

İkinci Yeni
The Turkish Avant-Garde

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Ece Ayhan
İlhan Berk
Edip Cansever
Cemal Süreya
Turgut Uyar



Translated & Edited with an Introduction
by
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İkinci Yeni

— *Introduction* —

Cartography of the Turkish Avant-Garde: Mapping the *İkinci Yeni*

The maps of J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth demonstrate a remarkable fealty to the fictional world they depict. And yet they *are* fictions. They are also astonishing visual manifestations of Tolkien's fetish for facts. Here, I perpetuate my own myth-of-choices, idiosyncratic priorities, shadings and foregroundings, shaped as much by the *idea* of an "İkinci Yeni" and my fealty to a mapping of that idea. In this sense, it too is a fiction, but one that intends its truth.

The story I put together in *İkinci Yeni: The Turkish Avant-Garde* is one of canonical status in Turkey. Simply put, it states: that from roughly the early 1950's until the late 1970's the poets gathered here, collectively and alone, were at the forefront of Turkish poetry's most rapid and dynamic period of innovation and change.¹

The *İkinci Yeni* (meaning literally, the *Second New*) was an informal group of second-generation Turkish Modernists who emerged in the 1950s, and were active throughout the 50s, 60s and 70s, primarily in Istanbul and Ankara. Though ostensibly a conceptual grouping, the poets shared some distinctive stylistic and poetic concerns, as a well as sharing close friendships, and drew from the work of the French Surrealists and the contemporary European avant-garde. The basic tenets of *İkinci Yeni* poetics were to treat the poem as an object of the deepest subjectivity, to emphasise the self, the individual, and the poetic possibilities of the wounded unconscious.



The phrase "ikinci yeni" was first used by Muzaffer Erdost,² in a short essay published in *Son Havadis* on 19 August 1956. Erdost had become increasingly aware, he claimed, of "bir başkalık" (*a difference*) in the poetry being published from 1953 onward, particularly in the Ankara-based *Pazar Postası* (Sunday Post), which Erdost edited.

¹ See Orhan Koçak's essay "Our Master, the Novice": *On the Catastrophic Births of Modern Turkish Poetry in The South Atlantic Quarterly* 102.2/3 (2003) for a lengthy discussion of this 'innovation and change.'

² Muzaffer İlhan Erdost (1932–). *İkinci Yeni Yazıları*. Ankara: Onur Yayınları, 1997.

The core poets were, according to Erdost, Ece Ayhan, İlhan Berk, Edip Cansever, Sezai Karakoç, Cemal Süreya, Ülkü Tamer, and Turgut Uyar. Despite a profusion of other later voices, these were the most prominent exponents of the new poetics.³

For Erdost, the new poetry was “abstract” (soyut), “absurd” and “devoid of meaning” (anlamsız), “introverted” and “obscure” (kapalı), “deformed in form and content” (özde ve biçimde deformasyon); it displayed unique concerns with “individualism” (bireycilik) and “formalism” (biçimcilik); it was a poetry, moreover, that “turned its back on society” (yopluma sırtını dönme) and in this Erdost recognized its central thrust as a revolt, not against tradition *per se* but, against a tradition of poetry-as-public-address. It was, in particular, as Nermin Menemencioğlu later claimed, a “reaction to the brevity and simplicity” of the *Garip* Movement.⁴

The poets of the *Garip* had “sought to eliminate all artifice and convention . . .”⁵ In their view, “rhyme and metre, metaphor and simile had been devised to appeal to a succession of elites”. It was time for poetry to address the tastes of the growing masses. As Orhan Veli explained in the preface to *Garip*, a book published jointly in 1941 by Veli, Melih Cevdet Anday, and Oktay Rifat:

“The problem is not to undertake their defence, but to find out what kind of poetry it is that appeals to them, and to give them this poetry. New roads, new means must be found to achieve this end . . . The structure must be changed from the very foundations.”⁶

The *Garip* poets transformed the notion of what a poem could be in Turkish. And in a profoundly mannered and restrictive cultural milieu, their achievements were little short of revolutionary. The *Garip* movement later became known as the *Birinci Yeni*, or the First New.

While the social optimism of the post-independence years found expression in the *Garip*, for many poets of the early 1950s optimism had

³ Who was and who wasn’t an “ikinci yeni” poet is a matter of great importance to some critics. To the names above one might add those of Attila İlhan, İsmet Özel, Özdemir İnce, Süreyya Berfe, and Hilmi Yavuz. And the list could go on. I restrict my selection to work of the five most well-known poets.

⁴ *The Penguin Book of Turkish Verse*, edited by Nermin Menemencioğlu & Fahir İz, 1978.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

turned to despondency. It was a decade marked by the brutal realpolitik of Adnan Menderes's first freely elected government. The openness of the *Garip*'s democratic rhetoric seemed dangerously exposed in an increasingly closed society, one that oscillated violently between social reform and conservatism, between the promotion of private freedom and public repression.

The linguistic experimentalism of the *İkinci Yeni*, then, in broad terms "reflected a search for aesthetic and philosophical criteria in a society undergoing a new phase of development."⁷ Little wonder, at a time when poets were being routinely arrested, tortured and imprisoned, that many sought to explore more ambiguous modes of "abstraction" and "obscurity". The poetry of the *İkinci Yeni* was, in this sense, hermetic, ruminative, subversive—an implosive resistance to the naïve, delusional "open" language of a closed state.



Unlike those of the *Garip* movement, the poets of the *İkinci Yeni* had no sense of collective self-purpose, no manifesto, and few, except İlhan Berk, warmed to Erdost's early characterization. Berk was often at the center of public debate, and assumed the role of unofficial spokesman for the new poetry. Despite strong friendships among the poets, all (again, with the exception of Berk) came to repudiate their association as a "movement". Edip Cansever was categorical: "Not one of us accepts the *İkinci Yeni* . . . Each of our poetries is different, and not one of us is bound by a shared theory".⁸ There were few joint works or collaborations, and no seminal gatherings in anthologies, though several of the poets edited prominent journals and magazines. The critics continued to battle it out. Eser Gürson, an important critic of the 1960s, talked of "poetry rich in possibilities" and acknowledged that "the poetry being written today is in very large measure indebted to the *İkinci Yeni*".⁹ In the same period the critic Asım Bezirci sounded off, in a remark clearly aimed at Erdost: "The *İkinci Yeni* is history. Today's Second New is now Secondhand."¹⁰



⁷ Ibid.

⁸ In Cansever's *Yaş ve Şiir Üstüne*.

⁹ *Edebiyattan Yana*. İstanbul, Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2001.

¹⁰ *İkinci Yeni Olayı*. İstanbul, Evrensel Kültür Kitaplığı, 1996.

Foremost, and finally, the poems are here to tell of themselves. The poems I select for translation seem purposely at odds with critical pronouncements about the *İkinci Yeni* as a whole, and that, while not entirely coincidental, is the necessary breach through which the poems themselves form spaces for our reception, our own take on their differences, their foreignnesses.

Ece Ayhan wrote fewer poems than any of the other poets here. His dense, darkly lit and obsessive themes of erotic transgression, references to suicide, to physical and sexual abuse broke every conceivable taboo. The unofficial, the unorthodox, the forbidden lay at the heart of his poetic world. His Turkish—flexible, rhythmically taut—as unsettling as his themes, clawed at convention with its elusive unpunctuated syntax, its crooked ambiguities. Ayhan’s language takes experimentation to its limits, its melodic tortions sing of the oppressed, of the Pera underworld of Istanbul, of Jews and Greeks and Armenians, pimps and prostitutes, sadistic despots, victims and paedophiles. It was a world never before seen in Turkish verse, a subterranea of the unholy and the damned, of the perverse and alienated, an unrivalled depiction of suffering and survival.

Well known even before the *İkinci Yeni*, İlhan Berk’s earlier poems owed much to the realist thrust of the *Garip*: Simple, redolent evocations of Anatolian life and the natural world, for which he was dubbed “the Turkish Walt Whitman”. An early collection, *Türkiye Şarkası* (Song of Turkey, 1953), landed him before the Supreme Chief Justice on a charge of promoting communism. Berk’s transition to a more abstract, eclectic and cosmopolitan experimentalism followed shortly after his acquittal. His poem “Saint-Antoine’in Güvercinleri” (Saint Antoine’s Pigeons), first published in *Yenilik* Magazine in 1953, became a pivotal reference for a generation of younger poets. Berk’s subsequent work was encyclopedic in range, informed by an eye for intimate, sensual detail. Berk was a celebrant, a magi of the overlooked, conjuring the commonplace into objects of uncommon beauty. He is now the most widely translated Turkish poet in English after Nâzım Hikmet, and undoubtedly the most well-known of the *İkinci Yeni*.

Istanbul is an obsessive presence in poems replete with place names, locations, descriptions. But the Istanbul of the Ottoman divan—the Bosphorus, the rose garden, the mosque and minaret—is passed over for the seamy, opaque shades of Pera, Galata and the narrow, maze-like streets of the decaying European quarter, the red-light zone. Few knew

Istanbul better than Edip Cansever, who lived most of his working life in and around Istanbul's Fatih district, in the precinct of the Grand Bazaar. Cansever was staggeringly prolific and wrote almost every facet of Istanbul life into his poems. His development of the long lyric, his easy-going, democratic rhetoric contrast starkly with Berk's and Ayhan's radical denaturing of the sentence. His human landscapes, surreal urban pastoral, are infused with colloquial, private (and therefore intimately alive) speech, richly idiomatic. Cansever's are poems that *talk*, transcribing the patterns and rhythms of ordinary language into poetic narratives that betray the same nuanced disruptions, about-turns, sudden stops and starts as daily conversations.

Cemal Süreya's 1960s magazine *Papirüs* (Papyrus) was a fulcrum for experimental poetics. Süreya's first book, *Üvercinka* (Pigeon-Tongued, 1958) introduced him as a latter-day troubadour, with his erotically charged language of power and seduction. As with many of the *İkinci Yeni* poets, Süreya prompts a kind of poetic double-take, a re-visioning of his subjects and of the poem itself as object. What masquerades as seduction and conquest belays a more evasive sense of melancholy and lost. The precision of Süreya's metres, the controlled cadences of his music, leave nothing to chance in a world in which accidental sightings, coincidental meetings, take on the greatest significance.

The complexity of Turgut Uyar's verse, its subtle prosody, its visually encoded import, weighs heavily on any translator. His early poems have a kaleidoscopic, dizzying intensity. Punctuation is sparse. Meanings are shaped and arranged cognitively, image on image, into powerful verbal tapestries. His inner world, explored in a language of the deepest subjectivity, is one of isolation and loneliness. Uyar vociferously rejected Erdost's idea of the *İkinci Yeni* and his own part in it. His 1970 collection, *Divan*, masterly reinvents the gazel—the favoured form of the Ottoman court poets—with its strict demands on repetition, metre and rhyme. It was, in a sense, Uyar's final revolt, bringing his formal obsessions full circle back to the syllabic measures of his earliest work.

By the early 1990s only two, Ece Ayhan and İlhan Berk, had outlived the booze and cigarettes. Ayhan died in 2002. Berk, active to the very end, died aged 90 in August 2008. Apart from Edip Cansever, who worked as an antiques dealer, all were sons of the state. Ece Ayhan was

a provincial governor. Berk taught in government schools and later as an employee of a state bank. Cemal Süreya was a lifelong civil servant, working first for the Ministry of Finance and then for the Director of the Mint. Turgut Uyar was a commissioned officer in the Armed Forces. From their unassuming, routine working lives they created some of the most imaginatively challenging and sophisticated poetry ever written. Their legacy is the story of Turkish poetry as it happens now, as an act of defiant remaking, broad and various in its practises. The achievements of the *İkinci Yeni* are as relevant now as they ever were.

*George Messo
Ankara
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