

THE ECOPOLITICS OF HOSPITALITY IN WHITMAN AND HIKMET'S POETICS

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This garden, this moist earth, this scent of jasmine,
this moonlit light will continue to sparkle after
I've trodden the earth and gone, since before I came,
and after I came they were there without me
and appeared in me just as a form of creation.

(*Poems of Nazım Hikmet* 118)

In 1945 Nazım Hikmet claimed in a letter to his wife that he would undertake an unprecedented project and challenge the traditional literature of Rubaiyat¹. His aim was to conjure up this poetic genre in a materialist spirit. Detaching it from its presumably stylized depiction of any figure or topic outside human concerns, he yearned to cling to reason and focus realistically on the dynamics of society. However, Hikmet's wish remained unfulfilled against his will, owing a lot to his unrestrainable inclination towards a rather romantic tone in his poetry, according to Talat Sait Halman (Halman 17). And the quatrain above, the seventh piece in the first series of his *Rubaiyat*, is an exemplary reflection of his conflicted ideas and feelings about his own work.

This tension, however, was never a disheartening fact for Hikmet when he embarked on his pursuit of a revolutionary poetics. "These uncompromising edges of emotions and thoughts" might be taken as the skeleton of the corpus of his poetry, Ali İhsan Kolcu suggests (Kolcu 47). Rather than sabotaged by an incongruity as such, his poetry is marked by a particular celebration of this paradoxical fusion of the sentiments and the intellect.

Walt Whitman's non-conformist attitude as a poet must have been one of his literary charms that drew Hikmet. As a champion of paradox, Whitman declares "I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul." He defies rooted oppositions and teases them through his rhetorical question "Do I contradict myself?" (*Leaves of Grass* 45-78). Mehmet Fuat attests to Hikmet's personal interest in Whitman's poetry, informing us that the Turkish poet had planned to be involved in the translation process of *Leaves of Grass*, "which did not occur due to private matters" (Fuat 322). And the lyrical resemblance Hikmet's poetry bears to that of Whitman is mentioned also by Mutlu Konuk and Randy Blasing, scholars and translators who have had a remarkable role in introducing Hikmet's poetry to English-speaking readers in the introduction to their translations (Blasing and Konuk 17). Still, we can grasp better that the bridge

between their poetry stands actually firmer than it is claimed when we approach the pastoral passion they both exhibit towards nature with due focus.

Ecocritical scholarship can help us address the green link between the selected poems of Whitman and Hikmet. “Ecocriticism entails an implicit critique of the notion that humans are in some way separate from the natural world. Ecocritical readings of texts can function to remind us that we are, in fact, animals of this particular planet. Certain literary texts make this point explicitly” (Payne 229). This argument of Tonia L. Payne has a crucial role in the scope of this study, which regards the poems of Whitman and Hikmet as examples of those ‘certain literary texts’. Through an ecocritical stance, this comparative reading of Whitman and Hikmet rests on the notion of hospitality in the post-human context. An ecological approach to their poetry underlined with this notion offers an invitation to be mindful of the possibility of another politics. This unusual political agenda their poetics offer can be called a solidarity, stripped of any hierarchical designations, between nature and humankind. Just as Whitman acknowledges and praises the autonomous mechanism of nature with its diverse life forms, Hikmet clings to his predecessor’s ecologically democratic tone and resounds it with a further wish to incorporate human and nonhuman politics on a new ground, unsoiled yet by anthropocentric practices and thoughts. The foreword voiced by the former, therefore, is adopted by the latter to reach an open-ended conclusion, which still -and probably most vitally than ever- needs discussion today.

Hikmet and Whitman’s lyrical sensitivity to nature reaches beyond the reductive location of it in the human-oriented operation of literature. The relation they assume towards their environments seems to render the revision of certain human concepts inevitable. And the moments of such a reconfiguration underlined in their poems brings an alternative sensibility to the surface. This, in return, demands the recognition of life forms outside the human body and intelligence as they are.

To argue that both Hikmet and Whitman invite nature to their poetry as historical signifiers can be in line with nature-concerned projections on literature and life itself. For their poetry appears to provide us with a gesture, through which the metaphorical representation of the nonhuman is problematized. Paying heed to their poems sharing the same topic, a preoccupation with human history, would help us catch the glimpse of this problematic.

In chapter 7, titled *In the Moonlight the Ox-carts Were Rolling*, of his lengthy poem *The Epic of the War of Independence*, Hikmet places the animal side by side with the human. The oxen’s participation in the human warfare attracts our attention in the following lines:

The ox-carts moved on with their oak-trunk wheels,
 like the first wheels that ever rolled in the moonlight,
 and in the moonlight the oxen
 as though they’d come from some alien, miniature world,
 were tiny, short,
 and their diseased broken horns gleamed
 and under their hooves – the earth, the earth,
 the earth flowed. (*Beyond the Walls* 80)

One can observe a similar gesture in Whitman’s *An Army Corps on the March* as well. Embedded in war imagery, the animal’s involvement in a specific period of history is mentioned in the last line of the poem:

...Glittering dimly, toiling under the sun – the dust-cover'd men,
 In columns rise and fall to the undulations of the ground,
 With artillery interspers'd- the wheels rumble, the horses/ sweat,
 As the army corps advances"
 (*The Complete Poems* 326).

These inscriptions of the non-human in such intense and violent historical moments of humankind may promote an idea less conventional than pathetic fallacy in Whitman and Hikmet's poetry. Reading the alignment of the animal with the human political history entails a more radical train of thought if we are to hold on to an ecocritical vantage point. In this respect, what these poems potentially promise, this study assumes, might be a provocation of thought that overreaches the metaphorical confinement of the non-human within the human field of representation.

The oxen and the horses in the poems shall not necessarily be taken as signifiers of human suffering and struggle. Rather than personified images of concepts as such, the non-human is marked in its sheer partaking in human history. Not disguised with attributes that would portray them in a humane fashion, the oxen and horses simply join the scene of combat. No matter how purposeful their inclusion seems, their difference and indifference remain unviolated in Whitman and Hikmet's lines.

Integration of the animal into history has presumably an unsettling influence on its anthropocentric structure. While dwelling mainly on the human agents in a historical event, both poems herald an alternative nuance as to the concept of history. The quoted parts can trigger the following the question: May the human history be defined only through the agency of humankind, while it obviously has bearings on those outside the human milieu and is simultaneously affected by this alterity? Yet, because this question requires an indepth discussion of history from this particular angle, we have to leave it unanswered at this instant and turn back to Whitman and Hikmet's inclusive literature towards the non-human.

Both poets suspend the hegemonic influence of human beings on the natural environment, and greet other species with utmost gentleness. Their texts salute the non-human, the absolute other, and dare try to welcome 'it' as it is. And we can explicate this peculiar hospitality noted in the poetry of Whitman and Hikmet most lucidly through Jacques Derrida's comments on this notion:

[A]bsolute hospitality requires that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, that I give place to them, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names. (Derrida 25)

What Derrida names as 'absolute hospitality' in the terrain of philosophical thinking finds its literary match in Hikmet and Whitman's poetry. Both poems attempt to call the non-human into their representational territories as complete strangers. The historical moments in each poem, molded through human politics, are somehow interrupted by and yet intertwined with animals.

Since it is merely their silent ‘being’ mentioned in words, the position of the animal, or more widely, of the non-human remains entirely unconceivable and indefinable in human semantics of the poets. Still, despite this complete anonymousness of the animal as the perfect stranger, Whitman and Hikmet strive to let them *in* by being disloyal to the anthropocentric tradition of writing. Derrida’s discussion on hospitality helps us locate this promethean motive in their poetry.

Assuming an ecocritical stance in reference to Derrida’s highly genealogically and socially concerned argument on hospitality proves not an inconvenient theoretical superimposition at all, when his own cautiousness on this issue is taken into consideration. A post-human sensitivity is already embedded in his text. For he argues that this spontaneous act of welcoming towards the foreigner shall take place “whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female” (77). And the politics of hospitality he sketches out guides our look on Hikmet and Whitman’s poetics in the same fashion.

In order to translate the politics of an unconditional hospitality into Whitman and Hikmet’s poetry, one shall initially trace the limits of the non-human’s foreignness in them. To what extent do these poets grant the other its due independence? Is the non-human granted an unconditional welcome in Derridean sense as pure foreigners in the poetry of Whitman and Hikmet? To explore whether their poetics is troubled with a familiarizing manner or not, citing Whitman’s poem *Unseen Buds* would be in place at this point, since it responds well to such an investigation.

Billions of billions, and trillions of trillions of the waiting,
 On earth and in the sea – the universe – the stars there in the
 heavens,)Urging slowly, surely forward, forming endless,
 And waiting ever more, forever more behind. (*The Complete Poems*
 568)

Providing a microscopic observation on the underground life, Whitman pulls our gaze downward to the “unseen buds, infinite, hidden well” (568). His lines, although struck with human fascination, foregrounds the untouched territory of this otherwise unnoticed existence. And the extraordinary mode of living the speaker witnesses supersedes the human presence, reducing it to a mere observant eye. The scene is entirely occupied by the alien community of buds.

It is worth noting the fact that the poem’s location of buds expands gradually. While it places them in the beginning “under the snow and ice, under the darkness, in every square/ or cubic inch”, buds become almost extraterrestrial beings, populating the parts of the universe beyond the immediate human grasp (568). And Whitman’s lines unearth their autonomous existence through a syntax characterized not by a subject and a verb, but a descriptive chain of words concerned solely with the ones other than human. Likewise a dramatically relevant tone prevails in Hikmet’s *The Story of the Walnut Tree and Lame Yunus*:

If you sat under it at night,
 you couldn’t see the stars.
 Darkness like water flowed over its top,
 its roots went deep in the earth,

its branches looked down at Yunus. (*Beyond the Walls* 126)

Although the poem revolves around the intricate relationship between Lame Yunus as a mourning subject and a walnut tree as an object of loss, the story undergoes occasional shifts in its narrative. Its emphasis migrates from the intimacy between the man and the tree to an irreconcilable separation. The physical connection between *him* and *it* does not account for an intact relation in the poem. Ironically, what pinpoints the irretrievable un-relation is the assumed closeness between them. Even more assertive than the admitted detachment observed in Whitman's poem, this one brings forth the un-relatedness of the non-human to the human in their very interaction. Its branches leaning towards Yunus does not deprive the tree of its singular presence; the walnut tree stands, with its roots dwelling in deep soil, literally on its own. And through this admitted singularity, Hikmet seems to highlight his recognition of the other as it is, unbound by any identification. The question of a radical acknowledgment as such relates again to Derrida's notion of hospitality:

Does one give hospitality to a subject? to an identifiable subject? Or is hospitality rendered, is it given to the other before they are identified, even before they are (posited as or supposed to be) a subject, legal subject and subject nameable by their family name, etc.? (Derrida 29)

Absolute strangeness of the animals and the tree in the face of the human being is respected in both *Unseen Buds* and *The Story of the Walnut Tree and Lame Yunus*. Whitman and Hikmet carry the foreign individuality of the non-human into their poetics with no taxonomic rendering. In line with Derrida's proposition on the subjectivity of the other, they welcome the alien identity of the buds and the walnut tree in their poems, despite their nature, indecipherable to the anthropomorphic determinations. And this negative attitude towards the identification of the other furthers a disruption in the subject-object economy between the *it* and the *he*. Yunus's relation to the walnut tree, for instance, invokes a self-inquiry that debunks his position as a subject:

Loneliness struck Yunus Hard.
 He sweated blood on another's land.
 Thinking he had lost the walnut tree
 in the dark, sleepless, he waited till dawn.
 The walnut tree was indifferent to loneliness,
 its roots went deep in the earth,
 its branches looked down on Yunus... (*Beyond the Walls* 128)

This is not a moment of an actual physical contact between Yunus and the walnut tree. A lamented remembrance of the tree, this contemplative occasion offers an introspective approach of Yunus to himself. Laying out the difference between himself and the tree in terms of the notion of solitude, he almost undergoes an epiphany as to his condition. Recognizing the irreducible difference of the other from himself, he encounters his own position, which appears to him questionable this time. This sort of an anxiety is uttered in Whitman's poem *I Saw in Louisiana a Live- Oak Growing*, which introduces a self-reflection akin to that of Yunus in its

first lines:

I saw in Louisiana a live-oak growing,
 All alone stood it and the moss hung down from the branches,
 Without any companion it grew there uttering joyous leaves of dark green,
 And its look, rude, unbending, lusty, made me think of myself,
 (*The Complete Poems* 159)

Human subject, as a perceptive agent, withdraws his gaze in this poem into himself. Through a contrast with the other, which is apparently not self-serving, human's locus of consideration and action becomes his own self. M. Jimmie Killingsworth makes a similar remark in his reading of *The Compost*, another poem by Whitman, where he holds "The poem begins not with a celebration of identity with the earth but with a dramatic recognition of difference. We see the poet face to face with the earthly other, alienated from the very ground of his daily walk by the "thingishness" of the environment, which forces him toward the recognition of death, disease, and dissolution" (Killingsworth11). Killingsworth's interpretation is strongly relevant to our reading of both poems of Whitman and Hikmet, since the close contact with nature highlighted in these poems does not result in a companionship. The inanimate, through its own disinterestedness, maintains its detached position, and this causes a perplexity for the human subject concerning his own presence.

Whitman and Hikmet, challenging anthropocentric empiricism, grant a communicative function to the seemingly silent and passive posture of the trees. The personae in these poems undergo a self-disorienting touch with the non-human. And while this dialogue between the human and nature perverts the subject-object structure, it also evokes an uneasiness concerning the former. In the quoted lines of both poems, men suffer an estrangement concerning themselves in their relation to the foreign other. Trees inflict them with a compulsory self-alienation. Recognizing the irreducible distinctness of the non-human, human beings in those lines are confronted with an awakening: a post-human awareness that makes them seem different even to themselves.

Now that the dividing line between the human and the non-human leaves its place to an ambiguity regarding the subject-object distinction, human politics that ground such dynamics lose their referential function. No longer possessing an epistemology, assertive and intact enough to locate themselves as human beings as *known*, the men's view of themselves alters through their contact with the alterity in Whitman and Hikmet's lines. This alteration and alienation from the culturally given terms of humanity suspends the validity of the politics, through which this dualism between the human and the other is assured and sustained. Thus, the legitimacy of the political projections in favor of the anthropocentric epistemology and ontology falters, these poems might suggest.

Presently we can take a look at David Gilcrest's reading of a Han-shan p to illustrate our discussion. Pinpointing this exhaustion of the binaries in his interpretation, Gilcrest reminds us "[S]uch a decomposition of the autonomous self leads us to discover a new sense of identity, the relational identity of the 'ecological self' with implications that are epistemological, ethical and political" (Gilcrest21). The relational identity Gilcrest foregrounds may be the fruit of this breakdown in the oppositional understanding of the human and the nonhuman. And only an alternative political approach can shelter these selves, no more defined and confined by such an

exclusive dichotomy. Whitman and Hikmet's poems, likewise, respond to this call for an "ecological self" by unsettling the self-referential position of the human, through an incorporation of, or rather, a co-operation with nature.

In Whitman and Hikmet's poetics a mutual language replaces the antinomy between the human and the alterity. Humans' relation to nature is no longer entrusted to an anthropocentric soliloquy. The interrelation between them is articulated through the participation of both interlocutors. And this intercourse has its utmost manifestation in Hikmet's 12th quatrain.

The cabbage, the car, plague microbe and star –
 we are all kith and kin.
 And hey, my darling with eyes like the sun, it's not 'Cogito, ergo sum',
 we exist in this splendid family and therefore we think.
(Beyond the Walls 148)

Cartesian human rationale is eclipsed in these lines, which privilege the communal presence of culture and nature, and the animate and the inanimate. Rather than a monolithic view that appeals only to the human side, Hikmet adopts a pluralistic approach embracing both parties is adopted. Reversing the order between 'I think' and 'I am', he prioritizes the condition of 'being with all' over the 'thinking human self'. Human's relation to the non-human is not only a pre-requisite for his being but also for his intellect according to the poet. The awareness and acceptance of such co-existence and interdependence can be the blueprint of Hikmet's eco-poetics. And the familial bond he praises between the human and the other(s) hints strongly at an alternative politics.

The politics shaped through this solidarity avoids homogenizing principles. Hikmet's emphasis on this "splendid family" is far from attributing an likeness to the other, in which case it could be appropriated as a licensed member of that community. On the contrary, expelling any need for similitude, he bows to the non-human's different temperament by allowing it to take part in his lyrical writings in its entire disconnectedness. Offering an unconditional hospitality towards nature in its radical foreignness, Hikmet endeavors to welcome the stranger as it is. Otherwise, "If he was already speaking our language, with all that implies, if we already shared everything that is shared with a language, would the foreigner still be a foreigner...?" (Derrida 16-17).

Almost in response to Whitman's exploration of a poetry that would ultimately voice the mute, Hikmet advocates a poetics, which would appraise the absolute hospitality towards alterity in Derridean sense. "Still something not yet told in poesy's voice or print-/ something lacking,/ (Who knows? the best yet unexpress'd and lacking.)" (*The Complete Poems* 567). The doubt Whitman poses on the interests of human-concerned poetry, finds its resolution in Hikmet's lines. For his poems recognize the urge to include the unexpressed through its utmost speechlessness, which is what preserves its inevitable difference and independence. Whitman's humility and openness towards the impenetrable autonomy and un-decipherable traits of the non-human, leaks into Hikmet's lines and helps compose another politics.

Both Whitman and Hikmet assumes the negative criticism of the human taxonomy, as discussed by Derrida and the challenge it brings upon the anthropocentric political agenda. Hikmet, taking such a radical recognition a step ahead, presents the gleams of a politics, in and through which the human and the non-human dwell together, as complete foreigners respectful

of each other. By doing so, he becomes one of those poets who salute Whitman and *justify him and answer what he is for* in ecocritical terms (*The Complete Poems* 48).

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Endnotes

ⁱRubaiyat, meaning quatrains in Arabic, is best known for Omar Khayyam's extensive use of this form in his poetry. See, Khayyam, Omar. *Rubaiyat*. Trans. Edward Fitzgerald. Greenwich, Connecticut : New York Graphic Society, 1966. Print.

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