

I Felt Like a ‘Prisoner of Language’: An Interview with Seyhan Kurt*

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M.T. (Mehmet Tekin) - *Seyhan, you have a lifeline from France to Turkey. Could you tell us a little bit about this process along with the problems you faced while learning Turkish?*

S.K. (Seyhan Kurt) - I was born in the commune of Bourgoin Jallieu in Grenoble. After completing my education at the Ecole de Jean Jaures in Lyon, my parents decided to send me to Turkey. The reason for this decision was their concern that I knew almost nothing about Turkish and Turkey. French was spoken even within the family. Religious (Islamic) education – for lack of space – was provided in the city’s central church. I arrived in Turkey at the age of 14 and was placed in a boarding school in Mersin, where none of my peers spoke Turkish. The only way for me to communicate in this ‘foreign’ country was through my facial expressions. I didn’t know a word of Turkish, so I made a lot of logical mistakes while learning the language and felt like a “prisoner of language”. Imagine how language can seem to you in an environment where even people’s smiles are foreign. There are rare times when language is a prisoner, like when you think in French and try to read and write in Turkish. Especially if it is a language you have to learn. At this age, I could not find an answer to the problems I had with language and culture in French or Turkish. In fact, in order to create space in my mind in this complexity, I started to resist both languages from time to time. I could have sacrificed many words, concepts and signs that would have made my life easier for a small gap in my mind. However, I could not do this under a bombardment of meanings. In the end, I started to give a concrete response to every new word I learned, which turned out to be the most tragicomic mistake

* The original title: “Interview with Seyhan Kurt”, Prof. Dr. Mehmet Tekin, *Ayraç* Magazine, Issue 19, pp. 40-43. Istanbul, 2011.

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of my life. Adding the extremely difficult and unfavorable conditions of boarding school, it took me many years to learn the subtleties and abstractions of Turkish.

M.T. - *To give an example of the linguistic problems you face...*

S.K. - For example, when I started to learn Turkish at the boarding school in Mersin where I was placed, I couldn't understand some words, for example, I used to say "ilan" (bill) instead of "yılan" (snake). When I was walking around the streets of Mersin, there were signs on the walls and on the electricity transformers that said "Post no bills" and I spent almost two years trying to understand and questioning the Turkish desire to stick yılan (snakes) on the walls and why this desire was forbidden. I thought it was a 'cultural' or 'religious', surreal ban. I sat and cried when my art teacher at school said, "Sen atölyeye gidedur¹ ben hemen geliyorum" ("You go to the workshop and I'll be right back.") I couldn't understand whether the teacher wanted me to go or to stop. In traffic class, we were constantly told, "When crossing the street, look left and right". "Even if I cross the street, wouldn't I be in the same place?" I would get confused. The "Maşallah"² sign on the top front of buses and trucks would always make me think that the biggest transportation company in Turkey was a company named "Maşallah". I experienced countless confusions and bewilderments like these.

M.T. - *When did you start to be interested in poetry and thanks to whom did you develop this interest?*

S.K. - My connection with poetry started before my connection with Turkish. At that time, I was mostly devoting my time to painting and sports. But unlike my friends in my neighborhood, whose whole world was football, I met many of my 'friends' such as Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Aragon and Rousseau in my childhood. Naturally, people here encounter such names in classes from middle school onwards. I started poetry by imitating like everyone else who is involved in art. I can say that I had no difficulty in this. The painting education I received in France played a very important role in expressing myself. In time, this was not

¹ Concurrency – go and stop.

² Magnificent.

enough either. I started writing short poems in French and had a brief interest in theater thanks to Moliere. Upon my return to Turkey, the way to be myself in a geography where I was once a stranger was necessarily through ‘being others’. I eventually learned how to write letters to my family among people who had no idea how to process human beings. It was as if I was not learning Turkish to communicate with others; there was an ‘other Turk’ inside me that I had to encounter, deal with, confront. Writing – as it is now – always seemed easier to me than speaking. That’s why my friendship with poetry gave birth to an introverted and reticent child. My music and etiquette teachers in France, Monsieur Bret and Madame Lopez, and my high school literature teachers in Turkey, Ms. Zuhul and Mr. Hamdi, have made great efforts to untie the knots of my language and mind. I owe them a world.

M.T. - Loneliness is the incurable wound of poets, hence the theme. This theme forms an important vein in you as well. Your loneliness is not a natural process brought on by age. You are young, and isn’t it too early to say “The presence of others/ multiplies your loneliness”? Your loneliness seems to me to be the result of resentment, of being broken.

S.K. - Contrary to what is thought and said, you are not alone if you do not have a language. If you can use a language with all its cells, you are alone. This is why “the presence of others multiplies your loneliness”. Your language is the other here. Just as the burden of knowing something is hidden in your sense of incompleteness, the most painful hidden truth that an artist or thinker can face is the capacity to fulfill their soul in a universe other than language. In my opinion, a consciousness in which this substance exists cannot remain ‘alone’ and reaches out where the masses reach out. And in a universe where the masses find pleasure, this means the end of the image of fracture. In a common denominator based on mutual agreement, fulfillment and enjoyment, what solitude will you establish? I use the verb ‘establish’ deliberately, because solitude is in a way a process of construction that requires serious labor. We filter our accumulations through the sieve of time and space, and the result is a dazzling cake for others, and a hard-to-digest pile of dough for the editor. Therefore, what gives birth to loneliness is not indifference but a ‘primal’ urge to create. In other words, it is the ability to describe a kind of metaphorical existence with a real captivity. With all this in mind, I think that the strategies against loneliness developed by people with

different languages of thinking and communicating may be different and more circuitous than those of people who are “monolingual” by birth.

M.T. - *You have an urban, modern stance. However, in the poem “Manastır Hüzünü” (Bizden Geçen Sular), there is an air that postpones, not to say cancels, but postpones the stance in question. There are lines that advise us to be away from “cables” and closer to “tree hollows” and “castle walls”.*

S.K. - Perhaps the greatest passion of our time is the strange passion for nostalgia. In the face of the ‘original weight’ of every object, the ambition to reproduce it, the misfortune of trying to make sense of it forces us to be urban. The most important indicator that makes us urban, modern, is the objectivity of the universe that our language or art refers to with the politicality it invents. If being modern is nothing but a denial of the principle of existence, is there any way to escape our nostalgic fantasies of nature? There is almost no difference between what art ‘preaches’ and what modernism or technology imposes. For this reason, “Manastır Hüzünü” (Monastic Sadness) does not preach the remembrance and preservation of nature; it advises ‘migration’. Moreover, it should be added that it is not only the land that is becoming increasingly desert in the world. Along with urbanization, the cancer of desertification in minds has also spread to Anatolian mysticism or Far Eastern wisdom, which hardly meets touristic demand. This is a fully ‘educational’ and modern sphere of control; there is a highly complex political and linguistic apparatus that meticulously regulates how and where to live your desires. In this apparatus, the language and the objective manifestations of rituals become incompatible. Something ‘simple’ had to remain, didn’t it? I think it’s time to give the simple its due again. In other words, it’s time to show the virtue of leaving something as it is, leaving it in its place, leaving it in its flavor, leaving it alone. Otherwise, it seems that in this paradoxical cycle, poetry, like the countryside, will lose all its characteristics and language will destroy the meaning it has created by turning it into an illusion and evolving it. No matter which language you look at, today words are incapable of mating naturally to create a new discourse, civilization or way of life. They reproduce by artificial insemination, which leads to the alienation of two people, peoples, literature or thought that have influenced each other infinitely.

M.T. - *When you say migrating, would it be possible to say that this urge to*

relocate or travel is the basis of your poetry?

S.K. - Ever since I was a child. Every year on December 25th, when Santa Claus (I would later learn that this white-bearded man was a factory worker) came to our door and asked us what we wanted for Christmas, I asked for a big atlas without hesitation (the first time I asked for a globe with lights). After I came to Turkey, from my high school years onwards, I traveled long distances, especially by bicycle, walking hundreds of kilometers at a time. There is only one freedom of travel, and that is the freedom to travel on foot without any vehicle. The poetry of the roads and nature has always transcended the folkloric aesthetics of travel and culture. This has left deep traces in my poetry, as I have always found a connection between the curves of the earth and the curves of letters. I have often thought that what we call a journey is what we look for in others. Migrating from one place to another does not actually mean losing the previous place; getting lost in a new place deepens our horizons. You get to know yourself better in a place where you don't know anyone. Each time you lead a new life and the excitement of it never ends.

M.T. - *When it comes to poetry, the concepts of “self” and “other” necessarily come up. I would like to ask: In the universe of poetry, do you describe yourself, others or others in yourself?*

S.K. - If I had to look for a victim here, of course I would choose myself. I say 'victim' because in the end we will see that what is often expressed is embodied in the other with an absolute victory. The questions that can be asked about existence or non-existence are thus emptied of content. Therefore, the question of whether it is possible for the poet to speak of another or of the mystery of the universe outside himself becomes redundant. Hence the magic of the elegant distance between the artist and the work of art. Every 'other' born from the pairing of images symbolizes the self. At this point, it is necessary to remember how the ideological objectivity of language generates a skeptical discourse. Because the only thing that points and will point to the dynamics of language on the anachronic plane is the subject. The self does not distance itself from itself while telling, writing and painting others; it makes it possible to understand the utopian consciousness in itself. Who do we write for? First we write for ourselves, then for the other. In the end, we find our other in ourselves. This strange

adventure of freedom turns into a Sisyphean endeavor.

M.T. - *As in the debates on freedom in art?*

S.K. - Not exactly. The language of art and the meaning of objects navigate in different channels, and this, in a sense, gives the emancipatory nature of art a dubious and ambiguous framework. Most of the time, discourses of freedom in art have not gone beyond a political and class arrogance.

M.T. - *From time to time you use a critical, ironic style in your poems about poetry or art. Can this be explained as a reflection of your distant stance towards contemporary art in general?*

S.K. - Would it be an exaggeration if I said that in this age of extremes, even we have to distance ourselves from time to time? Today everything seems to be itself much more than it is itself. Today's art, which wants to turn the world into an indifferent subject, has been fed recklessly with the opportunities offered to it. Now it is in need of a serious angioplasty to understand the blockages these opportunities have caused in its arteries. I think that art today is creating a 'borderline' situation within itself, because as things become undefinable, art takes on a disguise that is able to overcome the transcendence that has not yet been clothed (embodied) with its whole being. Just like the architecturalization of poetry and the de-poeticization of architecture today, the effort of a non-existent art to make everything visible in order to preserve its virginity allows it to turn into a schizoid ideology that eventually commercializes itself. Art, which has the disease of making everything artistic, therefore needs to prove that its existence is artistic. And as a result, modern art has turned into an image machine that absorbs everything, eviscerates everything, produces forms that are not mirrored, but rather become the same. With the sensibility of a playboy transvestite who is constantly dissatisfied with his own body, he is not even aware that he is not in a real process of reproduction. This is why the idea of art is more attractive and less tiring than art. Because the idea of art can destroy, transform, distort and expose itself infinitely. Thus there is no need for art itself. And art is now so far from being artistic as to be unreal. Not to be distant from contemporary art means, in a way, to obey the commercial obscenity of this 'market'. If something has become everything, how is it possible to talk about

the existence of the image and transcendence?

M.T. - *You said ‘the architecturalization of poetry’. Can you explain this a little bit?*

S.K. - Only poetry? I’m afraid not. A latent urge to ‘save oneself’ that emerges with the immanent or formal evolution of poetry along with art is embodied in the architecturalization of images. This situation reminds me of the gigantic silhouettes of cathedrals or some mosques that are built as if to make God’s majestic presence visible. If it is necessary to cover up a problematic, to make it disappear, the easiest way is to give it an aesthetic form to make it more visible. Making God visible instead of understanding him, making poetry visible instead of understanding it. The divine *mise-en-scene* in poetry as a technique of Gothic architecture. There is no room for flexibility whatsoever. Roughly speaking, the ‘moralistic’ poetry, adorned with a medieval religiosity, falls into the fallacy of contemporary architecture, which is dedicated to expelling this moralism from the earth. In other words, the irony is that the obscene reality that emerges with the demystification of architecture and poetry creates its own meta-language. In poetry, the set of words corresponding to each object stripped of its value and aesthetics no longer forms any kind of whole. Just as modern architecture does not represent something that is, but something that is not. Modern art as a whole, whether it relies on deconstruction or magical deconstruction, has become a source of commanding power rather than a reflection of a mood. Today, the object of desire of poetry has turned into an architectural structure that always has a customer. As with the idea of installation in architecture, poetry presents its own chaotic confusion on an invisibly vast, minimal and desert-like ground, sweeping away all categorical distinctions and presenting it as a fetish. In this strange landscape, the alienation between poem and poet gradually becomes an ideological rupture between subject and object. The architecturalization of poetry is the product of an unlimited ‘aestheticizing intervention’, a form that is impossible to criticize and no longer surprising. I don’t know how long this anesthesia lasts, but it seems dangerous to me to take a decorative stake in reality from the illusion of mass-produced art. Because at the end of it all, the most human emotion that the modern world has stripped away from us, that it is trying to destroy, is surprise.

M.T. - *In one of your lines you say “I know my poetry is not the answer to any question”?*

S.K. - My poems are not sacred texts where I can find the answer I’m looking for here. Anyway, when you look at the history of philosophy and thought, questions have always dominated. Wouldn’t it be bad if poetry could be the answer to a question?

M.T. - *Thank you.*

S.K. - Thank you too.