

## The Soul and the Existence of Literature

**Speech given by Yashar Kemal on 16th May 1996 at the prize giving ceremony of the VIII Premi Internacional Catalunya.**

The fact that Mediterraneans have awarded me a prize fills me with satisfaction. Catalonia and Turkey are on opposite edges of the Mediterranean: it is between us, in an embrace. And being able to share the prize with you today is a special pleasure for me. We can, without doubt, say that the Mediterranean is the cradle of civilization and human culture. Egypt, Anatolia, Mesopotamia -which started at the coasts of Syria-and the entirety of Greek civilization make up the whole. The Mediterranean has had a profound effect on the coastal civilizations. The lands of the Mediterranean have their own peculiarities. As an example, the country where I was born and grew up, Cukurova, the Cilicia of old, was formed long ago by mountain waterfalls, making this one of the most beautiful and fertile places in the world, with an enormous variety of plants, vegetables and agriculture. Nature has shown great generosity here; and behind it, the Taurus range provides the higher plains where 'livestock breed. The mountains are also exceptionally fertile, with woods and wild animals. Just like in most other countries in the Mediterranean... Large spaces are scarce in the Mediterranean. But in spite of that, and throughout history, the population of the Mediterranean has been greater than in other geographical areas because of migratory currents from east to west and from north to south. In this way, hundreds of cultures came into existence and, in the end, rich and creative human civilizations came to these temperate lands. European culture is, basically, Mediterranean culture. The great miracle of history is not restricted to the Greeks, to Egypt or Mesopotamia but encompasses Mediterranean civilization as a whole. Ease of communication made our waters into one great lake. Thus the existence of Ceres, or mother earth, worshipped by the ancients, was

no coincidence: Ceres is the mother of the Mediterranean lands. From the *Iliad* to the Old Testament, from *Hammurabi* to *Theogony* and even

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*Guilgamesh*, the greatest epics in the world have been conceived and developed here. Comprehensive archaeological investigation tells us that as the old Mediterranean became larger and wealthier, human culture as a whole was the winner. In Antakia, on the Amik plains, more than 300 mounds were found. Sliced open like a watermelon, they revealed, step by step, up to nine different civilizations along with records of the peoples who had established themselves there. Accumulations of life... Humanity is made up of its past and its present. If I were a bit more daring, I would say that the future is also part of this whole. We, the Mediterraneans, need to feel greater responsibility and self-respect because we are the cradle of humanity; we should be more sensitive to our lands and mountains, love them more tenderly than we do and take much greater care of the culture of our people. In my own country, Anatolia, variants of such tales such as the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* or the poem of *Guilgamesh* are still going around even today. But, in spite of all the beauty all around us, the Mediterranean is now living through the worst period in its entire history. One of the most important dangers is the one threatening our mountains, woods and valleys. Mediterranean forests are prone to fire. Thousands and thousands of hectares of forest can be wiped out with a single spark. Fire, indiscriminate logging and the use of land for building have almost extinguished the forests of the Mediterranean. In consequence, soil erosion has damaged the land. At one time, Anatolia -and this can be proven scientifically-was one great forest. Civilizations are always born on fertile lands, such as those of Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Aegean coast and so many others that can be listed. There has never been a civilization on barren land. So how was the Hittite civilization able to flourish in the middle of Anatolia, you are saying? Well, we now know that Anatolia was a wooded region in Hittite times. Land that, these days, cannot even produce a blade of grass was once enormously fertile; Anatolia today is simply arid. In the last 50 years, the Anatolian forests have disappeared and 90 per cent of the

land has suffered serious erosion. Greece, Italy, France, Spain, whether to a greater or lesser extent, lose thousands of tons of soil to the sea on a regular basis. And there is something we should not forget: that the Mediterranean is one sole nation, As a result of the above, and all the dirty water and waste that ends up in the sea these days, it would not be strange if, in the not too distant future, we were able to cross the Mediterranean from Crete to Turkey by car. .. or even from Catalonia... on asphalt roads! Everything we do to the land affects the sea. In Cleopatra's time, her boats dropped anchor in the port of Tire. These days, Tire is 40 kilometres from the sea. But, you will say, "In Cukurova, the more that is lost the more is left, and its area is growing". And you are right, but that is because Cukurova has been built up by the erosion of the lands of the Taurus range: in the old days, the Mediterranean started at the foot of the Taurus Mountains. Today, the Mediterranean is unwell and it is man who is the cause. People say that technology is the cause, but I am not sure; maybe they are right. But it is not only technology that is to blame. In a world where man fights man, it is only logical that man should become the enemy of nature. A world in which one man exploits another leads to nature being exploited too. And it is entirely our own fault, because we have not been able to establish a rational, orderly and ecological way of living. Blaming technology is an excuse, but a false one. In fact, if one day we decide that we have treated nature badly and that we would like to get it back, then we shall have to use technology, that same technology that we used to destroy nature in the first place. The exploited man has a language, a strength and an intelligence of his own with which to express himself. When food is scarce, he complains, he goes on strike, but he does not succumb or die. Nature, however, has no way of protecting herself against man. Exploit it, annihilate it: you will never hear a word of protest. Now nature battles to survive and humanity along with it. Both could

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die out and we would not be aware of it. The world that has never ceased to bewitch our senses, that beauty, that creative force, the enrichment of man, that bird, those ants, that bee, must survive... just as the greatest epic of all time, the *Iliad*, the masterwork of traditional oral poetry, has survived. I want to remind you that the Ionian poet Homer was originally from a city near Tray, in the country that we know today as Turkey. The legend of *Guilgamesh* and other epic Mediterranean poems are popular works. The oral tradition still survives in Anatolia, and to an even greater extent among the Kurds, who, from the Caucasus to Mesopotamia, still tell stories. I grew up among Turkish and Kurdish legends. As a child, I approached the world of literature through poetry spoken aloud. At the age of seventeen, I became a storyteller. I went from town to town and told stories. I later put together a book of folklore. I found all this easy to do. It was common for a narrator of this sort to collect elegies. These were spoken or sung by women as they kept watch over the dead; "they kept the tradition going. I quickly got to know all these elegies, because I was a born storyteller, and this had a decisive effect on my life and literature. When I was twenty-three, I abandoned poetry and began to write the first of my longer works, entitled *A Brutish Story*. But it was difficult for me to go from telling stories to writing them down until I became aware of the differences that separate the one from the other. First of all, I read Turkish novels and then Western ones, especially Quixote, Stendhal and the Russian novels, which interested me greatly. After that, the works of Faulkner were what influenced me most of all. The adventure of the novel and of poetry filled me with enthusiasm. I started with the Russians, Pushkin and Gogo!. Both of these came from oral traditions in literature and created a new poetic language, and original work. I discussed the father of Turkish poetry, Nazim Hikmet, with people in prison, where I had been sent for social and political reasons, and got to know the great popular poets as well as a new language and a new poetic structure. I left prison with Hikmet's great work, *The Legend of Sheikh Bedrettin*. Hikmet had found his style in

popular tales. Our style developed from the richness of the Anatolian language as we travelled the thorny road to written literature under his guidance. Meanwhile, Russian literature, after the creation of the new state by Ataturk, had been brilliantly translated into Turkish. Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky were to me the fount of all narrative. Chechov was my greatest teacher. The structure of the Russian novel was what

. interested me most. I got to know the majority of translators from Russian to Turkish, with whom I enjoyed long discussion on the structure of this type of novel. The peculiarities of a language determine the structure of a novel and condition its content. The Russian novel, like ours, has something in common with the Western novel. The Russians also read widely among the Greek classics. After writing *War and Peace*, Tolstoy seemed to be saying: "Here you have a new *Iliad*". Gogol too, with *Dead Souls* used a similar structure. Tolstoy also admired Stendhal. Had he not done so, he would never have conceived *War and Peace*. First of all there was the war of Troy as seen by Homer, and then the battle of Waterloo reflected by Stendhal... As a result of this lesson in structure, I was -and am-able to assimilate the oral language in a new way and create a new form of literary language. This is where I captured an idea of the depth and richness of the Turkish . language. But I also understood the Kurds and their courtesy; I am, after all, the son of a Kurdish family that emigrated from the Van lake area, in the interior, to Mediterranean Anatolia. From these two languages, I was able to forge a new literary idiom, and even create new content for the novel. So my work became literary. And there is a link between the soul and the existence of literature. You, the Catalans, are well aware of that. We in Turkey had to go through something similar, although different, to get our language back. Apart from that, I try to make sure that the people who read what I write, my novels, are filled with a love of nature and the human race. I want my readers never to humiliate anyone. I hope that they never become killers or racists or cause wars, and, in fact, become declared enemies of war.

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I do not want them to chop down trees or even touch the leaves, nor step on ants nor collect butterflies. I am a passionate writer. Who can capture this? This is what I am like, how can I change into something else? In the name of literature, who could require such a thing of me? As

long as I am a part of humanity, how can I not be on the side of those who suffer? I have self-esteem and esteem for my courage.

"If you are stumbling from one dark place into another, however painful, you have to believe in and proclaim the light". "If I were stumbling from one dark place into another, having seen the light before, I would be grateful to nature that I were able to go on feeling the pleasure of being alive". What would have happened if I had never been born, if I had never lived in this fantastic world? Every epic expresses this idea of mine in some way or another. All of us have to try to bring happiness and friendship to the world and fill it with joy; we have to be thankful for all the opportunities life offers. As we are in the world, we should enjoy our existence and all its beauties. One of the greatest powers that man has is that of the imagination : Nature does as man does, the more we live and create, the more our imagination comes into play and the more splendid the creation . I come from nature and from life. There is an Anatolian saying that goes: "On a road where nothing has happened for forty years, the movement of a single leaf affects you deep in your heart." I did what I could for Vietnam, for Bosnia, for Afghanistan ... but humanity in my own country is also living through the greatest tragedy. Everyone now knows what has happened to the Kurds. And the West does not lift a finger to help them. As a journalist and writer, I have lived with the Anatolians, shared their adventures and written about their terrible experiences. I have had many difficulties as a result, but I have never been able to stay on the sidelines of the problem of the Kurds: something has to be done about the tragedy that has taken, and is still taking place before our very eyes. I have no respect for someone who, as a person, takes no part in the human adventure. It is hard for a human being, especially a writer, to

stand the suffering and misery of others. A tragedy is occurring in Europe and no one is paying any attention. I know what might happen to me for saying that: twenty months in prison, like before... and always with the Sword of Damocles overhead, forbidding me to write. But let us stop now. There is a popular song in prison that goes: "I went into the woods without knowing which road to take out. I have stayed a long time and have no idea when I shall be freed" . The Kurds want no more from the Turkish people than basic respect for universal human rights. Above all, they want to get their language back, a language that has been banned for sixty years. Kurdish is a very rich language, the only survivor, -in modern times , of the ancient Mesopotamian languages. Great epics have been written in Kurdish, a language that has produced great creators throughout the ages, great poets. Today, Turkish is a living language with very interesting literature. If the Anatolian language had not be prohibited for sixty years, if Anatolia had been allowed to keep its mosaic of cultures, if it had continued to enjoy cultural relations and the exchange of ideas, Turkish literature would now be much richer than it is. In this way, many cultures would have been able to evolve in the positive sense and would have been able to make an interesting contribution to other world cultures. This is because the world, with its thousands of different cultures, is like a garden full of flowers. One flower less in this garden means a colour lost to the world. There are, today, thousands of cultures and languages that have been annihilated. Cultural erosion is as dangerous as that of the soil. It impoverishes humanity. The Kurds, since 1806, have been in a constant state of rebellion; they live the Catalan experience in a different way. They, like the Catalans, will re-emerge sooner or later. These are all the reasons why I am so very happy that the Mediterranean Catalans have awarded me a prize.