



Yünus Emre's Poetry and Philosophy

Yünus Emre Őiri ve Felsefesi

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Abstract

Yünus Emre was a Turkish Sufi master of the 13th century whose poetry continues to reverberate to this day. The simplicity of the language used to convey the inherently complicated concepts of divine love, love of humanity, the illuminated heart, all from the perspective of unity transcends the boundaries of language and religion and speaks to all. His multi-layered interpretation of religion in one of his poems, where he writes, "Őeriat, tarikat, yoldur varana / Hakikat mârifet andan ićeru" – "Laws and paths are roads for those who arrive / The fruit of truth is what is within," takes the listener beyond religion as a set of rules and into the deeper and vast realm of belief, where it is the truth and reality of these rules that are brought to the forefront in order to support the believer in reaching the Ultimate Truth. Recent events have demonstrated, at times violently, the danger of denying or neglecting the profound side of religion and only concerning oneself with the dogmatic aspects. Yünus Emre's focus on humanity within the context of the divine and the universe allows the reader or listener to step back, acknowledge that all of humanity is one, and as part of Creation, all of us are subjects of the same message: "Sen sana ne sanırsan, ayruća da onu san / Dört kitabın manası, budur ećer var ise" – "You have a self-image in your own eyes, Be sure to see others in the same guise / Each of the four holy books clarifies; this truth as it applies to man's affairs."

Keywords: Yünus Emre, divine love, humanity, illuminated heart, Sufi poetry

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Özet

Şiirlerinin zamanı aşan etkileriyle günümüzde de yaşamaya devam eden Yûnus Emre, bir 13. yüzyıl Türk mutasavvıfıdır. İllâhî aşk, insan sevgisi, bilen kalp gibi özünde son derece karmaşık olan tasavvufî kavramları, tevhid perspektifinden aktarmak için kullandığı dilin sadeliği, dilin ve dinin sınırlarını aşarak herkese hitap eder. “Şeriat, tarikat, yoldur varana / Hakikat mârifet andan içeru” beyitleri aracılığıyla dine getirdiği çok katmanlı yorum, dinleyiciyi bir kurallar bütünü olarak dinin ötesine, inancın daha derin ve engin âlemine götürür ki burada aslolan, inananları Mutlak Hakikat’e ulaşmada destekleyen kuralların bâtinî yönüdür. Son zamanlarda yaşanan olaylar, dinin derûnî yönünü inkâr veya ihmal ederek sadece dogmatik tarafıyla meşgul olmanın tehlikesini zaman zaman şiddetli bir şekilde göstermektedir. Yûnus Emre’nin Allah ve âlem bağlamında insanlığa odaklanması, okurun bir adım geriye çekilerek tüm insanlığın bir olduğu ve yaratılışın bir parçası olarak hepimizin aynı mesajın muhatapları olduğumuzu kabul etmesine olanak tanır: “Sen sana ne sanırsan, ayruğa da onu san / Dört kitabın manası, budur eğer var ise.”

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yûnus Emre, ilâhî aşk, insanlık, bilen kalp, tasavvuf edebiyatı

Introduction

One of the few things we know for certain about Yûnus Emre is that he was a Turkish Sufî poet who lived in Anatolia in the 13th century. While much research has been done about the more specific details of his life, in terms of who he was, where he came from, and what he did, what concerns us is the power of his poetry reverberating in listeners’ hearts 700 years later. As one author states, “what is it to us where he is from, or who his family is? Even if we don’t know any of this, there is a Yûnus whom we do know, and what we know is more than enough for all of us. This Yûnus has the capacity to not only develop this world, but to build for us the hereafter world as well. This is the Lover Yûnus, the Pained Yûnus, the Silent Yûnus, the Dervish Yûnus, and above all, he is Our Yûnus!”¹

Our Yûnus has been referred to as the “*hâtem-i lisân-ı Türk*”, the seal of the Turkish language, for his mastery over the words he uses to express divine wisdom, divine love, love of humanity, all from the perspective of *tevhid*, of unity. He continued the tradition of Ibn ‘Arabî and Mevlânâ in explaining and

expressing Sufî concepts, with the difference of doing this plainly, and in Turkish. He writes, “Bu bizden öndin gelenler mâ’nîyi pinhân didiler / Ben anadan toğmuş gibi geldüm ki ‘uryân eyleyem”² – “In those who came before us, hidden was the meaning / I came as if just born from my mother, fully revealing.” Once again following in the path of these two great figures, Yûnus Emre states that poetry is simply the means by which he tries to convey what is truly important, which is the meaning, the spirit behind the words.³ He writes, “Yûnus’un sözi şi’irden ammâ aslı(dur) kitâbdan / Hadîsile dinene key (bilgil) sâdık olmak gerek”⁴ – “Yûnus’ words are poetry, but their origin is the Book / remain loyal to it and the Hadith constantly, no further one need look.” While preparing for this paper and thinking and reading through Yûnus’ poetry, what continually resonated with me was the immense love within Yûnus Emre, expressed through the powerful and encompassing perspective of *tevhid*, unity.

2 Mustafa Tatçı, *Yûnus Emre Dîvân-ı İllâhiyât*, (İstanbul: H Yayınları, 2014), 367, 173/7.

3 Mahmud Erol Kılıç, *Sûfî ve Şiir*, (İstanbul: İnsan Yayınları, 2014), 79-80.

4 Tatçı, *Yûnus Emre Dîvân-ı İllâhiyât*, 342, 137/9.

1 Nezihe Araz, *Anadolu Evliyaları*, (İstanbul: Atlas Kitabevi, 1975), 62.

Yūnus Emre's love shines from his poetry because it is not just the Divine whom he loves, it is every single existing thing that has been graced with one of the names of God. His cascading love flows to every single one of the seventy-two nations under the sky; this love is a fundamental part of his faith.⁵ The concept of humanism might come to mind when speaking of the love of humanity, wherein the focus is on the value of the human in different manners and interpretations throughout the world, but it has remained only at a theoretical level, not reaching what Yūnus Emre and others like him demonstrate where this love is an active part of life. We can see this call to action where he writes, "Bir hastaya vardunısa bir içim su virdünise / Yarın anda karşı gele Hak şarâbın içmiş gibi"⁶ – "If you visited the infirm, if you gave a sip of water / Tomorrow that will return, as if that sip was from the elixir of the Truth." It should be noted that while one interpretation of this verse is the more worldly one of acting for the care of the individual and society, there are multiple layers of meaning here. For someone at Yūnus Emre's spiritual level, the real sick person would be the one who is unaware of their Lord, who persistently refuses to mature in their level of humanity, who continually denies the entrustment God bequeathed them.⁷ Yūnus Emre offers the remedy for such a sick person in the second part of the couplet – what is it that can awaken the sick person from their heedlessness? That sip of water you give – it might not have an effect on them immediately, but it might awaken within them tomorrow, or later on, and it will be as if they have drunk from the elixir of the Divine.⁸

5 Sâmiha Ayverdi, *Âbide Şahsiyetler*, (İstanbul: Kubbealtı Neşriyatı, 2022), 61.

6 Tatçı, *Yūnus Emre Dîvân-ı İllâhiyât*, 525, 388/5.

7 Personal conversation with Rıza Tekin Uğurel, 13/11/2022.

8 Personal conversation with Kenan Gürsoy, 14/11/2022.

Another couplet that demonstrates the multiple layers of interpretation is as follows: "Bu dünyada bir nesneye yanar içim göyner özüm / Yigid iken ölenlere gök ekini biçmiş gibi"⁹ – "One thing in this world wrenches my heart and brings tears to my eyes / When, like a too-early harvest, a young one dies." This couplet can be read as Yūnus Emre being fully a part of the human community, sharing in both their triumphs and their losses, in this case, the death of the young. While this deep feeling might appear as going against the will of the Divine, there is no protest or rebellion against what occurs – this is the compassionate sharing of an immense pain.¹⁰ The additional meanings here, however, ask one to consider what it is Yūnus Emre means when he writes "yiğit/youth". Is this a situation where it is really an early harvest, or is it the harvesting of the spiritual bounty provided by God? Thus the "early death" referred to here might instead be to the concept of *mûtu kable en temûtu* – to die before dying, meaning to advance beyond the constraints of the ego (*nafs*), to strive for the level of *insân al-kâmil*, the Perfected Human Being.¹¹

Yūnus Emre truly believes that every human is equal, that true maturity can only occur by regarding every single person out in the world with the same eyes.¹² He writes, "Sen seni ne sanursan ayrığa da anı san / Dört kitâbun ma'nîsi, budur eger varısa"¹³ – "You have a self-image in your own eyes, Be sure to see others in the same guise / Each of the four holy books clarifies, This truth as it applies

9 Tatçı, *Yūnus Emre Dîvân-ı İllâhiyât*, 525, 388/4.

10 Mehmet Demirci, *Yūnus Emre'de İllâhî Aşk ve İnsan Sevgisi*, (İstanbul: Kubbealtı Neşriyatı, 1997), 103-4.

11 Personal conversation with Rıza Tekin Uğurel, 13/11/2022.

12 Demirci, *Yūnus Emre'de İllâhî Aşk ve İnsan Sevgisi*, 91-2.

13 Tatçı, *Yūnus Emre Dîvân-ı İllâhiyât*, 459, 299/6.

to man's affairs."¹⁴ He does not ever consider the human as a lone entity, separated from what surrounds her; instead, the human is always regarded in correlation with God and the universe, as the deposit for the divine entrustment, as the potentiality of reaching the Divine Essence (*zât*).¹⁵ This Divine presence can be witnessed within the heart of the believer, hence Yünus Emre's following verses: "Bir kez gönül yıkdunısa bu kılduğun namâz degül / Yitmiş iki millet dahı elin yüzün yumaz degül"¹⁶ – "If you even once broke a heart, it is no prayer to God, your obeisance / all the seventy-two nations may gather, but you, no effort is enough to cleanse." The same feeling comes through in another verse, where he writes, "Gönül Çalab'un tahtı gönüle Çalap bahdı / iki cihân bedbahtı kim gönül yıkarısa"¹⁷ – "The heart is the Creator's throne, wherein God's gaze lies / whosoever breaks a heart, misery in both worlds is where their destiny lies," thus once again emphasizing how important it is to treat everyone equally, justly, with respect and love, because we are all created by the same hand.

The universality of Yünus Emre's message and love has an underlying emphasis on unity. What he says can be applied to every religion and faith, and all one needs is an open heart to understand; it is not linguistic knowledge that forges connections. Yünus Emre writes, "Benem Hakk'un kudret eli benem beli 'ışk bülbülü / Söyleyüp her dürlü dili halka haber viren benem"¹⁸ – "I am the Truth's hand of power, yes, I am the nightingale of love / I

am the one who speaks all the different languages and informs the people." Using the Turkish language, he expresses his purpose, his belief, his love, feelings, and thoughts all with the aim of achieving *tevhid*, unity.¹⁹ As an internal act, *tevhid* is rather hard to define, although it might be referred to as a maturation, working on the submission of the ego rather than to the ego, and ultimately to see Truth, Haqq, in every single existing thing. Yünus Emre does not have this difficulty of expression,²⁰ as he writes, "Eğer âyîne bin olsa bakan bir / Gören bir, görinen bin bin görindi"²¹ – "Even if there are thousands of mirrors, there is only one who looks / the one who looks is one, the seen appear in the thousands."

In the matter of unity, there is an external unity that Yünus Emre speaks to as well. The matter of loneliness, of disconnect, is one we face as humans all over the world. There has been a distancing from each other despite – or perhaps because of – the hyperconnectivity brought about by the internet age and social media. Not only is there distance among humans, but we have also become isolated from nature. There is a line of thought in Islam where the Qur'ân is a divine book that should be studied and read, exemplified through the living Qur'ân that was the Prophet Muḥammad (saw), but there is also the book of nature, a book that continually renews itself and rejuvenates, that overcomes all its travails while fully submitting to that which occurs to it and within it. We have become ignorant of this

14 Talat Halman (ed.), *Yunus Emre and His Mystical Poetry*, (Indiana: Indiana University Turkish Studies, 1989), 155.

15 Kenan Gürsoy, "Yunus Emre: l'homme, le monde et l'univers chez Yunus Emre," speech at Gregorian University, 6-9 November 1991.

16 Tatçı, *Yünus Emre Divân-ı İlâhiyât*, 362, 166/1.

17 Ibid. 459, 299/5.

18 Ibid. 384, 193/11.

19 Müjgan Cunbur, "Yunus ve Türkçemiz," *Yunus Emre Sempozyumu Bildiriler*, (İstanbul: Marmara Üniversitesi Yayınları No 514, Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi Yayınları No 25, 1992), 27.

20 Mehmet Demirci, "Türkiye'de Yunus Emre Çalışmalarına Genel Bakış," *Uluslararası Yunus Emre Sempozyumu Bildirileri*, (Manisa: Yunus Emre Belediyesi, 2016), 18.

21 Tatçı, *Yünus Emre Divân-ı İlâhiyât*, 541, 411/9.

book as well, living in concrete jungles with very few forays into nature. Yūnus Emre bears witness, however, to the fact that even the trees, the flowers, every single grass blade, every insect, every bird, is also in the process of remembering God. One of the stories related about him is that while in the service of his *mürşid*, his teacher, he would go out to gather wood from the surrounding areas. One day, however, he is on his way back with not even a single piece of wood on him, instead holding a single violet in his hand. When asked why he did not gather any wood to be used in the lodge, he replies, “How could I? Every time I went to cut a piece, they were all clearly saying – ‘Do not cut me, you are keeping me from my *dhikr*, my prayer!’ All I am bringing back is this small flower, and the flower requested that I take it – ‘I forgot my *dhikr* for a moment and fell into heedlessness, please, take me away!’”²² And in one of his poems, he writes, “Dağlar ile taşlar ile çağırayın Mevlâm seni / Seherlerde kuşlar ile çağırayın Mevlâm seni / Su dibinde mâhı ile sahralarda âhû ile / Abdâl olup yâ Hû ile çağırayın Mevlâm seni”²³ – “I call for you My Lord, with the mountains and the rocks / I call for you My Lord, with the birds at dawn / With the fish in the depths of the ocean and the gazelles in the deserts / I call for you My Lord, as an Abdal shouting ‘O You!’” There is clearly a shared call here, where it is not just Yūnus Emre who is engaged in the remembrance of God, it is every single rock, tree, fish, bird, and everything else in existence.

The atomization that has happened under the guise of specialization has caused rifts within the feeling and perception of being in unity. It is almost as if humans no longer have the time and energy to simply stop for

22 Ahmet Kabaklı, *Sohbetler-I*, (İstanbul: Türk Edebiyatı Vakfı Yayınları, 1991), 131-3.

23 Tatçı, *Yūnus Emre Dîvân-ı İllâhiyât*, 781-2, 176/1-2.

a while and think and observe that truly, in the end, we are all one. This is the point that Yūnus Emre addresses throughout his many poems where he writes in different verses, “gelin tanış olalım” – “come, let us become acquainted,” “gelin birlik olalım” – “come, let us become one,” or “bir iken ayrılmayalım” – “let us not separate when we are already one”.²⁴ This appeal to remain one is a reflection of his understanding of the human as a social being – a human is not meant to be alone, only engaging in the bare minimum of whatever is necessary to continue to live. The human has been created with an enormous potential for love and mercy; every human is a manifestation of an illuminated heart that loves, that is loved, and that connects with compassionate and passionate love. Another of his verses points to the active nature of unity as well – “Gel hey kardeş gel sen birliğe özen / Birliktir her nefsin kal’asın bozan” – “Come, brother, and aspire to unity / It is unity that breaks down the castle of the ego.”²⁵

I have mentioned already the capacity Yūnus Emre has for stating simply what is complicated, and one of the examples of this is in how he characterizes himself in his poems. He refers to himself in different ways, but one of the more common ones is “Miskin Yūnus”. Although *miskin* is usually taken to mean sluggish, lazy, poor, spiritless, and even helpless, the entire character changes when considered from the perspective of *tasavvuf*. When considered from this perspective, *miskin* means “the fighter of the heart who comprehends their lack of power and presence in the face of God, who knows that God is the ultimate wealth and that they are the dervish servant, the poor one, who is

24 Levent Bayraktar, “Yūnus’un Güncelliği”, *Uluslararası Yunus Emre Sempozyumu Bildirileri*, (Manisa: Yunus Emre Belediyesi, 2016), 19-20.

25 Fulya Bayraktar, “Yūnus’ta Bağlanma”, *Uluslararası Yunus Emre Sempozyumu Bildirileri*, (Manisa: Yunus Emre Belediyesi, 2016), 32.

forever utterly dependent upon God.”²⁶ Yünus Emre demonstrates this meaning in one of his poems where he writes, “Miskînlikden buldılar kimde erlik varısa / Nerdübândan yitdiler yüksekden bakarısa”²⁷ – “It’s the true man who leads the mystic life – whoever is human, whoever dares / Those who stand high and look below with scorn, are bound to fall from the top of the stairs.”²⁸ His powerful, almost magical voice is an appeal to both the physical and the spiritual side of the human in urging them to think, listen and to bring themselves to account, thus fully activating the energy within them.²⁹

Loving the created because of the Creator, respecting all of creation because the very atoms of every single existing thing are continually remembering God, and looking at everyone through this ultimate perspective of *tevhid*, unity, Yunus Emre himself is the one who actually answers the question of why he remains relevant and influential 700 years later: “‘Âşık öldi diyü salâ virürler / Ölen hayvân durur ‘âşıklar ölmez”³⁰ – “The death knell rings, claiming the lover’s death / It is the animal part that is gone, for lovers do not die”.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude my words with what reads to me as a prayer from Yünus Emre upon those who walk with him. He writes,

Her kime ki dervişlik bağışlana
Kalpı gide pâk ola gümüşlene
Nefesinden müşk ile amber tüte
Budağından il ve şehri yemişlene
Toprağı dertli için derman ola
Ayağında saz bitip kamışlana

- 26 İlhan Ayverdi, “Miskin,” Kubbealtı Lugatı, <http://lugatim.com/s/miskin>, accessed November 2, 2022.
27 Tatçı, *Yünus Emre Dîvân-ı İlähiyât*, 459, 299/1.
28 Halman, *Yunus Emre and His Mystical Poetry*, 155.
29 Ayverdi, *Âbide Şahsiyetler*, 60.
30 Tatçı, *Yünus Emre Dîvân-ı İlähiyât*, 324, 113/8.

Cümle şâir dost bahçesi bülbülü
Yunus Emre orada dürraçlana³¹

Whoever receives the gift of the dervish state

Is cleansed, rid of counterfeit, gets his silver-plate

He’s that tree whose breath oozes musk and amber

From whose branches, city and country receive fruit

Those who are suffering find their cure in its leaves;

Reeds and bushes sprout and blossom at that tree’s feet.

Poets are the nightingales in the Friend’s garden;

Yunus Emre is the singing partridge in it.³²

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- 31 Kabaklı, *Sohbetler-I*, 150.
32 Halman, *Yunus Emre and His Mystical Poetry*, 168.

- Yunus Emre Sempozyumu Bildirileri*. Manisa: Yunus Emre Belediyesi, 2016.
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