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**MODERN ŐİİRİN ÖNCÜLERİ: NAZİM HİKMET
VE WALT WHITMAN**

Özet

Düz yazı şeklinde yazan Nazım Hikmet ve Walt Whitman, epik bir şair profili yaratma arayışı içerisinde, şekli içerikle özdeşleştirerek, sıradışı ve kendi kendini referans veren bir anlatım tarzıyla geleneksel şekilleri aşarak, şiiri modernize eder. Temelde iki şairi bir araya getiren şey, insanı konu alan mısralarının beşeri yönü kadar, hem tarz hem içerikte yaptıkları köklü değişimler ve modern şiirdeki öncü pozisyonlarıdır. Serbest nazımı ve sıradışı şiir yapılarını kullanarak, şekilde köklü değişiklikler yapmışlardır. Bu yazının amacı, hem içerik hem tarz olarak devrimsel bir hareketle, şiirin modernleştirilmesinde Nazım Hikmet ve Walt Whitman arasındaki bazı benzerlikleri incelemektir.

Anahtar kelimeler: modern, serbest nazım, yineleme, transandantalizm, sıradışı

**FORERUNNERS OF MODERN POETRY: NAZİM HİKMET
AND WALT WHITMAN**

Abstract:

Writing in a prosaic style, Nazım Hikmet and Walt Whitman modernize poetry by the identification of structure with content in a search for creating a heroic poet profile, which transcends conventional forms with an unusual, self-referential and narrative style. What mainly brings both poets together is their leading position in modern poetry by radical changes both in style and content as well as the humane aspect of their verses, which “touches the man”. Using free verse and unconventional poetic structures, they radically made changes in structure. The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the similarities between Nazım Hikmet and Walt Whitman in the modernization of poetry with a revolutionary movement both in content and style.

Key Words: modern, free verse, repetition, transcendentalism, unconventional

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Nazım Hikmet and Walt Whitman are both innovative and revolutionary poets who altered traditional poetic style in their age and led to a new movement of poetry in a parallelism with the changing social and political conditions of their countries. Representative of the democratic soul of his country, Whitman is the precursor of modern poetry in the nineteenth century America, with his prosaic poems. Appearing almost one century later than Whitman, Hikmet is one of the leading figures who pioneered modern poetry through the combination of an epic verse with history in the twentieth century Turkish poetry. Both poets referred to the lives of ordinary people by using their language in free verse cadences and deserved being called as “the poet of the people”. Writing in a prosaic style, both poets modernize poetry by the identification of structure with content in a search for creating a heroic poet profile, which transcends conventional forms with an unusual, self-referential and narrative style. Hikmet presents a distinctive style in his poetry book *Human Landscapes from My Country*, which he wrote in Bursa prison in 1941. Hikmet depicts the lives of real people from Bursa prison that he personally witnessed in an epic style, combined with history, portraits and life-stories. Whitman radically changes the verse form with long rhythmical lines in his poetry book *Leaves of Grass* by exalting lofty and transcendental values, significant for American national identity. The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the similarities between Nazım Hikmet and Walt Whitman in the modernization of poetry with a revolutionary movement both in content and style.

Nazım’s transcendentalism is related to form rather than ideology. The more he tended to resort to repetition in ideology, the more he was engaged in transcendentalism in form. With his avant-garde status in poetry, he rebelled against conventional poetic styles, rather than his own poetic style. The difference between transcendentalism and avantgardism is that transcendentalism is related to the poet’s challenge against his own poem, while the avant-garde is known for his challenge against the poems of the other. That’s why the avant-garde negates traditional styles in a rebellion against available poetry. Because of his avant-garde style, Nazım’s poetry is atypical. He negates tradition by depending on the ideology in his poems. He realizes this negation by benefitting from tradition structurally. Formal transcendence outweighs ideological repetition in Nazım’s poetry. Nazım modernizes poetry through the transformation of traditional styles. His ideology is hidden in the structure of his poems. The following lines show the extraordinary structure of Nazım’s poetry which is metrically irregular and unconventional.

Mustafa started the epic:

“They who are numberless

Like ants in the earth

Fish in the sea

Birds in the air,

Who are cowardly

brave

ignorant

wise
and childlike,

and who destroy
and create,

my epic tells only of their adventures (150 Book II, IV).

Depicting various models of people with different characteristic features and manners from every step of social ladder, these lines refer to Nazım's *Human Landscapes* self-referentially. That's why the appearance sequence of the words recalls the shape of a ladder. He deals with countless people, like "ants in the earth, fish in the sea and birds in the air" and his epic features their adventures. The form of Nazım's lines is identified with what is implied as message in a complementary way. The distinctive style of Nazım's epic is also confirmed by one of his characters, Mustafa as follows:

Mustafa stopped.

Mahmut was a little taken aback:

"that's a strange epic," he said,

"this guy in prison has written a different kind of epic.

He's stirring up something.

But your voice is sad, son,

and it reads like music:

it touches a man" (Book Two, Section IV).

The phrase "touches a man" draws the attention to the direct relation of lines with human life surrounded with human feelings, such as sorrow, happiness, loneliness or compassion. Reading his lines is a way of discovering, and gaining awareness about humans. In the Foreword to *Human Landscapes from My Country*, Edward Hirsch expresses that "to read Hikmet Deeply is to be stirred up and confronted by unabashed emotion, connected to something mortally, even nakedly human." and he calls Hikmet "a Whitmanesque poet of the emphatic imagination who felt his way into the lives of other people, who put his wild creative energies at the service of a humane vision"(Hikmet 2002: vii). As Whitman said once, "Who touches this, touches a man." That's why the common feature of Whitman and Hikmet is the humane policy they followed in their poetry and their closeness to ordinary people.

In *Human Landscapes from My Country* Nazım Hikmet portrayed different lives, ranging from peasants, soldiers, merchants to landowners, prisoners and government officials. An Istanbul intellectual descending from a pasha, Hikmet familiarized with Anatolian peasants in Bursa prison in the real sense and his lengthy period of imprisonment gave him a chance to observe various lives from different social strata. Written in free verse, Nazım's lines have harmony within themselves. It is like a microcosm of all kinds of genres, which is made up of observations, descriptions, dialogues, historical information, life-stories and narratives in a colloquial language. The author's own observations imbued with imagination in the third-person narrative change into the first-person narrative that mirrors the experiences, feelings and ideas of characters directly from their mouth. In a circle we come across the same characters

again and again in a non-linear narrative style, departing from conventionality. Focusing on individual lives and randomness of life, Nazım's epic poems don't bear any anxiety about being dependent on only one form stylistically. On the contrary, they are fragmented, like the fragmentary lives of characters who experience imprisonment, separation, or class conflicts.

The rhetorical structure of Hikmet's poems is reinforced by repetitions in harmony with the meaning of words as well as the ideology he intends to communicate through his verses. In Book I, Section V of *Human Landscapes* Corporal Ahmet's fighting in three different wars is narrated in a monotonous style, coming one after the other. The repetition of the act of "fighting" is portrayed by the sequences of the same kind of sentences consecutively like this:

On the steps, sunlight

A stalk of green onion

And a man:

Corporal Ahmet.

He fought in the Balkan War.

He fought in the Great War.

He fought in the Greek War.

"Hang in there, brother, the end's in sight."

He's famous for saying (*Human Landscapes*, Book I, Section 5).

Moreover, two common repetitive sentences in Book I Section II are that "the 3: 45 train goes screaming past"(Hikmet 2002: 16) and "the cars came rocking along"(Hikmet 2002: 19). The herald of modernism, railway system is used symbolically by Hikmet to reveal the divisions and gaps between Kemalist dreams of modernization and its reception by different social groups. One of Hikmet's main themes is the conflicts confronted related to reforms on the way to modernity. Hikmet examined the contradictions of modernity within a modernist imagination. Inside the train, compartment divisions separate lines between different classes, but the train itself acts as the most impermeable barrier between people of different social strata. For the peasants who make up a majority in Turkey's population, the passing train symbolizes a modernity that leaves them outside, or at least beyond its benefits. In Hikmet's work, the walls of the train moving through an agrarian countryside represent a kind of border inside modernity. Hikmet illustrates this in the following lines:

The train stopped.

Shouts came from outside.

The wet hands of women and children holding up things
pounded on the blue windows of the dining car.

The people inside looked at the grasping blue hands.

But the Anatolia Express left Sapanja
without buying a single apple.

It was 9: 57 p.m. (Book II, Section V).

As it can be inferred from the above lines, the work of Nâzım Hikmet exposes the divided world under the effect of the national modernization project of Mustafa Kemal, considering the helpless, miserable condition of peasantry in the face of modernist reforms. This contrasting situation leads to a delay in the acceptance of modernity. According to Marian,

Hikmet's poetic vision in *Human Landscapes from My Country* was offered in response to the modernity-as-project that dominated the nationalist political landscape. A gap lay between the promise of modernity and its realization; as a modernist of development, Nâzım Hikmet set out to represent that disjuncture in its full complexity. Hikmet demonstrated through his poetic work that modernity has been a mode of transformation compatible with different ideological commitments and various cultural identities (Marian 2007: 105-121).

A humanist poet, like Hikmet, Whitman used free verse skillfully and correlated the structure of his poems with the meaning of his words. He was not a poet who did not value form in poetry, but he believed that the new things he told would not fit into the old patterns. He searched for a new understanding of poetry, new forms and new ways of saying for developing events, meanings and purposes. He regarded stylistic innovation inevitable. He did not resort to traditional styles in *Leaves of Grass*, considering its content. He did not submit to most of the old rules and brought new rules instead of them. He did not use meter, rhyme and stress. He wrote with a new understanding of verse and harmony. However, he is not totally detached from the effects of the old literature, granting the impact of the Old Testament, folk poetry, Homeros and Shakespeare upon his works. Whitman ruined the barriers between prose and verse. The content of his poems outweighs their style, as the core of Whitman's poetry lies in his feelings and emotions reflected on the poems, rather than the way how the lines and words are constructed. Whitman aimed to reveal a fact in each work. Most of his poems are like an oration. One of the main innovatory aspects of *Leaves of Grass* is that most of the poems inside it are written in public language. Whitman believed that the last word belonged to ordinary men about language. In *One's Self I Sing*, Whitman portrayed the democratic way of life and "the Modern Man" in a modern style with a focus on the "Form":

One's –Self I sing, a simple separate person,

Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.

Of physiology from top to toe I sing,

Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the Muse, I say the Form complete is worthier far,

The Female equally with the Male I sing.

Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,

Cheerful, for freest action form'd under the laws divine,
The Modern Man I sing (*One's-Self I Sing*).

A mixture of biography, meditation and sermon, *Song of Myself* is an epic poem in which Whitman stressed the significance of democracy for the formation of American national identity and regarded self-esteem and self-consciousness as the main principles for a democratic life. Introducing himself by biographical information, he idealized an American nation, based on the principles of democracy and equality. He put the self into the core of poetry which represents a unified whole composed of individual parts, just as he depicted a unified democratic nation composed of equal but distinguished individuals. He identified his self with universe by defending his equal position with other people without any gender discrimination for the sake of democratic ideals as he exposed in *Song of Myself*:

Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,
Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding,
No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from them,
No more modest than immodest.

.....
speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy,
By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their
counterpart of on the same terms (*Song of Myself*, 24).

Whitman's starting point from the self to reach the ideal democracy leads him to use his own name and experiences in some parts of his poems, since he imagined putting all barriers away between the self and the world. His own being is directly linked to the lives of ordinary people and everyday life, which were his main subject matter in poetry. Each unique individual is significant for a unified whole within a democratic and egalitarian society. Thus, equality, democracy and the individual are common issues that Whitman explored for a uniquely American poetry. In the Preface to *Leaves of Grass* Whitman identified poetic skill with nationalistic values and claimed that "the Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem." (Preface to *Leaves of Grass*) Serving a national purpose, his poetry sings the song of American national identity and social patterns through his resonant voice. Maybe imagining as if he were the Saviour, Whitman announces himself as the mouthpiece of people from every corner of life and sings their life-stories:

Through me many long dumb voices,
Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves,
Voices of the diseas'd and despairing and of thieves and dwarfs,
Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,
And of the threads that connect the stars, and of wombs and of the
father-stuff,
And of the rights of them the others are down upon,
Of the deform'd, trivial, flat, foolish, despised,
Fog in the air, beetles rolling balls of dung.

Through me forbidden voices,
 Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the veil,
 Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur'd.

Whitman declares himself a liberator who saves myriad oppressed people from their captivity by giving up European attitudes and traditions and by celebrating the individual freedom. Having no rhyme scheme and no metrical pattern, *I Hear America Singing* is another nationalistic poem of Whitman, which resorts to repetitions to create rhythm. It reflects different kinds of workers, such as carpenters, masons, mechanics, shoemakers and mothers to expose the democratic fabric of his ideology in poetry. Especially the repetition of “the” for poetic rhythm is correlated with the work rhythm all these labourers create. Like Hikmet, Whitman centered upon ordinary people by using a common language in an unconventional style. As the subject matter Whitman illustrated the individual in a parallelism with European poets, but he differs from them in terms of rejecting traditional forms as it can be observed in the following verses:

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
 Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe
 and strong,
 The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
 The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off
 work,
 The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deck-
 hand singing on the steamboat deck,
 The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing
 as he stands,
 The woodcutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morn-
 ing, or at noon intermission or at sundown,
 The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work,
 or of the girl sewing or washing,
 Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
 The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young
 fellows, robust, friendly,
 Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs (*I hear America Singing*).

In the above poem called *To A Locomotive in Winter* the poet describes a locomotive with admiration and makes the structure of words and sentences fit into the physical features of a real locomotive. Using free verse, but creating rhythm through repetition, the content of Whitman's poetry matches the form evidently in this poem. The repetition of the words “thee” and “thy” successively and “ponderous” listing of the sentences justify the image of a “train”, composed of a range of wagons following each other. On the other hand, as Hikmet referred to the train as the product of modern life and as the symbol of the gap between reforms and their acceptance by various cultural groups in *Human Landscapes*, Whitman also praises the power and beauty of the train, representative of modernity through concrete images.

Thee for my recitative,
 Thee in the driving storm, even as now, the snow, the winter-day declining,
 Thee in thy panoply, thy measur'd dual throbbing and thy beat convulsive,
 Thy black cylindric body, golden brass, and silvery steel,

Thy ponderous side-bars, parallel and connecting rods, gyrating, shuttling
 at thy sides,
 Thy metrical, now swelling pant and roar, now tapering in the distance,
 Thy great protruding head-light fix'd in front,
 Thy long, pale, floating vapor-pennants, tinged with delicate purple,
 The dense and murky clouds out-belching from thy smoke-stack,
 Thy knitted frame, thy springs and valves, the tremulous twinkle of thy wheels
 Thy train of cars behind, obedient, merrily-following,
 Through gale or calm, now swift, now slack, yet steadily careering;
 Type of the modern—emblem of motion and power—pulse of the continent,
 (*To a Locomotive in Winter*)

One of the primary representatives of American Transcendentalism, Whitman realized his transcendentalism in a unifying and concrete way. He linked the self with the whole universe, from God, nature to all animate, inanimate and ordinary things extensively. In other words, as Reynolds and Lynch claim, his transcendentalism is “less vague, less formless, less other-worldly, and more attentive to mankind than either Emerson or Thoreau’s” (Reynolds & Lynch 1979:150). Actually, Whitman justified what Emerson proposed as the image of the expected poet in America, considering what he indicated in “The Poet”:

Time and nature yield us many gifts, but not yet the timely man,
 the new religion, the reconciler, whom all things await. Dante’s
 praise is, that he dared to write his autobiography in colossal cipher,
 or into universality. We have yet had no genius in America... The
 thought and the form are equal in the order of time, but in the order
 of genesis the thought is prior to the form. The poet has a new thought:
 he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was
 with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune. For the experience
 of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always
 waiting for its poet (Ralph Waldo Emerson).

As a final overview, Nazım Hikmet is a humane Turkish poet, like Whitman, who focused on the lives of ordinary people in a common language, loaded with colloquialisms, regional dialects and slang words for a communion with different characters and their various experiences. Hikmet composed an epic novel in verse in the twentieth century, while Whitman illustrated his democratic ideals and the ideal prototype of the modern man in the wake of American Civil War in the nineteenth century. Even though they addressed from different centuries, both deserve being called as “the poet of the people”. Using free verse and unconventional poetic structures, they radically made changes in structure. Hikmet’s ideology lies in the poetic structure, which shows an analogy with the message he intended to communicate. On the other hand, Whitman aimed to present a fact in his poems by means of concrete images and innovative poetic forms which justify the content. Whitman blurred the boundaries between the self and the outer world for unifying, transcendental thematic connections and strove to create a uniquely American society, based on the ideas of equality, democracy and brotherhood in a uniquely American style. Yet Hikmet tended more to explore the conflicts and gaps confronted in the application of

Kemalist reforms of modernism. Both realized this social purpose in an epic style, fraught with biographies, dialogues and descriptions. They consolidated their message and ideology through repetitions. However, what mainly brings both poets together is their leading position in modern poetry by radical changes both in style and content as well as the humane aspect of their verses, which “touches the man”.

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