

MODERN TRADITIONALIST YAHYA KEMAL BEYATLI

Xénia CELNAROVÁ

Institute of Oriental and African Studies, Slovak Academy of Sciences,
Klemensova 19, 813 64 Bratislava, Slovakia

Yahya Kemal Beyatlı (1884-1958) is presented in dictionaries and encyclopedias as a neoclassicist, but also as the last representative of classical Ottoman poetry (*Divan şiiiri*). The poet did not give up the traditional metre (*aruz*) and rhyme even in the period when the syllabic metre and free verse completely dominated Turkish poetry. However, Yahya Kemal did not use the classical metre and rhyme, or the traditional forms of Arabic and Persian poetry (*gazel*, *kaside*, *rubai* and others) as ends in themselves. He subordinated them to his own conception of poetry, which was connected with the cultural and aesthetic trends of Western Europe and especially France in the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.

Two factors played a decisive role in shaping the poet and essayist Yahya Kemal. The first was his childhood and youth in his native Skopje (*Üsküp*), the second, his years of maturing in Paris.

Far from cosmopolitan Istanbul, in provincial, still strongly Turkish and Islamic Skopje, the future poet originally called Mehmet Agah, was educated in the spirit of the old traditions.¹ His mother Nakiye Hanım was a niece of one of the last significant representatives of classical Ottoman poetry Leskofçalı Galip Bey (1829-1867). She gently led her son towards religion, singing of Turkish religious songs (*ilâhi*), and awakened a feeling for poetry and music in him. The combination of poetic words and music at the religious ceremonies (*âyin*) in the dervish convents (*tekke*, *dergâh*) even more strongly impressed themselves into the consciousness of the perceptive boy. He began to participate in these assemblies when he was thirteen, after his mother's death. The cultivated head of the Rufai brotherhood, Saddredin Efendi, brought the beauty of the poetry of the great Persian-Anatolian poet Mevlâna Celâleddin Rumî close to him. Rumî's poetry led the young Yahya Kemal to the Mevlevî monastery. The poetry, music and dance during the evenings which he spent there left a deep impression on

¹ KABAKLI, A.: *Türk Edebiyatı* (Turkish Literature) III. İstanbul 1990, p. 429.

the future poet.² The impressions of the first two decades, which the poet spent in a traditional Turkish Islamic environment, constantly emerged in his consciousness, even after more than half a century of further life, which he led in completely different conditions.

Yahya Kemal took his first steps from the old traditions towards a new cultural and aesthetic direction after his arrival in Istanbul in the spring of 1902. The place of his favourite poets Rumî, Ruhî, Nabi, Abdülhak Hâmid was taken by representatives of the so-called New Literature (*Edebiyat-ı Cedide*) headed by Tevfik Fikret. Europe breathed on him from French novels translated into Turkish. While his own country seemed like a prison to him, he saw the light of the world in Europe. He decided to go to Paris, which “shone like a star”³ in his thoughts.

In June 1903, Yahya Kemal set out on his journey to Paris, where he stayed for nine years. In the poem “Old Paris” (*Eski Paris*), he later spoke of these years as about “life on another star”.⁴ In the course of a year he learnt French and began to eagerly acquaint himself with the cultural currents characteristic of the period not only in France, but also in other European countries. “In the atmosphere of French poetry, thought and taste, I lived like a fish in water”,⁵ wrote the poet in his memoirs.

When Yahya Kemal read the poetry of the French symbolists Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud and Verlaine in the original, the new Turkish poetry appeared to him only as its shadow,⁶ in spite of the fact that it declared support for the message of symbolism.

In the poetry of the symbolists, Yahya Kemal was mainly interested in the connection between words and music. “*De la musique avant toute chose*,” this verse from Verlaine’s programme poem *Art poétique* (1873-4) became the credo of the Turkish poet. Perhaps it was precisely Verlaine’s collection of poems *Romances sans paroles* (1874), in which the majority of poems have the form of songs with a rich rhythmic variation of verses, which motivated Yahya Kemal to call one of his later poems “Composition without Words” (*Guftesiz beste*).⁷

The collection *Fêtes galantes* by Paul Verlaine (1869) played an important role in the poetic orientation of Yahya Kemal. It is an evocation of the gallant 18th century in scenes based on the pictures and drawings of the painter Watteau. These delicate, deeply felt studies of the atmosphere of former times,

² On the relationship of Yahya Kemal to Sufiism see: ÖNDER, M.: *Yahya Kemal’de Tasavvuf ve Mevlâna Hayranlığı* (Mysticism in Yahya Kemal and His Admiration for Mevlana). Millî Kültür 1984, 46, pp. 34-36.

³ YAHYA KEMAL: *Tarih Musahabeleri* (Historical Essays). İstanbul 1975, p. 74.

⁴ YAHYA KEMAL: *Kendi Gök Kubbemiz* (Our Own Sky). İstanbul 1973, p. 114.

⁵ YAHYA KEMAL: *Çocukluğum, Gençliğim, Siyasî ve Edebî Hatıralarım* (My Childhood, My Youth, My Political and Literary Memories). İstanbul 1973, p. 114.

⁶ Ibid., p. 101.

⁷ YAHYA KEMAL: *Kendi Gök Kubbemiz*, pp. 147-148.

which the melodicity of the verse strongly facilitated, awakened an interest in the young Turk in the poetry of the poets of the “tulip period” (*lâle devri*). This happy period of Ottoman history in the reign of Ahmed III (1703-1730) was notable not only for pompous celebrations, but also for the flourishing of poetry, music, architecture and the fine arts.

Yahya Kemal, inspired by Verlaine, evokes the “tulip period” in some poems in the style and language of its greatest poet Nedim (died 1730).⁸ However, before starting to compose his own poems in harmony with classical Ottoman poetry, he needed to get to know this poetry better. For this, it was essential to renew and perfect his knowledge of Arabic and Persian. Therefore Yahya Kemal registered to study at a language school in Paris.⁹

The poetry of José Maria de Heredia (1842-1905) was very stimulating to the young poet. Although Yahya Kemal looked at the creative work of this parnasist with critical reservations, Heredia’s single collection of poems *Les Trophées* became his “space” and “destiny”.¹⁰ The poems with a typically parnasist theme allegedly led Yahya Kemal to the literature of ancient Greece and Rome. However, Heredia’s love of the heroic and monumental, is undoubtedly reflected in the poems of Yahya Kemal on the theme of Ottoman history.

Yahya Kemal wrote the first poems of a planned historical cycle, “The Turkish Epic” (*Türk destanı*)¹¹ during his stay abroad. The aim of Yahya Kemal was that his approach to the themes of Turkish history would differ from the tortured, obscure, coded utterances of representatives of the *Edebiyat-ı Cedide*.¹²

The historical consciousness of the poet was formed with a significant contribution from the French historian Albert Sorel (1842-1906). In his first years of study at the École libre des sciences politiques (1904-1908), Yahya Kemal had the opportunity to attend Sorel’s lectures. Under their influence, he formed his own conception of the Turkish nation and its culture, which differed from the views of the Pan-Islamists and Pan-Turkists.¹³ He understood the Turks as a nation, which was born on the soil of Asia Minor and the Balkans. The language, culture and history of this nation were formed here, with the interaction of the Islamic and Mediterranean cultures and civilization.

⁸ They are especially the poems *Şerefabad* (the name of a pavilion on the Asian shore of the Bosphorus), *Bir Sâki* (A Cupbearer), *Mükerrer Gazel* (Repeted Gazel), *Mâhurdan Gazel* (Gazel in the Mahur Rhythm). In: *Eski Şiirin Rüzgârıyla* (With the Wind of an Old Poem). İstanbul 1974, pp. 29-30, 31-32, 33-34, 53-54.

⁹ KURDAKUL, Ş.: *Çağdaş Türk Edebiyatı. Meşrutiyet Dönemi* (Modern Turkish Literature, Constitutional Period). Broy Yayınevi 1986, p. 192.

¹⁰ YAHYA KEMAL: *Çocukluğum*, pp. 108-110.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 104. These were the poems *Akımlar* (Raids), *Akıncılar* (Raiders) and *Korsanlar* (Corsairs). Yahya Kemal’s cycle of poems with a historical theme was never completed in the form of an independent collection. Individual poems appeared in periodicals, and after the poet’s death they were collected in the volumes *Eski Şiirin Rüzgârıyla* and *Kendi Gök Kubbemiz*.

¹² Ibid., p. 103.

¹³ KABAKLI, A.: *Türk Edebiyatı*, p. 131.

While still in Paris, Yahya Kemal wrote some poems on subjects borrowed from Ancient Greece, inspired by the Heredia's sonnets. After returning to Istanbul, he and the writer Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu initiated a new literary current with the name *Nev-Yunânîlik* (Neo-Hellenism).¹⁴

When Yahya Kemal returned to his homeland after nine years in Paris, he took with him, not only definite ideas about what requirements a "genuine poetry" (*öz şiir*) should fulfil, but also the conviction that the history of the Turkish nation, like its art, needed to be reevaluated from a new point of view.

Yahya Kemal regarded the geographical factor as primary to the formation of a nation in the modern sense of the word. Immediately after it, he placed history. The historic factor was determined to a significant degree by the locality or living space in which the nation was situated. These factors are followed by ethnic origin, language and religion.¹⁵ The first three of these factors, that is geographical position, history and ethnic origin, roughly agree with the factors considered decisive by Hippolite Taine (1828-1893) in his theory of environment. According to this theory, most clearly formulated by Taine in the theoretical-aesthetic introduction to his monumental *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* (1863), man and together with him the work of art is the product of three factors: *race*, natural and social *milieu* and the historical *moment*.¹⁶

Yahya Kemal was convinced that with the decline and fall of the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish nation stood on the edge of the loss of its independence, and it needed to free itself from its feeling of inferiority compared to the West. A return to its glorious past could assist this. Yahya Kemal inserted reminiscences of this past glory into many of his poems. He believed that like individuals, whole nations find their identity in their own past. The future also has its foundations in the past, since it is constantly necessary to return to the past in memory.¹⁷

The poem "Open Sea" (*Açık deniz*) has key importance for understanding Yahya Kemal's returns to the past, and not only in themes, but also in poetic character and language. The poem was first published in 1925, in the periodical *Tavus Mecmuası* and became the event of the year in Turkish literature.¹⁸ This poem was the result of the long and precise work with an idea, which came into the poet's mind during his first journey to England in 1906.

In his search for infinity the poet came to the land of Byron. Here, at the frontier of the earth, he saw a raging sea. "Only it is the enormous open and the

¹⁴ For more details see TOKER, Ş.: *Edebiyatımızda Nev-Yunânîlik Akımı* (The Neo-Hellenic Movement in our Literature). Türk Dili Edebiyatı Araştırmaları Dergisi, 1982, 1, p. 136.

¹⁵ KABAKLI, A.: *Türk Edebiyatı*, p. 434.

¹⁶ *Dějiny francouzské literatury 2., 19. a 20. století* (History of French Literature 2, 19th and 20th Centuries), Praha 1976, p. 31.

¹⁷ Paraphrased according to the words of Yahya Kemal quoted in: KABAKLI, A.: *Türk Edebiyatı*, p. 434.

¹⁸ MUTLUAY, R.: *50 Yılın Türk Edebiyatı* (50 Years of Turkish Literature). İstanbul 1973, p. 161.

spectacle!” he calls in ecstasy.¹⁹ The poet felt a spiritual attraction, which drew him towards limitless spaces and the endless, towards the sea, which in its racing constantly strikes the shore. The desire to overcome the limitations of existence is like an unquenchable thirst. The poet tries to satisfy this thirst with memories. Here at the end of Europe, he understands the ambition of his ancestors. Those ancestors whose invasions were directed towards the west for centuries.²⁰

“Perfect is the man, who lives by memories” says the first verse of the poem “Verses to a Friend” (*Bir dosta misralar*).²¹ The perfect man - *al-insan al-kâmil* is an important concept of Sufism. He is the mystic, who achieves the highest level of knowledge of God, who finds God in himself. In the poem “Song of the Sea” (*Deniz türküsü*), Yahya Kemal calls on man to give in to intoxication with ideas without fears and doubts, and for a moment become God.²²

This is mysticism, but already not the mysticism, which Yahya Kemal learnt in his early youth. In many of his poems, the spirit of the new mysticism of Bergson blows. It raises intuition to the level of a divine force. According to Bergson, it is precisely this creative intuition, which enables artists to catch the rhythm of depicted things and phenomena, to comprehend their internal essence. For Yahya Kemal, with his intense relationship to music, Bergson’s comparison of the spiritual process to the gradual development of a melody, had to be very close. Bergson understands every reminiscence as a new creative moment, similar to a new note in a melody. In Bergson’s understanding, art is a process of reminiscence and dreaming.²³ It is also possible to look at the creative poetry of Yahya Kemal from a similar point of view.

Reminiscence and dreaming is also characteristic of the poetry of Yahya Kemal’s contemporary, the talented poet Ahmet Haşim (1884-1933). Haşim takes his reminiscences and dreams from the real world, to which he feels aversion, to a ghostly country with an unreal beloved. Yahya Kemal, in contrast is also firmly rooted in the earth in his reminiscences and dreaming, but in a concrete environment and time. The figures in his poems are certainly not phantoms, but living people, often concrete individuals, historical figures, such as Sultan Selim I, the title figure of the long epic poem *Selimname*.

With the exception of the already mentioned poem “Open Sea”, Yahya Kemal’s lyric hero does not flee from the world and from people. On the contrary,

¹⁹ YAHYA KEMAL: *Kendi Gök Kubbemiz*, pp. 14-15.

²⁰ For a detailed analysis of the poem *Açık Deniz* see M. KAPLAN: *Şiir Tahlilleri. Tanzimat’ dan Cumhuriyet’e Kadar* (Analyses of Poetry. From Tanzimat to the Republic). İstanbul 1969, pp. 191-203.

²¹ YAHYA KEMAL: *Kendi Gök Kubbemiz*, p. 112.

²² “Duy tabiatı biraz sen de ilâh olduğunu/Rûh erer varlığının zevkine duymakla bunu.” (To feel in nature that you became God for a moment. With this feeling the spirit arrives at the pleasure of existence.) YAHYA KEMAL: *Kendi Gök Kubbemiz*, p. 97.

²³ Paraphrased according to the sub-chapter *Henri Bergson a jeho učení* (Henri Bergson and his teaching). In: *Dějiny francouzské literatury*, pp. 322-4.

he is existentially connected with his environment, above all, he loves his city, he likes the company of people. He feels best among friends – *rinds*, who like him, drink wine – *mey*, but also life with full draught. A look at the beautiful scenery of Istanbul connects him with memories of drinking wine and walks with a beloved, about whom he talks tenderly, as about a *cânan* (sweetheart).

In Yahya Kemal's poetry, the very frequent expression *rind* can be interpreted in the ordinary sense as "a drinker" or "Epicurean", but also in the mystical sense as a "saint intoxicated with a love for God".²⁴ Many of his poems literally revel with the terms and symbols of Sufiism, which the Persian poets especially brought to perfection. However in spite of this Yahya Kemal cannot be classified as a mystical poet. This claim could be supported by analysis of individual poems, but here we must be satisfied with two arguments.

The first argument is provided by a poem from 1919, which Yahya Kemal dedicated to Abdülhak Hâmid, one of the most popular poets of his early youth. The poem "Dedication" (*Ithâf*) can be interpreted as a recognition that the true mystic has definitively disappeared not only in Turkey, but in the whole Orient. Yahya Kemal, who inclined to the Sufi poetry and music, still went back to the Mevlevî monasteries for some time after his return from Paris. He joined the literary current called the *Nâyîler* (reed players) which followed the Rumi's message. The movement took its name from the chief instrument of Sufi music – the *nây*, *ney* (a reed).

Yahya Kemal highly valued the tradition, which for centuries had held such great significance for the spiritual life of a wide range of inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire, and not only Muslims, but also Christians. In thousands of larger and smaller *tekkes*, they held regular assemblies called *âyin-i cem*. The music, song and dance at these assemblies satisfied the need for cultural nourishment of the inhabitants of the cities and rural areas. It was because of his respect for this tradition, and in an effort to remember it at a time when it was being forgotten because of changed living conditions, that Yahya Kemal inserted at least fragments of it into his poems.

The much travelled Yahya Kemal²⁵ honoured tradition, but was already unable to live in accordance with it. This led to his feeling of being uprooted, which he suggestively expressed in his poems *Atik-Valde'den inen sokakta* (In the street leading from Atik-Valde) and *Koca Mustâpaşa*.²⁶ On meeting a person from the world of old traditions, traditional forms of life, in which religion has a firm place, the modern person immediately feels a terrible emptiness. At the same time he hears his inner voice, which reminds him that he belongs to the people who live here, in the place where the fate of Byzantium intertwined itself into the character of the Turks.

²⁴ See the entry *rind* in REDHOUSE, J. W.: *Turkish and English Lexicon*, Beirut 1974, p. 959.

²⁵ Apart from the already mentioned nine years in Paris, Yahya Kemal worked from 1926 to 1948 as an ambassador in Warsaw, Madrid, Lisbon and Karachi.

²⁶ YAHYA KEMAL: *Eski Şiirin Rüzgârıyla*, pp. 34-35, 48-49.

The second argument supporting the claim that Yahya Kemal was not a mystical poet is his attitude to death. This differed diametrically from the position of the Islamic mystics. For Sufis, death was the aim of their effort to reach absolute truth (*Hakk*), that is God. They wished to die before death, to reach their aim sooner, and so by asceticism, living for long periods in cells and other practices, they mortified not only their bodies but also their spirits.

Yahya Kemal has an entirely opposite view:

Death is not the most tragic thing in our lives,
The difficulty is in the death of a person before death.²⁷

Yahya Kemal did not see death as the aim or even as a necessary evil. For him death is part of life. Whether a person wants it or not, his journey will end in the cypress grove. The *Servilik* (cypress grove) is a euphemistic metaphor for the cemetery.

Yahya Kemal instructed that four lines from the poem “Death of Rinds” (*Rindlerin Ölümü*), which he dedicated to his beloved Hafiz, should be carved on his grave-stone:

Death is a peaceful spring country for the rind;
His heart smokes from all sides like an incense burner.
And on his mound in the shade of the cypresses
every day a rose blooms and every night a nightingale sings.²⁸

In 1924, Yahya Kemal already expressed the conviction in one of his speeches²⁹ that the Turkish nation would fully accept European civilization. He literally spoke of it as “*bügünkü medeniyet*” that is “modern civilization”. In spite of this, or perhaps precisely because of it, he remained to a significant degree faithful to the canons of classical Ottoman poetry. The unique creative synthesis of old traditions with new cultural and aesthetic principles brought Yahya Kemal Beyatlı even during his lifetime, to the sunlit side of modern Turkish poetry.

²⁷ *Düşünce* (Thought). In: YAHYA KEMAL: *Eski Şiirin Rüzgârıyla*, p. 88.

²⁸ YAHYA KEMAL: *Kendi Gök Kubbemiz*, p. 93.

²⁹ The speech was given in the cultural-educational centre *Türk Ocağı*. See: YAHYA KEMAL: *Mektuplar, Makaleler* (Letters, articles), İstanbul 1968, pp. 307-8.