

Humour in Can Yücel's Poetry

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Long after being a *student* of the consciousness-raising *school* of reading Can Yücel's poetry during my youth, I had the honour of meeting him at a British Council translation event in Istanbul. Luckily, he was assigned to our table, and the poem we were to translate to be authorized by the poet happened to be one of his most frequently quoted poems 'The Wall of Love', in which he compares his loneliness to a 'countess' who pisses in her pants.

He watched us translate his poem (which is lost I am afraid, so I translated it again) and responded only when we dared ask him anything. Later we went to Cicek Pasaji and had some beer although he was strictly forbidden to drink beer. Some time later, I saw him sitting on the curb in front of the Atatürk Cultural Centre in Taksim before the premiere of his translation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I saluted him with respect, and the only thing he said to me after seeing me smoking, was: 'Gimme a fucking cigarette!' He always avoided redundant social formalities.

Later, the poet announced that the incontinent countess in that poem was his wife Güler Yücel. Güler Yücel, who stood by her husband throughout a long life of purgation, full of oppressions and trials, is such a 'straight' woman, afraid of

nothing, a woman of no lies or hypocrisy, full of life's joys, always wearing a big smile on her face. I believe that smile was always there to attract Can Yücel, but I also believe that due to Yücel's humour in life and poetry, that smile never disappeared after their marriage. Mrs. Yücel wanted me to tell the readers that the disorder in her urinal system has just been diagnosed and that the doctor admitted the fact that Can Yücel anticipated the disease in his 'pissy countess' poem, some twenty years before he himself could. His wife, his family, his nation, his people in general, it seems, fed the poet enough to write humour and gave him the courage to stand by what he did, instead of just doing things he thought he could stand by.

The images Can Yücel gathered around the central incontinent countess – the personification and ultimate image of loneliness in her helplessness to hold her pee – give away the most important pillars of a life of dignity. That is why I preferred 'solitude' rather than 'loneliness' in my translation.

With a rebellious tone, the voice in 'The Wall of Love' puts itself and its solitude to the margins against corruption and oppression, similar to that of Kurt Vonnegut Jr. or J.D. Salinger. However,

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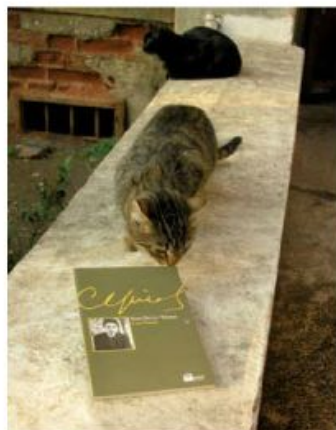
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Can Yücel was a devoted, a committed socialist, and therefore as he manifested himself as an outsider, always placing himself among the outlaw, the misfit, the wasted lives of the capitalistic system, in general, the people. His humour is much more than a laugh. Like all serious, good, important art, his poetry makes us think.

Turkey has always been one of the best countries at creating humour and satire. One reason is believed to be that it has always been a country of social unrest and oppression. Artists and intellectuals under oppression create more, maybe out of necessity and responsibility to 'imagine', as the John Lennon song puts it, a better world. And the creative minds of multicultural Turkey have always had to find subtler ways to express themselves to escape being convicted for their art. Can Yücel, one of the best in poetry, set an example and created hope in Turkish youth for human rights for all.

Having studied Latin and Greek, and in addition to being efficient in English, Can Yücel was a wizard in the use of contemporary and Ottoman Turkish and never used his knowledge of languages for the elite. His humour was always a part of his social satire, intended to change the world for the better. Slang was a part of his medium peculiar to his style, and I would never agree that he fell into the trap of vulgarity, as he used slang only out of honesty, and he wrote as he spoke. This is one of the reasons why he has been understood effectively by the masses. This is also why his translations of Shakespeare, Lorca and Brecht tend to be adaptations rather than translations. He almost always sought cultural equivalence in his translations, and theatre-goers in Turkey found in his translations too, their very selves, and never had any difficulty in empathizing with the characters in a foreign play. Vulgarity as it appears in some stand-up comedians is not poetry's job. As a result of many social problems, like unemployment and social injustice, Can Yücel's humour was always related to some lost dignity and integrity, and the hypocrisy, pretentiousness and intellectual indifference he always detested; hence his tendency to swear or to put the F word or its equivalents in pauses in everyday life, and subtly and childishly at times imply them in his poetry.



Never did he fight in the dark, nor did he hide behind blurred intellectualism. His humour and rhetoric found their way to court, to trial, to his panels at universities and he soon became like a figure out of a tall-tale, or a legend, like a shameless version of 'Nasreddin Hodja'. He spoke through his beard with a wise elderly voice, like the Santa Claus of the Turkish language, the 'loving witty and naughty daddy' who wrote poetry to redeem us but who could also enjoy breaking our TV set. Therefore, in his poetry, he has the character of a larger-than-life pulp-fiction hero, and yet even when he sounds aggressive and vulgar, he is extremely sensitive and humane. He is so natural in his idiom, as if he is speaking to a friend when he is addressing his readers in a poem, some of which are like aphorisms. In such aphorism-like poems, he gives the reader the need to agree or disagree and start an argument or join in a dialogue. For example, in his 'You're Lighting a Match in the Dark' (Kibrit Cakıyorsun Karanlıkta) he writes:

*You're lighting a match in the dark
To see the almond blossoms
And your eyes you have there are like
A pair of troubled tank ships in march seas
Boy, you're going to give us trouble
Fire maybe, or maybe spring?*

Nature emerges in almost every poem in many ways. In his poem 'Charity' (Hayir), nature is a source of relief, a home for the forsaken child to grow up in, but also – as in naturalistic literature – indifferent and mean, insidiously hiding social unrest outside, or thoughtfully sending relief to the sufferer in some situational irony, or irony of fate:

*This landscape is
For our eyes to take a breath;
For tired birds to rest, this world is,
And when gods are tired of space.*

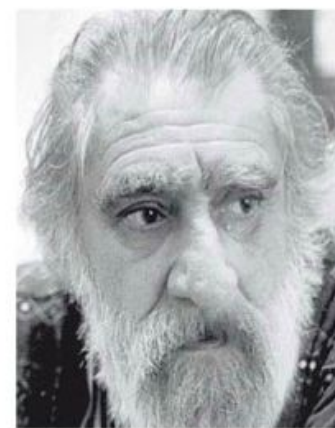
*Our hands happen to sense and
The colour of water is with its fish and flowers
So plain is the peace of thought
And the silence of the cold, likewise.
Our hair in rolling stars,
We grow up slowly;
Lest we hear the clamour in our sleep
At nights, it rains.*

Not only in his poems full of images from nature, but in almost all his poetry, he admires irony and pun. He is a master of both, but unless deservedly necessary, he never gives in to cynicism or sarcasm.

In everyday life, his responses to injustice may have sounded vulgar but gradually people got used to it and his using F words for pause or interjection became so typical of him that people expected or feared that this language would appear in his poems as well but he always refrained from being vulgar in poetry. Satire and irony make people laugh easily, but Can Yücel dwelled not in shadows but in the clearings of the realms of black humour, ethnic or cultural humour, and popular and mystical topics when necessary. He never failed to prove that he was a seer. He was never a mainstream poet, but his name walked so before his poetry, and when his name was mentioned people took position to listen with a ready smile on their face. In a sense he can be likened to the sincerity of Bukowski encompassing the outsider, the demented, the rebel, the defeated who are – in Can Yücel's case – the victims of the capitalistic system. He never fell into the trap of mystifying himself as a poet, as he used the vernacular. Anything

that belonged to his people was his, and he kept himself and his family within this vernacularisation (e.g. inspired by his wife's going to pee, he addresses loneliness 'Pissy Countess'). But he was unique in being comradely humanitarian and sensitively vulgar, it took no time for him to become a legendary and therefore 'popular' figure on the Turkish literary scene.

During his talks, lectures too, he did not refrain from using swear words to pin disrespect to cultural or national heroes or to swing away some irrational sexist argument. A university student asked him why the best poets are always men, and why women do not make good poets, he said to the student: 'How the fuck would I know? Are we writing with our dicks?' His answer was another example of the first rule in art, that 'Less is more'. Such a brief reply, made my long essay – in which I was trying to prove that women do make good poets – ludicrous. In his poem 'The Wall of Love' he wanders in saloons, galleries and witnesses pretentious 'art lovers', which in Turkish is '*sanat sevicileri*', a term also implying lesbians. With the pun in '*sevice*' he is not hideously or cynically making fun of a sexual orientation, but is mocking pretentious art lovers. Hence, in my translation I preferred 'art'homos'.





Another anecdote comes from a trial when he was accused of obscenity in poetry: the judge asked him why he used swear words like 'ass' in a poem. He replied, 'Well, in our language if you want to say "ass", you use the word "ass", and if I cannot use a Turkish word in the right place, fuck this democracy.'

It seems that as opposed to living a life full of lies and pretension, a 'straight' life and humour came as a choice for the poet and his poetry.

'Haysiyet' (dignity, honour) is a word he and Nazim Hikmet taught a nation of poetry readers in Turkey, and he was always the epitome, the apotheosis of that virtue. Thanks to the heart and labour he put in his words and translations, we are still working hand in hand for a better world and our left side is still alive and kicking. In his poem 'By Holding Hands' ('El Tutusa Tutusa'), he puts forth his desire for revolution with child-like expectations and in a humanitarian way. He does so through the symbol of friendship and fraternity in the meeting of two hands, with the hope of plurality again.

*My, my, so many hands we have eh?
First, my hand holding yours,*

*Then the kids' hands,
Then hands of the youth,
The hands of tobacco workers
Later, hands of others...
Look, we got so many hands
Holding, grappling, catching
Like a forest fire.*

And in the end – through his joy for life, with his awareness of a journey of dignity – court verdicts proved ineffectual as in his humour, the monolithic stance of power of the oppressor melted, just as most oppressors fail to get the gist of irony or in some cases cannot help surrendering to wit and intellect.

Freedom of conscience and expression is a natural right, and they need not be fought for, but Turkish poets and artists – intellectuals in general – have bitterly enjoyed this fight throughout a lifetime. Loving your solitude and your 'pissy countess' means being aware of this dichotomy in life itself, and being able to smile at it. Humour and satire in Can Yücel's poetry is like peeing out of one's cells: the body, the city (Istanbul) and his most beloved country.

In conclusion, I would like to compare humour in Can Yücel's poetry to the 'sea' in another aphorism-like poem of his, 'Gobbledygook' ('Herze'):

*On the boat, a snake fell by my side
I embraced the sea. □*

All translations are by Yusuf Eradam.

THE WALL OF LOVE

Was it you or my solitude
We opened our rusty eyes in blind darkness
Our word was a hanged-over curse from last night
We strolled in parlours, markets with art'homos
Yet, all I wanted was to get you outdoors
An ammoniac blossom on your collar
My solitude, O my pissy countess
The viler we get, the better.

We haunted the taverns at Kumkapi
Before us golden raki, golden beer and beanstew
After us, civil police, patrol forces and Hizir Pashas'
In the mornings, they would find my carcass out on the open sea
So warm were the garbage-collectors' hands
I caressed you with their hands
My solitude, O my broom-haired' beloved
The worse we smell, the better.

O I see a red plane in the sky
So much steel, so many stars, O so ample is man
One night we surpassed the wall of love
So clear, so open was the place I fell on
At my side, only you and the universe
No need to count the men I died or resurrected
My solitude, O my plural ballads
The straighter we live, the better.

Poem by Can Yücel
Translated by Yusuf Eradam

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES:

1. Hizir Pasha is known to be the cruel Ottoman governor of Sivas who got Pir Sultan Abdal, the rebel Alevi bard, hanged (16th century).
2. During a translation event, I remember asking Can Yücel himself, how we should translate 'supurge sacilm' into English, as there was a cultural difference in the idiom which both meant 'bushy haired' and also a 'loyal and rigorous' housewife. The poet immediately said 'broom-haired', which is appropriate for the first meaning of the idiom, and seems to be literal translation; yet I here would like to enjoy that moment, that memoir of translating with him, in tribute.

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