthlessness of living conditions that leads the speaker to evasiveness and self-destruction. The poem is loaded with endless images this symbol creates, together with a very dramatic narration that is close to cinematography with a touch of sentimentality and melancholy as created in the following lines:

sisler bulvarında öleceğim	I will die on the boulevard of mists
sol kasığımdan vuracaklar	they will shoot me from my left groin
bulvar durağında düşeceğim	I will fall down at the boulevard stop
gözlüklerim kırılacaklar	my specs will brake
sen rüyasını göreceksin	you will see it in your dream
çığlık çığlığı uyanacaksın	you will wake up screaming
sabah kapını çalacaklar	they will be at your door next morning
elinden tutup getirecekler	they will take you by the hand and lead you
beni görünce taş kesileceksin	you will be dumbfounded at the sight of me
ağlamayacaksın! ağlamayacaksın!	you will not cry! you will not cry!
(İlhan 2014: 55)	(transl. mine)

The poem, as is conspicuous in the above stanza, is experimenting with the innovative stylistic approach, creates the extremely personal and subjective mood by means of romantic, even gothic imagery and symbolism. As mentioned by İlhan himself, this modernist involvement with the personal takes over the social realist themes in the poem which are understood through the symbols of the city and the boulevard.

Attila İlhan, in his essays on literature and poetry and in his prefaces to his poetry collections have always defended embellished, and heavy vocabulary along with obscure and ambiguous messages and implications in poetry, in order that it will be regarded as an art form. For him aesthetic and artistic qualities make up a poem. Memet Fuat, one of the leading figures in Turkish cultural polysystem as a literary critic and publisher evaluates Attila İlhan and his poetry in the following lines (transl. mine):

Attila İlhan recognized Nazım Hikmet as the master, and although he did not find it very successful, he was in favour of the social realist poetry of that period. He appeared to have a countenance which suggested that he was to deal with important subjects and to take Turkish poetry forward, to a more contemporary level than Nazım Hikmet brought. Those who wanted to confront his hard criticism claimed that his poetry was not original and that all he was doing was to follow the outdated movement of free verse. In 1950's it was observed that Attila İlhan's poetry underwent great changes, gained a more original character and entwined social and personal concerns in its content. These poems with their brand new imagery, repetitive sounds, their unconventional lines, along with their extreme sentimentality received warm welcome from the intellectual circles, contrary to the expectations of a possible rejection. Actually, individualist Attila İlhan poetry, due to its lack of hints, was a 'closed'

type of socially- concerned poetry... In his later stages, Attila İlhan displayed affinities with the traditional court poetry. ... Hence, in modern Turkish poetry, he established himself as the only socially-concerned poet who was a proponent of old language use. (Fuat 1991: 39)

Attila İlhan's fondness of symbols and imagery in his poetry is a modernist trait in general, but this fondness gains an originality in his treatment of the symbols for veiling the social themes which are very subtly handled in his poems. The symbols of love, mostly created through personification of abstract or concrete objects, are intertwined with the social problem that pressurizes or depresses or even frightens the persona and weaves the melancholic mood which is forever present in his poems. In the poem *Yağmur Kaçağı* (The rain fugitive) the following lines point at İlhan's above quality:

elimden tut yoksa düşeceğim	old my hand or I'll fall down
yoksa bir bir yıldızlar düşecek	or the stars will fall one after the other
eğer şairsem beni tanırsan	if I am a poet if you know me
yağmurdan korktuğumu bilirsen	if you know I am scared of rain
gözlerim aklına gelirse	if my eyes come to your mind
elimden tut yoksa düşeceğim	hold my hand or I'll fall down
yağmur beni götürecektir yoksa beni	the rain will take me away or it will
(Fuat 1991: 40)	(transl. mine)

In these lines the poet is talking about the themes of loneliness, fear, love and companionship in a conversational tone, however the Turkish is obscure and ungrammatical, making it hard for the reader to understand the understated meanings. It is actually a monologue, the speaker is addressing his lover and asks her to share his loneliness and to help him overcome his fears. The rain in these lines is a symbol of more than one concept. In the first place, the rain represents parting from the beloved; he wants her to hold his hand and not to let him go. Secondly, in terms of love, rain is its symbol especially in the title *Yağmur Kaçağı* (The Rain Fugitive), he is simultaneously in love but scared of love because of the troubles, most probably social, and the pressures of love. Another interpretation of the rain as a symbol is its metaphorical significance as a representative of the modern man's dissolution amid the city life.

As a conclusion, Attila İlhan is a significant Turkish poet who is also one of the forerunners of modernist Turkish poetry with a flavour of his own. The flavour comes from his ability to mix modernist elements of theme, style and form with those of traditional Turkish poetry and Turkish folk poetry, along with a dash of melancholy, romanticism and cinematographic narration in which, in some instances in poems like *Sisler Bulvarı*, *Ben Sana Mecburum*, he, more often than not, gets carried away. Within this constitution of his poems, his symbols of love, always in the shape of personifications rather than metaphors, hid in themselves his escapist and evasive tone in terms of modern man's dilemmas and, become suggestive of multiple meanings and interpretations. Nevertheless, with all these

peculiarities, Attila İlhan has managed to become a model poet for the coming generation of Turkish poets with his ability 'to look at our age from the window of realism with a romantic sensitivity' (Alkan 2015: 3).

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