

İlhan Berk

SAMPLER

# SAMPLER

ALSO BY İLHAN BERK, IN GEORGE MESSO'S TRANSLATION

A Leaf About to Fall. Selected Poems <sup>†</sup>

Madrigals \*

Letters & Sound

The Book of Things \*

*\* published by Shearsman Books*

*† out of print*

*İlhan Berk*

*New Selected Poems*

1947–2008

SAMPLER

*translated from Turkish by*

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Shearsman Books

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1997-2008

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## Translator's Preface to this Edition

*New Selected Poems* updates, expands, and replaces my previous selection, *A Leaf About to Fall*, published in 2006. All of the poems published there are reprinted here, some with minor revisions, alongside substantial new selections from three subsequent books in English: *Madrigals* (2008), *The Book of Things* (2009; 2nd edition, 2016) and *Letters & Sound* (2014). For the present edition the poems are presented chronologically, stretching across the length of Berk's long writing life, from 1947 and the appearance of his first book, to 2008, the year in which he died, aged 90, at his home in Bodrum.

A decade ago Berk was virtually unknown outside of Turkey. Today his strange, beautiful, surprising poems have been heard in almost every corner of the English-speaking world. His audience, admittedly small, is one that grows, in breadth and in depth. I hope this new selection continues to carry his voice.

George Messo  
2016

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## Context and Counter-Current

— INTRODUCING İLHAN BERK —

İlhan Berk was born in 1918 in the Aegean city of Manisa. He once said “If a poem is written and goes out into the world, something in the world has changed.” Berk’s poems have been changing the world of Turkish poetry for the best part of seven decades. His innovative poetics have marked him out as one of the vital modernising forces in contemporary Turkish literature and earned him a reputation as a literary *enfant terrible*, even an “extremist.” Yet others deride his linguistic experimentalism as the work of a “French renegade.” Few poets in Turkey today would dispute the significance of his work. Even in the year of his death, at the tender age of 90, more productive than ever, Berk remained a force to be reckoned with.

İlhan Berk graduated from Necatibey Teacher Training College in Balıkesir and, after two years as a primary-school teacher in Eskişehir, Giresun, entered Gazi Institute of Education (now Gazi University) in Ankara, graduating from the department of French in 1944. From 1945 to 1955 he taught French at various secondary schools and colleges in Zonguldak, Samsun and Kırşehir. In 1956 he joined the publications department of the state-owned Ziraat Bank as a translator, where he stayed until his retirement in 1969.

His first poems appeared as early as the 1930’s in magazines like *Varlık* (Presence) and *Uyanış* (Awakening). His first book, *Güneşi Yakanların Selamı* (Greetings of the Sun Burners, 1935), published by the Manisa Community Centre, was strongly influenced by the poetry of Nazım Hikmet. Yet even by the 1930s Turkish poetry was barely out of the Ottoman court, cramped by convention and seemingly marooned in a netherworld of post-symbolism. Hikmet, who had almost single-handedly set about upturning the status quo, was by 1938 serving a prison sentence for treason, his books banned. Much of Hikmet’s revolutionary poetic credo, his belief that poetry should address the social and political concerns of everyday folk in a language free of artifice and intellectual pretention, lived on into the following decade in *Varlık*, a magazine to which Berk continued to contribute alongside leading “First New” poets Melih Cevdet Anday, Oktay Rifat and Orhan Veli Kanık. It was Kanık who nailed the *First New* movement’s controversial manifesto in his collection, *Garip* (Strange, 1941):

The literary taste on which the new poetry will base itself is no longer the taste of a minority class... The question is not to make a defence of class interests, but merely to explore the people's tastes, to determine them, and to make them reign supreme over art... In order to rescue ourselves from the stifling effects of the literatures which have dictated and shaped our tastes and judgments for too many years, we must dump overboard everything that those literatures have taught us. We wish it were possible to dump even language itself...<sup>1</sup>

Berk's subsequent poems of this period, in *Istanbul* (1947), *Günaydın Yeryüzü* (*Good morning Earth*, 1952), *Türkiye Şarkısı* (*Song of Turkey*, 1953) and *Köroğlu* (1955, named after a sixteenth century folk hero and wandering minstrel) relied heavily on early modernist strategies of the *First New*. But Berk was seldom, if ever, ideologically driven. The ambitious scope of his early books, their oracular, legend-telling quality, the colloquial musical structures and rhythms prompted one critic to dub him "the Turkish Walt Whitman." In 1953, however, two years before the last and most accomplished of his "Whitman period" books, *Köroğlu*, Berk made a sudden and decisive break. The publication of his poem 'Saint-Antoine's Pigeons' in the magazine *Yenilik* was to signal a paradigm shift in Turkish poetry as pervasive and fundamental as the *First New*, a movement which would later be known as the "Second New."

Both the *First New* and the *Second New* were responses to Turkey's volatile, reactionary social and political landscape. Just as the War of Independence had dramatically transformed Turkey from a Sultanate into a modern Republic, so too the *First New* had dragged Turkish poetry, somewhat belatedly, into the twentieth century. By the end of World War II, however, the reformist platform of the first Republican government was beginning to look hollow. The routine arrest and imprisonment of left-wing activists, writers and intellectuals defined the increasingly hostile and conservative political ethos. By the late 1940s the painfully slow rate of reforms led to Turkey's first multi-party election, amid widespread feelings of disillusionment and betrayal, feelings which many on the political left were now wary to voice for fear of arrest. It is little wonder, then, that the *First New*'s naive, optimistic celebrations

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Halman, T.S. 'Introduction' in *Just For The Hell of It: 111 Poems by Orhan Veli Kanık*, Multilingual Foreign Language Press, Istanbul, 1997.

of everyday life seemed to many poets, including Berk, tragically out of place at a time when freedoms to speak on social issues were being so violently suppressed. With bitter irony it was the same incoming far-right nationalist government of Adnan Menderes which initiated Nazım Hikmet's release, following a general amnesty of political prisoners, a government which was to preside over one of the darkest and most politically repressive periods in the Republic's history. Indeed, it was Hikmet's fear of re-arrest that had him flee Turkey only six months after his release.

It was into such a climate that Berk's now famous poem 'Saint-Antoine's Pigeons' fell, with its fragmentation, its disruptive grammatical juxtapositions, its sexually suggestive and historically-minded rhetoric, its radical and shocking disavowal of the *First New's* "public language". What began with 'Saint-Antoine's Pigeons' was a poetry of the personal in which formerly preconceived notions of self and identity, authority and history, language and freedom were now fundamentally questioned and challenged. In the Menderes climate of violent, psychotic political paranoia the *Second New* took nothing for granted, not even meaning itself, castigating the semantic demands on the poem in a poetry that made little sense as public address.

If the *First New* was an explosion, the *Second New* was seen by many of Berk's contemporaries as a catastrophic implosion, a reckless and suicidal assault on the very idea of poetry itself. The poet, now distanced from society, was little more than a solipsist, babbling in a language only he could understand. Over the next three decades Berk became a fierce and outspoken defender of his own new poetry and the new poetries of Ece Ayhan, Edip Cansever, Cemal Süreya and Turgut Uyar.<sup>2</sup> Collectively, as the *Second New*, these poets revitalised Turkish literature, insisting, as they did, that poetry be no longer just a matter of social obligation and political commitment but a matter of personal survival, of our very existence.

"I have regarded the world," Berk once said, "as a place to write in, not to live in." Berk lived for much of his life in the Aegean town of Bodrum, known to antiquity as Halicarnassos. He was the author of more than two dozen books of poetry, as well as volumes of critical and biographical prose. He was also an acclaimed visual artist. He translated a selection of Ezra Pound's *Cantos* in 1948 and a celebrated version of

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<sup>2</sup> Selected translations: Messo, G. (2009) *İkinci Yeni: The Turkish Avant-Garde*. Shearsman Books.

Arthur Rimbaud in 1962. His awards for poetry included The Turkish Language Association Poetry Prize for *Kül* (*Ash*, 1979), the Bahçet Necatigil Prize for *İstanbul Kitabı* (*Book of Istanbul*, 1980), the 1983 Yeditepe Poetry Award for *Deniz Eskisi—Şiirin Gizli Tarihi* (*In the Sea's Wake—The Secret History of Poetry*, 1982) and the Sedat Simavi Literature Prize for *Güzelİrmak* (*Beautiful River*, 1988). In 2002 Berk brought his poetic trilogy of *Ev* (*House*), *Çok Yaşasın Sayılar* (*Long Live Numbers*) and *Birşey Olanlarla Birşey Olmayanlar* (*Things That Count Things That Don't*) together under the title *Şeyler Kitabı* (*The Book of Things*, 2002), a monumental project which he described as a need “to add dust, mud, rubbish, stone, dot, dash, question mark and slug” to his “reputation as a man of small subjects.” Berk’s writing was a process of steady, careful refinement and, though his language never stopped changing, the vision remained remarkably clear. “The important thing,” Berk tells us, “is to live the life of poetry, the writing always comes later.”

George Messo  
2006, 2016

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1947-1975

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## Tree

*(To Eluard)*

If this sky, brought suddenly to mind, decided to grow a little more  
this desperate tree  
would be erased.

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## Kizilirmak

7 October 1951

was a cold, dark, deserted night  
we were thirty people, a knife wouldn't part our lips  
then we saw you from the wagon  
languorously flowing  
we all took out our cigarettes, lit up  
and sang folk songs.

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## A Forest in the South

If wheat grows now in Turkey  
it grows, I swear, with love.  
I swear lavender, opium poppies and thyme grow, with love.  
Sheep, goats, cattle  
corn, rice and oats  
are grown and raised in this world with love.  
For thousands of years rivers run down to see the world,  
so we learn for thousands of years there are rivers flowing and plants  
growing in the world's many and various parts  
I talked with moss, ferns and fish  
there's none that hasn't seen the world.

Now in the south if clover grows  
like me it grows for a better life.  
Poppies grow for this too, side by side with my roots.  
If cotton opens whiter than before  
its reason is the same.  
I'm raised, thinking of every forest.  
They too grow up thinking of all the forests,  
like me, the whole of Turkey's forests.  
We have reached such a point in the world's age  
when no one loves the world better than anyone else,  
I love the forests, rivers and hill pastures of England as much as life,  
I love those of America no less.  
Here water-logged rice fields, cotton and tobacco love each other no less.  
Now garlic, grapevines and beans grow by embracing each other.  
Now the steppes and mountains love loneliness no more,  
now no one in the world loves loneliness.  
Now in Iran and in Egypt and in Sudan they know why forests grow.  
Now they know why veins of petrol flow  
Now they know why everything in this world has life.

## The Grieving Stream

Each morning my job it was  
to take this plain from you  
and raise it.

Each morning  
my loveliest task in this world  
was to magnify  
and beautify life.

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## The Flower's Indescribable Grief: Yellow Crocus

We came first into the world  
and as we did  
we learnt to try to love.  
Little did we know  
we'd one day learn to mourn.

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# Saint-Antoine's Pigeons

## I. Eleni's Hands

One day Eleni's hands come  
Everything changes.  
First Istanbul steps out of the poem and takes its place  
A child laughs  
A tree opens into flower.

Before Eleni  
When I was barely a child, before I'd got used to coffee and tobacco  
Even before I knew mornings or nights  
I once looked at night in my hands, in my eyes  
Another time morning was all around me.

Eleni comes  
I'm looking at the world  
That day I realise the world's not as small as it's thought  
We're not as unhappy in this world as we think  
That day I said we should burn all poems and start again  
A new *Brise Marine*  
A new *Annabel Lee*.  
It's with Eleni we realize  
Why this sky rose up, why it came here  
With her we understand why the sea packed up and went.

One day Eleni's hands come  
For the first time the sea can be seen from a street.

## II. Youth

My soul  
Do you hear İlhan Berk crossing the bridge?  
A sparrow is slowly flying by  
A fish with its head through the water is looking around  
A leaf is about to fall from the branch.

Lambodis took a bottle from the shelf and opened it.  
A cloud stopped in the window  
Lambodis went on with his job  
Cleaned his hands, sliced cucumbers, tomatoes  
Then sat and pondered his youth.

It was in a house  
Eleni was eighteen, Ilyadis was twenty-three  
Eleni knew songs  
You couldn't imagine  
    Coffeehouses all over Istanbul  
    Pavement cafes indoor cafes  
No matter how good the songs  
They never could capture Eleni.

In those days Lambodis went everywhere in Istanbul with a cigarette in  
    his mouth  
Eleni's most beautiful features were her hands, her garlic smelling mouth  
Lambodis wasn't yet a barkeeper  
Lambodis wasn't yet anything  
In those days they went every Sunday to Saint-Antoine  
Eleni's breasts were peeled almonds  
Her hands like pigeons  
Even then Lambodis' enemies were many  
The whole of Istanbul was behind Eleni.

Yes,  
Lambodis' youth: a leaf about to fall.  
He sat by the window, watched people come and go

Come look he said to me  
Look, people are going by  
I watch them when I'm bored  
And forget all my troubles  
We forget all our troubles.

My soul, it's always the same  
A man a woman doing the same thing  
Soon I'll get up and go to Sirkeci  
My sweetheart's leaving on a train  
One day the sun won't rise, there'll be no morning,  
we fear one day it will be as if we're not in the world.

This will all come to pass, my soul  
One day we'll see Istanbul is beautiful  
Thereafter Istanbul is always beautiful  
A long long time ago the world was much more beautiful, for example  
Those clouds this sky was a place we could reach out and touch  
Now they only exist in poems  
It all comes down to this, my soul

This world is beautiful  
And Gülhane Park is full of trees.

### III. Saint-Antoine's Time of Lovemaking

This sky  
Is not like this every day above Saint-Antoine  
It's certainly time to make love  
Windows are opened first  
Ants crawl out of their nest  
Mosses stir  
Sky draws taut like a drum  
A girl stitching in her window is happy for the first time  
Homes and coffeehouses facing the sea are happy for the first time  
For now Lambodis has nothing to fear  
Eleni has nothing to fear  
The pigeons will all take flight and no one will know fear  
An hour when everything wakes  
Love will begin  
Everything will stop  
A girl's hand stretching out to her dress will stop  
Saint-Antoine will rise from his sarcophagus and walk off to a place on  
the coast  
With him tombs and holy relics, Jesus himself will follow on behind  
In everything's place there will be love  
Chairs  
Windows  
Saint-Antoine's ceiling will walk straight to another ceiling  
A door straight to another door  
Nothing will want to be smaller  
You'll see the sky grow large  
The sea more blue  
This love will go from eye to eye like a dark complexion  
Going now to Istanbul along with all the best songs  
Now, no matter where, a girl's hand, her mouth, grow for this  
For this a child clings to its mother's breast  
Saint-Antoine's pigeons  
Fly for this  
The anxiety of order in poetry is for this  
This sky can have no other meaning.