Orhan Veli

The Complete Poems

Translated from Turkish, edited, and introduced by

George Messo

Shearsman Books
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Orhan Veli: A Brief Life

Sometime in 1939 Orhan Veli was travelling in a car together with his best friend and fellow poet Melih Cevdet Anday. As they drove past Çubuk Barrage in Ankara Anday suddenly lost control of the wheel. Their car sped off the road and somersaulted down a steep embankment. While Anday walked away unscathed, Orhan Veli spent the next 20 days in a coma. He was lucky to be alive. But he seemed thereafter destined to live on the edge.

* * *

Orhan Veli Kanık was born in Istanbul, capital of the Ottoman Empire, in 1914. The son of a prominent musicologist and conductor, he was privately educated at Galatasaray Lycée where French was the dominant language of instruction. When his father was appointed chief conductor of the State Orchestra in the newly founded Turkish Republic the family moved to Ankara. It was at the Ankara High School for Boys that he met his best friends and fellow-poets Melih Cevdet Anday (1915-2002) and Oktay Rifat (1914-1988). Among their teachers were several leading poets, including Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar (1901-1962). He attended Istanbul University in 1933 only to drop out several years later without graduating. On his return to Ankara he took up a civil service position with the Postal Administration where he stayed until 1942. He was then enlisted as a reserve officer in the Armed Forces until 1945 when he again returned to Ankara and joined the Translation Bureau of the Ministry of Public Education. He translated a prodigious number of works from French into Turkish, including plays by Molière, Jean Anouilh, and Jean-Paul Sartre, before his sudden resignation in 1947.

Orhan Veli began publishing poetry as a student in the 1930s. His early poems were accomplished formal lyrics, following strictly controlled use of stanzaic forms and demanding quantitative syllabic metres. Many of these poems appeared in
the influential monthly literary magazine Varlık under the pseudonym Mehmet Ali Sel. Despite their many technical accomplishments, the poems were imitative and unoriginal. Though he continued for some time to use his old pseudonym, midway through the 1930s Orhan Veli reached a turning point. The poetry underwent a sudden, radical change. In September 1937 six new poems appeared in Varlık, among them this simple, seven-line poem ‘Journey’:

I’ve no plan to travel.
But if I had
I’d come to Istanbul.
What would you do
When you saw me on the Bebek tram?

Anyway, like I said
I’ve no plan to travel!

Written only one month earlier in Ankara, the step into print was short but the revolt total. Gone were the forced rhymes, the strenuous metres, the intricate metaphors, the perplexing allusions. Purged of all forms of familiar prosody Orhan Veli’s new poems were virtually unrecognizable as poetry.

From the opposite end of a century saturated with free-verse it is difficult to appreciate the impact these new poems had on audiences schooled in the long traditions of Ottoman verse. Like Nâzım Hikmet (1902-1963) before him, who was the first Turkish poet to explore the possibilities of free verse, Orhan Veli was viciously lampooned by the literary establishment of his day. In a typically melodramatic outburst one famous critic, Yusuf Ziya Ortaç (1895-1967) wrote:

The insane asylum and the flop-house of art are now joined hand in hand… O Turkish Youth! I appeal to you to spit in the face of such shamefulness!

From 1935 onward Orhan Veli became increasingly familiar with the experimental poetics of Dadaism and Surrealism. He was among the first Turkish poets to translate Jules Supervielle (1884-1960) and Philippe Soupault (1897-1990). In the consciously underplayed rhetoric of Soupault's early poems from *Chansons* (1921) and *Georgia* (1926) Orhan Veli found a stylized naivety of arresting power and relevance.

In 1941 he published his first book, *Garip* (Strange), a collaborative anthology with poems by Melih Cevdet Anday and Oktay Rifat. The collection was prefaced with its own strident manifesto:

‘The literary taste on which the new poetry will base itself is no longer the taste of a minority class… This does not signify that an attempt should be made to express the aspirations of the masses by means of the literary conventions of the past. 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.’

While its iconoclasm consciously drew parallels with the French avant-garde, the attitude of the *Garip* poets was to turn even Surrealism on its head in poems which shocked the reader awake. Orhan Veli’s colloquial spontaneity was already a matter of style, a crafted low-key anti-rhetoric coupled to a socially poignant anti-heroism. The *Garip* poets were masters of the ‘artfully artless’. It was a poetry striking for its ‘ordinariness and the aggressiveness of this ordinariness’. And though they aligned themselves, in spirit, with the revolutionary aristocrat Nâzım Hikmet, their poetry spoke existentially, of real human

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**ii** Orhan Veli met and interviewed Soupault in Kızılay, Ankara, in 1949 while Soupault was on a UNESCO visit to Turkey.

**iii** See Halman


experience in all its grubby, visceral splendour.

‘We can arrive at a new appreciation by new ways and means. Squeezing certain theories into familiar old moulds cannot be a new artistic thrust forward. We must alter the whole structure from the foundation up.’

The book gave birth to the first truly modern wave in Turkish poetry, which came to be known as the Garip Movement. The neo-classical grandees they had begun by emulating, such as Yahya Kemal Beyatlı (1884-1958) and Ahmet Haşim (1884-1933), were now seen as the representatives of a regressive literary edifice, their poetry the outdated preserve of privileged elites:

‘In order to rescue ourselves from the stifling effects of the literatures which have dictated our tastes and judgments for too many years, we must dump overboard everything that those literatures have taught us.’

And dump it they did. What they put in its place was poetry of unprecedented directness and simplicity. Its zen-like compression spoke of awakening and renewal. Over the decade that followed Orhan Veli grew into his role as the enfant terrible of Turkish letters, his lyric genius maturing in the longer, unforgettable poems from 1949, such as ‘I’m Listening to Istanbul’, ‘For You’, and ‘Towards Freedom.’

* * *

Between 1941 and 1950 Orhan Veli published five short books: Garip (Strange, 1941), Vazgeçemediğim (My Compulsion, 1945), Destan Gibi (Like an Epic, 1946), Yenisi (The New One, 1947) and Karşı (Up Against It, 1949). The poetry retained its

vi See Halman
vii See Halman
power to provoke, in poems often no longer than a few flashing lines, such as ‘For the Motherland’:

What didn’t we do for this motherland!
Some of us died;
Some gave speeches.

He drew inspiration from his own domestic life, transforming the mundane facts of a peripatetic minor civil servant into some of the most memorable and often-quoted poems in the Turkish language. When he spoke of revolutionizing Turkish poetry, he could hardly have imagined the impact his writing would have. It is no exaggeration to say that Orhan Veli’s influence, large or small, can be found in almost every aspect of modern Turkish poetry. His idiolect echoed the colloquial rhythms and vocabulary of the common man. His taste for controversy, together with his disdain for authority and artifice, earned the admiration of his friends and contemporaries, and invoked the wrath of the conservative establishment he railed against.

Orhan Veli’s reputation was of mythic proportions and he was infamous for the womanizing and heavy drinking that fuelled a decade of creativity. But the booze eventually caught up with him. Following a prolonged binge on a weekend trip to Ankara he stumbled into an unmarked ditch and suffered what appeared to be minor head injuries. Several days later, on his return to Istanbul, he was rushed to hospital with acute head pains. Shortly afterwards he slipped into a coma and died. He was 36.

* * *

We can only guess what Orhan Veli might have done had he lived. Melih Cevdet Anday and Oktay Rifat enjoyed long writing lives, reinventing themselves several times over as poets, playwrights and novelists. If we trace through time any one of the many intricate paths that lead us to contemporary Turkish poetry, sooner or later we encounter Orhan Veli.
There have been many individual translations of Orhan Veli’s poems into English. Two large book-length selections have also appeared in translation in the United States: Talat Halman’s *I am Listening to Istanbul: Selected Poems of Orhan Veli Kanık* (1971) and Murat Nemet-Nejat’s *I, Orhan Veli: Poems by Orhan Veli* (1989). Anyone familiar with these two remarkable books will recognise the extent to which their various resonances echo through the present volume. I acknowledge my immense debt to both these translators.

I make no attempt here to include any of Orhan Veli’s early, formal lyric poems. The poet himself disowned them. What I have translated is the full output of his mature work, the poems for which he is best remembered and justly celebrated one hundred years after his birth.
## A Chronology of Orhan Veli

### Life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>13 April: Orhan Veli born to Mehmet Veli Bey and Fatma Nigar Hanım in Yalıköyü, Istanbul, Ottoman Empire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>Orhan Veli enrolled at Galatasaray Public School as a boarder.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>Mehmet Veli Bey appointed conductor of Presidential Symphony Orchestra in Ankara. Also appointed professor at Ankara Conservatoire. Orhan Veli and his mother remain in Istanbul.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>Orhan Veli moves with his mother to Ankara. Starts at Gazi School.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>Enrolled in Ankara High School for Boys where he meets Oktay Rifat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Historical / Cultural Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>First World War. Turkey sides with Germany.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>French, British and Allied troops invade Gallipoli.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>Allies begin 4-year occupation of Constantinople.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>Greek army lands at Smyrna. Turks begin War of Independence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>Greek army defeated. Izmir (Smyrna) razed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>Declaration of the Turkish Republic. Mustafa Kemal becomes President. Capital moves to Ankara.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>Abolition of Islamic Caliphate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>Abolition of the Fez. Western calendar adopted.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Horozcu and Melih Cevdet Anday. Together they publish the poetry magazine *Sesimiz*. Taught by Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>Language Reforms. Latin alphabet introduced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>Graduates from Ankara High School for Boys.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>President of Student Association. Enrols in Istanbul University Department of Literature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>Drops out of university.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>Moves back to Ankara. Starts work for the State Postal Service. In the same year his early formal poems begin to appear in <em>Varlık</em> magazine under the pseudonym Mehmet Ali Sel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>First appearance of new style poems. Oktay Rifat and Melih Cevdet also publish new free-verse poems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>Death of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Ismet İnönü becomes president. Nâzım Hikmet sentenced to 28 years' imprisonment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>Involved in a car accident along with Melih Cevdet Anday. Spends 20 days in a coma.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>Fazıl Hüsnü Dağlarca, <em>Çocuk ve Allah</em>.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
1941 *Garip* anthology published in May. Includes 24 poems by Veli, 16 by Anday, 21 by Rifat, with introduction by Veli.

1942 Resigns from State Postal Service.

1942-5 Military service. Posted to Kavak, Gelibolu, as lieutenant.


1946 Publishes *Destan Gibi*. Resigns from Ministry of Education.

1947 Publishes *Yenisi*.

1948 Translates La Fontaine’s *Fables*. Founds the bi-monthly magazine *Yaprak*, with Bedri Rahmi Eyuboğlu, Abidin Dino, Oktay Rifat and Melih Cevdet Anday.

1949 January: Issue 1 of *Yaprak*, includes Cahit

Asaf Hâlet Çelebi, *He*.

Melih Cevdet Anday, *Rahatı Kaçan Ağaç*.

Oktay Rifat, *Yaşayip Ölmek*.

Edip Cansever, *İkindi Üstü*; İlhan Berk, *İstanbul*.


Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, *Huzur*. 

1950


1951 *Complete Poems*, Varlık Publishing. 1951 Hikmet stripped of Turkish citizenship.

1953 *Prose Works*, Varlık.

1954 Death of Sait Faik.

Part One

Collected Poems
A Guide to Pronunciation

With few exceptions, where Turkish appears in the book I have employed standard Turkish spelling. The exceptions are those words for which well established anglicized forms exist, such as İstanbul and İzmir, which are commonly written in English with İ rather than İ.

As a guide to pronunciation the following may be useful:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Pronunciation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>(a in apple)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>(as in English)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>(like j in jam)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ç</td>
<td>(ch in chips)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>(as in English)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>(e in pet)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>(as in English)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g</td>
<td>(g in gate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ğ</td>
<td>(lengthens a preceding vowel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h</td>
<td>(h in have)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>(i in cousin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i̇</td>
<td>(i in it)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j</td>
<td>(like s in measure)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k</td>
<td>(k in king)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l</td>
<td>(l in list)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m</td>
<td>(as in English)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>(as in English)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o</td>
<td>(o in the French note)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ö</td>
<td>(as in German)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>(as in English)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>r</td>
<td>(r in rag)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>š</td>
<td>(sh in ship)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ş</td>
<td>(lengthens a preceding vowel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t</td>
<td>(as in English)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u</td>
<td>(u in put)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ü</td>
<td>(as in German)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v</td>
<td>(as in English)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y</td>
<td>(y in yes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>z</td>
<td>(as in English)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Garip Strange (1945)
SAMPLER
Nearing Gemlik
You'll see the sea.
Don't be surprised.

[İnkilâpçı Gençlik, 17.10.1942]
Robinson Crusoe

My gran is the most loved
Of all my childhood friends
Ever since we tried to save
Poor Robinson from his desert isle
And cried together
For wretched Gulliver’s
Suffering
In the land of giants.

November 1937

[Varlık, 15.12.1937]
Dream

I saw my mother dead in a dream.
I woke up crying.
It reminded me of one holiday morning
Staring at the balloon I’d lost to the sky,
Crying.

1938

[İnsan, 1.10.1938]
People

How I love those people!
Those who look like others living
In the colourful, faceless world of decals
With chickens, rabbits and dogs.

Ankara, August 1937

[Varlık, 15.9.1937]
Public Holiday

Crows, be sure not to tell my mum!  
When the cannon goes off today I’ll leave  
Home and sign up for the Ministry of War.  
I’ll buy you sweets, if you keep shut,  
Simits and candy-floss too.  
I’ll let you into my swing-boat, crows,  
I’ll give you all of my marbles.  
Come on crows, don’t tell mum!

November 1938

[Varlık, 15.3.1940]
Exodus

I

From his window looking out on flat roofs
The harbour could be seen
And church bells
Rang endlessly all day.
Now and then,
And at night
Trains could be heard from his bed.
He began to fall in love with a girl
From the apartment opposite.
Even so
He left this city
And went to another.

Istanbul, November 1937

[Varlık, 15.12.1937]
Exodus

II

Now from his window
Poplars can be seen
Along the canal.
In the day it rains,
At night the moon comes out
And the square opposite becomes a market.
Be it a journey, money or a letter,
There’s always something on his mind.

November, 1938

[Garip I, 1940]
My left hand

I got drunk
I thought of you again,
My left hand,
My clumsy hand,
My pitiful hand!
My shadow

I’m sick and tired of dragging it around,
For years, on the tips of my toes.
Let’s live a little in this world,
My shadow alone,
Me by myself.

Ankara, September 1937

[Varlık, 15.12.1937]
My eyes

My eyes,  
Where are my eyes?

The devil took them,  
Carried them off,  
Brought them back  
Unsold.

My eyes,  
Where are my eyes?

_Istanbul, October 1937_

[Garip I, 1941]
In the sticks

You’re in the sticks,
Homesick like hell.
It’s evening,
The sun goes down,
What the hell can you do but drink?

[İnkılapçı Gençlik, 1.8.1942]