

Notes on Robyn Rowland's Poetry on Turkey*

Robyn Rowland'ın Türkiye üzerine şiirleri Hakkında Notlar

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Öz

İrlanda kökenli Avustralyalı şair Robyn Rowland, şiirlerinde kendi ikili kültürel kimliğini ve kültürel meleziğini yansıtmaktadır. Şiirleri sadece ikili kültürel geçmişinin bir yansıması değil, aynı zamanda kendi çok kültürlü geçmişinin de yansımalarını taşımaktadır. Bu nedenle, şiirlerinin tematik kapsamı Avustralya'dan daha da geniş bir coğrafyayı içermektedir. Son yıllarda Türkiye'ye karşı duyduğu ilgi şiirine yeni bir kültürel boyut kazandırmış ve Rowland'ı Türk kültürel coğrafyasını keşfetmeye yöneltmiştir. Bu makale Robyn Rowland'ın Türkiye üzerine yazdığı şiirleri, kültürel çeşitlilik ve kültürel etkileşim bağlamında çözümlemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Burada, karşılıklı kültürel önyargıların ve hayranlıkların Rowland'ın şiirlerindeki kültürel diyaloga ne ölçüde bir katkıda bulunduğu ve bu diyalogun çift dilli ve çift kültürlü bir şiirsel anlatı içinde kültürel ve anlam bilimsel bir alışverişe olanak sağlayıp sağlamadığının sorgulanması amaçlanmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Şiir, kültürel coğrafya, şiirsel anlatı.

Abstract

The Irish Australian poet Robyn Rowland represents her dual cultural identity and hybridity in her poems that expand on large cultural landscapes. Her poems are not only the reflections of her bicultural background but also the representatives of her multicultural worldview. Therefore, the thematic scope of her poetry covers larger cultural landscapes than those of Australia. Her keen interest in Turkey brings yet another cultural dimension to her poetry and turns her into an explorer of Turkish cultural landscape. This article aims to analyze and examine Robyn Rowland's poetry on Turkey in terms of cultural diversity and cultural exchange. The purpose here is to question how mutual cultural prejudices and admirations contribute to cultural dialogue in Rowland's poems and interrogate whether or not this dialogism in poetry contributes to a reciprocal semantic and cultural exchange through bilingual and bicultural poetic narration.

Keywords: Poetry, cultural landscape, poetic narration.

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Introduction

Robyn Rowland (b. 1952) is an Irish-Australian poet whose career spans over thirty years. She represents her dual cultural identity in her poems that expand on large cultural landscapes. She was born in Sidney and has regularly visited Ireland since nineteen eighty-three. She lived not only in Australia but in various geographies including New Zealand and Britain, which enables her to have several different cultural perspectives. Her poems are not only the reflections of her bicultural background but also the representatives of her multicultural worldview. Therefore, the thematic scope of her poetry covers larger cultural landscapes than those of Australia. She has her poems published in many countries including Turkey. Her poetry especially deals with multicultural themes in her earlier works such as *Seasons of Doubt and Burning* (2010) in which she explores the sufferings of the Bosnian war. Coming from an Irish origin, her identity leads her into an immense interest in reflecting bicultural perspectives in her poems. Therefore, her poems on Turkey and Turkish themes are particularly examined in this study in order to discuss and elaborate on her depiction of cultures through the landscape by deploying Turkish words in English lines.

Her keen interest in Turkey in recent years brings yet another cultural dimension to her poetry and turns her into an explorer of Turkish cultural landscape. This interest inevitably turns into a historical one through the Anzac soldiers who lost their lives in Gallipoli, as well as an interest in Turkish history. Thus her poetry bears the characteristics of both war poetry and cultural poetry that connects the Turkish and Australian cultures through the Turkish cultural landscape and cultural icons.

Therefore, this paper aims to analyse and examine Robyn Rowland's poetry on Turkey in terms of cultural diversity and cultural exchange. The purpose here is to question how mutual cultural prejudices and admirations contribute to the dialogic heteroglossia in Rowland's poems and interrogate whether or not this dialogism in poetry contributes to a reciprocal semantic and cultural exchange through bilingual and bicultural poetic narration.

Cross Cultural Journey

The context of Robyn Rowland's poems on Turkey and Turkish culture presents her personal experience of her travels in Turkey. In these poems, she explores the things which are new and unknown to her by making herself acquainted with the local culture through her observations. By doing so, she prefers to deploy Turkish words in their idiosyncratic uses. Thus, her poems reflect the culturally dialogic context of her poetry. As Susan Hawthorne asserts Rowland's poems travel "between the known and the new; the known in the recollections of places lived in" conveying "long histories of empire and poetic tradition in a form that picks up" even on the traditional lines of Rumi (2014, p. 1). Rowland's poems are peopled with fathers, mothers, children, partners and friends who appear to be so real that they almost live during "times of loss and pain, times of joy and confusion" (Hawthorne, p. 1). The sense of realness in her poems is usually felt in the lines that express refrain according to Hawthorne, as in "Snap Frozen":

Nothing had happened. Nothing. (2010, p. 21)

However, when the refrain is expressed, the realness is more powerfully felt since the line that tells us "nothing had happened" functions to emphasise the opposite by this refrain. If nothing had

happened, asks Susan Hawthorne (2014, p. 1), why could the female figure in the poem not return to that ordinary beach? Jay Daniel Thompson points out that Rowland takes her reader “through bush fires, across windswept beaches” to feel the landscape and relies on topography to strengthen the emphasis on culture.

Rowland’s poetry will be analysed through an intercultural reading. The first group of poems in this study are taken from *This Intimate War: Gallipoli/Çanakkale 1915*, published bilingually in 2015 and they reflect the sufferings of war during the Gallipoli campaign lead by the British and Anzac – that stands for Australian and New Zealand Army Corps – forces, in the First World War. The stories in these poems sufferings rely on her researches on the Gallipoli peninsula about both Turkish and Anzac soldiers. As suggested by Jeffrey Sychterz, because of the globalized “wars and ever more potent weapons of mass destruction”, individuals in the twentieth century were “mobilised intellectually and imaginatively in ways that have left an enduring fetishization of war” which led to the “development of a distinct genre of poetry about war” (2009, p. 137). Robyn Rowland’s poems about the Battle of Gallipoli between 25 April 1915 and 9 January 1916 between the Turkish and British Navies focus on the destructive nature of the twentieth century wars, without, however, fetishizing them but drawing vivid pictures of the war’s influence on individuals. In “Nightingale”, the natural beauty of the Gallipoli peninsula is not yet scarred by the war in the beginning of the poem:

Sweet bird, rejoicing in clean salted air over Gelibolu,
silent ridges full of food, pine forests,
nests among filigreed branches under a
star-crushed heaven above a cobalt-blue sea.
Here you do not need the rose, nor adoration,
where you are free and the joy of it rings. (2015, p. 30)

However, “Nightingale” is about a young Turkish teacher in his early twenties and he is wounded to death in the war, and thus the poem soon leads the reader into the violent trenches of war while Hasan Ethem, the story of whom Rowland has gathered in her researches on Gallipoli, writes to his mother about his hesitation whether or not he should kill anything foreign to him:

Sweet boy, Hasan Ethem, writes to his mother –
the beauty here speaks to me of God
and the love in your letter is a blessing.
Amazing mother that a nightingale sits on a pine branch
singing, everywhere green nature thrives
and I will fight for my country, repel invaders,
take this song into my ears and fill my dreams
to block the pain of what I will hear in combat,
a clamour of noise and crying out; to block the torture of
what I must do – to kill, anything, anyone, so foreign to me. (2015, p. 32)

Although he knows that he must fight for his country, his pain and fear are not relieved but intensified by the “clamour of noise” that blocks the sound of the nightingale’s song. As Sychterz states, “poetic devices such as onomatopoeia and imagery locate the meaning in the epiphanic moment of the

poem's speaking" by building "meaning not through the relationship of events, but through the heft of words" (2009, p. 144). Therefore, poetry "speaks a language closer to that of trauma" (Sychterz, 2009, p. 144-5). The traumatic memories, according to Sychterz, are "disconnected from history" and become "strongly imagistic" (2009, p. 145), turning Robyn Rowland's poem not necessarily into a text about the Gallipoli war but about the universally destructive image of war. The poem quoted above, then, contextualizes the environment in which Hasan Ethem finds himself as a setting where he goes through the trauma of the war. While the clamour of the guns causes fear, the sweet voice of a nightingale makes him remember home. These opposite images used to reflect the realness of the atmosphere where the nature is still alive to remind the soldiers of spring are also the employed in the poem to create an emotional effect. Rowland does not only narrate the war, but she also writes about the humane feelings such as fear and homesickness.

"Poppy Picking", another poem on the Battle of Gallipoli, for instance, stands out as an effective example of this symbolic model. The poppies picked up in Çanakkale/Gallipoli² are the direct reminders of the poppy appeal tradition in Britain and the Commonwealth countries including Australia and New Zealand. During the First World War (1914–1918), especially in Western Europe where "much of the fighting took place", although the landscape "swiftly turned to fields of mud: bleak and barren scenes where little or nothing could grow", red poppies "grew in their thousands, flourishing even in the middle of chaos and destruction"¹. Since then, the citizens carry poppy badges to commemorate the soldiers who lost their lives and donate money to the funds that support the families of the martyrs and veterans on the anniversary of the WWI every year:

Not the soft wrinkled skin of old men –
papery, easily torn – or the crumpled blooms in our town plots.
Upright as tulips, Turkish Red Poppies are firm and sure
they need just four petals, bright scarlet,
red as red can get, each with its eye black khol. (2015, p. 112)

In "Poppy Picking", the narrator of the poem conveys her experience with her Turkish friend on the Island of Bozcaada², where they pick poppies in the fields to make poppy jam. However, a connotation to the poppies in Europe during the First World War is created by poppy picking. Hence, the poet relates the image of the poppies to the "grief over fields full of bodies of young men" (2015, p. 114). The Turkish poppies are, however, firm and sure, standing upright, which indicates the poet's standpoint that honours both the Australian and Turkish soldiers. The black, woolly part in the centre of the poppy bulbs is described as their eye with black khol, which the poet describes as Turkish poppies. On the other hand, the poem does not recall any memories of the war but merely talks about poppies. However, the delicacy of the poppies, their papery texture that might easily be torn invites comparisons of poppies to the delicacy of peace that might be spoiled once again by wars. Their scarlet colour also stands out as the blood spilled during the war. Yet, the sorrow is foregrounded when the jam jars are ready to be taken home. They contain poppy jams:

1 <http://www.britishlegion.org.uk/remembrance/how-we-remember/the-story-of-the-poppy/>

2 The old Greek Isle of Tenedos, 6 km off the coast of Çanakkale.

When the jam is ready it cools into dark-claret shades
ready to sit in my bags with poppy lokum, red-poppy syrup
travelling back to a country where red poppies only ever meant
grief over fields full of bodies of young men,
a generation of women left unmarried, lonely. (2015, p. 114)

The foregrounded idea that the poppies symbolise the young martyrs in the war over whom the whole nation grieves is juxtaposed with the poppy jams in the jars, while at the same time it presents a similarity to the significance of cypress trees usually planted in cemeteries in Turkish culture. As in the renowned folk song anonymously composed in Çanakkale, “a tall cypress tree” represents the young martyrs who were either newly married or engaged:

A tall cypress in Çanakkale
Some married, some have fiancée
(Çanakkale içinde bir uzun selvi
Kimimiz nişanlı, kimimiz evli)

Hence, in Thompson’s words, “poetry helps transform the personal into the political” (2014, p. 3). In Rowland’s poems in question here, the personal experience of the people involved in the war are transformed into political statements in her poetic lines in order to point out the tragedy of the war. If it is usually the young men who are sent to death, wars result in personal destruction while at the same time the personal sorrow remains to be inarguably political. May Massee regards love and hate as “the two great mysteries of this life” and asserts that war is “such a marvellous manifestation both in their highest and lowest expressions it intrigues the minds of men to find the answer, to understand, to explain, [and] to glorify” (1918, p. 72). In “Night Ravings”, the narrator of the poem focuses on questioning the mysterious of this life mentioned by Massee by pointing out the fact that what the soldiers remember as the sweet memories of their childhood do not resemble what they have to face in the war. The poem conveys the personal experience of a young man as one of the consequences of political and historical reasons of war:

They knew sea-blue was a colour of the past;
now red everywhere, tawny rock, white snow.
Rats ate their hair while they slept.
They wrapped their faces against
pincers of enemy and nature.
Lousy, their skin removed itself constantly,
was a peeling unveiling thing of its own nature
creeping backward for the memories
of smooth bronze summers
on Kızıl Adalar or Bawley Point. (2015, p. 34)

Although the young men in the war are very young to talk about a long-lost past, they witness the sudden changes caused by the war in the landscape that turns to red from “sea-blue”. “Kızıl Adalar” reminds Turkish the soldiers of their childhood while “Bawley Point” reminds the Australians of

theirs. The hazardous results of the power and rage of the war and the nature are described graphically here through the images of “rats” and “pincers” and it is not only the Turkish but also the Australian young soldiers who suffer from these. What they suffer from the sunshine is no more comparable to the peeling of their skin under the sweet sunshine of “smooth bronze summers” either in Kızıl Adalar in Turkey or in Bawley Point in Australia. In war poetry, there is always a “growing intimacy with death” as suggested by Massee who also claims that the youth completes the wisdom of old age in the war (1918, p. 73). In “Night Ravings” again, the young soldiers do not see any reason in the war but feel that they only have to obey without even realizing the true cause of their being there:

The brain kept telling them
listen to the boss, the captain, the commander
but their legs yearned to run anywhere, backwards.
They knew that in the bowl of their brain
their friends remained whole, young, happy. But
their bloodied hands collecting fleshy jigsaw-pieces
knew the lie as open graves filled up
and no way of knowing who was in there. (2015, p. 34)

While their minds are still occupied with the thoughts of their friends back at home, they come across with graves filled with dead bodies reminding them of the fact that death does not distinguish anyone. So, regardless of their nationality, young people suffer from the consequences of the tragic consequences of war.

Robyn Rowland's poetry describes cultures and she employs mutual cultural experiences in her poems. In its simplest sense, cultural themes in poetry involve cultural locations, traditions, cross-cultural relations. As Phillip M. Richards points out, “emotional and cultural qualities” define the subjects in such poems where culture is significantly foregrounded (2011, p. 250). Robyn Rowland's poetry describes the cultural qualities of Turkish society through the characteristics of landscape that involves mosques, caravanserais and marketplaces. Istanbul, for instance, is culturally described through the culture of eating and drinking in Rowland's unpublished poem on Istanbul entitled “Say Istanbul”³. The food and drink consumed daily in the city are the “palate tempters” for centuries rather than being prepared and presented for the taste of the tourists:

Say, *az şekerli*, a little sugar, and think thick coffee; sour-cherry cream
chunked with chocolate inside chocolate roulade riddled with
chocolate chips swathed in a melted glaze; or *lokum*,
Turkish delight, simple as rose water, or roll on roll of
coffee clouds round pistachio brittle, coconut, lime,
each ‘comfortable morsel’ a momentary melt into childish greed,
palate tempters for six hundred years; more seductive than a dance of veils
or the unwelcome, unaware flesh of careless tourists.

Turkish words within English sentences are purposefully used in order to emphasise the cultural

3 Translation of this poem by the author of this article was published in *Sözcükler* Issue 49, May/June 2014/3, p. 94-96.

qualities of the subject of the poem. They are written in italics without translations provided in the footnote format but the meanings are explained within the poem itself not only to indicate the poet's acquaintance with the local culture, but also to convey the local cultural qualities to the audience who perceive the meanings through the semantics of English language. Hence the poem acquires bilingual qualities by the inclusion of Turkish words in Turkish spelling. "Say Istanbul" continues to describe the hectic life on the streets of Istanbul by giving the vivid pictures of street vendors:

Say, *merhaba*, and hear the street vendor's reply, eyes
keenly searching early day for custom, his rings of bread
sprinkled with poppy seed, warm and tanned, while
the corn vendor turns his cobs in the flames on his cart's brazier,
hot chestnuts blackening a little in their jackets.

The crowds on the streets of Istanbul are strongly felt in the poem although the above quoted part of the poem does not give a description of the people but only a description of the vendors. Yet, it creates a lively image of the streets where differences fill the city with life. In the final stanza of the poem, it is suggested that these varieties of life in Istanbul could never be possible without the rich historical past of the city. It is a multicultural metropolis:

City of Emperors and slaves; Sultans and janissary;
city of mosque, church and synagogue; of fisherman and girls at study.
Headscarf or unveiled face in the sun, the street accommodates both.
Not just a city for the young; the old sun themselves in gardens
brim-full of rose and hyacinth; men entwine their arms with men,
women laugh with women; children delight in ice cream on a hot spring day.
Skyline of dome and minaret, seven hills of the second Rome,
mythic city, imagined place, unwearied, curious for the yet undiscovered,
it never tires of its load of people, past and passing and to come.
In a city too old to remember all its names,
Say *Constantinople*. Say, *Byzantium*. Wisps of the ethereal nostalgic.
Say, *Istanbul*. Worship, and dream.

Conclusion

In conclusion, taking a standpoint from the perspective of Turkey's geography and cultural symbols, Robyn Rowland establishes on firm grounds a literary representation of historical relationship between the two countries by foregrounding her detailed descriptions of the Anatolian topography that bears the traces of ancient history as the centre of its emotional and cultural qualities. Rowland's poetry, involving the characteristics of both war and cultural poetry, also stands out as an example of bilingual poetic narration by the use of Turkish vocabulary within the English context. To conclude, Rowland's stance in poetry is yet another proof of the intercultural connection between Turkey and Australia established ironically by the Gallipoli war.

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