Ikinci Yeni, The Turkish Avant-Garde (Shearsman Books)
Translated from the Turkish and edited by George Messo

Reviewed by Poetry Society member Ken Head

Messo’s absorbing and challenging anthology presents work by five Turkish Modernist poets of the ikinci yeni, “the second New Wave”, active primarily in Istanbul and Ankara between the nineteen-fifties and seventies, a period of major change in both Turkish poetry and society. His forceful introduction to “the brutal realpolitik” of a time when “poets were being routinely arrested, tortured and imprisoned”, when “One day the sun won’t rise, there’ll be no morning, / ... it will be as if we’re not in the world ...” (Saint-Antoine’s Pigeons II by Ilhan Berk), adds valuable context to the detailed and informative biography and bibliography provided for each poet.

Cryptic, encoded elusiveness is the strategy throughout. Poems stop, start, change direction without warning or obvious logic, defying easy reading, subverting comfortable assumptions about meaning and, perhaps, even for a native speaker, making the process of translation more complex. The clear intention, what gives the poems their sombre, brooding power, is to make the reader work for understanding, share the poet’s own struggle with thought, feeling, the problem of giving voice, as Edip Cansever says in Triplets, to “the words and songs / Never sung in any tongue / Never written in any language”.

Reviewed by Poetry Society member Stewart Hildred

As a newcomer to Turkish Poetry, I was keen to see what these poets had to offer. I have to say that I was greatly surprised and delighted by this collection. To begin with, editor George Messo provides what he calls 'A Cartography of the Turkish Avant Garde' – a useful exercise which not only positions this movement, which emerged in the 1950s and in a period of social and political unrest, but also goes some way to providing a snapshot of each of the poets. These are the poets of the Ikinci Yeni – the Second New – not a formal group, but an influential one nevertheless.

The poems, not previously translated, range from dark, sinister, disturbing imagery to the light, sometimes mildly humorous. Of the five poets featured in this collection I was particularly taken with the work of Ilhan Berk and Edip Cansever for their detailed and imaginative observations of daily life.

For me this was an adventure, an introduction to a culture and, whatever they may claim to the contrary, a group of poets whose work I would like to learn more about. This is an excellent introduction to the Turkish avant-garde and certainly bears rereading slowly and thoughtfully.

Reviewed by Poetry Society member Dr Robert M Jaggs-Fowler

The Ikinci Yeni are five 20th century Turkish poets, who overturned conventional thinking and took Turkish poetry down a new, experimental and thoroughly modern path. The idiom is often dense and obscure; the metaphors frequently challenging for a reader more used to English classical and contemporary styles. The poetry of all five is illustrative of their melancholic lives; a fact exemplified by their seemingly collective problem with alcoholism.
Previously unknown to me, this was not an easy collection to read and, perhaps with the exception of Süreya’s delightful Striptease, demands that the reader works hard at gaining access to each poem. Nonetheless, there is a power within this work which equally provokes the reader to read, puzzle, return and read once more with an almost masochistic inquisitiveness.

Reviewed by Poetry Society member Joan Hewitt

I knew nothing about Turkish poetry or the political context behind the poems, but I skipped the foreword so as to react to the translations of George Messo. It was clear the translations were of the highest order: they were poems.

Ece Ayhan was frustrating. His poems were rarely anchored in a locus, and full of dramatics (“I, who've not tried suicide for the last three nights”) and tropes like “Death is a half-moon sliced by palaces that will burn”. Less oblique ones, such as The Unknown Student’s Monument had strength and starkness. I guessed that the obliqueness was the tool of the politically oppressed, as used by the Misty Poets in Maoist China.

Ilhan Berk was much more accessible and - the litmus test - made me want to write. His short narratives (“Today I rose early. I woke up the sea”) in which Instabul emerges piece by piece and above which images float like dark balloons (“I’m like a stopped clock in a far-off station”) and his apparent artlessness are reminiscent of Frank O’Hara’s lunchtime poems. The Thames is a masterpiece: the heightened lyric tone and European and Turkish contrasts made me suspect exile rather than travel.

Edip Cansaver’s Oh Yeah Now That’s A Table is a brilliant metaphor for poesis; elsewhere there is urbanity, romance and arresting imagery. (“I’m a freshly-picked bunch of carnations. /My hair is cold and long.”)

Cemal Sureya’s musical, erotic, nostalgic poems were a delight.

Turgat Uyar has a high-bardic tone which often irritated but aroused curiosity about the political context.

So I allowed myself to read the foreword. These were poets who lived through oppressive times, who wanted to wrest language away from the public arena, and restore experiment and individuality. These luminous translations allow us to walk with them along their roads. Respect.

Reviewed by Poetry Society member Jocelyn Page

"Not one of us accepts the Ikinci Yeni ... Each of our poetries is different, and not one of us is bound by a shared theory." Edip Cansever, one of the featured poets in Ikinci Yeni: The Turkish Avant-Garde, seems to represent many poets (Frank O’Hara and John Ashbury of the New York School among them) with his views on so-called poetry movements. Of course, for the reader, groupings of poets and their anthologies are interesting as a study of place and time, of political and cultural climate. Ikinci Yeni provides a fascinating variety of styles with no sense of forced commonality in the selection. On the contrary, there is a beautiful synchronicity in the work of these five poets (Cansever, Ece Ayhan, Ilhan Berk, Cemal Süreya
and Turgut Yuar) that is given room to flourish: open windows, footprints and waterways (the Mediterranean Sea and its beaches, the Thames River) appear in various poems.

Naturally, there is also a pervasive sheen of melancholy and despondency that isn't surprising in a time of a 1950s closed-state Turkey. The challenge for the reader of such group presentations is to avoid generalization, comparison and rank. For this reviewer, it didn't seem necessary to favor; it was simply delightful being introduced to Turkish verse with such a cornucopia of experimental voices under one cover.