The Great 'Umar Khayyam

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Quatrains of ‘Umar Khayyām in Turkish, and Turkish Quatrains

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Although Ottoman poets were deeply influenced by Persian poetry from the very beginning, i.e. from the fourteenth century onwards, they did not adopt the Persian quatrain, or *rubā‘* form. They preferred the *kaside* and the *gazel*. This was not a coincidence, as I understand from the keynote address at the conference on *The Legacy of Omar Khayyam* by Dick Davis, entitled *Too good a poem to be faithful?* The Ottoman poets were not acquainted with Khayyām’s quatrains, because this poetry reached the Ottomans only at the end of the nineteenth century through western translations or adaptations.

The Turkish quatrain form, the *tuyuğ* (from Old Turkish) or *terane* (from Persian) or *mani* or *murabba* (both from Arabic), was very rare among *dīvān* poets, but it was widely used by folk and mystical poets. The *tuyuğ* originates with Turkish folk songs brought by the nomads from the Altai through Central Asia, into Anatolia and even further. This consists of a couple of four-line stanzas, each of eleven syllables, usually rhyming aaba. The *tuyuğ* with *‘arâd* metre (i.e. the Arabic quantitative metre), in contrast, was a product of Ottoman *dīvān* poetry in which the Turkish language, without any differences between the length of vowels, is adapted to a metre based on length differences. This was possibly because of the linguistic complexity of Ottoman Turkish, a combination of Arabic, Persian and Turkish vocabulary, united by Turkish grammar. The Ottoman elite was multilingual, using Turkish and Arabic for administrative and religious purposes, Persian for literary purposes, and often also French.

We know of only three Ottoman *dīvān* poets who devoted a substantial part of their poetical works to Turkish quatrains of this type. The first is Kadi Burhaneddin from Kayseri (1344-1398), who specialised in writing *gazels* and ‘songs’ consisting of *tuyuğs*. The second is Ahmed Paşa (died 1497) from Edirne, who witnessed the conquest of Istanbul by Mehmet II in 1453. He was appointed kadi of the new capital by the same sultan and in later years even became his vizier. Apart from writing *gazels*, Ahmed Paşa, like his predecessor, also preferred the Turkish quatrain for the composition of his so called ‘songs,’ for which he won popular fame. Last but not least Mihri Hatun (died 1506), daughter of a kadi and one of the very
few woman poets among the Ottomans, wrote tuyuğs. Devoting herself to writing rather than accepting marriage, she was even a member of the literary ‘salon’ of Prince Ahmed, son of Sultan Beyazit II and governor of Amasya.

On the cusp of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, i.e. towards the end of the Ottoman State’s existence, there appeared a young poet, Yahya Kemal Beyatlı (1884-1958), who, inspired by the French poets with whom he became acquainted during his ten years’ sojourn in Paris, considered his literary heritage of such importance that he started his career by seriously studying the work of his predecessors before creating his own. Kemal tried to master the art of classical Ottoman poetry by composing such poetry himself, using the required forms. He did the same with the quatrains of Khayyām which he, as a traditionally-educated intellectual, read in the original language. He could hardly do otherwise, in fact, because Turkish translations hardly existed at that time.

Besides his new and original poetry, he produced two special collections of ‘old poetry,’ entitled Eski Şiirin Rüzgârıyle [On the Wind of the Old Poetry], published in 1962 and Rubâiler ve Hayyam Rubâilerini Türkçe Söyleyiş [Quatrains and the Quatrains by Khayyām in Turkish] in 1963. As the publication dates indicate, these were published after his death, by the director of the newly-founded ‘Yahya Kemal Institute and Museum,’ and one of his best friends, Nihad Sami Banarlı (1907-1974). During his life, his poems appeared in papers, magazines and the like. Although Kemal’s poetry represents a turning point in Turkish poetry, Kemal, not being an avant-gardist, did not want a break with the past. He, on the contrary, sought continuity. Despite this ‘conservatism,’ Kemal came to be considered the first modern Turkish poet, and also one of the best, a reputation that still holds today.

In this presentation, I will take a closer look at the quatrains of Khayyām as they were translated and recreated in Turkish by Kemal, because the other Khayyām translators of his time remained, poetically speaking, in his shadow. Among them were Abdullah Cevdet (1869-1932) and Hüseyn Danış (1870-1942), intellectuals and scholars who were active in politics as well as in the literary field. Both translated the quatrains into Turkish prose, wrote a comprehensive introduction to Khayyām’s life, philosophy, ideas and poetry, and provided detailed annotations. Another poet was Hüseyn Rifat, who compiled and translated ‘Ruba’iyyat-i Hayyam, manzum tercemeleri’, [The Rubáiyát of Khayyām, poetical translations] in 1926, when the Arabic script was still in use in Turkey. The radical change from Arabic to a Latin script was introduced by Atatürk in 1928. The change in script was part of wider developments relating to the modernization of Turkey and the spread of literacy. It was accompanied by a rigorous ‘purification’ of the language, especially the vocabulary. The effect of this for poets will appear below, in some

The last translator of Kemal’s generation who should be mentioned is Rıza Tevfik Bölükbaşı (1869-1949), a dissident politician and minister, who published his translations of Khayyām in 1945. Finally, in 1963, the year Kemal’s volume of quatrains appeared, the Turkish iranist, Mehmed Nuri Gencosman (1897-1976), published his translations into modern Turkish,\(^44\) aiming at allowing the younger generation to experience the beauty of Khayyām’s quatrains.

Kemal’s Quatrains of Omar Khayyam in Turkish and Turkish quatrains\(^45\) consists of fifty-three quatrains translated from Persian and forty quatrains made by the poet himself. If we apply Whinfield’s\(^46\) classification of Khayyām’s quatrains into chapters and mentalities, seventeen of the quatrains Kemal translated belong to the chapter ‘Poetry’ in the spirit of ‘carpe diem,’ about the joys of love and wine drinking. All the remainder belong to the chapter ‘Philosophy,’ addressing questions of faith and life from an agnostic perspective. The selection gives a good impression of Kemal’s own preferences.

In Kemal’s view, ‘Umar Khayyām is an agnostic, who had great doubts about the meaning of life but enjoys life to the full, his life revolving around science, literature and wine. In the words of a quatrain written by Kemal himself:

\[\text{Hayyam}^{47}\]

\[
\text{Hayyam ki her bahsi açar sagarden} \\
\text{Bahsetmedi cennette akan Kevser'den} \\
\text{Gül sevdi şerab içti gülp ü eşlendi} \\
\text{Zevk aldı tiraşide rubailerden}
\]

In my translation:

\[\text{Khayyām}\]

\text{To Khayyām every conversation started with a glass} \\
\text{He did not mention the river of paradise Kevser} \\
\text{He loved roses, drank wine, laughed and enjoyed himself} \\
\text{And found pleasure in polishing quatrains.}

Kemal made the following recommendation about the good translation of Khayyām’s quatrains:

\[\text{Rubai}^{48}\]

\[
\text{Hayyam'ı alıp tercüme et derlerse} \\
\text{Öğrenmek için talib isen bir derse}
\]
Derdim ki rubaisini nazmetmelisin
Hayyam onu türküde nasıl söylerse

Quatrain
If one says let’s translate Khayyam
And says: let me study to learn this
I would say one ought to turn his quatrains into verse
As Khayyam would have said them in Turkish

Now, as I promised, I would like to give an impression of the differences between Kemal’s language and the ‘Pure Turkish’ [Öz Türkçe] which developed following the switch to a Latin script, before having a closer look at Kemal’s choices and translations. The younger author and translator Sabahattin Eyüboğlu, who celebrated his twentieth birthday in the year of the change of script, 1928, became a passionate supporter of the political fight against illiteracy in Turkey, initiated by the regime. He himself translated many important works of Ottoman and non-Ottoman writers into modern Turkish. He also tried his hand on Khayyam’s Rubāʿiyāt.49 I will compare his and Kemal’s translations of the same quatrain, beginning with the meaning of the quatrain concerned in English:

We are on a lawn in the season of roses on the edge of the stream
And with us are some lovely beloveds as well
Pour the wine, so the early drinkers of that wine
Will be free from mosque and church

Kemal’s version reads:50

Gül faslı çemendeyiz kenar-i cuda
Bizlerle beraber iki üç ahu da
Mey sun ki sabah erken içenler o meyi
Mescide kenisaden olur asude

Wherever Persian words were also regularly used in Ottoman, and especially in Ottoman poetry, Kemal adopted them in his translation. Asude [‘free from care’] is an example here. He also employs the izafet genitive construction, which is not native to Turkish but was borrowed from Persian by the Ottomans. The izafet compound ‘kenar-i cu’ here has the meaning ‘on the edge of the stream.’ Eyüboğlu did it in this way:51

Gül mevsimi çimendeyiz su kıysında
Birkaç nur yüzülü güzel de var aramızda
Şarap sun çünkü sabah erken içenlere  
Ne mescit gerekir ne kilise dünyada.

The Turkish is quite colloquial, as Turkish was spoken and written around the middle of the twentieth century.

The content of this quatrain is remarkably close to the themes and motifs of the Ottoman gazel, in which the dominating themes are wine drinking in the rose garden on the edge of a stream in the company of one’s sweetheart or some other beauties. Carpe diem: in this short worldly existence love and wine provide heavenly delights. The next quatrain, also a translation, has the same themes.

Since Venus and the moon have appeared in the sky  
Nobody has seen a thing better than wine  
I am truly astonished at the intelligence of the wineseller  
There is nothing superior to be had than the thing he sells.52

Other examples of Kemal’s translations dwell on themes which did not generally appear in the Ottoman gazel, or at least not too explicitly, such as themes about the creation and the meaning of human existence. But the metaphors and diction used are as common in the Ottoman world as in Persian poetry.

I will give a few examples with English translations.

Hallâk ki hillkatleri eyler terkib  
Mahkûm-ü zevale etmesi gayetle garib  
Hillkatler eğer güzelse tahrib neden  
Çirkinse bu işten kim edilsin ta’yib  
Tanrî gönülçince yaratır da her şeyi  
Neden ölüme mahkum eder hepsini?  
Yaptığı güzelse neden kirar atar  
Çirkinse suçu kim kime yüklemeli?

From the Creator who is making his creations  
Their being condemned to decline is very strange  
If creations are beautiful why should they be ruined?  
If ugly who will therefore be reproached?

***
What in the world is my part of mankind? It is nothing
The pleasure I took from fate during my life was nothing
I am a flame of longing, should I suddenly be extinguished,
I am nothing
I am the bowl of Cemshid, should I break, my fulfillment will be nothing

Therefor it is better to enjoy the good things on earth:

Where are the ruby lips of Bedahshan
Where the colourful wine that’s balsam for the soul?
It is said that wine is forbidden according to Islam
Drink, don’t swallow tears for Islam, where is that faith!

If we turn from Kemal’s translations to his own quatrains, we find some particularities. They all have titles, often naming the person to whom they are dedicated. He used these verses to honour his masters, friends, or predecessors and the like. The motto which Kemal gave to his volume shows the same preference:

We are not aware that our heads reach the sky
Henceforth our place is in the rose garden of words
If his message of intoxication reaches Khayyám
Our quatrains will bring the beloved’s enjoyment

The next quatrain is dedicated to one of his masters and friends, İhsan Kongar:

İhsan’a
Cem mezhebi vaktinde şu dünya neydi
Cuşişle akan hayat rindaneydi
Günler geceler her biri bir türlü şerab
Nef’ti sagar Nedim meyhaneydi

To İhsan
How was this world at the time of Cemshid’s creed
Hedonistic was life and flowing with ebullience
All day and night all and sundry kinds of wine
Nef’ti was the glass Nedim the tavern

I suppose we all know what Cem and his creed stand for in Persian poetry: it is no different in Ottoman poetry. Nef’tı (1572-1635) and Nedim (1681-1730) are well-known Ottoman poets, satirical and worldly respectively.

Another quatrain by Kemal himself, on life:

Ömür
Bir merhaleden güneşe derya görünür
Bir merhaleden her iki dünya görünür
Son merhale bir fasıl-ı hazandı ki sürer
Geçmiş gelecek cümlesi rü’ya görünür

Life
In one day’s journey sun and water are seen
In one day’s journey both worlds are seen
The last stage is an autumnal season that continues
Everything appears in a dream, what has been and what is coming

And in the end only wishes and dreams persist:

Tercih
Dünyada ne ikbal ne servet dileriz
Hatta ne de ukbada saadet dileriz
Aşkıngłębek açan bülbül öten vaktinde
Yaranla tarab yar ile vuslat dileriz
**Preference**

*In this world neither prosperity nor wealth is what we want
Not even eternal happiness is what we want
Blooming roses and singing nightingales in times of love
Joy with friends and union with our beloved is what we want*

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**Notes**

1. The basic research for this article I did when I was writing my thesis Yahya Kemal Beyatlı, *Turkse poëzie in de vroege twintigste eeuw - een analyse* - [YKB, Turkish poetry in the early twentieth century - an analysis -], Rotterdam: 2004.


4. Those three works were newly edited, translated into modern Turkish and published in one volume by Mehmet Kanar, Abdullah Cevdet, Hüseyin Danış, Hüseyin Rifat: *Ömer Khayyam Rubailer*, Istanbul: 2000.


9. The motto of Kemal to “Hayyam Rubâ‘îlerini Türkçe Söyleyişi” [The Quatrains by Khayyam in Turkish], in *Rubâ‘îler* [Quatrains], p.49.


11. Kemal’s translations are from Kemal, “Türkçe Söyleyişi” [In Turkish], in *Rubâ‘îler* [Quatrains].

12. Eyüboğlu’s translations are from Eyüboğlu, *Hayyam*.

13. The first line in Persian is: ‘Tâ Zuhra-u Mæh dar āsmân gasht padt’d’)

14. The following quatrains are from Kemal, “Rubâ‘îler,” in *Rubâ‘îler* [Quatrains].

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