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Peace Prize of the German Book Trade **LITERATURE, DEMOCRACY AND PEACE**

by Yashar Kemal

The 1997 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade was awarded to Yashar Kemal of Turkey, honoring the seventy-four-year-old Kurdish writer as "an advocate of human rights who has selflessly stood up for the poor, the exploited, and those persecuted for political or ethnic reasons". Kemal, the fiftieth recipient of this prestigious German cultural prize which has been awarded in conjunction with the annual Frankfurt Book Fair since 1950, received the award in solemn nationwide broadcasted ceremonies at Frankfurt's Paulskirche on the 19th of October 1997.

Yashar Kemal was born in 1922 in a village on the cottongrowing plains of Chukurova. He received his basic education in village schools, then became an agricultural laborer and factory worker. His championing of the poor peasants cost him a succession of jobs, but he was eventually able to buy a typewriter and set himself up as a public letter-writer in the small town of Kadirli. After a spell as a journalist, he published a volume of short stories in 1952, and then, in 1955, his first novel *Memed, My Hawk* won the Varlik Prize as the best novel of the year. His distinguished literary career has continued in this vein, and his work has won countless prizes from all over the world and been translated into many languages.

Kemal was a member of the Central Committee of the banned Workers Party and in 1971 was held in prison for twenty-six days before being released without charge. Recently, he was again placed on trial for actions in support of Kurdish dissidents, and in 1996 he was sentenced to twenty months for what the Turkish authorities called "inciting hatred". A strong outcry from the world's press followed, and his appeal for suspension of the sentence was successful. Still, he remains a thorn in the side of the Turkish government, and his case is being monitored by both Amnesty International and Index on Censorship.

Following a lengthy meeting with WLT's interim editor on the 18th of October 1997 in Frankfurt, Kemal graciously offered the journal the text of his Peace Prize acceptance speech for first English-language publication, himself suggesting his old friend and longtime WLT editorial board member Talat Halman as a translator. Halman readily agreed to the proposal, with the enthusiastic approval of the novelist's wife and frequent English translator, Thilda Kemal. We are honored to offer the resulting text here.

MY DEAR FRIENDS,

I thank you all for giving me this valuable award. I am a man of literature. Ever since embarking on a literary career, I have done my utmost to serve people. I say "literature", not "writing", because I did not start my literary work by writing. Until I turned seventeen or eighteen, I was a teller of folktales and a collector of folklore. I used to go from village to village in the Taurus Mountains region, narrating the tales I had learned from Chukurova's leading itinerant storytellers, with whom I had done my apprenticeship. Meanwhile, I also collected folk elegies as well as verses by major rural poets. Storytelling made the collection of folkloric materials easier for me. Elegies are poems that women recite about death. Aside from professional elegists, most women memorialise their dead by singing their own dirges, which are then chanted by many other people. To collect elegies was no easy task, especially among women. But being a storyteller proved a big help to me: women would even voluntarily dictate to me elegies they knew.

At the age of twenty or twenty-one, I took up written literature and began to turn out my earliest short stories. In 1943 I published a slim volume featuring the elegies I had collected. My first short stories were published later, in 1952. And in 1953 I managed to finish the novel I had started writing in 1947.

In my days as a storyteller, I had already realized the impact of the art of oral literature. In villages and in rural areas, where I found attentive audiences willing to join me in my act, my words used to take wings and fly – and I would do my narration with greater enthusiasm and joy. Where I had less audience response or participation, my creative act tended to be lackluster. A master storyteller does not merely narrate what he has committed to memory. Each time he tells a tale, he creates it anew depending upon audience partici-

pation. That is why epics and tales-like pebbles left underwater for forty thousand years – are passed along from teller to teller, getting washed, cleansed, smoothed out, and polished for brilliance.

Written literature is altogether different. Facing you, all you have is pen and paper. No voice or sound, no human beings, no bodily gestures, nothing. We cannot determine when oral literature began. Written literature, however, has a history. One could say that from the outset down to the present century, oral literature has constituted the wellspring of written literature. In countries such as mine, this is still the case. Even today, we find in oral literature a wide diversity of forms and styles. Take *Gilgamesh*, the *Iliad*, and the *Odyssey*, the *Manas* epic, the *Dede Korkut* tales, the *Shahnamah*. No matter what some assertions claim, oral literature has had an impact on the written literature of every language.

People have always created their own worlds of myths and dreams, perpetuating their lives in those imaginary worlds. At times of duress, they have created more such worlds, which have given them haven and facilitated their lives. In their transition from one darkness to another, having acquired the consciousness of death, they have realized their lives and the joy of living in the world of myths and dreams they have created. Since the word is the human being, people have

also sought refuge in the power and the magic of the word. Both in storytelling and in writing, I have always felt the magic and the power of the word deep in my heart. Consciousness is subject to development. As my awareness grew, I sensed in the core of my heart that human beings can be greatly supported by the wings of eloquence. Roger Caillois, the prominent French critic and philosopher and a friend of mine, often said to me: “You attach a great deal of importance to the word. For you, it is as if the word governs the world.” My reply was: “Even if it has not or does not, it is paramount among the powers that create and govern the world.”

Ever since my youth I have been reiterating that people who read my novels and short stories should reject warfare, loathe wars, and always strive for peace and brotherhood. Those who read my writings should not tolerate man’s exploitation of others. Poverty is the shame of humanity. There should be no more paupers in any society. The disgrace of poverty should be driven out of all hearts. A curse on whoever coined the term “primitive man”, because no human being can be primitive. No one should utter this accursed phrase. My readers should never commit an evil deed. They should always do good. Thank goodness, in our day and age, the source of good and evil is gradually becoming evident.

What I mean to say is that I am an “engaged” writer with a firm commitment to my integrity and to the word. Also, since my youth I have always affirmed that the world is a garden filled with the flowers of a myriad cultures. We all know that it is a garden of culture with thousands of flowers. Throughout history, cultures have always nurtured, influenced, and cross-pollinated one another. Civilizations and cultures have never harmed or destroyed each other. Plucking any one culture from our world would obliterate a color, a scent, a wealth. Take my native land of Anatolia, and beyond it the Mediterranean: Because they served as the breeding ground for thousands of cultures which they preserve, they are a well-spring for world civilization and universal culture today. Take a look at my country. The Ottoman state was a multilingual, multicultural, multifaith empire. So was Anatolia, its heartland. And Anatolia was also the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia and the Caucasus and the Black Sea. Throughout history, Anatolian cultures have maintained a process of cross-fertilization. A glimpse at Anatolia’s Aegean coast prior to the Christian era will reveal a wide variety of languages and cultures, which produced the philoso-

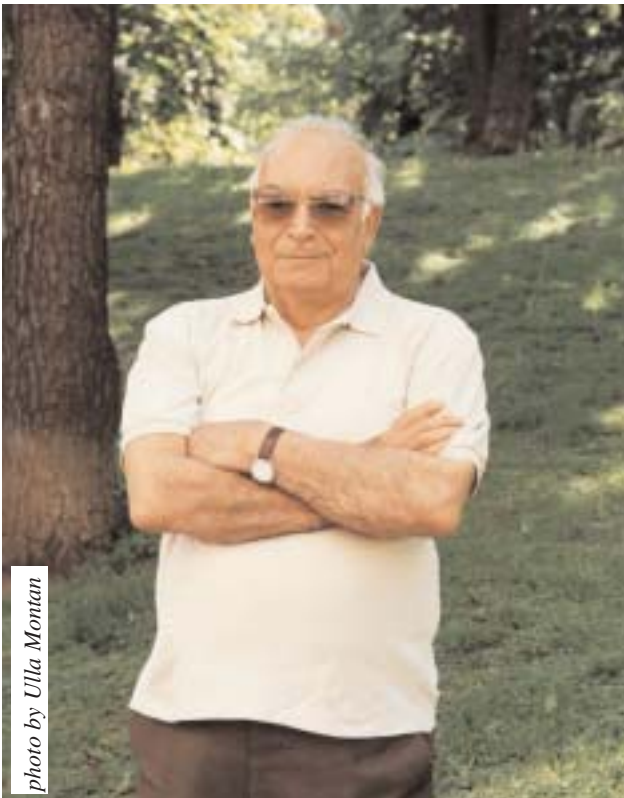


photo by Ulla Montan

phers of Miletus as well as Homer. Having created hundreds of masterpieces, they have constituted a rich source for universal culture.

Since the proclamation of the Republic, in present-day Anatolia too, despite all the prohibitions and all the attempts to demolish them, many cultures manage to survive, groping and limping along. The Republic banned all these languages and cultures for reasons not yet fully understood. They say this is done for the sake of a unitary state, because it was impossible to create a unitary state in multicultural Anatolia. Anatolia was always multicultural and should remain so forever. The passion for a unitary state led to make Turkish the dominant language and Turkish culture the single sovereign culture. In the process, Turkish language and culture have been enfeebled. To cite one example: if the language and culture of the Kurds, who have always constituted one-third of the Anatolian population, had remained free, this might have enriched Turkish language and culture. By the same token, Circassian, Laz, and other Caucasian languages as well as Arabic, Syriac and Assyrian would have cross-fertilized and enriched not only each other but also Turkish and Kurdish. Present-day Anatolian cultures might not have been as fertile a source for universal culture as ancient Anatolian cultures, but, like them, they would still have contributed a great deal to it.

Banned from reading and writing their language for seventy years, the Kurds were forced to resort to oral literature, creating epics, folk songs, elegies, and folktales. They produced a very rich folk literature based on the power of the word, an art of enchantment. Today, many Kurdish intellectuals themselves are not aware of this.

Furthermore, they have failed to undertake a deep-rooted and strong effort to collect folkloric materials. Even at Turkish universities there is no institute of Kurdish language, folklore, and literature today. Everything points to the fact that it is difficult to establish a unitary state in Anatolia. Even if it could be accomplished, this would go against Turkey's rich tradition of cultural diversity. The Anatolian land is a mosaic of cultures. Its greatness and wealth are the result of the richness of its cultures and languages. The Turkish state's insistence on a unitary state for seventy years has caused this country, which has all sorts of impressive potential, to founder, as it does today, turning the regime into an inscrutable anomaly. Is Turkey a democracy or is it being governed by a dictatorship? Even those who are running the government are unable to sort this out.

An amorphous administration. Utter confusion. And the Kurds are putting up a resistance on behalf of their language and culture. The ruling establishment asserts: "You insist on independence. If we grant you freedom of your culture and language, next you will demand independence." So, for twelve years now, an incredibly dirty, vicious and absurd war goes on and on. And no one knows when it might end.

A large majority of Turkish and Kurdish intellectuals are anxious to see the end of this war. Turkey has suffered a great injury because of the conflict. So has Turkey's supposedly democratic regime. Not knowing what to do or where to turn to it falters and drifts. The world knows the Turkish situation better than we do. In the world which strives to protect universal values, humanity has suffered a great injury. Turkey's partners, too, stand bewildered, probably reluctant to confront such a predicament.

Democracy is an integral whole. It must serve all humanity. All true democrats, wherever they may be, should give every kind of support they are capable of to people who aspire to and struggle for democracy.

I also have a deep-rooted faith which I am convinced will not change. Man is always optimistic, full of the joy of living. It is all too clear that, coming from darkness, we are going toward another darkness. We have seen too many evil deeds, too many wars, plagues, tyrannies. But the world, they say, is too beautiful to abandon. These are not my words. I have learned them from epics, songs, folktales, ballads, and elegies-and also from Dostoevsky. Never mind where we have come from and where we are going. After all, we have seen and experienced this exquisite world, all this light, this earth with its myriad colors, these people whose hearts are full of joy. Imagine if we had never come here, never witnessed this lovely world. The joy of life in people's hearts is immortal. It has always been my fond hope to sing the songs of light and joy. I have always wished that those who read my novels are full of love for their fellow human beings, for all birds and beasts, for bugs and insects, for all of nature. And I firmly believe that my nation, residing in our land of culture, will not long remain in this plight but will instead give new vitality to the fertile soil. I have faith that, sooner or later, we shall embrace real democracy and help the democratic people struggling for the sake of democracy on earth.

[Frankfurt a.M., October 19, 1997]

*Authorized First English-Language Publication
Translated by Talat Salt Halman*