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Echoes of Modernity: Nazım Hikmet’s “Machinisation” of Turkish Poetry

Petra de Bruijn

While in Anatolia a new republic was being born, the young poet Nazım Hikmet (Ran, 1902–1963) was studying Marxism-Leninism, French, and Russian at the Communist University for the Workers of the East in Moscow. After discovering how difficult it was for a schoolteacher to impart Mustafa Kemal’s modernist secular ideas to the generally traditional Islamic-minded inhabitants of central Anatolia, he had travelled by train to Moscow, passing through a countryside that had been devastated by the Russian civil war.

The shocking impressions of that journey inspired Nazım to write a new kind of poetry. In Batum on his way to Moscow, he encountered a kind of poetry that was unlike anything he had ever seen before, most likely the work of Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893–1930). He did not know Russian at the time, but he was inspired by the poetry’s form. In Moscow, Nazım Hikmet met with Mayakovsky and even shared the stage with him at several poetry readings (in those days, poetry was often recited at public events). Although Nazım claimed that he first read Mayakovsky’s poetry in the 1940s, he could not deny that there were formal similarities with his own work.

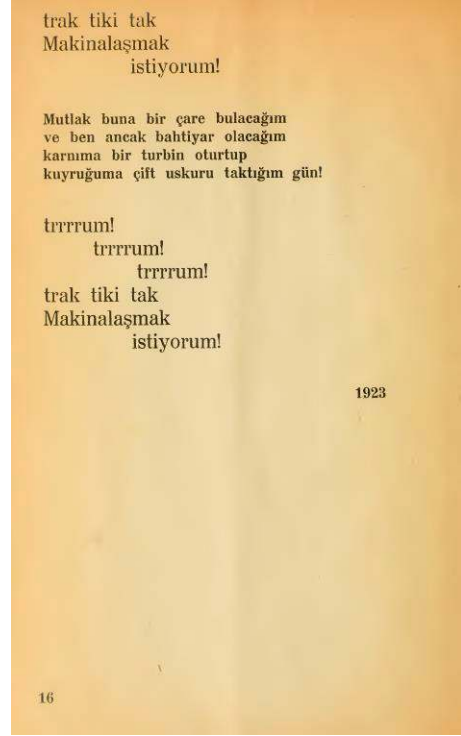
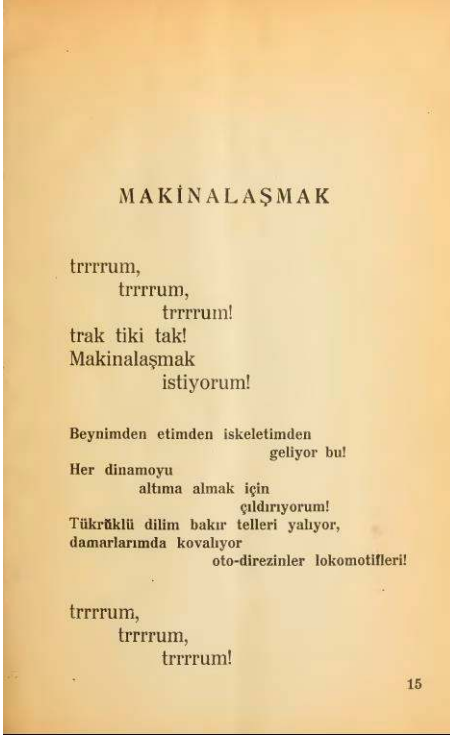
Cultural life in Moscow in the early years of the Soviet Union was fragmented. Nazım associated himself with the constructivist journal *LEF* of the Left Front of the Arts (*Levy Front Iskusstv*). Literary constructivists, who were the revolutionary successors of the futurists, argued that literature had to be composed in harmony with modern technology and modern principles of organisation. They asserted that literature should depict reality and be free to use collage techniques, drawing from prose, statistics, business language, and citations from documents.

Nazım Hikmet stayed in Moscow during the years 1922 to 1924. His grasp of Russian at the time was good enough to allow him to become involved in the Russian experimental theatre scene. More so than by poets, he was impressed by the innovative work of theatre producer Vsevolod Emilyevich Meyerhold (1874–1940), who incorporated circus acting into his plays. The poems Nazım wrote in those years were performed in Turkish and some were translated and published in literary magazines.

Backed by his experience of those new forms of art, Nazım returned to İstanbul in 1924. He garnered acclaim with his poetry as well as articles on Marxism published in *Aydınlık*, the periodical of the Communist Party of Turkey (*Türkiye Komünist Partisi*, TKP), and he became involved with the more radical *Orak-Çekiç* (Hammer and Sickle). After the Kurdish rebellion

of 1925, which gave Mustafa Kemal the pretext to suppress communist voices as well as others, Nazım was sentenced to fifteen years of imprisonment. Granted amnesty in 1926, he stayed briefly in Moscow from 1926 to 1928, at which time the TKP asked him to establish a publishing venue for the production of party literature. Differences of opinion, however, led him to be expelled from the party in 1932. Nevertheless, he remained dedicated to communist ideals.

“Makinalaşmak”*



* Nazım Hikmet, *835 Satır* (İstanbul: Mualim Ahmet Halit Kitaphanesi, 1929), 15–16. University of Toronto, Robarts collection: <https://archive.org/details/835iesekizyotoonzuoft/page/14/mode/2up>

To Machinise

trrrum,
trrrum,
trrrrum!
trak tiki tak!
To become an engine
is what I want!

From my brain, my flesh and my bones
this comes!

To attach each dynamo
under me
makes me go out of my mind!
My tongue with saliva licks the copper threads
in my veins the lorries
chase the locomotives!

trrrum,
trrrum,
trrrrum!
trak tiki tak!
To become an engine
is what I want!

I will certainly find a solution for it
and I will only be happy
on the day I place a turbine in my belly
and attach a screw-propeller to my tail!

trrrum,
trrrum,
trrrrum!
trak tiki tak!
To become an engine
is what I want!

Nazım Hikmet wrote “Makinalaşmak” (To Machinise) in 1923 in Moscow. Written in the vein of the constructivists, the poem invites the audience to embrace mechanisation to such an extent that they become engines themselves.

“Makinalaşmak” was first published in 1928 in Baku in *Güneşi İçenlerin Türküsü* (The Song of Those Who Drink the Sun) in Ottoman script. The version analysed here was included in *835 Satır* (835 lines), which was published in Latin script by Ahmet Halit in İstanbul. The layout of the poem emphasises the content. The title is set in the largest font, followed by the refrain in a slightly smaller font, and the rest of the text is set in the smallest font. The refrain consists of the onomatopoeic sound of a starting engine together with the exclamations of a first-person narrator who states that he wants to become an engine. As that is the essential message of the poem, it is foregrounded. The fact that a larger font is used for the refrain could be read to indicate that the performer of the poem should read that part more loudly and in a more theatrical manner.

The lines of the poem take on the appearance of waves in a staircase form that highlights the meaning they carry. In the refrain, the *trrrrrums* emanate from one another. The way that the second and third *trrrrrums* are indented successively under the first *trrrrrum* is suggestive of the sound of a starting engine, and after the third *trrrrrum*, the engine starts. The idea of a starting engine is reinforced by the alliteration of the consonant “r” in the word *trrrrrum*.

Nazım placed the second line of the second sentence of the refrain under the second “m” of the verb *makinalaşmak*, which incorporates the Turkish grammatical suffix indicating the infinitive form of the verb. In this way, the desire to become an engine emerges through that very action. Conforming to the constructivist manifesto, the poet thus appears to call on the proletariat to internalise mechanisation.

The first stanza after the refrain, again in staircase form, works in a similar manner. By placing “*geliyor bu*” (“this comes”) under the words for brain, flesh, and bones, the words actually do emanate from those very elements. The same principle applies to the second and third sentences of the stanza. The placement of the part of the sentence which indicates that a dynamo has to be placed underneath the narrator further adds to its meaning. The way that the verb “*çıldırıyorum*” (“I am going out of my mind”) emerges from the sentence above emphasises the causal effect of the element that is indeed making him go out of his mind. In the next sentence, only the third and last lines are indented, and as the objects of the sentence, lorries and locomotives, are actually under the verb “*kovalıyor*” (“chasing”), the words are physically chased by the verb. Moreover, the use of the present continuous tense reinforces the feeling of becoming a machine, making it even more pronounced by emphasising the continuity of the effort involved.

The last stanza before the last refrain does not utilise the staircase form. Due to this lack of indentation, the text becomes compact, as though something is speeding up. It is as if the urge to become an engine has reached its most intense stage. The form of this stanza resembles traditional poetry. The first two lines rhyme with each other and even employ a meter; the

hece (syllable count) meter is 4+6 = 10, with a caesura after the first four syllables. In terms of content, both lines contain the most important parts at the end. The rhyme and meter highlight the fact that the narrator will only become happy when he finds a solution. In the next two lines, in free verse, an innovative solution is presented.

Makinalaşmak does not contain metaphors or comparisons. However, the poem as a whole, through a realistic description of someone who becomes an engine, comes to constitute a metaphor of the need for mechanisation in order to establish a happy modern future.

Nazım Hikmet's break with existing forms of Ottoman/Turkish poetry was radical. While some Turkish poets began experimenting with metre, rhyme, and content in the second half of the nineteenth century, none of them had used free verse and the actual layout of the text on the page to contribute to the meanings of poetry.

The collection in which the poem was first printed in Turkey received a strongly positive response from literary critics. The well-known female writer Halide Edip Adivar even paid tribute to the poem in her play *Maske ve Ruh* (Masks and Spirits), in which she uses a slightly adapted version of the work as a song for schoolchildren. When the play was published in 1937, Nazım Hikmet was being heavily persecuted. Although early Republican Turkey was fiercely anti-communist, Kemalist Turkey had nonetheless taken steps towards modernisation and industrialisation in collaboration with the Soviet Union. And while both Nazım Hikmet and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk shared the idea that Turkey had to adapt to modern times, Nazım's conceptualisation of change ultimately did not mesh with that of Mustafa Kemal.

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