İlhan Berk
Also by İlhan Berk, in George Messo’s translation

A Leaf About to Fall. Selected Poems †
Madrigals *
Letters & Sound
The Book of Things *

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† out of print
 İlhan Berk

New Selected Poems

1947–2008

translated from Turkish by

George Messo

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Contents

Preface 10
Context and Counter-Current:

Introducing İlhan Berk 11

1947-1975

Tree 16
Kızırlınmak 17
A Forest in the South 18
The Grieving Stream 19
The Flower’s Indescribable Grief: Yellow Crocus 20
Saint-Antoine’s Pigeons
I. Eleni’s Hands 21
II. Youth 21
III. Saint-Antoine’s Time of Lovemaking 24
IV. Childhood in Fener 25
V. Morning 26
VI. Eleni Light 27
VII. Sky 28

Arma Virumque Canto
I. Saturday Darkness 29
II. Ramparts 29
III. Little 30
IV. Map of the Firmament 31
V. The Gate of Ahmet I 31
VI. Invitation 31

Water Days I, II, III, IV, V, VI 32

Season of the Hunt

Prologue 34
I. The Hunt 35
II. The Women 36
III. The Rampart 37
IV. The Child 38
V. The Men 39
VI. Upstairs… 40
VII. Flow 41
VIII. Me 42
IX. Sefine

Epilogue

You
Istanbul

from Woodcuts

Steppe
Yeşilyurt Street
Country Life
Autumn
Sun
Sunset
Picture
Window
Plane Tree Leaf

1978-1982

The Thames
A Street Leads Down to the Sea
Paris
Sofia
Forest
For Homer
The Sea Book

I. Chaws
II. Threewells Street
III. The City
IV. Hay
V. Those from Karya
VI. Ecology
Reading Li Po
Novembers
The History of a Face

I. History
II. Voice
III. Exile
Inscription on a Grave
Dead

I. On the Frontier of Pain 84
II. Death 84
III. About to Leave 85
IV. Death was Scrutinized 85
An Old Street in Pera 86
Poem for a Father Looking for his Lost Son 87
What a Woman Sees Each Night from a Coast 88
An Old Salt 89
View 90
The Man Walking along a Sunny Coast 91
Visiting the Beloved Wife of a Dead Poet 92
Old Boatmen 93
Evening with a Sprig of Basil 94
The Men 94
As if Death were a Daily Routine 95
A Shoreside Coffeehouse 96
Book of the Dead
   On the Painful Death of a Discoverer 98
   Conversations on the Life of an Exalted Person,
   According to Ibn-i Hacer Heytemi 99
I Woke Saying I love You Three Times 100
Poet and Voices 101
Hamam Street 102
The Women 103
In the Sea’s Wake 104
*from* The Secret History of Poetry 105

1984-1996

*from* Delta and Child
   Passer-by 110
   Sage 110
   Clocks 110
   Quince 110
   Autumn 111
   Birds 111
   Forest 111
   Tobacco 111
Black Amber 112
Now As a Little Rose Goes Through the World 113
Each Day I Walk From One End of a Market to the Other 114
Thank You 115
Beautiful River 116
Yesterday I Wasn’t at Home, I Took to the Hills 117
There Have Been Trees I Have Made Friends With 118
Letters and Sounds 119
Whichever Angle We Take, Everything Explains Itself 120
I Don’t Want to Think 121
Askelopis 122
Rocks 123
Towards Evening 124
Fern 124
Garden 124
Death is like Nothing Else 125
Leaf 125
Shadow falls across the Courtyard 125
Stopping 126
Goat Track 126
As I Write 127
Ashes and End 127
What the Tree Says 127
Trees 128
Words II 128
Blonde Haired Child 128

1997-2008

from Things That Count Things That Don’t
Lyre 130
Stones 133
Golden Oriole 136
Table 138
Roundness 146
Slug 149
Bra 152
Mud 154
Sparrow 157
Dot/Dash 159

_from Long Live Numbers_ 162

_from House_
Door 179
Room 181
Window 182
Wall 183

A Turtledove Valantin Taskin 189
Denizens of Hristaki Arcade 190
Nevizade Street Greengrocer Ahmet Aslanoğlu 194

_Madrigals_
I Came to You Always with a Piece of Sky 195
Small Villages Birds Cats Dogs 195
It's True I Sometimes Turn to Rivers and Trees 196
A River Moves Around Like a Peasant 196
It Was Then the Self-Explaining World Came… 197
That Was You Thin As a Leaf 197
It Should Be Evening Where You Are Now 198
We Used to Use a Water Clock & a Sundial 198
As If We Were Like Blacked Out Days 199
Ask Night About Me in Time and Space 199
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
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 Espiye, 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, Guneşi Yakarın Selamları (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…

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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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 Pigeon’s’ 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. 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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Arthur Rimbaud in 1962. His awards for poetry included The Turkish Language Association Poetry Prize for Kül (Ash, 1979), the Bahçet Necatigil Prize for Istanbul Kitabı (Book of Istanbul, 1980), the 1983 Yeditepe Poetry Award for Deniz Eskisi—Şıirin Gizli Tarihi (In the Sea’s Wake—The Secret History of Poetry, 1982) and the Sedat Simavi Literature Prize for Güzelırmak (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
1947-1975
Tree

(To Eluard)

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