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**Concrete Poetry in Turkish Literature**

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## **Concrete Poetry in Turkish Literature**

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### **Abstract**

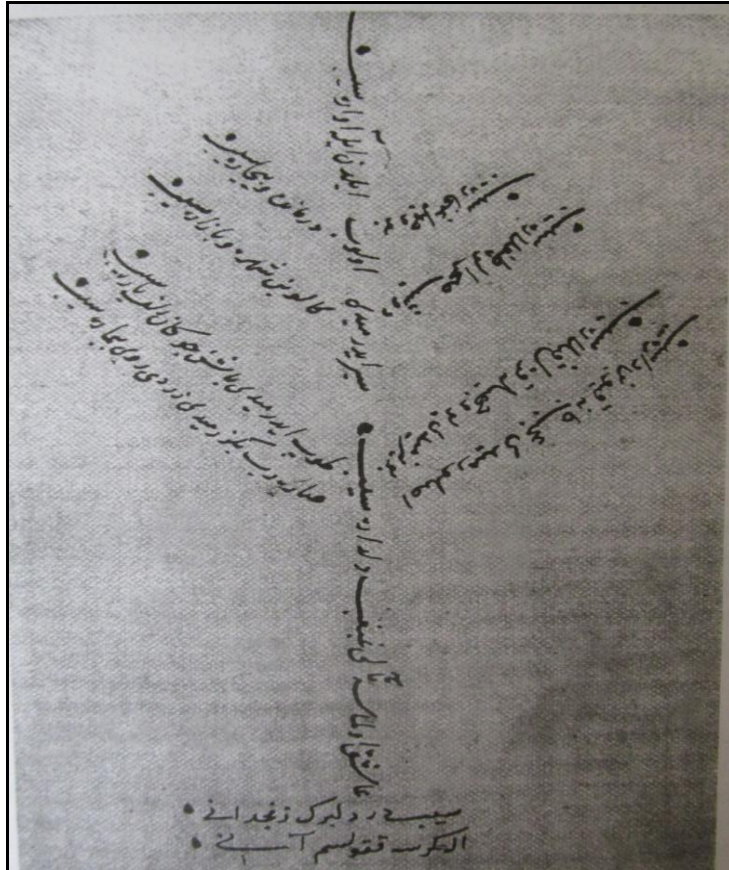
Over centuries many poets have thought the poem rendered what words could not with visual images. The poems composed with this perception aim to shatter the difference between looking and seeing. If the distinction between looking and seeing is removed so will the difference between visual and literary language. Thus the task that visual or literary language is not able to accomplish will be performed on both sides. The need of the poem for the visual image is of course not only to remove these differences. This need may be a tradition coming from the times when writing and image were not distinctive from one another or from the human mind's need for images as it conceives. In today's world in the "process of imaging everything" as Jean Baudrillard emphasizes, the poem's merging with visual imagery is seen in a variety of experiments. Poetry's ability to naturally cross the boundaries evolved with the language of poster boards in the age of nonverbal communication. This essay aims to find reasons for the relationship between poetry and image as it uncovers the journey of visual imagery use in Turkish poetry.

**Keywords:** poetry, image, concrete poem, Turkish poetry.

**Introduction**

It can be asserted that poetic types like calligram, figurative poetry, concrete poetry, visual poetry etc. date back to the Ancient times. Theocritus' "The Shepherd's Pipe", Vestinus' "The Second Altar", Simias' "The Bull" and "The Wings" are among the first examples of these types (Doğan and Demirkan 1998: 456). As seen, the available examples belong to the Hellenistic and the Roman period. There are also many examples from Medieval Europe and the Renaissance. In Turkish traditional arts, the blending of the Seljuk exterior architecture, the Ottoman ornament, calligraphy and fine arts with script had produced excellent works (Pazarkaya 1996: 4).

The birthplace of the figurative poetry, samples of which are found in various literatures, is unknown. It can be explained in a few words: "Just as it is futile to talk about the existence of 'a first inventor poet' who taught people from all over the world the meaning of rhythm and rhyme and where to use them, it is also futile to search for 'a first poet' who came up with the idea of writing poems for the eyes as much as the ear" (Özgül 2005: 6). The primary examples of this sort of poetry in Turkish literature are found in the Divan literature. According to Meâlî, one of the 16<sup>th</sup> century poets, a poem is made up of verses classified in a way to form an apple tree figure with red fruits sprinkled branches in accordance with redif (repeated voice/word after the rhyme) (Özgül 2005: 7).



There are also examples of Picture poems in Turkish literature after the Divan literature. In fact, in almost every period of Turkish literature it is possible to see examples of figurative poems, born out of human's desire to see. Metin Altıok's "Discordant Encounter" (Bir Uyumsuz Rastlaşma) is a good example of this type.

BİR  
UYUMSUZ  
RASTLAŞMA

Yangın		Deprem
lardan		lerden
geliyorum		geliyorum
	dedi	dedi
	adam	kadın
	ve	
	dep	yan
	rem	gın
	lere	lara
gitti		gitti
yıkık		yanık

(Altıok 2006: 376)

The name of the poem is *Discordant Encounter*. If the poet had not written the poem in its original form but in lines one under the other we would not be able to see the "discordant encounter". That is to say, we understand that "the man coming out of fires" encounters "the woman coming out of earthquakes" with the conjunction "and". Moreover, if the poem had been formed in lines one under the other the poem would have only one reading. But it provides multiple readings by drawing upon the graphic:

- I am coming out of fires said the man and went to the fires burned.  
I am coming out of earthquakes said the woman and went to the earthquakes ruined.
- I am coming out of fires said the man and went to the earthquakes ruined.  
I am coming out of earthquakes said the woman and went to the fires burned.
- I am coming out of earthquakes said the woman and went to the earthquakes ruined.  
I am coming out of fires said the man and went to the fires burned.
- I am coming out of earthquakes said the woman and went to the fires burned.  
I am coming out of fires said the man and went to the earthquakes ruined.

If the lines were written one under the other it could not imply all at the same time. We would learn that after the encounter of the two discordant

people either their life has changed completely or nothing has changed and they continued their life. However, by forming the poem in that way the reader is provided with an opportunity to read the poem as he/she likes.

Foucault underlines that the calligram has a triple role in its thousand year tradition: "to augment the alphabet, to repeat something without the aid of rhetoric, to trap things in a double cipher" (Foucault 1998: 190). In Metin Altıok's poem we can see this triple role. The meaning in the poem is thus squeezed from both sides.

### **A Poetic Movement in the Age of Image: The Concrete Poetry**

In today's world dominated by "the process of imaging everything" (Baudrillard 2005: 79) how can poetry which cannot be divorced from image make a track? To take the matter from a different perspective, to which point has the ability of poetry to violate the boundaries reached when even in its world its innate discrepancies have intermingled?

In a wide geography reaching from Switzerland to Brazil, from England to Japan, a new type of poetry called the Concrete poetry has been born. It can be said that this poetry is an art that meets and merges in a wide space with picture, calligraphy, typography, design and other modern ornamental arts (Türkay 1968a: 37). Thus, we observe a gradual blurring of the boundaries between the genres. In fact, it should also be noted that the issue of merging of the boundaries did not start in the 1950s. The meeting of genres can also be observed in the Egyptian hieroglyphics, in Medieval and Renaissance Europe, Seljuk architecture and the Ottoman ornament and calligraphy. The relation of poetry with other arts has developed with the Italian futurists, Russian formalists, German Dadaists, Apollinaire's "Caligrammes", and French surrealists. Thus, we can say that contemporary novelties are not rootless or created out of thin air (Pazarkaya 1996: 45). However, it can be argued that picture poems today has become relatively more wide-spread compared to the past. Of course the situation is not coincidental. The concrete poetry was born as the result of the search for a new poetry by a group of intellectuals who were fed by science, ignored national boundaries in art and who wanted to step on a solid ground after the war.

"It is a movement which wants to start anew, which has attempted to burgeon out of the slaughter and ashes of the war described by Adorno who said there could be no poetry after the Holocaust, which has been put forward by intellectuals and writers from various countries in communication with each other who has also attempted this burgeoning by reflecting it on thought" (Pazarkaya 1996: 84).

The birth of this movement, which does not seek a reader but a viewer, is certainly related with the changing/transforming modes of present day modes of communication:

"Colour or black and white televisions, newspapers have accustomed the people to viewing rather than listening or reading. Consequently, the people show interest in images and diagrams more than written or spoken words. It can be argued that the concrete poetry emerged as a reaction to verbosity in the abstract poetry" (Türkay 1968a: 41).

In his article "A Look on the Concrete/Visual Poetry Movement", Ali Kozan also argues that this poetry has been born from the reaction against the generalisation of mass media. In fact, looking at the formal and aesthetic principles of the concrete poetry enables us to see the birth of this poetry with its reasons.

"The formal and aesthetic principle of the concrete poetry is to strip the language off its semantic halo and rescue it from its traditional semantic avalanche or pile, to wipe out the taken for granted, conventional images and stereotypes which constitute much of the language, and by forgetting the tiniest elements, letters, syntactic rules which do not recall meaning no other than its own to start to use them as the initial constituent" (Pazarkaya 1996: 87).

While this movement, which can be defined as "a modern international poetry movement taking linguistic elements (word, syllable, letter) as a concrete material" (Balçı and Darancık 2007: 106), has a lot of different definitions, there are some shared opinions. These, in fact, consist of a set of novelties that the precursors of the movement wanted to practice on poetry.

The objectives of the precursors of the concrete poetry movement can be listed as follows:

- **Creating a spatial poetry:** The precursor of the concrete poetry movement pursued the goal to arrive at a poetry called "spatial poetry." Pierre Garnier claims that they have created "a poetry that aimed to 'disclose' the reflected space rather than the projective display of space, energy, fiction and structure" (Garnier 1986: 8).
- **Making poetry visible:** Plasticity is the most prominent trait of this poetry. Paul de Vree expresses that the major objective of this poetry is to appraise a poem as an object to be used and looked at, and to make it directly visible (Vree 1986: 13).

Hasan Bülent Kahraman also underlines the visual aspect of the concrete poetry: "The concrete poetry is a search and tendency in which the borders between the visual language and literary language are destroyed and then reconstructed, and the direct correspondence between the two languages is abolished" (Doğan and Demirkan 1998: 454).

On the other hand, Yüksel Baypınar says that "not the ears but the eyes of a concrete poetry reader are at work" (Baypınar 1993: 71). Shortly, in this poetry, visual elements replace the acoustic elements of the classic poetry.

- **Extending linguistic dimensions:** Pierre Garnier declares that national languages have lost their magical powers. He indicates that they wish to reconstruct language by replacing/repairing the syntactic and semantic values of it which become more and more bureaucratic gradually (Garnier 1986: 8).

The precursors of the concrete poetry do not desire to write poetry using a language which they believe confines them. By turning language upside down they aspire to bring its essence to daylight. In this way, they believe they will place "the individual into a liberated, non-stop creation frame" (Garnier 1986: 8).

- **Forming a universal language:** One of the aims of the concrete poetry is to form a universal language. Indeed the concrete poetry does not need translation as it uses very few words and the reader can read the poem in its original language. After all, the concrete poetry is written with a word, a syllable or with a letter. That is why there is no need to know the language it is written in. The manifesto written by Pierre Garnier and Seiichi Niikuni draws attention to this feature. Both poets define this poetry as "a poetry that can be visually transmitted without the need to translate; a poetry that can speak in the silence of the letters, words and numbers" (Kozan 2008: 133).

Pazarkaya remarks that the concrete poetry does not differentiate languages. This type of poetry blends and combines languages. After all, "the ability of the concrete poetry to create a first-time real international poetry movement is hidden in its linguistic method" (Pazarkaya 1996: 86).

- **Verbivocovisual:** The concrete poetry stands up to the elements of "voice, plastic form and semantic discharge." The manifesto declared by Noingrades group in 1958 identifies its basic qualities:

"This age wants to speak a new language; against the technical appearance of the industry society, against the new wordless communication mode, the language of advertising and billboards, the poetry should transform into an object due to its nature to save itself from the alienation of abstraction and from being the interpreter of subjective and external emotions. In this context, industrial object/poetry has a specific communication aimed structure and this structure considers the relations between words acoustically and visually that leads us to a visual syntax. Augusto Compos named the language of the new poetry: verbivocovisual" (Kozan 2008: 134).

- **Easy readability:** We cannot say that the language of the concrete poetry is forcing. The reason why a new language is used in the concrete poetry today is that the language as a living thing has changed. Today people use a simple and common language. This is a



language composed of limited number of words and images. It is the yearning of the concrete poetry to write poems with this language used by the today's people. In fact, what is implied here, as Kozan also remarks, is the location of a popular language in to the poetic language (Kozan 2008: 135). The precursors of the concrete poetry movement believe that this language has an impressive communication power, and therefore, they want to write poetry in this language. Shortly, the concrete poetry envisions a direct, open and comprehensible language. The poets of the concrete poetry set to work by paying attention to the language not to be a language addressing only to the man of letters, who have the highest command on their native languages. However, they cannot be said to be successful in their endeavour because from the moment when the visual image enters into business it is expected of the people watching it to be equipped well and, therefore, to have a skill for interpretation. However, the present-day people do not have that much time to "wait" while the image waits to be understood.

Concrete poetry aims for clarity/understandability, on the other hand it includes images mostly requires interpretation, and this situation creates a paradox<sup>1</sup>. "Compared to the modern and traditional poetry, which may cause the emergence of thinking barriers because of its hard clause structure and textual composition, the concrete poetry has simpler structure and makes a playful impression on the reader" (Balçı and Darancık 2007: 104). However, in addition to this, the concrete poetry casts the reader in an active role:

"Unlike the classic poetry which is written for the sake of giving the reader something or making him feel something by pure formal and ideological analysis, the concrete poetry is a type of poetry which wants to encourage creative thought and to create many question marks in the minds of the reader" (Balçı and Darancık 2007: 103).

Tarık Günersel's poem, *9/11*, will be a relevant one. What this poem tries to tell is explicit; however, if the viewing eye cannot see that the exclamation marks make a tower or if there is no knowledge in his memory about September 11, it is impossible for him to understand this poem.

We have already said that the concrete poetry wants the reader only to view; but, as in this poem, the reader is also expected to see. That is to say, there are some clues in this poem to be recognized. The first clue is the title of the poem. The title already gives away the subject, however, as long as we can see the exclamation as the number "1" ... . The second clue is the "newer york" expression placed at the end of the poem. The suffix "-er" in English adds comparative meaning to the adjectives. What makes New York newer, or to be more precise: What happened so that New York has changed? The final clue is that the exclamation marks are aligned like

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<sup>1</sup> If there is a visual image, it requires technical knowledge on poetry, and high level of interpretation skill. But modern people have not enough time "to be on standstill". Whereas, image needs to be "understood".





The poem is in fact a two-line poem (distich): Planes fall/Birds become happy. If the poem had been written in this form, it would still give the meaning it intends to. The poem (The Dream of Sky) suggests that sky is belong to birds, reminds us the duty of "noninterference", which is called by Paul Taylor in his ideas on "respect for nature". "Noninterference" idea suggests that we human beings should not interfere with the freedom of ecosystems, community of living organisms, or each living organism (Jardins 2006: 280). Interpreting the poem, in the light of this idea, we may easily reach that conclusion: The sky is a land of freedom for birds, and it should be saved from human interference. The dream of sky is to be a land of freedom for birds. Even though the title of the poem makes the idea clearer, the meaning strengthened and the effect is increased by poem's visuality. The first image animates the fall, and then a plane is seen. We see the plane crash to the ground. Finally the flight of the birds is seen.

The final part of the poem, "Birds become happy" is written in a form likened to a flying bird. However, the bird image here in fact, does not rise because of the similarity but comes out of a learned idea because using the letter "m" while drawing a bird is a learned knowledge. The image is incomprehensible for someone who does not know how to make a symbol of the bird from the letter "M".

Conditioning is within the nature of seeing. We see everything as we look at the image of ourselves in the mirror. Seeing is always subjective. Perception can never be separated from the past. "A viewer is said to simply apply to the present what he has learned about things in the past; or, as the contention has been worded sometimes, we see things as we do because of what we expect them to look like" (Arnheim 1971: 80). To be able to understand a thing one should have met the form in the past. "The influence of memory on the perception of the present is indeed powerful" (Arnheim 1971: 80). This is valid both personally and socially. In other words, an image is meaningful as long as it tells us something, namely we need to have stored knowledge for that image in the past. For the social meaning, on the other hand, the image should be located in the collective memory. "The 'visual' style of any image is partly determined by representational practices valid in a certain historical period. The practice, to define shortly, is the pursued way to do any work within the consent of the society" (Leppert 2009: 23). Every time we see an image we embark on solving a problem. Perception is also a problem solving. In front of an artwork, we often feel like we are solving a problem. This is because every perception includes a problem solving. By associating it with the artworks, Leppert explains the difficulty of interpreting an image:

"Artworks are not like radio-television transmitters which always send the receivers the same signal or signal cluster: The meaning here is constructed dynamically both by the creator and the user. The construction of meaning is an infinite production motivated by objects under particular historical and social conditions. To talk about an image, to try to decipher

its code, is not a process of decoding in which nothing would be left to talk when decoding is finished and the action will stop when the final meaning is verbalized. Ultimately, to talk about an image is the attempt of a person to associate himself with the image and with the vision represented by the image. Like a place worth visiting and roaming, an exploration area, a place where we see the things we can see, the image is a place which always deserves a return as there are always things left that we look at without seeing" (Leppert 2009: 22).

Leppert underlines that seeing is not perceiving:

"There is no point in believing a picture is 'a delivery truck carrying meaning to the customer'. An audience is not a group of people waiting to receive wrapped meanings from a picture; they are the people actively participating in determining the meaning. To 'be able to see' (namely, 'to be able to perceive') I need to know something. In the simplest term, I need to recognize the thing I view; but of course recognition provides only a small advantage. Thus, Roman scholar Pliny says: 'The main instrument of seeing and observation is the consciousness; the role of the eyes is to function as a container carrying and taking the visual elements of the consciousness" (Leppert 2009: 20).

Besides, it is unfair to say that every example of the concrete poetry is difficult to understand. Most of these poems do not even need to be explained because their meanings are already clear. For instance, Yüksel Pazarkaya's poem below can easily be understood by everyone. By making a picture of a knife using the word "şiiir" (poem), the poet tells that his poem is his knife.

1  
ş  
ş  
  
şi  
şi  
  
şii  
şii  
  
şiiir  
şiiir  
  
2  
şiiirş  
şiiirş  
  
şiiirşi  
şiiirşi  
  
şiiiri  
şiiiri  
  
şiiirşiiir



The matter that works produced in all other fields of art might be accepted as poetry due to the removal of poetical boundaries by the concrete poetry is a criticism faced by the concrete poetry; however, what is inconvenient here is uncertain because even though we think that this case disrupts the nature of poetry, we also should not forget that every "good" poem also forces the nature of poetry. Still, the major criticism directed to the concrete poetry is that it is against the nature of poetry.

## Conclusion

The ever-changing structure of society, the intermingling real/virtual worlds, and our lives encircled by the image world ... . The correlative of these will sure be found in poetry. No matter how hard we resist, we cannot prevent the change/transformation in poetry. The most important quality of the concrete poetry is its tendency to bring the poetic language closer to visuality and it should not be forgotten that, in the age of image, this tendency can be observed almost anywhere. For this reason, the concrete poetry is not written to be read, but to be viewed. The concrete poetry forces the limits of the language and brings the poetic language into question. It provides the reader with an active role. Within these terms, we cannot know whether it is going to be the poetry of the future, but we can understand this poetry as the signal that poetry will disguise in the future.

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