

THE MAKING OF A TURKISH FOLK NARRATOR: BEHÇET MAHIR OF ERZURUM

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Behçet Mahir of Erzurum, probably the greatest living storyteller in Turkey, was born in 1909¹ in Erzurum, an important city in eastern Turkey. He belonged to a modest family. His father was a mason, with no literary talents. His mother Güneş was an unpretentious Turkish housewife. Behçet spent 30 years of the early part of his life in his parents' home in the Keleş Ağa Sokak in Erzurum. He never went to school. There was nothing unusual in his behaviour until about the age of 13. He used to play the games of the day with children of his age, but he preferred being in the company of much older men in his neighbourhood. When he heard of a gathering of the elders in his part of the city, he left his companions and went to listen. Before the days of radio and television such meetings were about the only occasion for social intercourse and the quiet conversation very much enjoyed by the Turkish people. Such meetings were often held in local coffee-houses, and the guest-rooms (*odas*) belonging to the wealthy members of the community. Such *sohbet* meetings enjoyed great popularity all over Turkey until quite recently, and one can say that they are still part of our tradition, though they are being progressively stripped of their leisurely charm. Such meetings of the elders were particularly popular in eastern Turkey where winters are severe and long, and there is not much else to do except to gather around the fire place or stove and talk. The ordinary Turk, who is a good listener, loves stimulating conversation better than anything. I can safely say that Turkey is a country where the art of conversation is still very much alive. Story telling was frequent at such meetings. Behçet grew up at a time when such meetings were salient features of the cultural life of the city of Erzurum.

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¹ Mahir's birth date is still a subject of controversy.

One night when Behçet was 13 years old he had a dream, in which he was visited by three dervishes, that is three old men wearing long white robes. The old man in the middle was holding a *saz*, the traditional string instrument of the Turkish minstrels. When Behçet saw these old men, he stood up and then squatted on his bed. The old man on the right pointing at the one standing in the middle asked him : "Boy, do you know this man?" Behçet said "No, but he looks like a minstrel". "Well he is Summani of the Sami Kale village of Narman. Take a good look at him". Behçet did as he was told. Like many citizens of Erzurum he had heard of Summani, the greatest minstrel of eastern Turkey, but he had never seen him in person, as he had died during the First World War. Behçet was only 9 years old when the Great War broke out. He still has a faint recollection of the Russian occupation of Erzurum during that war. The Russian occupation was, however, over when Behçet had his dream. The dervish on the left went on : "We have come to deliver the *Devri Daim* to you". Turning to Summani he said : "Deliver the *Devri Daim* to him". Literally the *Devri Daim* means the external flux, or endless cycle, but its exact significance is obscure.

When I questioned Behçet Mahir about the meaning of *Devri Daim*, he explained to me that it was 'the pain in the heart of the minstrel', "a kind of burning" or "divine love".

Summani said : "Let me present it to him. first he must kneel". He knelt and three old men knelt too. When he woke up he found himself still kneeling on his simple mattress. It was about midnight of the night of the 11th of August. When he awakened the three old men had already disappeared. His mother and sister were still asleep, but he lacked the energy to speak to them of the strange experience he had had. The room was lit by a small oil lamp with the wick turned right down. He turned up the lamp a little to have more light. He rose from his bed and walked around the room for a while. He then fell asleep while thinking about his strange dream. He was visited a second time by the old men, but this time Summani was absent. The old man on the right said : "Son, we were going to present the *Devri Daim* to you, but you woke up, so we have given you only a small portion of divine love (*aşk*). Your destiny is no longer in our hands but has passed to another old dervish for three

days. Your portion will include some part of the "love", "pang" and the "power", but you will never play the *saz*."

Behçet Mahir describes the rest of the strange experience he had as follows : (The text is an exact transcription of a tape recording I made in 1976) "When I woke I felt an intense pang in my heart and started walking about in the room for a while; then I went to bed again. It was about break of day; the room was getting lighter. I was not able to control myself. I shook violently. I did not say anything to anyone. The day passed and night fell again. As soon as I went to bed I started dreaming. This time an old man, not one of the former three, came and held me by the right hand saying "Come along son!" He led me down three steps. I saw there an iron gate which was locked. The old man said "*Bismillahirrahmanirrahim*" (I begin in the name of Allah) and pushed the gate open with the palm of his hand. We went through and found ourselves in a small place like a classroom. It was nicely lit. The old man produced a *Koran* from a pouch on his right and placed it on a desk. He took out a reader with big letters from his left side. He said : "I am going to teach you how to read and write, my boy". Saying again "I begin in the name of Allah" he got me to read from both the reading book and the *Koran*. I do not remember how long I read, but I woke up with the voice of my mother calling me. I said to her : "I wish you hadn't wakened me". "Why, son?" she asked. "Mother, they were teaching me in my dream". I said. She said : "Don't tell it to anyone, son". But I told it to many people, some of whom are still alive. The old man taught me for three nights in succession. When he got me to repeat *Bismillahirrahmanirrahim*, the long and difficult expression in Arabic from the *Koran*, which meant "In the name of Allah", he became very excited. He kept saying "That's wrong; that's wrong." and got me to repeat it over and over again. He complained that I did not put enough force into it. He wanted it to come from some deeper part of my soul. Every morning for three days I repeated to everyone I met that the old man had been teaching me. During the fourth night the old man came again and led me down the three steps; he struck open the iron gate; produced the two books; placed them on the desk and asked me to look at his face. He slapped me hard with his right hand while I was looking at him. He cursed me saying "May Allah turn you blind! Why did

you let out the secret?" Upon this I jumped out of bed. Bitter tears were running down my cheeks. I didn't know what to do. I was crying loudly. My other was awakened. 'Mother, something terrible has happened to me. I can't see'. I told that I had gone completely blind. I could not see the light of day for three months".

All kinds of folk remedies were tried to restore Behçet's sight. Finally, at the suggestion of the neighbours, he was taken to Hakkı Hodja, a learned man, who had power over the *jins*. Hakkı Hodja confirmed that Allah had great gifts for Behçet, and that that was why he had been slapped. If he had known how to keep the secret he would not have been struck blind. Hakkı Hodja was sitting on a sheep skin. He told Behçet that he would have a dream during the next three nights and be told what to do about his blindness. He added that he should tell his dream to no one.

When Behçet was asleep that night he had a dream in which a boy of about 11 or 12 years old asked him why he was lying in bed. He added that Behçet was himself responsible for what had happened to him. He asked him why he had revealed the secret. He then went on "You have been assigned to Maksud, our Saint. You'll go and stand at the head of his tombstone. Address Maksud as follows "Your mercy is endless. Have mercy on my youth; help me". While saying this you must rub your hands first on his tombstone and then on your face".

Maksud was a local Saint in Erzurum. Lighted candles were always placed on his grave during the night by people seeking his help.

Behçet woke up early that morning and prepared to leave the house. His mother wanted to know where he was going, but he would not tell her. She wanted to go with her son, but he insisted that he would go alone. He dressed up; took a stick in hand and groping his way, often stumbling, falling and getting up again, he walked on crossing the Çaykara Bridge which bore the carving of an elephant. He was finally led to Maksud Efendi's tomb. Behçet sent away those who had helped him to find the tomb, as he wished to be alone there. He addressed the tomb as follows : "You have endless mercy. I have been sent to you. Have mercy on me. Let my eyes see". Crying he rubbed his hands on the tombstone and then on his face. At that

moment the balls of his eyes were, so to speak, twisted in their sockets. He felt as if something was being taken out of his eyes. His sight was restored. He first saw the tombstone he was standing beside. He was so excited that he threw himself down, and started rolling in the dust. He returned home in great joy. That night the three old men again appeared to him in his dream. One of them said : "Son, we have given you some measure of love on the strength of which you will be 'mahir', that is to say, a person of talent (Mahir since then has been Behçet's surname). Wait for forty years. In forty years' time we'll visit you again. We'll then instruct you as to whom your portion of *Devri Daim* must be passed on".

In the morning Behçet went to see Hakkı Hodja to have his dream interpreted. Listening to his dream Hakkı Hodja told Behçet that he would be a man of talent, move in the company of great men, and prosper in life.

Shortly after Behçet became an apprentice to Hafiz Mugdat, a famous minstrel in Erzurum. He was 13 years old when Mugdat accepted him as an apprentice. He said to Behçet : "Son, Summani came to Erzurum at the age of 14 and kissed the hand of a story teller like me. He received instruction from him. He learned from him both good manners and the art of speech. Son, no one can rise without leaning on a Perfect Master".

Behçet sustained his apprenticeship to Minstrel Mugdat for 7 years. He was 20 years old when he left him. Mugdat had earlier warned him never to give a performance as long as his master was still alive— the traditional practice in Turkey. Another tradition that was observed in Behçet's case was the ritual examination in the presence of his master and a number of city elders. Without this formality no minstrel's training is regarded as complete. This custom is no longer observed with absolute rigour and Behçet himself is intensely critical of what he considers to be upstart pseudo - minstrels who have not fulfilled all the requirements of their craft.

Behçet describes his Master Hafiz Mugdat as follows : "Hafiz Mugdat was a native of Erzurum. Besides being a Meddah (a public story-teller) he was a gardener with patches of ground in the Gez quarter of Erzurum. He had 5 sons and 2 daughters. He died in Erzurum at the age of 93. He had wandered through in Arabia and Iran for 18 years. He had stayed in the court of Czar Nicholas for

6 years. He used to talk Turkish with a strong Azeri accent. He knew some Arabic. He was a man of profound learning. He never drank alcoholic drinks. He was an honest and serious man. He could make the strings talk like a human being. He was a tall man. He was skilled in flyting”.

Briefly, this is how Behçet Mahir became a narrator.

Following the death of his master, Behçet Mahir, as expected, took his place and became the most popular story-teller of Erzurum. He had many apprentices of his own, some of them like Reyhani now enjoy great popularity as minstrels. Although not a minstrel himself, because he cannot play the *saz*, Behçet Mahir is a talented folk poet and can create spontaneous poetry and can successfully engage in flyting with other folk poets or minstrels. His true achievement, however, is his excellent style of narration, his powerful memory and vast repertoire.

He always narrates standing. When I questioned him on this he explained : “When I begin a tale, the 366 veins in my body begin to throb and I cannot remain seated. (The figure 366, by the way, figures prominently in other aspects of Turkish folklore too).

Behçet Mahir’s repertoire includes about 50 traditional tales. The principal groups of the tales in his repertoire can be classified into four main groups :

1. Love stories usually with a tragic ending.
2. Historical tales from the early years of Islam.
3. Folk epic such as the Koroğlu cycle which is more or less the Turkish Robin Hood.
4. Probably most important for Behçet himself are the moral tales which he uses to put across some moral point, particularly acceptance of one’s lot in life, self-discipline, honesty and unpretentiousness.

Most of Behçet’s stories have generally been the common stock of storytellers in Turkey for many centuries and many of them are available in print. However, as he is totally illiterate, his sources have been exclusively oral.

Behçet Mahir is a narrator with a serious purpose. He uses his tales for didactic purposes. He digresses frequently and brings in much moralistic commentary even in stories of love and adventure.

The tradition of public narration is still very lively in many parts of eastern Turkey, particularly in the provinces of Kars and Erzurum. The extension of television into these remote parts of the country has been noticeably detrimental to almost all types of folk literature, particularly in urban areas, but the traditional story-teller and minstrel never fail to attract large audiences at village weddings. In fact a wedding without a story-teller is hardly considered a proper wedding in the rural parts of those provinces.

Behçet Mahir used to tell tales in coffee-houses of Erzurum until a few years ago, and in 1976 I attended his performance for two weeks and recorded 4 of his long tales. There were about 30 people listening to him, and about every 15 minutes a round of tea was served during a three hour performance which ran from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. He usually finished a tale over 3 or 4 evenings, each time leaving his tale at a point of crisis. On one occasion a collection was taken during the narration produced about 120 Turkish Liras (1975), or the price of 4 meals at a moderate restaurant.

Mahir's longest tale is no doubt the *Köroğlu* Legend, the greatest Turkish legend known over a very wide part of the world extending from Belgrade to Hong Kong and from Siberia to the Bay of Basra. Mahir's version of this legend, which he took no fewer than 95 hours to tell was published by Atatürk University, where he was employed as a janitor until 1980. Many scholars have used material obtained from him for their articles or dissertations. He is always available whenever a collector of folktales, a serious scholar or anybody who wishes to hear an old tale approach him. If you have the time, tape and patience, Behçet is always ready to tell you a tale.

Last time I talked to Behçet, I felt that he was somewhat bitter towards the state radio and television for ignoring him. The people of Erzurum are very eager to hear him as was evidenced on one occasion when he had the opportunity to address them on the radio. They stood still in the streets listening to him on the loudspeakers. But this opportunity has occurred only once. Today coffeehouse owners consider it bad business not to install a TV set on their premises, and so Behçet can rarely have the chance to practice his art as public narrator.

Almost 80 years old now Behçet cannot compete at village weddings with younger narrators who can sing and play the *saz*

at the same time. He is a narrator for the serious listener. For me it is a memorable experience to listen to his rich Azeri dialect with its many local inflections, to watch his unique style of delivery and to respond to his warm personality.

Like many Turkish minstrels, who have been offered the "divine cup" (*Bâdeli Âşık*), Behçet Mahir is believed to have the power of clairvoyance; when I questioned him on this, he gave me an account of a dream experience. He was informed in this dream that a saint, buried in Adana centuries ago in a tomb, all apparent trace of which had been lost, was deeply distressed because a sewage canal had been built very close to his tomb. He was given minute details of the location of this Saint's tomb in Adana, although this city was 500 miles away and he had never visited it. Mahir became so restless after this dream that, he could not help taking the train to Adana in search of this tomb. Although he boarded the train without a ticket, because he could not afford one, he was helped by several strangers on the way. A total stranger met him at Adana station, accompanied him through the streets until he recognized from its description the street where the Saint's tomb was supposed to be concealed. The ground was dug up, again with the assistance of people who believed in Mahir's divine inspiration, and deep down the tomb a sewage canal was discovered. The sewer was diverted, and then covered up and reburied. Behçet was accommodated by the appreciative people of Adana for some two weeks after this apparent miracle. Behçet's mind was now at rest and he could return to Erzurum.

At the age of 53, that is exactly 40 years after the earlier visit of the three old men, which followed the restoration of his sight, on the night of 11 th August, The three old men appeared to him again as they had promised. They told him that he should give his 17 year old daughter to a young man by the name of Rifat Bedir son of Ibrahim, a man completely unknown to him. The old men stated that they decided to hand the *Devri Daim* to this young man. A few days after this revelation Behçet Mahir was introduced to this young man by the young man's father. He gave his daughter Gülbahar to him in marriage. Behçet did all he could to train his new apprentice as a minstrel and public narrator, but it was a thankless task. He turned out to be a worthless and shiftless character. In fact, be-

fore long, he abandoned Behçet's daughter disappointing him bitterly. Behçet has suffered much as a result of this unhappy experience. He feels that all his life he has lived in peace and goodwill with all men, and that he has done nothing to deserve such severe punishment. The fickleness of the three old men in offering him first a blessing, his great talent, and then a curse, reminds one of the offhand treatment of Homer's Trojans by the gods who had once blessed them.

I am sure you will be wondering why I have brought in all these details about the life of this narrator. My aim was merely to present the case before you and stimulate a discussion on what significance these strange psychic experiences may have had in the career of Behçet mahir as a narrator. In fact my aim has been to offer information rather than interpretation. Certainly there are a number of unresolved, and possibly unanswerable questions associated with the life of Behçet, and with the lives of many such narrators. I would like to pose three questions in order to stimulate discussion— I myself have theories, but no definite answers.

First— a methodological problem. How is one to handle biographical material from a known story - teller about events that occurred over half a century ago? Is this history, or should it be treated as the narrator's self - creation?

Secondly —If an event such as Behçet's blindness actually occurred, how is it to be explained? Is it the hysteria of a child entering puberty? Or is the child responding to the suggestions latent in stories of great poets afflicted by blindness? If these events are hallucinations or pure inventions, what psychological function do they fulfill for the narrator?

And finally - given that the narrator himself believes in the reality of such esoteric or psychic experience, what significance does this have for him as a teller of tales? Does it influence his repertoire? his delivery, or, in Behçet's case, the moral themes he chooses to illustrate? Asking so many question of my readers brings to mind the Turkish proverb "*Bir deli kuyuya bir taş atmış, kırk akıllı onu çıkarlamamış.*" or in English "A lunatic can throw a stone into a well, but 40 wise men can't dredge it up again."

