

BOOK REVIEW

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SAIME GÖKSU and EDWARD TIMMS, *Romantic Communist: The Life and Work of Nazım Hikmet*, London: C. Hurst and Co., 1999, 367pp., ISBN 1-85065-371-2, Price: £25 (hbk).

Nazım Hikmet is one of the giants of twentieth century Turkish literature. Born to an aristocratic Ottoman family, he was entertained by presidents and mingled with world-renowned artists, and because of his Marxist beliefs he spent almost all his adult life either in prison or in exile. Remembered principally for his large output of poetry, he was also an important participant in the innovative movements of Russian theatre during the 1920s, as well as a writer of novels. Nazım Hikmet's personal charisma and the popularity of his poetry inspired in his readers a train of radical political thought and a mood for reform in Turkish literature. Always a revolutionary, Nazım Hikmet refused to compromise or suppress his ideas, whether he was in conflict with the military authorities of Turkey or the Turkish Communist Party.

The ten chapters are divided into sub-sections which are structured as background information, description of the events which shaped Nazım Hikmet's life, and examples from his poetry. The historical facts, essential in a work of this kind, are expertly selected and neatly grafted in, providing the reader with an excellent yet accessible overview of the complexities of Turkish and Russian political life. Although the title of this book makes no overt reference to Nazım Hikmet's role as a literary artist, there are frequent references to his works in the text. Poem titles are given in both English and Turkish, and the liberal selection of quotations is also well translated into

English (mostly by Göksu and Timms).

Göksu and Timms convey the excitement of Hikmet's early years in Moscow where Meyerhold and Mayakovsky welcomed him into their avant-garde theatre movement. Later this rich experience would provide Nazım Hikmet with a reservoir of resources for his own work. The controversial events after his return to Turkey, when he was intent on promoting communism and attacking eminent figures of the Turkish literary establishment, are related with careful objectivity.

The intense relationship between Nazım Hikmet and his first wife Piraye is subtly and convincingly conveyed, particularly when the focus is on how the relationship was sustained during times of adversity. This is apparent in the poet's resilience during his years in prison, when he was able to utilise his time by writing collections of fine poetry and fostering the talents of fellow inmates, two eminent examples being the writer Orhan Kemal and the painter Balaban.

The account of Nazım Hikmet's time in exile is especially valuable as it provides readers with specific material, relating to his activities and developments in ideology, which has been hard find in the past. The thrill of meeting renowned international figures (Picasso, Sartre, Robeson, Shostakovich and Neruda), coming to terms with the realities of the Soviet political system, the constant yearning for his beloved homeland are individual factors which contributed to his work during exile.

The popular appeal of Nazım Hikmet's work lies in its sonority and emotional content rather than its political message. His ability to shape musical phrases from everyday language shows him to be a master of the Turkish language, while his creative use of imagery and simple language facilitates the successful translation of his poetry into other languages. The following lines, translated by Göksu and Timms, are an example of how he drew on his own experience of suffering and love to create poetry which has a universal attraction:

26 September 1945

They've taken us prisoner,
they've locked us up:

me inside the walls
you outside.

But that's nothing.

The worst
is when people — knowingly or not —
carry prison inside themselves [...].
(p. 186)

The authors have taken care to articulate the exuberance and artistic energy which fuelled the idealism of Nazım Hikmet, supporting each piece of information with evidence from carefully documented sources. There is no attempt to romanticise or fictionalise the life of this headstrong charismatic character, nor is there any undertaking to create an aura of personal intimacy between authors and subject.

While readers with no prior knowledge of Nazım Hikmet will find this a comprehensive yet approachable introduction to his work, it undoubtedly contains much that will interest those already familiar with him. This is a scholarly study of a man whose genius was recognised by friends and enemies alike, whose work transcended barriers of language and politics, and whose literary legacy is highly valued by those whom Hikmet most wished to reach — the Turkish people.