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The Sami Baydar Project: Painterly Space and Poems

Barely appreciated in his life time, Sami Baydar is one of the central and most elusive Turkish poets of the turn of the century. He died in 2012 at the age of fifty. His collected works *Dünya İnanıcı (The World's Belief)* appeared in the same year. Baydar's startling originality can be approached from two perspectives: a) thematically, his work is infused with a version of Turkish Sufism centered on the elimination of the ego through tears and suffering. The result is a radical melancholy (in Turkish called *hüzün*) which is on the verge of being ecstatic. The primary image is water, implying both fluidity and weeping. In a characteristic Baydar poem, both the lyric persona and the point of view and the subject matter undergo continuous transformation. This process, which involves the dissolution of the lyric form (its *ego*), is part of what gives Baydar's work its elusive mystery; b) the second approach has to do with Baydar's writing process itself. Baydar was a painter before he was a poet. His university degree was in drawing and painting. Reading his poetry, one senses that Baydar develops his poems by assigning spaces to his thoughts and organizing them (and the poem) visually. Language is secondary, almost an afterthought. As a result, the syntax in a characteristic Baydar poem is often full of distortions verging on chaos. These moments of blur which give linguistic substance to the spiritual concept of dissolution constitute perhaps the most exquisite moments in Baydar's poetry.

The Sami Baydar project involves the translation of a number of his poems into English, presenting a range his work, and a short essay discussing the nature of his startling and quite revolutionary achievement as a poet.

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July 10, 2013

Sami Baydar (1962 - 2012)



Sami Baydar was born in the Anatolian town Merzifon near the Black Sea. His formal education was in the arts, particularly in drawing and painting. He graduated from the Department of Painting of Mimar Sinan University in Istanbul in 1987. He had the first one-man exhibition of paintings in Istanbul in 1989.

Baydar's poetry is infused with the sensibility of a painter. His poems are often organized in spatial terms. The result is an idiosyncratic, startling body of work. Chronologically, Baydar's poetry can be divided into two groups. The first consists of four books published between 1987 and 1996: *The Gentlemen of the World* (*Dünya Efendileri*, 1987), *The Green Flame* (*Yesil Alev*, 1991) *The World Will Tell Me the Same Story* (*Dünya Bana Aynisini Anlatacak*, 1995), *The Flower Worlds* (*Çiçek Dünyaların* 1996). The second group of two books arrives after a hiatus of seven years *Between Being and Not-Being* (*Varla Yok Arasında*, 2003) and *Nicholas's Portrait* (*Nicholas'in Portresi*, 2005). Posthumously, right after his death, Turkey's major literary publisher Yapi Kredi publishes his collected works *The World's Belief* (*Dünya İnancı*, 2012) which also includes the poems he wrote after 2005.

There is a striking surface difference between the poems of the two groups. The complexity of the earlier poems is replaced by a minimalist style which seems very simple. The simplicity is more apparent than real. The later poems are full of gaps, narrative jumps which connect them with the earlier work. The hiatus in Baydar's output corresponds to his moving away from Istanbul and the poetry community there to his family home in Merzifon where he remained more or less incommunicado to the outside world until his death of a heart attack. There are hints in his earlier poetry that the departure was caused by his heartbreak being abandoned by his male lover (this poetry is full of the anguish of a loss), as there are hints that Baydar suffered a total mental breakdown ("a dissolution of the ego") during that time. Whatever the biographical facts may be, it is also true that Baydar's arc as a poet follows closely the arc of the quintessential Turkish Sufi story *Leyla and Majnun* in which the hero Majnun

loses his beloved Leyla, loses his mind as a result and, exiled to the fields talks to animals there, achieving spiritual enlightenment through loss.¹

¹ In an interview with the critic Fatih Ozgüven the Turkish poet Lale Müldür says that the denizens of Istanbul/ Byzantium consist of "people who drink the liqueur of wisdom, of *sophia*, distilled from madness... So you see, Byzansiyyans are sun-struck people. Even if each individual is a pathological case, one can at least say Byzansiyyans have drawn for themselves a 'luminous path of escape,' in the Deleuzian sense." ["Are Turks Really... Dangerous?" *Eda: An Anthology of Contemporary Turkish Poetry*, pp. 358/361 (Talisman House: Jersey City, 2004)]

FOURTEEN POEMS

(Translated from Turkish)

LEAVES

I hold under shedding tears,
a thirst pit,
at thirty,
I arrange your neckties.
Please tell me what's a good time for you.

From the wood a gazelle is escaping midnight
springing it back will take
tears – warped
wood after years.

Warm bread is waylaying me nowadays
as if I hallucinate a rabbit in the bush
if I merely take a walk in the field --
either way the house guest is gone (you
were used to this place, weren't you?) --

Before leaving on the trip
checking out
the house
the windows,
the wind is
like the first stirrings of pain on the roof
first lost foreskins of living,
yet unfulfilled.

weep. weep.

WATER

Water boils.
It is the cloud of the sick,

the heat rises.
this fire is
this spring.

roots park
up the tree,
home

sick.

1985

PITCHER *

The late ones are taken by death,
but it takes them early, before anyone arrives
the birds flocking to the first step
rains fighting in tears are guarding us
there are spins belonging to you, in the attracting
loneliness

Like a caterpillar the rain is flowing over him
snarled s o s is sending waves to the shore
rising in the throat to the surface, death
is putting on its gloves, at the depth of words
you whispered to those swimming

I'm not sore, just spinning firecrackers in my mouth,
what's off, eye lines will true, it seems, on my part,
the broken line is vowing
revenge -waking up crying-
the letter flowing from the lip to the eye
telling its dream

On my part, I see my salvation on shoulder ends
but I can't tell what's in the pitcher because the wall of [1]
shoulder ends doesn't resemble the walls in the world.
If rains fighting in tears then
like a caterpillar over the pitcher
the man asking for help
drowns.

1987

[1] *I can't tell what's in the pitcher*: Water in a pitcher is invisible; one can only see its contours ("shoulders," "walls"). A poem almost beyond speech. To know what is inside the pitcher, one has to drown; the poem is made of cadences towards that state, delineating through tears ("caterpillar rain") the contours of the soul.

VIRGIN RIVER

To bathe in your water
between your face and your hair
a hand must be.

Waters are alive,
madly to love, links and links
I can't tell is it rose, is it house
how sad

I can't make it heard
your loving kiss is like a mask
glued to my face
to pull them out in memories,
hair of torture

The milk lotus won't bloom in water, go figure. *
that's why waiting for this moment is beautiful
as if one single sparrow left its tail flying.

SEAGULLS

Boiling in the swamp, aren't they consolations
the finders of moonlight, piano and Roman bells?
consolations dying, lose their innocence
then one understands, "i lost my breath"

When your coffin opens, smile for the new friends
complain how hard it is to carry this to carry this
my Lord, during the moments of laughter
treat me nice

In the house of shadows, the sea gulls multiply, they multiply
lit up by your flashlight,...
my eyes, wounded by these, little empty chasms open
don't watch me, darling, watch them...

1996

UNTITLED

...

In the insanity of turtles
i am the owner of useless arguments
i strolled along the shore for days.

...

1996

A SEA BIRD

Towards the apex of the wave created on the
surface of the ocean, the bird
draws an arc, first is on the right side of this wave
its breast grazes the water
lifting, then the wave slides right
the bird reaches above the apex
and in the space relinquished by the wave
weaves to the highest point reached by the
crested wave
hitting it on a tangent returns
belly first the bird is now entering the vault of the arc
scaling down in the left side of the wave
the wave progressing and passing this arc
draws a circle completed
by the bird's belly on the surface of the water
or adding the waveless emptiness of the moment between two waves joining [2]
to the arching vault
there is always a crest left back
by a slightly sliding wave
the surface of the sea
is full of these circles of witchery
traced in the air
as a sea bird lingers on the wave
until the wave completes its circumferal motion
between two waves adds to itself
the emptying circle
of the previous wave.

[2] *The waveless emptiness of the moment between two waves*: Not the waves, but the space in-between, is the ultimate end of this poem. Does the progress of waves embody change or is it a sensory illusion, the water remaining static and only the location of its up-and-down movement changing? The poem starts with a description of the bird's flight in relation to water and ends with bird and water joining in a third place, the emptiness in-between, becoming a mathematical, spiritual motion: "as a sea bird lingers on the wave/ until the wave completes its circumferal motion/ between two waves adds to itself/ the emptying circle/ of the previous wave. "Waves left behind, what is left is union in emptiness.

The sensory becomes the spiritual.

JACKET [3]

In the pocket of the jacket, a newspaper
why did they try to make them
one? Calling them lovers...
drawing two figures?

It's not enough to be separate
maybe the cloud doesn't believe
it, being called rain cloud,

maybe sometimes we'll see nothing
find broken needles on the floor
rice grains.

A master key'd be nice
boards will be broken
to the line traced by a ruler
another arc will be added.

Have you ever drawn an eyelid
a lovely profile in one stroke
the weight of iron cotton
a year passing, another coming

the sky emptying
the forest is in its own room
I groped in my bed
shushed,
all together unwanted...

I prayed to those who dropped me from my crib
sat as I was told
drinking the water they were going to give me.

The cat and I
played
I detoured my dad like black bears
like a cup mowed in two
not because I knew the danger
but because, not having added sugar and
stirred it, I couldn't empty the tea on the ground.

Two love spirits will make lamp shades out of deer legs
deer into their fabrics

a moment will vanish
they'll grow timid in life.

besides, no one is eternally guilty these days
at the bifurcation they part

Y,
one sling,
yet

in my heart
one sling shot.

1996

[3] *Jacket*: Human life is a jacket where the wearer (the soul) is not visible.

GIGI

Gigi, the angel of invisible meetings
we did so well making angels listen to music
kids are now embarrassed, of their big ears
angels are sleeping in the meadows Gigi
bored, they are weighing bird seeds
but not selling them to birds Gigi ,
I am getting by in dust and shit ,
who is attempting to remind birds
that they eat seeds,
who is laboring in the meadows Gigi,
tailors for fairy tales?

I'll croak like an idiot Gigi
like an idiot hiding my love from you
I'll seal you inside a wall Gigi
you'll be invisible but people will see you
they are onto what I saw Gigi
your wish, a broken doll in the garden,
wishing me to trip and fall
don't reveal the places I've been Gigi

BAPTISMAL TRAY

I used to collect horse chestnuts
I knew, I rolled in meadows
in hollows and projections...
which stopped them.

As half of a sliced lemon
gets moldier, forming a white line
along its edge, the holding hand-in-hand
of angels.

The rain forced to settle
inside a snail grows
field angels inside.

The girl entering a dark salon
a light, lightly, is feeling its hand on your back,
phosphorescent crayons of
erotica everywhere.

That unpossessable prepossessing sleeping child, me,
is holding a flower belonging to ancient worlds
in a book.

Drawing a baseless triangle
watching the ancient flower...
the ancient flower is signaling a flying coercion
to the candle, capsizes
scratched by bird's feet...

Fearing that you might notice
the oddness of lines delineated in emptiness
i'm not turning in the direction of the sound, then,
as if asking you to focus at an odder thing,
I'm skipping over the candle.

(Chestnuts, moldy lemon, colored stones,
cooled waters, a dry leaf, a burnt match,
a few shining objects, a glowing lid,
snail shell, a burnt out candle...)

As you leave the child is waking:
I'm saying here I had prepared this baptismal dish
we'll write another poem, before being turns into purity.

HIS WINTER FRIEND

Don't insist.
what I gave you, long afterwards,
will make it up
if you can't go through,
before.

My later love
of no return,
my love with no return
protects them
enters a religion.

Spell and religion
are my advice
as they gave it
to me. listen.

In a mysterious land
words are drinking rum
against the cold.
return the gesture.

Don't search
without a return
what you lost.
you are in a foreign country.

In the middle of summer
it's snowing,
killing those who don't see it
growing their hatred.

Keep quiet my darling
snowing outside
a snow visible only
without touch.

Since his girl friend
stepped out to look for cherry blossoms
this is so.

The far away tree
what could it change

keep quiet.

Before forgetting
I am drinking absinthe,
words against the cold
are drinking rum.

Since she stepped out for
cherry blossoms
this is so,
keep quiet my darling.

August, 1988

the leopard's bed.
But considering it only a little.

The rain keeps pouring, my loneliness is changing, but without a hole in it.
One must return to who is left behind for a song.
Summer not fool you, things will split again.
The leaves which shed during sleep, in our waking'll be on their branches.
the leaves which stayed on the branches, in our waking'll shed.
Summer not fool you, things will split again.
an illusion is lifting from the ground all its arms.

1990

HERE IT'S COMING

nothing can make us roll down the wall
neither our being kids
nor navy suits
not even our curly hair
if one must talk of an equation.

As for our shadow, as if lost in the wall –
with the candle expired in your lantern
one night after feeding the kids
and putting them to sleep
opening the door, if,
standing before us,
basket on your back, with two signs on your chest
which today I would kid you about,
that was not the shadow.

A rose, if you saw a pillow before you,
a sheep, a sheep if you lay down on a grave stone.

The ambassador of our belly, the rose
we are saluting it with a hand
here it comes
we see those kneeling and saluting
kneeling and saluting.

In my bed a wave covers me
those who draw near, at each others' skirts
try to pull each others' fate.

When my husband arrived
naked dead men on the floor,
he saw a sea of disaster
staring at me – how far how far he sleeps
in his bed.

I let myself go, gently
slipping into the water
in the land of water they dry my feet that day
I remember I have a family
someone considers himself my equal

NO ONE HOME [4]

When my wife cried
my servants told her to keep quiet
as I, while they kiss her hand,
see it in the mirror.

They embraced my wife, daughter,
making them drink herbs, I saw it in the mirror,
she sleeping, they worship her
by her bed.

Together,
when I turn my back, I don't see what they are doing.

Before my wife my servant
puts his forehead to the ground, from his back
the top of a creature is emerging
who listens to my wife like a child.

That's what they say, I know my wife
is pleading with me on the floor, but I see
her climbing someone in the mirror
sadly I love her.

My love lifts the weights from her body
and she, growing light,
can approach me
as the servant sees the blood on the floor
I see her crying in the mirror.

The servant is climbing down the stairs in the mirror
I see a postman arriving
the servant says there is no one home.

1991

[4] *No One Home*: The mirror is a central symbol in Sufism, the site where God, the human mind and nature can see themselves in each other's reflection. In the phenomenal world, such a state –to see oneself only as a reflection, an it- borders on pathology. In this poem schizophrenia and spirituality join. "No one home," because the speaker experiences everything as seeing in a mirror, as "it"; "no one home," also because the human soul is invisible, apprehended only through reflections.