To Read Yashar Kemal

TURKISH TALES

by A.G. Mojtabai, The New York Times –*

"BIRD and tree conjoin in us," wrote Rene Char in "Recherche de la Base et du Sommet." The urge to take flight and the need to root down and take hold are fundamental human polarities. This double need for grounding and transcendence lies at the very heart of *Seagull*, Yashar Kemal's latest novel, and is reflected in all its curious images of children attempting to tie flying things to themselves - the paper kites, the bees and hornets on strings, the efforts to tame seabirds and attach them.

Yashar Kemal is a Turkish writer of international stature who has spent some time living in exile in Sweden. *Seagull* is his 10th book to be translated into English. Political currency is not the great strength of the book; its relevance is timeless rather than narrowly contemporary. This is an archetypal story, the fiercely moving account of a young boy's coming of age. The season is spring; the place: an impoverished town on the Black Sea coast. Salih - the hero of the tale - is about to turn 11. He is hopelessly idle; his principal occupation is gazing out at the passing scene. "It was as though ever since he could remember he had been given the task of keeping an eye on the whole world." Finding a seagull with a broken wing, Salih refuses to relinquish it; his struggle to save the bird becomes a struggle to find his own wings, to escape from the troubled confines of his family, his town. Carrying the seagull around in a basket, he goes from expert to expert in search of healing for the broken wing - first to his hottempered grandmother, who is much sought after for her rejuvenating salves, then to the vet, the doctor, the pharmacist, the magician - only to meet with disappointment at every turn.

In his wanderings with the seagull, Salih takes in the life of the town: the secret meetings of smugglers, the first stirrings of political unrest, the ritual motions of the townsfolk at their various trades. He wonders whether to apprentice himself to Skipper Temel or to the Ismail, the blacksmith. When the urge to flight is dominant, Salih thinks with longing of the sailor's life: "These fishermen would come to the little fishing port in the winter, from the Marmara coast, from the Aegean, from Istanbul, and all through winter and spring their boats would put to sea in the early dawn and return at sunset with clouds of seagulls in their wake."

At the first breath of summer, the boats will sail away, leaving the harbor empty.

"Salih would a thousand times rather be a mate on the Skipper's boat than apprentice to the smith. ... Had anyone ever seen a smith with kind smiling eyes like the Skipper's, clear as the sky?"

The smith's life is quite different. He is rooted in the town; his work is unremitting. At the forge by dawn until late at night, he is known to be a hard master. His last apprentice ran away. Still - there is something stubborn and unyielding that Salih respects in the blacksmith. He is an artist, and his work demands strength, love and patience: "The smith's craft is a holy craft, and so it has been since days of yore. The patron saint of smiths is the Prophet David, may peace be upon him, who was as skilled with his hands as he was gifted with his tongue ..."

"The Prophet David had a beautiful voice and he was the first to sing to an instrument ... He would strike up a song to the rhythm of the hammer, and the blending of the two was so harmonious that all the people of the desert would gather around to listen. The first musical instrument ever was therefore the hammer and anvil."

Many of the elements of folklore and fairytale are here: the wicked stepmother (the grandmother), the magician, the young prince setting forth to rescue the princess who is under a spell (Salih's quest to cure the injured seagull), enchantments, trials, the thorny wood (Salih's daily round), friendly spirits of the earth (the smith) and the sea (the skipper), assorted small beasts, knaves, clowns, demons, helpers.

This fairytale quality has considerable charm, as does the author's fidelity to the child's perspective throughout the story, but certain difficulties result. As an observer, Salih is usually hidden and crouching; he sees feet, torsos, heads, but never whole persons. And his perceptions of political events are rather similar: disjointed, peripheral, magically connected, if connected at all.

Of course, many of the adults in the story seem to have no firmer grasp of political reality than Salih. There's a marvelously jumbled speech by Salih's father as he tries to master the rhetoric of exploitation. In the past, the father has been a rather useless character, living off the earnings of the women of the family, who are all skilled weavers. But recently he has been talking to some socially committed students and has vowed to become useful: "From now on I'm going to work like a slave and not exploit anyone any longer. But then others will be exploiting me, and these young students, that the police and military are chasing and killing all the time, they say it's just as despicable to let yourself be exploited and not do something about it. Listen to me, if any of those youths come to this house running from the police, you're to keep them well hidden and never turn them over. They've taught me something, that it's better to be exploited and then to rise up against those who exploit you. If a man does that he'll go straight to God's heavenly Paradise."

Yashar Kemal is a storyteller in the old style, and a very grand and spacious style that is. Useless to ask for streamlining here - the storyteller rambles; he gets where he's going, but in no great hurry. Along the way are excursions and, wherever he stops, many, many genuflections. There is perhaps too much of a blue radiance over everything - one tires of it, even in Chagall. But, at his best, Yashar Kemal tells tales as the good smith forges iron, and what he says about the smith applies to his own work: "His is a work of love and patience. Only thus can he melt mountains of iron and create something. Only the well-tempered iron, white-hot from the forge, can be fashioned by beating. Only with well-tempered love can a man become a good smith." [S]

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