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THE TURKISH FOLK POETS*

By MUBECCEL BELIK

IT HAS LONG been known that, in addition to the blend of Arabic and Persian elements which served as the classic court literature of Turkey, there has been a large and rich area of unwritten literature catering to the rural population and to the Turkish people outside the empire—serving them with “folk” poems in their own language. For centuries, however, these poems and songs were considered vulgar, crude, and unworthy of the attention of any serious scholar. It is only since the beginning of the nineteenth century that a great interest has awakened in all the doings of the people, including their verbal art. The strengthening national movement gave great impetus to the folk life, and with the establishment of the Republic, planned, scientific folklore studies began.

The first students were amazed by the vastness and richness of the material with which they were confronted. While every field of folklore showed variety, it was in folk poetry and lyrics that the greatest richness was uncovered. Furthermore, there exists, in connection with these forms, a situation almost unique in folklore. Whereas most folklore is, by definition, anonymous—the creation of a whole people, formed and reformed through many generations of interpreters—the Turkish folk poetry shares, in some instances, a characteristic of literate poetry in that many individual poems are known and recognized to be the work of individual bards. The best pieces of Turkish folklore are found to be the work of known poets who lived as long ago as the thirteenth century; today hundreds of the old Turkish troubadours live on by virtue of the connection of their names with unwritten folk poems.

It perhaps goes without saying that there is reason to doubt, and certainly no means of proving, that the poems accredited to the individual *ashiklar* or lovers, as these men are known in Turkey, have been maintained over the centuries in exactly their original form. Nevertheless, the remarkable uniformity exhibited by versions of specific poems collected from many parts of Turkey, the consistent coupling of certain poems with the names of certain poets, and the refusal of contemporary *ashiklar* to accept spurious versions as genuine, all lead one to believe that the folk poems falling into this class actually deviate to only a slight degree from the original creation.

A contemporary *ashik* will recognize, in addition to this relatively unchanging type, two other classes of folk song: one in which the composer has been completely forgotten, and in which a wide range of improvisation is permitted; the other, a group of songs but loosely coupled with the name of a composer, and also permitting the exercise of a fair degree of individual creativeness on the part of the singer. The attitude of the *ashiklar* toward these categories is quite different from the one they bear toward songs of the first type, in which not only is the composer's name invariably mentioned, but any attempts at variation are frowned upon.

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Since most of these folk poems are sung in connection with folk stories, a brief consideration of Turkish folk tales will be in order. In these, there are two main parts: the narrative, which relates a series of events structured and embellished according to the memory, imagination and skill of the individual narrator; and the verses which are sung or chanted to the accompaniment of the inevitable *saz*, a three-stringed plectrum instrument, with long neck and small sound-box. This instrument has become identified with folk songs of this *genre* to such an extent that folk poets are sometimes called "*saz-poets*." The purpose of the songs is usually to set the stage, in other words to describe the scenery in which the events of the narrative took place, or to portray and comment on emotions felt by the characters in the story. The songs are relatively independent variables, and the skill of the *ashik* is demonstrated by the facility with which he can tastefully introduce a large number of them into the thread of his narrative. Sections of narrative are alternated with songs; a competent *ashik* can recite and sing a connected story for as long as five consecutive evenings, and sessions which last for three are common.

The heroes of the original lyrics were usually the composers themselves—*ashik* of outstanding creative genius who told and sang about the events of their own lives. As time passed, and as other *ashik* added to and modified the elements of the stories in accordance with their own ideas, the original, mundane heroes have tended more and more to assume the rôle of legendary culture-heroes. To differentiate between the true works of the original poet and poems latterly introduced is impossible, especially since additions are composed as nearly as possible in the style and structure of the previous work. One result of this has been the growth of two distinct lines of interest in the study of Turkish folk poems. Some students are trying to discover, as a problem in historical reconstruction, the original, archetypal poem, and have concentrated their attention on the works of one or another of the old folk poets. The other school stresses the study of variation in folk poetry in general. As a consequence, the first type is happiest when he finds a wide distribution of similar versions of a poem; the other becomes more joyful with each variation he discovers.

While only a few of the folk poets, such as Haçi Bektash Veli and Yunus Emre, can be traced back as far as the thirteenth century, the works of countless others who lived between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries are sung today. Certainly, all of these poems are not equally good, according to Turkish standards of verbal art, but somehow they have retained the association with the identities of their authors.

It should be understood that, within the body of Turkish folklore, this constant reference to individual creators is found only in folk poetry, and only in the type of folk poem discussed above. There are, for example, no epic or folk-drama forms comparable in this respect. Epics, as such, once existed in Turkey but have failed to survive; the folk-dramas are entirely anonymous, or rather, take their character from the actor-director who composes each version, so that no "original" creator is taken into account.

The metrical form of the poems of the *ashiklar* is invariably based on syl-

lable counting, rather than on prosody. In Turkey this form has been for centuries used only in folklore and by folk poets. While it is now being introduced as a new form in sophisticated literature, the works of the *ashiklar*, who developed the form, are still generally conceded to be superior in point of harmony and expression. The language they used, while not completely free of Arabic and Persian influences, was relatively simple Turkish, a fact which goes far to explain the persistence, in a literate society, of this rather elaborate form of unwritten literature, for the official literary language of the court was almost unintelligible to those to whom the songs and stories of the *ashiklar* appealed.

Furthermore, in choice of subject matter, in manner of expression, and in world-view, the works of the *ashiklar* were much more in accord with the tastes of the vast bulk of the Turkish people, most of whom were illiterate, than with the ideas of the literate few who might have transmuted the form into a written one. Certainly the main trends in Eastern literature, idealism and abstraction, have influenced the works of the *ashiklar* and Turkish folklore in general. Since, although the prose part of a Turkish folk story consists of a narration of events, the verses or songs deal with rather refined philosophical speculation concerning the affective aspects of these events, the very structure of the folk story contributes to this idealism and abstraction. Nevertheless, we find in the works of the *ashiklar* a constant concern with down-to-earth human realities which nicely balances this prevailing literary trend, in such a way as to make the artistic products palatable to the common folk of Turkey.

Although the folk poets use abstraction and vivid imagery with great freedom, any form of supernaturalism, either in character or event, was excluded from the original poetry. From this point of view the old *ashiklar* were always very realistic. Later, however, when variants of the poems began to develop, supernatural motifs appear, together with other, sometimes almost mythical, elements. For instance, if an *ashik* sings a song about the heroism and courage of a soldier in some specific war he may distort the historical truth in a poetic way, but no ultra-natural events will take place. As an example, we may quote the following song of Kayikchi Kul Mustafa, who composed it in the late sixteenth century:

When at first we attacked Bagdad
Across the moat jumped Young Osman
The flag-bearer killed, he seized the flag,
Brought it into the city and raised it, did Young Osman.

Saddle for me my two grey horses.
Let me overcome all my enemies.
At the time of the morning prayer, the doors of Bagdad
He threw open, shouting, "Allah, Allah," did Young Osman.

The Sultan Murat said, "Bring him! Let me see him.
What sort of hero he is, let me learn.
If he wants a vezier-ship, I'll give him three."
Red blood dripped from the sword of Young Osman.

While Kul Mustafa was keeping watch,
While cannon-balls and bullets fell like rain,
While accursed Bagdad punished us,
He became the leader of the honored dead, did Young Osman.

The last stanza, incidentally, indicates the method employed by the *ashiklar* to immortalize their names—simply by working them into their poems.

An example of the inclusion of supernatural events in later variants will now be given. This version, which has dropped the name of Kul Mustafa, and has otherwise deviated in several respects, was collected near Karaman, a small town in central Turkey. Only the first two stanzas will be quoted.

Young Osman says, "Mount your horses!
Let us swing our swords against the infidel dogs."
Let Allah give power to our young rams;
He who covers the battlefield like a ram is Young Osman.

Young Osman opened the doors of Bagdad.
The watching infidels were astounded.
He fought for three days with his head under his arm,
And became the leader of the honored dead, did Young Osman.

The rest of this version of the poem of Young Osman adds several incidents to the original story, and makes considerable changes in the wording. Both versions are sung today, but only the former is credited to Kul Mustafa. The many variants of this song, and of countless others, frequently reveal, through choice of incident and through the injection of "local color," the socio-economic and regional background of the *ashik* who sings the song.

Chronologically, Turkish folk poets may be arranged in three groups, and it may be observed that their works reflect their times no less than their environments. The first period extended from the thirteenth century until the fifteenth. From this period only the religious works of the *ashiklar* remain. These, however, as is evidenced by the best known of the works of Yunus Emre, are more human and mystical than sectarian and dogmatic.

The second period, which covers the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was the "golden age" of Turkish folk poetry. The fervor of new religious sects, the campaigns and invasions of Europe, Arabia and Persia, and the social movements in Anatolia itself, all proved sources of rich inspiration. Today we may credit to this period in Turkish history at least ten great folk poets and numerous works of less known *ashiklar*.

The period from the eighteenth century until the present covers the third phase, which is characterized by a retardation in Turkish folklore in the sense that fewer of the great *ashiklar* developed. This is undoubtedly due to the circumstance that any great poetry created in response to the drastic social and political changes of the last fifty or sixty years is likely to have been published immediately, and thus drawn outside the province of folklore.