



From Mundane to Memorable: The Poetics of Everyman in the Poetry of W.H. Auden and Orhan Veli Kanık*

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ABSTRACT

Twentieth-century poetry, shaped by the turmoil of the two World Wars, military conflicts, poverty, and oppressive regimes, often gives voice to those ignored by history. W. H. Auden in Anglo-American literature and Orhan Veli Kanık in Turkish verse emerge as pioneering figures of this chaotic era and offer a democratic poetics foregrounding the lives of ordinary people. Auden's "The Unknown Citizen" and Veli's "Epitaph" (Kitabe-i Sengi Mezar) portray the unremarkable lives and de-individualization of common men that eventually sink into oblivion upon death. Similarly, Auden's "Sonnet XVI" and Orhan Veli's "Bayrak" (The Flag) capture the despair and futility of war, defy its glorification, and reflect on how ordinary people are sent to their deaths by those in power. In that regard, this study argues that these poems exalt human life over socio-political ideologies and realistically portray the disparaged lives of the common people—whether lost within the masses or consumed by the horrors of war. By reclaiming the dignity of the individual reduced to a mere statistic or dispensable entity, Auden and Kanık, in these works, seek to re-humanize him and call for a deeper recognition of the value of the individual amidst the all-pervading forces of politics and war and, present a democratized, collectivist, and humanistic poetry that designates ordinary lives as extraordinary. Thus, these poems redefine poetry as a medium that celebrates the dignity and value of the common man's life over great historical figures and ideologies.

Keywords: The Unknown Citizen, Sonnet XVI, Kitabe-i Sengi Mezar, Bayrak, Common Man



Introduction

As a profound and enigmatic means of expressing the human condition, poetry has always had a say over the ills of its time and given voice to those on the periphery. However, twentieth-century poetry is particularly distinctive for its down-to-earth approach and focus on the ordinary person and his bereft individuality and autonomy. Rather than exploring mystical realms and transcendent states, the poetry of this chaotic century reflects real people's real-life experiences, grounded in the belief that something meaningful and worthwhile can be found in those lives. Accordingly, W. H. Auden in Anglo-American verse and Orhan Veli Kanık in Turkish poetry meet on common ground in their attempts to democratize poetry by thematizing the "man-in-the-street," a figure undermined by totalitarian states, economic crises, and two World Wars. Auden's "The Unknown Citizen" and Kanık's "Kitabe-i Sengi Mezar" present epitaphs for the everyman of the twentieth century, whose conformity, ignorance, and mediocrity eventually lead their heroes to oblivion. On the other hand, Auden's "Sonnet XVI" and Kanık's "Bayrak" (The Flag) suggest the disillusionment of war and challenge the romanticization of self-sacrifice and the devaluation of human life. In other words, while these poems represent the common man and his wasted life among the crowds and sometimes on a battlefield, they are also the manifestations of the two poets who designate poetry not only as a humanizing power that turns statistics into precious human lives but also as a democratising force exalting man in-the-street over ideologies.

This article fills a gap in the comparative literature by examining how W.H. Auden and Orhan Veli Kanık use irony, minimalist diction, unconventional form and depictions of ordinary people and everyday life to reimagine democratized poetics. Through close readings of selected poems, including Auden's "The Unknown Citizen" and "Sonnet XVI", and Orhan Veli's "Kitabe-i Sengi Mezar" and "Bayrak" (The Flag), the study explores how both poets reject elitist literary traditions and exalt the lives and struggles of ordinary people. Employing textual analysis, intertextual references, and cultural contextualization, the article explores how Auden and Orhan Veli redefine the notions of subjectivity and the role of poetry in a world shaped by war, political violence, and urban alienation.

Unlike previous studies that mainly address the poets' focus on the common man, this study emphasizes their formal innovations and ideological challenges. It argues that both poets represent a poetic rupture: Orhan Veli, rejecting traditional Turkish poetics through the Garip movement, and Auden, challenging modernist conventions.

Their poetry reflects a shared commitment to aesthetic democratization. This article, therefore, discusses how their efforts to make poetry accessible are linked to broader literary movements like Turkish Garip movement and Anglo-American modernism, both of which aimed to transform conventional poetic expression.

W. H. Auden and “The Unknown Citizen”

As one of the central figures of twentieth-century Anglo-American poetry, Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-1973) is a distinguished and prolific poet admired for his clear and witty expressions, formal achievements, and skilful treatment of the social and moral issues of his time. The unpretentious, colloquial language and diverse yet down-to-earth themes that characterize his verse helped define the poetics of the century. Alongside Stephen Spender, Louis MacNeice, and C. Day-Lewis, Auden was regarded as one of “the Thirties poets,” who collectively initiated a new ideological tone to poetry and a novel “way of introducing political views into their works” (Carter & McRae, 1996, p. 1992). While in his early poetry, Auden’s “Marxist influence [which] leads to a great feeling of change and destruction” often manifests through his use of “the frontier as an image and a fascinated and loving attachment to what is being destroyed,” his poetry took a new turn in the ‘40s (Stephen, 2000, p. 296). Rather than turning a blind eye to contemporary issues, the poet uses his early works to convey his concerns about the social issues and “political realities” of his time and “felt empowered to produce poems about tyranny” (Arana, 2009, pp. 69, 72). Auden’s early verse “combined deliberate irreverence and sometimes even clowning with a cunning, verbal craftsmanship, [...] to show England now as a nation of neurotic invalids who must learn to ‘throw away their rugs’” (Daiches & Stallworthy, 1993, p. 2261). In that regard, his poetry before the 1940s was more ideological and “much concerned with a diagnosis of the ills of his country” (1993, p. 2261). Auden’s works, in this period, mostly address the modern individual rather than “history, protest or controversy” and embody a collectivist and anti-elitist stance (Arana, 2009, pp. 69, 70). However, his versification after the 1940s took a distinctive turn marked by a “religious view of personal responsibility,” “pellucid clarity, and deep yet unsentimental feeling” (Daiches & Stallworthy, 1993, pp. 2261–2262). Even in his later poetry, Auden “never lost his ear for popular speech” as an “experimenter [...] bringing together high artifice and a colloquial tone” (1993, pp. 2261–2262). Auden, who aspired to be recognised “as a poet of common sense,” insisted on using colloquial diction to bring poetry down to earth and rob its elitist associations as a form cherished by the upper class or intellectuals (Raichura et al., 1975, p. 31):

Auden believed that poetry in the era prior to his own had become a medium for the highbrow few, which he believed was not poetry's original intention, and he wished to disapprove that the common man would appreciate poetry if it were presented in a more colloquial manner. The fact that Auden felt a need to defend poetry indicates the actuality of resistance to it, particularly among the working class and their mistaken association of it as an emblem of the upper class. (Izzo, 2004, p. 26)

In "The Poet and the City," Auden argues that in a capitalist system where labour is depersonalized and stripped of meaning, the poet remains one of the few individuals who still has control over their creation. This creative freedom, however, brings a responsibility; the poet is to engage with and inspire those trapped in monotonous and powerless works. Reflecting this belief, Auden emphasizes that "[the poetry's] characteristic hero is neither the "Great Man" nor the romantic, both doers of extraordinary deeds, but the man or woman in any walk of life who, despite all the impersonal pressures of modern society, manages to acquire and preserve a face of his own" (1948, p. 84). As an expression of the poet's responsibility to inspire and make poetry appreciable to the ordinary person, "The Unknown Citizen" (1939), with its everyday language and conversational tone, conveys Auden's unease about the political wrongs and oppression of his time. Published in his *Another Time* (1940), the poem serves as an epitaph that portrays "'the average man' as a statistic and as the man who goes about his business without fanfare" (Izzo, 2004, p. 265). It critiques the dehumanization of the 'little man' by totalitarian governments and economic systems in the modern world through its nameless hero who is no more than a brick in the wall for bureaucratic officials. As Mendelson also notes, this elegiac poem mirrors how individuality and autonomy are sacrificed for compliance: "[The poem] a neat uncomplicated satire on the corporate state in which freedom and happiness are equated with conformity" (2017, p. 369). Thus, by reclaiming the humanity of everyman in a century marked by jingoism and fanaticism through an "unknown" man reduced to a mere living body, a de-subjectified, dehumanized figure, a "citizen" to be dictated, used and kept in line by governments, "The Unknown Citizen" echoes Auden's claim that "in our age, the mere making of a work of art is itself a political act" (Auden, 1948, p. 88).

Its title, "The Unknown Citizen" alludes to the monuments of the "unknown soldier" erected in many parts of the world, while its hero is introduced as a figure whose only significance and identity lie in his citizenship. From the beginning, Auden's verse

foregrounds the ordinariness and socio-political identities as the modern individual's sole distinctive feature. Furthermore, the numeric identity "JS/07 M 378" carved on the "[m]arble [m]onument" that is "[e]rected by the [s]tate" illuminates the dehumanized self of the citizen whose nameless presence renders him both a casualty of political extremism and an anonymous victim of the oppressive governments and state authority (Auden, 1979, p. 85). Built on reports from a nameless officer serving that omnipotent authority; "The Unknown Citizen," with an unsentimental and mechanic voice, delineates a state hero whose official identity is denied, not to mention his complexion, personal life, traits or character. Nonetheless, the citizen is portrayed as a role model for his nation due to his life-long servile existence, which suggests the enslavement of modern man under oppressive states and his bereft individuality in a century that glorifies sameness and conformity. As a poet who "grew increasingly hostile to the modern world, and sceptical of all the remedies offered for modern ills," Auden in "The Unknown Citizen" expresses his "sceptic[ism]" and distrust of the solutions proposed by hegemonic ideologies (Daiches & Stallworthy, 1993, pp. 2261–2262). With its 'professional' and detached tone, the poem strongly communicates this suspicion and idolizes the citizen for his "proper" life, exemplary conformity, meek attitude and convenient ideas (Auden, 1979, p. 85). Rendered as a statistic rather than a human, individual, husband, father or son, the citizen is defined and glorified as a predictable and controllable part of the modern industrialized world, a cog in the machinery of the so-called perfect society. Thus, Auden mirrors every man of the twentieth century with his nameless citizen who is a "sensible" man "popular with his mates," a "normal" person in "his reactions" and a "saint" in his unquestioning obedience (1979, p. 85). Complying with societal norms and remaining uncritical of dominant ideologies, Auden's twentieth-century man is committed to preserving the status quo. The poet employs religious terminology to underline how modern man idolizes and bows down to a new god—the state or the system—to find meaning after losing his faith due to economic crises, the ravages of industrialism, and the devastation of the two world wars. As both a compelled perpetrator and a victim of this dehumanizing social and political order, the citizen is presented much like a saint who advocates and preserves the status quo: "That, in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, he was a saint, / For in everything he did, he served the Greater Community" (1979, p. 85). As his sainthood is not a virtue but a manifestation of his submission to dehumanizing political systems, the poem highlights the ironic reverence the "unknown citizen" received from the sovereign state for his servility and self-sacrifice. Through its use of capitalized terms like "Greater Community" and its religious connotations, the poem suggests not only the mystification of society and

the state as modern omnipotent powers but also the transformation of the man-in-the-street from a subject of God into a servant of socio-political forces. In other words, "The Unknown Citizen" reflects humanity's enduring servitude despite the advent of new ideologies and grand-narratives, as everyman is still expected to be a "saint," though now "in the modern sense" (1979, p. 85). A figure never "a scab or odd in his views," but having fully internalized the dominant ideology of the state without holding any oppositional views, the citizen dutifully went to the battlefield when the government declared war and became an advocate of peace during peacetime. Seeking self-validation through unquestioning submission and conformity, the citizen is portrayed as an obedient worker who worked in the same workplace without opposing his employers or union until his retirement, except during times of war. Auden's everycitizen is the representative of the common individual illustrated as a modern slave to the new socio-political order.

The epitaph ironically brings up the corporation where the citizen worked while leaving the identity of the central figure anonymous: "He worked in a factory and never got fired, /But satisfied his employers, Fudge Motors Inc." (Auden, 1979, p. 85). Thus, the poet highlights the modern socioeconomic order that elevates corporations above human life and degrades the man-in-the-street into mere tools that "satisfy employers" with his dutifulness and compliance (1979, p. 85). The imposed consumerist lifestyle is also suggested as a means of building a conformist society marked by its citizens' indifference to the world of politics and compliance with social norms. The citizen bought newspapers daily just to read the advertisements and purchased "everything necessary to the Modern Man" such as "a phonograph, a radio, a car, and a refrigerator," which are the items dictated by the dominant, consumerist culture as symbols of normalcy and bourgeois values (1979, p. 85). As a docile figure who never stood up against his teachers, friends or superiors, the citizen also adhered to the government's eugenicist's advice by "add[ing] five children to the population" (1979, p. 85). The authoritative and bureaucratic tone of the persona further conveys the strict surveillance of modern man by the panoptical, all-seeing government, which is also reflected in the poem's closing lines: "Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd: / Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard" (1979, p. 86). Here, the poem unveils how happiness and freedom are irrelevant in the ideological language of the state, as the interests and authority of the government take precedence over the citizens' lives (1979, p. 85). Hence, Auden pictures everyman as a modern 'everycitizen,' too docile and indifferent to attribute meaning to his monotonous existence determined

by the omnipotent states that value statistical normality over the individual's existential fulfilment. Dehumanized and pacified since childhood, the citizen in Auden's poem is a sheep within the crowd, never challenging authorial figures or institutions. Like the cold statue erected in his honour, the nameless hero is left to oblivion after an absurd, lifeless and inhuman existence. By portraying a man who never went beyond the boundaries drawn by authorities, "The Unknown Citizen" designates the ordinary man as an inhuman figure stripped of an authentic self and de-individuated by oppressive governments and dominant ideologies.

Orhan Veli Kanık and "Kitabe-i Sengi Mezar"

The early works of W.H. Auden and the Turkish poet Orhan Veli Kanık (1914–1950) share notable similarities in tone and thematic focus. Auden's early poetry reflects a sensibility that resonates with Orhan Veli's "verse forms and pessimistic cynicism" (Roberts & Corporation, 1970, p. 141). Like his Anglo-American counterpart, Orhan Veli addresses the struggles and dreams of the 'little man.' He is one of the three founders of the literary movement "Garip" (Strange), which challenged the old school of Turkish poetry and its decadent, ornate versification. Together with his friends Oktay Rifat and Melih Cevdet Anday, the poet published a literary magazine entitled *Garip* (1941), which revolutionized Turkish Poetry by "put(ing) in the place" [of previous "literatures"] the "poetry of unprecedented directness and simplicity" (Messo, 2016, p. 13). Their efforts to represent the life of "man-in-the-street" using "the rhythms and idioms of colloquial speech" revitalized Turkish Poetry (Halman, 1972, p. 230). Orhan Veli and his friends elaborate on their objectives in The *Preface to Garip* (1941):

... the aesthetics of a new poetry should represent the common laboring man. The laboring classes today have established their right to live after a long tug-of-war. The new poetry is theirs and should appeal to them. This should not mean they have to use the tools of past literatures in order to generate their own. The problem is not about defending the needs of a class; it is about looking for and finding its own aesthetics. (Kanık et al., 1941, p. 200)¹

1 ... yeni şiirin dayanacağı beğeni, artık azınlığı oluşturan o sınıfın beğenisi değildir. Bugünkü dünyayı dolduran insanlar, yaşamak hakkını sürekli bir didişmenin sonunda buluyorlar. Her şey gibi, şiir de onların hakkıdır, onların beğenisine seslenecektir. Bu, söz konusu kitlenin istediklerini eski edebiyatların gereçleriyle anlatmaya çalışmak demek de değildir. Sorun, bir sınıfın gereksinmelerinin savunusunu yapmak olmayıp yalnızca beğenisini aramak, bulmak, sanata onu egemen kılmaktır.

Their claims that “They demolish one tradition and create a new one” and “discover a new system of registers that emerges naturally from within the old one²” echo Auden’s call in “The Poet and the City” to reject “highbrow” poetry (Kanık et al., 2015, p. 201). Like Auden, Orhan Veli, through the Garip Movement, redefines the poet’s role in response to the alienating impact of modernity. Both poets reject elitist poetic traditions, use everyday language and represent common people to make poetry accessible to all. Poetry is not an escape for them, but a socially engaged practice that restores connection and meaning in a depersonalized society. As Auden contends, “a poet ... is concerned with the reality that is common to us all,” Orhan Veli calls for a new poetry that “was primarily aiming at being the poetry for the people,” and “creating a break with traditional” by abandoning “conventional meter, rhyme, language style, and outdated themes” (Raichura et al., 1975, p. 33; Duyan, 2021, p. 8). Both figures, thus, share the idea that poetry should belong to and reflect ordinary people and their tastes rather than serving the powerful.

Through the Garip movement, Orhan Veli, along with his collaborators, challenged earlier poetic conventions that made poetry a domain of the elite and renounced artificiality, pretentiousness, complex symbolism, symbolic meter and aruz prosody “to communicate the common man” and make verse people’s again (Halman, 1972, p. 230). They used “the rhythms and idioms of colloquial speech” and moved away from the elevated styles of earlier traditions to “write not only *about* the common man but also *for* him” (Halman, 2011, p. 95). For a poetry “grounded in proper colloquial language—pure, simple, ordinary, natural and primitive in its words” and “positioned in opposition to the ‘poetic tone,’”³ the poet “abandon the formal language to be appropriate to the taste of the masses” (Konyalı, 2021, p. 432; Duyan, 2021, p. 9). Since, “ordinary language is the only way to integrate poetry into daily life” for Orhan Veli (Duyan, 2021, p. 12). With its humour, clarity and unconventional theme, “Epitaph” (Kitabe-i Sengi Mezar) became the poetic manifesto of these tenets of “Garip” and illustrated the poet’s “idiolect [that] echoed the colloquial rhythms and vocabulary of common man” (Messo, 2016, p. 14). The poem presents Süleyman Efendi⁴ as the representative of the ordinary man and portrays him as a character suffering from his corns and leading a life without existential dilemmas until his death. According to the renowned Turkish poet and

2 “Onlar bir an’aneyi yıkıp yeni bir an’ane kurarlar”

3 Orhan Veli’nin tesis etmeye çalıştığı, Garip önsözünde doğru dürüst konuşma diline yaslanan, saf, basit, alelaide, tabii, iptidai kelimeleriyle anlaşılır kılınmaya çalışılan şiirin –onun yaklaşımıyla sahici şiirin– şairanenin karşısında konumlandığı görülür.

4 The honorific “efendi” in Turkish society alludes to the low status of a man on the social ladder.

literary scholar Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, Orhan Veli's hero is a man who "contents himself only with existing like a creature who has cut all kinds of bonds to the transcendental" like "the first human being man born into an absence of idealism or value hierarchy" (1992, p. 115). Tanpınar elaborates further by underlying Süleyman Efendi's central role in Orhan Veli's mission to initiate a renewal in Turkish Verse:

He wanted literature and poetry to change with their languages and purposes. Thus, he sought a figure to revolve around. Süleyman Efendi became the first stage of this search and the look of this figure changed from poem to poem. Instead of a figure confined to his loneliness, he appears as a man heedless of refined ideas and tastes, [...a man] embracing his life too seriously to envision another, a person who is like a man of the people in between Istanbul roughneck and Anatolian efendi. (Tanpınar, 1992, p. 116)

In that regard, Kanık's playful, colloquial, and sometimes absurdist tone represents a linguistic and ideological rebellion. In poems like "Perforated Poem" (Delikli Şiir) and "Tree" (Ağaç), he employs the simple style of nursery rhymes to provide a poetic protest. A similar approach is seen in Auden's "As the Poets Have Mournfully Sung," where a sing-song rhythm and nursery rhyme hide a reflection on the futility of human endeavours in the face of death. Both poets use such strategies not only as formal experiments but also as a way to challenge the traditional aesthetic rules and mock elitist attitudes. They defy "everything that belongs to the past and all outdated notions of "poeticity" in poetry⁵" (Kanık et al., 1941, p. 204).

In one of his interviews, Orhan Veli remarks that he "wanted to talk about the life of a simple man who led a simple life" and that he "believe[s] that corns is significant for one who does not have great spiritual sufferings in his life⁶" (qtd from Sazyek, 1996, p. 280). Rather than focusing on the extraordinary stories of the exceptional people or the poet's sublime feelings and personal grasp of existence, Orhan Veli's work explores the extraordinariness in the ordinary and reframes the usual through its modern hero. Thus, "Epitaph" stands as one of the foremost manifestations of the effort to democratize

5 "eskiye ait olan her şeyin, her şeyden önce de şairanenin aleyhinde bulunmak gerek."

6 "Ben hayatı sadelik içinde geçmiş basit bir adamın hayatından bahsetmek istedim. Hayatında büyük manevi ıstırapları olmayan bir insan için nasırın mühim olduğunu telakki ediyorum." ("Rakı Şişesinde Balık Olmak isteyen Şair", Yedigün, S.726, 2 Şubat 1947, s.4).

Turkish verse, reclaim the human dignity of the ordinary man, and restore poetry to the people. The poem mirrors the experience of the common man through Süleyman Efendi, whose death left no trace behind due to his simple, dull and mediocre life. Furthermore, through its title “Kitabe-i Sengi Mezar” which stands for ‘epitaph’ in Ottoman Turkish, Orhan Veli’s work presents itself as the “Epitaph” of everyman rather than of sultans, pashas or great men whose elegies dominate Ottoman poetry. In other words, “Epitaph” is a commemoration of the man-in-the-street whose epigraph is carved into Turkish poetry by Orhan Veli to honour the memory of ordinary people who have long been undervalued, belittled, caricatured or despised in the poetic tradition. The poem reflects the poet’s attempt to elevate the mundane lives and undermined existences, their silent presences to memorable, visible, significant and meaningful. “Epitaph” makes the ignored visible by representing their simple lives and overlooked experiences and thus, honours every individual’s value. Furthermore, as symbolic as the title itself, the name of the hero alludes to Suleiman the Magnificent, whose life and death were the subject of interest for many Ottoman poets, historians and critics, unlike the ordinary, unremarkable Süleyman Efendi, who sinks into oblivion after his death. Published in 1938, “Epitaph I” portrays the hero as a man who led a routinized, colourless life and suffered from his corns, which illustrates the “sympathetic” treatment of the “ordinary and poor peoples of the Strange Movement” (Sazyek, 1996, p. 119). According to Talat Sait Halman, “Epitaph I” celebrates “the ideal of ‘the little man’ as its hero, the ordinary citizen who asserted his political will with the advent of democracy” (2011, p. 94). As an expression of this “celebration”, the poem pictures him in an affectionate light, delineates his life sincerely and expresses regret for Süleyman Efendi’s evanescing, as if he had never existed (2011, p. 94). The persona also renders the hero an ugly man who does not care about his appearance or the idea of a god, except those times when his corn makes his life unbearable: “He never took the Lord’s name in vain/ Unless his shoes pinched, /But he’d hardly count as a sinner. /It’s a pity about Suleyman Efendi” (Kanık, 2016, p. 38). Although Süleyman Efendi is similarly not devout, he has not committed big sins or gone beyond the rules. Like the Unknown Citizen, where conformity is celebrated as sainthood, he was an ordinary man with an ordinary life and whose death is described as “a pity”.

On the other hand, “Epitaph II” portrays him as a man who does not experience existential crises or contemplate the meaning of his life, which underlines the contrast between the man-in-the-street and intellectual elites: “For him “To be or not to be”/ Wasn’t a question at all./ One night he slept/ And never woke up” (2016, p. 39). By

suggesting that concerns such as appearance or philosophical musings are trivial to the common people who only focus on earning a living, the persona celebrates Süleyman Efendi's simple, unadorned way of life and re-designates his existence as valuable as that of the intellectual elite. The second "Epitaph" published in 1940, highlights the lower-class background of Süleyman Efendi, who is only remembered by his payees, as his debts are the sole reminders of his life: "If his creditors hear of his death/ They're sure to give up any claims." (2016, p. 39). In the final "Epitaph" (1943), the persona emphasizes Süleyman Efendi's "indistinct and dull life he left behind" by referring to his military belongings from the days of his military service (Sazyek, 1996, p. 143). These items, now passed to other men, stand as the symbols of the shared fate of the common man: "They put his rifle in the depot, / Gave his clothes to someone else. / Neither breadcrumbs in his satchel now / Nor lip prints on his can" (Kanık, 2016, p. 40). Just as a noble family might pass down heirlooms, Süleyman Efendi's old rifle, uniform and canteen are transferred to other 'little' men as symbols of civic duty. Nevertheless, unlike the privileged, "[n]ot even his name was left" which suggests the economic disparity and social injustices that dehumanize the underprivileged majority (2016, p. 40). Rather than mystifying or belittling the lives of ordinary people, Orhan Veli in his "Epitaph" mirrors the human condition in post-war Turkey with impartiality and realism. Through his Epitaph, the common man's ignored story is brought to life, to the forefront and immortalized by being recognized in poetry.

W. H. Auden's "Sonnet XVI"

W. H. Auden, like Orhan Veli, challenges the rise of dictatorships and the devastation of World War II by representing the ordinary men sent to the battlefields and sacrificed on the front lines. Auden's "Sonnets from China" as a manifestation of the ferocity of war and suffering of everyman offers a powerful critique of the dehumanization of common people and their wasted lives due to the Second World War. Together with his friend Christopher Isherwood, the poet was commissioned to write a travel book on the East and made a trip to China where they witnessed first-hand the horrors of the Sino-Japanese War. This experience underpinned their *Journey to War* (1939). First published alongside Isherwood's diary and photographs, Auden's profound sonnets entitled "In Time of War" break from traditional sonnet forms to challenge the long-seated poetic conventions in English verse while also responding to the brutalization of people whose lives are regarded as worthless by those in power. Auden later republished the sequence as "Sonnets from China" conveying the poet's anxieties during

the war and his turn from ideological commitment to ethical reflection. "Sonnet XVI," in particular, as a concise and striking reflection of the evils of war, leaving deaths, suffering and destruction behind, offers a lyrical yet dense exploration of personal responsibility. Through short diction and little punctuation, the poem critiques the glorification of war and violence. Unlike the bureaucratic irony in "The Unknown Citizen," its tone is marked by simplicity, which highlights the contrast between the detached logic of state power and the real loss of human lives. The distant voice and mechanical rhythm suggest how modern warfare dehumanizes the individual and erases individuality. Auden also challenges the romanticized view of war, much like World War I poets like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. Yet, unlike the direct mourning of "Dulce et Decorum Est" or the accusatory bitterness and anger of "The General," Auden adopts a tone of cold detachment and offers a modernist critique of the ideological and linguistic systems that reduce people to numbers in the service of political power and ambition.

Opening with a disturbing metaphor in an unnamed military quarter, the sonnet defines war as "simple like a monument," which not only alludes to the signifiers of troops on maps that reduce war to a game or illusion but also challenges the idealisation of war (Auden, 1979, p. 72). The poem, while drawing a parallelism between war and the monument to suggest the mystification of wars by those in power, also highlights the stark contrast between the horrid reality of war and the sterile atmosphere of the base where battle plans are made. This analogy signifies the ideological impositions framing war as an act of heroism designed to convince the masses to march into battle and sacrifice themselves without hesitation, while the decision-makers remain distant from the carnage. The first stanza also conveys this mechanical, senseless life at the base bound by timetables and rigid rules. The apathetic atmosphere in the headquarters is reinforced by a telephone that speaks to a man as if it were human, informing or directing the war. This image points out the heartless, dehumanizing force of technology that serves as a tool for mass destruction and massacres. As another dehumanizing sign of war, the flags that stand for the troops awaiting orders also suggest how human beings are controlled and exploited by the powerful, only to be sacrificed for their cause. The secure and comfortable environment of the commanders contrasts sharply with the brutal and fearful lives of the soldiers on the frontlines. The second quatrain reveals the soldiers' fearful, miserable existence and pictures how the rigid rules turn them into puppets or slaves. While high-ranking officers enjoy fresh milk every day, the soldiers in the trenches endure inhumane conditions and wait until noon. The

persona also suggests that the soldiers may lose their lives for the generals and officers, as is typical in times of war. Rather than being regarded as human beings missing their families, the soldiers are designated as expandable bodies that may “die too soon” “[u]nlike an idea” for which so many lives are sacrificed (Auden, 1979, p. 72). Thus, fighting the enemy “in terror of their lives,” the soldiers, with their plight, mirror the oppression of common people through the stark divide between high-rank officers and low-ranked soldiers, who, as the lower-class, are shepherded into battle via ideological manipulation and lose their lives for the sake of “a lie” (1979, p. 72).

On the other hand, the third stanza highlights how human life is trivialized and deemed worthless by political ideologies that precede a “lie” over human life. In the final stanza, the persona not only underlines the hegemonic discourses that stir antagonisms leading to collective brutality but also criticizes the fact that the masses can easily be manipulated into advocating war and laying down their lives. With the concluding rhymed couplets that refer to the Nanking massacre and the Nazi concentration camps, the poem universalizes the horrors of World War II to evoke a collective conscience and moral responsibility for humanity. The maps illustrate how cities are turned into “evil” and burned down to ashes by bombs on the orders of a few select rulers. Through this dichotomy of ideas versus human beings, death versus life, and abstractions versus reality, the sonnet questions the bigotry of the masses that kill and die in service of “lies” (1979, p. 72). Highlighting that no thought or belief holds greater value than human life, the poem illuminates the countless lives lost to the antagonisms fuelled by the ideological discourses of imperialist and totalitarian regimes. While picturing the devastation caused by bombs that slaughter thousands, as in “Nanking” and “Dachau,” the persona urges the reader to walk in the shoes of war victims and witness the ferocity and barbarity of war without partisanship.

Orhan Veli’s “The Flag”

Unlike Auden, Orhan Veli Kanık did not experience war first-hand. He was very young during the Turkish War of Independence, and as a young and gifted poet during World War II, he followed the global conflict only through newspapers. Nevertheless, Orhan Veli, like his Anglo-American counterpart, addresses the horridness of World War II from a universal and anti-militarist perspective and represents ordinary people who lost their hopes or lives for the future on battlefields, despite playing no role in the outbreak of war. His poem “The Flag” illustrates his humanist approach and suggests the shared

innocence and ignorance of people regarding the perpetrators of war. By presenting a nameless, anonymous hero, the poet sets forth a humanitarian ideology that centralizes equality and fraternity in opposition to the rhetoric of war. Thus, "The Flag" defies the tradition of chauvinist war poetics that divide communities into 'us' and 'them' and perpetuates cycles of violence by challenging the dehumanization of those who have long been otherized. Besides, the title of the poem designates the "flag" not as a nationalist symbol that separates humanity into opposing binaries but as a representation of the bond of humanity, shared victimhood and solidarity among the oppressed. Through its unconventional persona and symbolism, the poem offers a critique of the ideologically constructed enmities that create the epic of the 'good' against 'evil,' glorify war and lead the masses to march into battle to destroy the demonized. Centred on a soldier who has lost his life after a close-range encounter on an unnamed World War II front, "The Flag" portrays humanity as the common denominator of one's existence and as an antidote to the destructiveness of war. Addressing another dead soldier whose "[p]alms filled with [his] blood, / [h]ead under [his] torso / [l]eg slung over [his] arm" that lies beneath him in blood, the persona, without revealing his name, underlines that he does not know the soldier, yet refers to him as his "lifeless, prostrate brother!" (Kanık, 2016, p. 192). Thus, he introduces both himself and his addressee as forlorn everyman soldiers who have lost their lives on battlefields, which signifies the human bond transcending the dehumanizing discourses of hatred and enmity. In other words, by deeming their personal or collective identities insignificant and referring to the dead soldier as "brother" instead of labelling him as a man, soldier or enemy, Orhan Veli's poem erases ideological divisions and exalts the idea of being human through the "lifeless, prostrate" brotherhood of the two soldiers and offers their same, tragic ends as a bond that unites them (2016, p. 192):

I know neither your name
 Nor your crime.
 Maybe we're on the same side,
 Maybe we're enemies.
 Perhaps you know me.
 I'm the one who sings in Istanbul,
 The one gunned down over Hamburg,
 The one wounded on the Maginot Line,
 The one who starved to death in Athens
 The one taken prisoner in Singapore. (Kanık, 2016, p. 192)

Beyond its critique of ideologies that distance and antagonize people, the poem also foregrounds their spilt blood as an attachment bonding them together like two blood brothers. Their victimization becomes a unifying force that binds them together despite the uniforms and politics that separate them. As two martyrs—perhaps from opposing sides—they are ultimately the same as nameless casualties and mere statistics. Furthermore, the poem offers a critique of the general tendency to unjustly convict a particular nation and its soldiers and blame them for deeds in which they had no part, as reflected in the persona's remarks that he does not know his addressee's "crime," name or side in the war. In other words, Orhan Veli's verse frames the universality of the ferocity of war that brutalizes all through his "unknown soldier" who has been killed, tortured, injured, starved and captivated owing to military conflicts and wars he did not choose. The poem echoes Auden's "Sonnet XVI," particularly in its emphasis on the great distance between the ordinary people suffering the horrors of wars and the powerful that perpetuate and sustain those battles. By underlining the fears, joys, hopes and aspirations of the common man against the authorities that view them as less than fully human and undeserving of "the finer things," "The Flag" conveys the persona's reaction to being dehumanized by the rulers that eventually led to his death: "I didn't script my own fate. / But I know all this as much / As the one who wrote that script" (Kanık, 2016, p. 192). Like Auden's "Sonnet" where the course of the battle is determined by a telephone, the poem rejects the glorification of war by revealing its bureaucratic absurdity: the lives of millions are decided by a distant and privileged few. The poem also delineates the wasted lives of many soldiers through the persona's youth: "Twenty years of strife / Weighed against a single bullet" (2016, p. 192). "The Flag" problematizes the idea of fate and suggests that the speaker and his unknown "brother" will not be the only ones to die in the bloom of youth due to wars, forasmuch as commoners are fated to suffer and lose their lives on the front lines: "Fated / To start life in Kharkov; / Forget it" (2016, p. 192). Thus, by referring to Kharkov, a city in Ukraine bombed during World War II, the poem, in its closure, deconstructs warlike rhetoric and redefines the symbol of "the flag," regarded as a token of war signifying military troops on a map: "We brought a flag this far, / Others will carry it further; / In this vast world / There are two million of us, / And well we know ourselves" (2016, p. 192). By picturing common men carrying the flag, only for it to be carried away, Orhan Veli's verse turns this militaristic emblem into a symbol of solidarity of the masses as victims. Flags carried for others do not suggest a hopeful future but rather more deaths and losses. The "two million" common people so alike in their victimization at the hands of rulers "know" each other "well," and they will never be the last to lose their lives and futures for the 'uncommon'

leaders (2016, p. 192). Regardless of their sides or backgrounds, both the persona and his addressee are represented as sons of humanity whose lives are no less valuable than those of those in power perpetuating wars. "The Flag" strongly critiques discourses that otherize people, stir enmities, cost lives, and define self-sacrifice as sacred. Orhan Veli's humanistic perspective, here, echoes Thomas Hardy's "The Man He Killed" (1902), a poem questioning the ideological distance between enemies in wartime: "Yes; quaint and curious war is! / You shoot a fellow down / You'd treat if met where any bar is, / Or help to half-a-crown" (Hardy, 2016, p. 287). While Orhan Veli focuses on collective anonymity with the line "two million of us," and Hardy depicts a personal encounter, both poets convey the shared vulnerability of ordinary people across political divides. Their poems suggest that the real tragedy of war is how it dehumanizes men who, in different circumstances, might have been friends.

Like Auden, Orhan Veli adopts a direct language to convey the sorrow of anonymous deaths. "The Flag," with its short and open-ended form, avoids ideological messages. While Auden critiques systemic violence with irony and complex diction, Orhan Veli turns to simplicity to reveal the power of patriotic symbols. Both poets refute the idea of sacrifice and explore the tension between political symbols and real human lives with a shared mistrust of state rhetoric and historical mythmaking.

Conclusion

By framing the wasted lives of ordinary people, W. H. Auden and Orhan Veli Kanık, in their particular poems, suggest the danger of ignorance and the horrific consequences it brings to the world. As poetic epitaphs marked by their humanistic visions of the common man that highlight the worthiness of his life, "The Unknown Citizen" and "Epitaph" defy oppressive systems that dictate the individual a conformist, mediocre, selfless and dehumanized existence. Both poets tear down poetic monuments, whether it is Auden's marble bureaucrat or Orhan Veli's forgotten Süleyman Efendi, to reclaim the ordinary as extraordinary and worthy of poetic attention. Similarly, "Sonnet XVI" and "The Flag" unveil the atrocities of war and mirror how common men, misled by ideological "lies," are drawn into battle and lose their humanity and lives. Through the portrayal of the ordinary man as the true hero, these works manifest the poets' attempts to dignify and give voice to the man-in-the-street. The poems set forth a democratized, collectivist and humanitarian form of poetry that redefines ordinary people as extraordinary and reinvents itself as people's artistic medium that

cherishes the simple life and dignity of the common man over the splendour of great figures and ideologies.

This article has explored how W. H. Auden and Orhan Veli Kanik, despite their different cultural and linguistic contexts, use shared poetic strategies such as irony, colloquial language, simplicity and an anti-epic tone to build a democratic poetics that resists ideological abstraction. Their innovation lies not only in focusing on ordinary lives but also in formally breaking from tradition: Auden through modernist irony, as seen in the satirical monument of "The Unknown Citizen," and Orhan Veli through the Garip movement's rejection of Ottoman prosody, exemplified by the ordinary hero of "Epitaph." Both poets redefine poetic authority as something accessible, ethically grounded and democratically shared. Rather than romanticizing the "common man," they critique the structures that render him expendable. Their works deconstruct traditional forms like the epitaph, the sonnet, and the nationalist symbols to expose how ideology and aesthetics collaborate to erase individuality. While "The Unknown Citizen" and "Epitaph" challenge the cultural mechanisms that render individuals invisible, "Sonnet XVI" and "The Flag" strip war of its heroic illusion and reveal the bureaucratic system behind mass sacrifice. Thus, both poets defy the aesthetic hierarchies of traditional poetry and the ideological narratives of power.

This study distinguishes itself from previous analyses with its comparative approach that positions Auden and Orhan Veli as global modernists who respond to the crises of the twentieth century with formal experimentation and political urgency. By foregrounding colloquial language, irony and poetic simplicity, both poets reclaim poetry as a medium of dissent and recognition. Their poems offer more than critique; they embody resistance, empathy, and remembrance. In a world marked by alienation, conformity and violence, Auden and Orhan Veli restore poetry's role as an ethical space where the life of 'little man' is not only worthy of poetic remembrance but also of individuality, recognition and dignity.

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