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Laurence Raw

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*Selections from Varlık 1933-2008 (2008)* Osman Deniztekin (ed.), İstanbul, Varlık Yayınları, 343 p., ISBN 9789754243571;

Sabahattin Eyübođlu (2008) *The Blue and the Black*, translated by Hughette Eyübođlu and Lynne Saka, İstanbul, Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 198 p., ISBN 9789944884686;

Bengisu Rona (2008) *Orhan Kemal in Jail with Nazım Hikmet*, İstanbul, Anatolia Publishing, 181 p., ISBN 9789789275860.

- 1 In recent years there has been protracted debate both inside and outside the country about Turkey's future as a prospective member of the European Union, as a mediator in the Middle East peace process, and as a secular Islamic nation with strong links to the west. In January 2009 we witnessed the sight of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan walking out of a Davos debate in protest at what he perceived as an excessively pro-Israeli stance adopted by the mediator, the journalist and novelist David Ignatius. The reaction – especially from sections of the Turkish media – was ecstatic as they claimed that Erdoğan had made a stand on behalf of the nation against western and Zionist interests. Six months later the journalist Nedim şener from *Milliyet* stood trial for having written a book about the killing of the activist Hrant Dink, a case that prompted one American

journalist to suggest that ‘with its recent record of judiciary mishaps, Turkey should be banned from all international forums let alone EU membership.’

- 2 These incidents brought contradictory demands to the fore. On the one hand, Erdoğan’s act of ‘nationalism’ could be seen as an expression of resentment against the west – both America and the European Union – which still refuses to accept the Turkish Republic as an equal peer. On the other hand, Şener’s arrest also reminded us of the pre-election demonstrations in 2007 when thousands of Turkish citizens marched through the streets of İstanbul and other major cities, shouting slogans in support of Atatürk and laicism, and portraying Erdoğan and the AKP as a major threat to the country’s secular future. They deliberately evoked memories of the Hrant Dink funeral (where the mourners had shouted ‘We are all Hrant Dink’) by wearing Atatürk masks and shouting ‘We are all Atatürks.’
- 3 As Michel Foucault reminds us, however, ‘where there is power, there is resistance.’ There are still a remarkable number of independent publishers prepared to issue material written by intellectuals – both past and present – who envisaged a better world in which people of different political persuasions (socialist, liberal, Islamic) could learn from one another. It is this spirit, I believe, which has inspired the translations of *Selections from Varlık*, *The Blue and the Black*, and *Orhan Kemal in Jail*, all of which are designed to help western readers make sense of the contradictory positions characteristic of Turkish political life. The first two books have been issued by established outfits (*Varlık*, *Türkiye İş Bankası*), both of which have substantial back catalogues of books on Turkish culture (in Turkish as well as English). *Orhan Kemal in Jail* has been issued by Anatolia Publishing, a small outfit backed by a textile firm. The translations seek as far as possible to recreate the rhythms of the Turkish text, and thereby help readers understand the significance to the Republic of principles such as secularism, westernization and democracy.
- 4 *Selections from Varlık* brings together forty prose pieces from the literary magazine, established in 1933 by Yaşar Nabi Nayır, which has regularly published work by major Turkish writers. Most authors and critics who have established a reputation both at home and internationally have appeared in the journal: the poets Orhan Veli, Melih Cevdet Anday and Hilmi Yavuz, the novelists Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar and Selim İleri, the poet/critic Talât Halman, and the cultural critic Hasan Bülent Kahraman. The editor of *Selections from Varlık*, Osman Deniztekin, claims that the book’s basic aim is to examine key concepts such as modernization and westernization and their relationship to twentieth century Turkish history: ‘In their [the contributors’] thinking, as probably in the mind of Atatürk, “civilization” [...] would be taken to mean “modernization,” all amounting to the same idea: the process of socio-economic development’ (10). The experiment with the Village Institutes in the mid-twentieth century was an important example of this: ‘[it] signified a kind of “Rural Enlightenment” or even Renaissance’ (11), as the government embarked on a campaign of mass education. In this case, modernization and westernization were interchangeable, as the government tried to implement Atatürk’s desire to emulate European standards. The contemporary relevance of this statement is obvious – although the Village Institutes are long gone, Deniztekin implies that the process of development continues to this day, as the Turkish Republic accommodates itself ‘to the globalizing world’ (13); and thereby renders itself suitable for EU membership.
- 5 However such processes have often encountered considerable resistance from writers of different political persuasions. In a 1939 essay included in the anthology, the writer/

translator İsmail Hüsrev Tökin observed that ‘a deep traditionalism dominates Turkish village life entirely. Inhibition against innovation, commitment to wisdom and methods acquired from forefathers is ingrained in the Anatolian villagers’ mentality’ (33). Eight years later the academic and poet Sabahattin Eyüboğlu pointed out that many of the educated elite were opposed to the Village Institutes, in the belief that their social position might be under threat: ‘These retired and naïve reactionaries of the revolution period hamper the revolution, not so much with their presence as with their way of thinking and acting which they pass on to young generations’ (70).

- 6 In modern times many artists have encountered similar resistance, not so much from the educated elite, but from successive governments living in the shadow of the military’s 1982 constitution and the oppressive laws enacted by the government at that time. The critic Göksel Aymaz’s article ‘The City in the Distance, the Distance in the City’ (2003) claims that ‘he [the artist] could only be a run-of-the-mill photographer who does cheap work, and the reality, which did not grant what he wanted, which kept him from his aspirations and dreams, stands relentlessly in the way’ (266). This statement expresses many of the contradictions inherent in contemporary Turkey: artistic expression is suppressed by those in power who profess to be democratic and/or independent-minded, yet practice censorship in the interests of state security.
- 7 Nonetheless *Selections from Varlık* celebrates successive generations of creative artists and intellectuals who have transcended such difficulties and contributed to the advancement of the Republic’s intellectual culture. In the poet Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu’s words (written in 1953), they have ‘achieved greater command of our beautiful Turkish language [...] and achieve[d] the pleasure of expressing the myriad manifestations of life with the voice of their own flesh and blood’ (116). Sometimes this can be achieved by imitating western models, but, as the poet Atilla İlhan observes in 1966, many writers preferred to find their own distinctive voices and thereby created ‘a significant, expansive and interesting national literature’ (175). *Varlık* has continually provided an outlet for those who have followed this advice. The sociologist Adnan Binyazar’s 1992 essay ‘A Turkish Culture Emerging in Germany’ shows how writers from *Gastarbeiter* families began to develop their own voices, expressing both longing for their homeland and yet celebrating plural identities. The literary critic Jale Parla writes about her colleague Berna Moran – one of the pioneers of comparative literature study in Turkey – who discovered motifs pertaining to Turks in Renaissance literature, and showed how ‘pioneering novelists such as Ahmet Murat Efendi and Samipaşazade Sezai have not only been inspired by bard’s tales, but have been intrigued by this genre enough to translate Western romances’ (258-9). Esra Akcan’s sociological study of neighborhoods in Germany and Turkey (2005) concludes that Turkish writers have embraced ‘a new kind of *intertwinedness*, one that can tell the individual [...] interrelated stories of different countries, and one that does not unify merely by assimilating the non-dominant to the dominant’ (306).
- 8 *Selections from Varlık* ends on a somber note by returning once again to the case of Hrant Dink, who was slain for speaking ‘whatever is on his mind, hid[ing] nothing, and open [ing] his entire heart and mind to others via his discourse’ (328). Editor Deniztekin understands that there are forces within the ruling elite which would like nothing better than to suppress dissenting viewpoints, and who are prepared to commit murder to achieve their aims. One of the ways of fighting back in a struggle which might not be successful, but which might help intellectuals of all persuasions, whether Turkish or non-

Turkish, to learn how to ‘fail better,’ as Beckett once put it. This helps to explain why *Selections from Varlık* is such an important book.

- 9 Sabahattin Eyüboğlu (1908-1973) worked for the Ministry of Education until 1947, as well as directing the government-sponsored Translation Office. A strong supporter of the Village Institutes, he taught at İstanbul University on and off until 1960, when he was one of a group of 147 professors who lost their jobs in the wake of the military takeover. Thereafter he taught Art History at the Technical University. A prolific translator and essayist, Eyüboğlu firmly believed in opposing those hegemonic forces in government which tried to restrict freedom of expression. *The Blue and the Black* (1965) is a collection of his pieces from a forty-year writing career, which now appears in English for the first time, co-translated by his sister-in-law Huguette Eyüboğlu.
- 10 Eyüboğlu’s emphasis on intellectual resistance as a way of ensuring the Republic’s future is as important today as when the book first appeared over four decades ago. He despises those who treat writers ‘with suspicion and answering with unfair accusations’ (184). In an essay ‘The Witch-Hunt for the Left’ (1960), Eyüboğlu asks why ‘the authorities should deprive the citizen, innocent in the face of the law, of his job for having said, read or written this and that, or for pursuing a new idea instead of buying property or goods?’ (154) Despite their claims to believe in Atatürk’s dictum (‘Peace at home and peace throughout the world’), the ‘leeching parasites’ of the ruling oligarchy have absolutely no intention of promoting dialogue, enabling people to develop a genuine curiosity about what others are saying within the Turkish Republic and abroad. By such means Eyüboğlu shows how Kemalism can be identified with repression and censorship. The only way to challenge this viewpoint is to modernize, which in Eyüboğlu’s opinion means to trust in the people, who in the past ‘resisted the church and the palace in order to enhance their voice, their language, their own color’ (39). Such resistance, he believes, would help to create a pluralist society guaranteeing freedom of speech, in which an individual ‘talks as much as he [sic] understands; he asks questions as much as he can, even at the cost of falling into [...] intrigues’ (40). To lay the foundation for this kind of world, however utopian it might be, Eyüboğlu proposes a wide-ranging program of educational reform designed to develop new ways of thinking into the young: ‘The great majority of the schools [...] have not been able to free themselves from memorization, from the spirit of the middle Ages [...] This is why our top students have no opinion about the world, or even about themselves, add the reason why, once their schooling is complete, they are transformed into some kind of sleepwalker’ (146-148). This process does not involve slavishly imitating previously formulated models, but developing strategies for independent thought. In Eyüboğlu’s view this is what the Village Institutes were endeavoring to achieve by ‘transform[ing] pain into joy, weakness into strength, difficulty into pleasure, the teacher into a friend, [and] the blackboard into soil’ (152).
- 11 In some ways the experience of reading *The Blue and the Black* is a depressing one, as it demonstrates how little the conservative mentality pervading the institutions of power (e.g. the judiciary, the Ministry of Education) has changed over the last five decades. The Turkish Republic can only develop intellectually if it permits independent thinking, tolerance and the recognition of difference at all levels of society. This process would be greatly helped if western attitudes also changed: rather than adopting essentialist positions (e.g. that the Turkish Republic is an ‘Islamic’ or ‘a developing country’), people should try to understand better what is ideologically important to Turkish intellectuals of all political persuasions.

- 12 Both Nazım Hikmet and Orhan Kemal might subscribe to this view; as the two writers were imprisoned during the mid-twentieth century for expressing their political views. Hikmet's cause became something of a *cause célèbre*, as a 1949 international committee that included Picasso, Paul Robeson and Jean-Paul Sartre campaigned unsuccessfully for his release. Orhan Kemal (the *nom de plume* of Mehmet Raşit Öğütçü) was a novelist imprisoned for five years during the 1940s for expressing supposedly subversive political views. Bengisu Rona's compilation *Orhan Kemal: In Jail with Nazım Hikmet*, translated from letters and essays written by Kemal himself, tells the story of how his political and artistic views were shaped through regular association with Hikmet in Bursa prison. The essay 'Three and Half Years with Nazım Hikmet' (*Nazım Hikmet'le 3.5 Yıl*), informs us that Hikmet 'had the utmost respect for working people,' while at the same time insisting upon the individual's right to self-expression: 'He respected people who believe in a cause, whatever it might be. That's why he respected Mehmet Akif [...] for being "a man of character" who believed in his cause' (76-7). Like Eyüboğlu and Hrant Dink, Hikmet would never be dissuaded from expressing his opinions, despite all attempts to silence him. Inspired by Hikmet's example, Kemal stresses the importance of giving artists the freedom to develop their own idiosyncratic forms of discourse even if they challenge received opinions: 'He [Hikmet] loved words which were a combination of originally Turkish words and ones which people were in any case already using colloquially.' Hikmet believed that artists had a central part to play in Turkish intellectual life, as they were capable of using language creatively – unlike the members of the conservative oligarchy whose 'top-down commands' imposed constricting verbal forms on to daily conversation (80).
- 13 Hikmet believed that the only way to initiate ideological change this was to rely on creative artists, who not only wrote for themselves but fought for the rights of their people as citizens of the Turkish Republic. They could not use weapons; but like Eyüboğlu they understood the capacity of words to persuade or to move. In the light of recent events – for example, the killing of Dink and the ensuing trials – I would argue that the state (backed by the military) are well aware of such possibilities, which helps to explain why they are so keen to silence, imprison or even liquidate anyone questioning their views. Or perhaps, as Meltem Ahıska recently observed, their response consists of organizing apparently spontaneous demonstrations in support of the nationalist cause, such as those taking place in 2007: 'The intimacy produced through the displayed form becomes the medium for redefining Turkish "native" modernity and the dangerous others within – and of course Orientalizing them' (Ahıska 2007, 142). On this view, intellectuals are categorized along with 'Islamist' politicians as potential threats to social stability.
- 14 *In Jail with Nazım Hikmet* ends with a series of extracts from Kemal's notebooks covering the period 1941-1943. From these we learn something about Hikmet the man, who sometimes appeared 'so impervious that [Kemal] [...] became consumed with anger and ran away' (144). On other occasions Hikmet would look 'meaningless and vacant,' with a facial expression that could only be understood by his fellow-intellectuals. Like Mahatma Gandhi he understood the value of passive resistance; it was better to allow others to voice their opinions – however superficial they might be – rather than talking too much. By doing so he became renowned as someone whose life and work captured the spirit of 'the Turkish people, of honest humanity, of our country and of this beautiful world' (159). Although spending much of his life either in prison or exiled from his country of

birth, Hikmet contributed far more to the cause of Turkish intellectual life than an entire cabinet of politicians: '[T]he artist is an engineer of the psyche [....]. What is developing is not without hope, it is not without joy' (166).

- 15 Taken together, all three translations tell us a lot about Turkish history, and how intellectuals of all political hues have struggled to make themselves heard in the face of continual repression from the state. Moreover, it is clear that such struggles remain as significant today as they were seven decades ago when Hikmet was imprisoned – otherwise the publishers would not have commissioned the translations in the first place. On the one hand all three books celebrate the capacity of the creative imagination to overcome adversity – whether mental or physical. Whatever hardships they might have endured, writers such as Hikmet, Kemal, Eyüboğlu and the *Varlık* contributors show how intellectuals continually reframe the nation's cultural agenda, despite repeated attempts by the authorities to suppress them. On the other hand the translations stress the importance of understanding the lessons of the past as a way of looking at the Turkish Republic's future both internally and in terms of its future relations with the west. Perhaps one day the members of the ruling oligarchy might come to appreciate this point.

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## RÉSUMÉS

This extended review of three recently published English translations of the works of intellectuals such as Nazım Hikmet, Orhan Kemal and Sabahattin Eyüboğlu shows how they emphasized the importance of freedom of thought, in a context that continually sought to suppress them. In the light of recent events, such as the killing of Hrant Dink, the review also suggests that their struggles are as important today as they were seven decades ago.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés** : Censure, démocratie, intellectuels, littérature, politique

**Keywords** : Censorship, Democracy, Intellectuals, Literature, Politics

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