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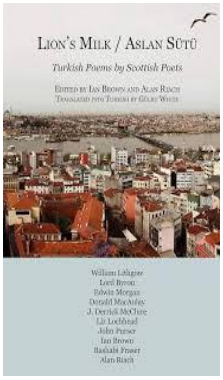
"POETIC BRIDGES: SCOTTISH VOICES ON TURKISH THEMES IN *LION'S MILK / ASLAN SÜTÜ*"[1]

Ayşegül DEMİR [2]



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[1] Ian Brown and Alan Riach (Eds), (2024), **Lion's Milk / Aslan Sütü**, Translated by Gülru White, ISBN: 9781234567890, 256 pages.

[2] Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Munzur Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, Batı Dilleri ve Edebiyatı Bölümü, aysegul.demir.tr@gmail.com, ORCİD 0000-0002-0411-4561

INTRODUCTION

Encountering *Lion's Milk / Aslan Sütü* was, for me, more than a scholarly exercise in comparative literature—it was a moment of recognition. As a scholar working at the crossroads of Scottish and Turkish literary traditions, I approached this anthology with both curiosity and caution: could a single volume truly capture the tonal range, historical nuance, and emotional texture of centuries of poetic engagement between these two distinct cultures? Edited by the renowned Scottish poets and academics Ian Brown[3] and Alan Riach[4], and translated by Gülru White[5], the anthology spans four centuries of verse written in Scotland's three main literary languages—English, Scots, and Gaelic—responding to themes and images drawn from the Ottoman Empire to contemporary Turkey.

The result is not a uniform portrait but a prismatic dialogue. *Lion's Milk* brings together disparate poetic voices—some canonical, others contemporary—in a literary conversation that cuts across time, geography, and linguistic borderlines. Its multilingual design strengthens this dialogic aim: while offering readers access to Scottish poetic responses, it also implicitly asks how Turkish culture, space, and memory are refracted through foreign poetic lenses.

The title itself, *Lion's Milk*—the colloquial Turkish name for rakı—holds metaphorical weight. The transformation of this clear spirit into a cloudy liquid when diluted with water evokes both gentleness and potency, clarity and obscurity, surface and depth. This duality extends to the poems themselves, many of which appear quietly lyrical yet carry an undercurrent of emotional and political charge. Moreover, the rakı table (*rakı sofrası*), a site of storytelling, shared memory, and introspection, becomes a fitting metaphor for the anthology's structure: a literary gathering where Scottish voices meet Turkish themes in conversation, sometimes earnest, sometimes ironic, often intimate.

In this review, I aim to reflect on the anthology not only as a scholarly artifact but also as an aesthetic and emotional experience. I will examine the editorial framework, highlight selected contributions that struck a particular chord, and address the challenges posed by translation. The collection, as I hope to show, invites us not simply to read poems, but to listen—across languages, histories, and geographies—for moments of unexpected kinship.

[3] Ian Brown (1945–) is Professor of Drama at Kingston University and served as President of the Association for Scottish Literary Studies from 2010 to 2024. He brings together his extensive academic expertise in Scottish drama and literature with his own poetic voice, contributing both critically and creatively to the field.

[4] Alan Riach (1957–) is Professor of Scottish Literature at the University of Glasgow and was President of the Association for Scottish Literary Studies from 2006 to 2010. A prominent poet and critic, Riach has written extensively on Scottish culture, literature, and national identity.

[5] Gülru White is a graduate of Boğaziçi University's Department of Turkish Language and Literature. She has worked as a teacher of literature and the arts, and her literary translations reflect a deep engagement with cross-cultural and bilingual expression.

Visual and Editorial Framing

Before opening the book, one is already offered an invitation: to look at Istanbul not just as a city, but as a layered site of encounter. The front and back covers of *Lion's Milk / Aslan Sütü*, adorned with Annemieke Borras's panoramic photographs, act as visual preludes to the anthology's poetic dialogue. I found myself pausing at these images longer than expected. Shot from opposing angles across the Golden Horn, the covers frame Istanbul's skyline as both familiar and elusive—much like the city appears throughout the anthology itself.

The front cover draws the viewer's eye toward the dense rooftops of Galata, shadowed by minarets and domes that recall centuries of layered history. The back cover, taken from the opposite shore, shifts the viewer's gaze, reminding us that even the most iconic cityscape changes depending on where one stands. These visual reversals mirror the anthology's approach: Scottish poets, each from their unique vantage point, offer refracted perspectives on Turkey. As a reader familiar with both geographies, I couldn't help but see the visual layout as a subtle metaphor for the act of cultural translation itself—where perception is always dependent on position.

Beyond its visual design, the anthology's institutional trajectory adds another dimension of meaning. First introduced during the 11th European Society for the Study of English (ESSE) conference in Istanbul and supported by the Scottish Government, the volume carries the weight of formal endorsement without losing its artistic freedom. The inclusion of poets ranging from William Lithgow and Lord Byron to Edwin Morgan and Liz Lochhead testifies to the editors' commitment to temporal and stylistic diversity. As I progressed through the collection, I began to see it less as a top-down editorial effort and more as a carefully curated mosaic—one that makes space for both the formal and the intimate, the historical and the sensorial.

Thematic Scope and Stylistic Diversity

What struck me early on while reading *Lion's Milk / Aslan Sütü* was the anthology's refusal to impose a single narrative or tone on Turkey. Instead, it offers a polyphonic record—sometimes reverent, sometimes ironic, often searching. This thematic and stylistic diversity is one of its great strengths. The poets approach Turkey not as a uniform object of observation but as a shifting set of impressions shaped by time, memory, and movement. Istanbul, in particular, becomes a recurring presence—not merely a setting but a palimpsest of empires, faiths, and personal reveries. At times, the city is an emblem of sensual overwhelm; elsewhere, it is a mirror reflecting the poet's own dislocation or longing.

William Lithgow's seventeenth-century verses offer an early—and at times unsettling—

entry point. His fascination with Ottoman Istanbul is infused with the exoticism and martial imagery typical of early modern travel writing. When he refers to "Scythian blood," we hear not only admiration but also a deeply ingrained Western vocabulary of otherness. And yet, his voice does more than judge; it records, often with startled respect, a world both alien and magnificent. I found myself reading his verses less for their accuracy than for what they reveal about the shifting gaze of a Scottish traveller centuries ago.

In contrast, Lord Byron's Romantic take on the East walks a more ironic line. In "Written After Swimming from Sestos to Abydos," he dramatizes his attempt to recreate the mythic crossing of the Hellespont, only to undercut his own bravado with humour. Here, the East becomes both a backdrop for performance and a place where performance falters. Byron's voice—restless, self-aware—complicates the idea of the poet as heroic observer and instead exposes the limits of both classical myth and colonial imagination.

Edwin Morgan, whose poems were among the ones I revisited most often, brings an entirely different register. His "Istanbul" is a symphony of sound and structure, capturing the city's sensual fullness in a way that feels almost cinematic. But Morgan also makes room for the strange and absurd. "My First Octopus," a wry travel anecdote, reminds us that cultural encounter is not always sublime—it can also be awkward, embodied, and oddly tender. This oscillation between lyric grandeur and comic unease gives the anthology much of its emotional depth.

Donald MacAulay's poems, shaped by a Gaelic sensibility and an ethic of observation, quietly resist the temptation to exoticize. In "Holiday" and "Market Day," he observes Turkish rural life with a patient eye, attending to gestures, glances, and silences. There is a sense here of respectful distance—of a poet aware of his role as guest. His restraint becomes a kind of ethical stance, one that invites reflection rather than conclusion.

Among the most affecting contributions for me was Liz Lochhead's "Noises in the Dark." In its evocation of alien sounds and solitary nights, the poem traces the contours of vulnerability. What lingers after reading is not an image, but a sensation—a heightened awareness of how foreignness seeps into the senses. In moments like this, the anthology transcends geography and enters the terrain of the deeply personal.

Other poets offer different keys into Turkish space and culture. John Purser's "In Antalya" listens for continuity in voice and music across cultural lines. Bashabi Fraser's politically engaged "As Europe Debates Turkey's Entry" reminds us that poetic encounter can also carry contemporary urgency. And the editors themselves, Ian Brown and Alan Riach, provide reflective, often elegiac pieces that frame Turkey as a site of loss, beauty, and metaphysical transformation. Riach's "Lion's Milk," in particular, struck me as a kind

of lyrical manifesto: a meditation on the alchemy of language, drink, and identity.

What unites these varied contributions is not a common vision of Turkey, but a shared openness to being changed by encounter. The anthology does not attempt to resolve cultural difference—it dwells in it, listens to it, and sometimes laughs at it. In doing so, it achieves something rare: it lets poetry do the work of diplomacy.

Translation Critique and Editorial Gaps

As someone who works closely with poetic translation, I approached *Lion's Milk / Aslan Sütü* with a particular sensitivity to how meaning travels—or falters—across languages. Gülru White's translations, in many cases, are competent and clearly the product of careful attention to structure, tone, and thematic resonance. Especially in poems like Edwin Morgan's "Istanbul" or John Purser's "In Antalya," much of the lyricism and sensory texture is preserved. Lines such as *"Kalbin en boş kalmış yerlerini / Doldurdu"* effectively echo the emotional cadence of the original. In those moments, I felt a continuity of feeling across languages, which is no small achievement.

Yet the task of translating poetry—especially poetry as linguistically and culturally nuanced as these—is inherently fraught. White's versions, while often faithful in spirit, at times reveal the limits of literalism. One recurring issue lies in the loss of tonal complexity, especially in poems that rely on irony, rhythm, or cultural idiom. Ian Brown's "Unique's a Big Claim," for instance, uses repetition and ironic detachment to critique nationalistic rhetoric. Rendered in Turkish as *"Eşsiz olan büyük bir taleptir,"* the line becomes declarative, even earnest, and loses the self-aware edge that characterizes the English version. Likewise, the phrase *"The 'unique' Yankee bluefish's here"*—marked in English by quotation marks that distance the speaker—is translated without those visual cues, flattening its tonal ambiguity.

In other cases, translation choices smooth out poetic tension in ways that dull the original's force. Liz Lochhead's sound-rich line, *"its three-times off-key harmony of drones and wails,"* captures a textured soundscape that is either oversimplified or altogether omitted in translation. The poetic density of such lines depends not only on their content but on their acoustics—on rhythm, sibilance, and tension—all of which are difficult to replicate, but all the more necessary in a bilingual edition. Similarly, Alan Riach's metaphor of "transmutation" in his poem "Lion's Milk," meant to evoke both the alchemy of rakı and of linguistic-cultural transformation, is rendered in Turkish as *"Sihirle aslını değiştirir"*. While technically accurate, this version lacks the philosophical ambiguity of the original and feels overly concrete, as if explaining rather than evoking.

Beyond these tonal and metaphorical shifts, the translations occasionally suffer from more technical issues. Typographical errors and awkward grammatical constructions appear

with enough frequency to interrupt the flow of reading. While not pervasive, these moments undercut the professional polish of the edition and can distract even the sympathetic reader.

Another limitation is the absence of supporting editorial apparatus. For a volume that draws on multiple linguistic and cultural traditions, I was surprised to find no footnotes, glosses, or brief contextual notes accompanying the poems. This omission is especially noticeable in works that reference historical events, cultural practices, or idiomatic expressions that may not be immediately accessible to all readers. For instance, poems that engage with specific Ottoman practices, Turkish folk imagery, or local vocabulary would benefit greatly from light annotation. Even a short appendix with historical background or a translator's note could have expanded the reader's understanding and appreciation.

It's also worth considering the inherent challenge posed by the anthology's structure. The selected poems represent not just different time periods but radically different aesthetic and political sensibilities—from Lithgow's early modern Orientalism to Bashabi Fraser's 21st-century postcolonial critique. Translating across such a wide spectrum is a formidable task, especially when each voice brings its own rhythm, tone, and context. A more collaborative model—perhaps involving multiple translators or editorial advisors fluent in both poetic traditions—might have produced more finely tuned results. Such a model would also have allowed for dialogic translation decisions, where meaning could be negotiated rather than settled by a single voice.

None of these critiques are meant to diminish the translator's evident labour and intention. Rather, they emphasize the difficulty of what this project set out to do: not merely to translate poems, but to convey cultural textures, rhetorical gestures, and the felt experience of language in poetic form. In this sense, *Lion's Milk / Aslan Sütü* offers a valuable case study in the possibilities and pitfalls of literary translation. It reminds us that the work of the translator is never merely linguistic—it is deeply interpretive, political, and creative.

Critical Evaluation

Reading *Lion's Milk / Aslan Sütü* was never merely a scholarly exercise for me; it became an emotional and intellectual encounter. The anthology does not simply collect poetic impressions of Turkey—it stages a sustained and often vulnerable dialogue between Scottish voices and Turkish geographies. It poses timely questions about what it means to engage across linguistic and cultural thresholds, and whether such engagements can ever be complete or symmetrical.

What distinguishes the volume is its refusal to collapse Turkey into a romanticized

elsewhere. Rather than reducing the country to a static symbol or aestheticized object, the poets often occupy a space of uncertainty, curiosity, and humility. Their gaze is attentive, but rarely assertive. They do not claim authority over the cultures they depict; instead, they foreground the self-in-question—a visitor, a listener, a translator of perception. This ethical restraint becomes one of the anthology's most understated accomplishments.

Furthermore, the anthology implicitly encourages comparative methodologies without forcing them into rigid frameworks. It raises generative questions: How do metaphors of place operate across languages? What happens when Scots or Gaelic are tasked with conveying emotional and geographical registers shaped by Turkish experience? How does the poetics of nostalgia shift when filtered through the voice of a cultural outsider? These questions remain open-ended—but crucially, they are not foreclosed.

The editors' choices—from visual framing to historical breadth—reinforce the idea that poetry can function as cultural diplomacy, not in the institutional sense, but as a medium for listening, encounter, and resonance. There is a hospitality in this curation—a willingness to dwell in complexity rather than resolve it. In this sense, the volume recalls Edward Said's vision of the intellectual: not to simplify the world, but to hold space for its entanglements.

That said, the volume's shortcomings deserve attention. The translational imprecisions and lack of editorial apparatus (such as glossaries, poet biographies, or translator's notes) limit accessibility, particularly for cross-cultural readers unfamiliar with the nuances of Scottish or Turkish cultural contexts. A dialogic or multi-translator approach might have mitigated tonal inconsistencies and allowed for richer semantic interplay.

Nevertheless, *Lion's Milk / Aslan Sütü* achieves something rare. It does not aim for closure; it opens a space of resonance, where poems speak not only across centuries and nations but across sensibilities. Its value lies not in offering answers, but in fostering attentiveness.

CONCLUSION

Lion's Milk / Aslan Sütü succeeds as both a literary anthology and a cultural gesture. It invites readers into a textured, multilingual landscape where poetry becomes a medium of encounter rather than explanation. For Turkish readers unfamiliar with Scottish poetics, and for Scottish readers curious about Turkish histories and spaces, this volume offers more than access—it offers invitation. In allowing poems to remain unsettled, plural, and emotionally charged, the anthology reminds us that literature, at its best, does not translate the world—it listens to it

REFERENCE

Brown, Ian & Riach, Alan (Eds.), (2024), *Lion's Milk / Aslan Sütü*, Translated by G. White, [ISBN: 9781234567890]