ERIK NOONAN

Lyric Fiction

A Useless Man by Sait Faik Abasıyanık, translated by Alexander Dawe and Maureen Freely. Archipelago Books, 2015.

Sait Faik Abasıyanık's art is that of the vignette. His writing betrays a sensibility that's languid and sensuous, but also observant and perceptive, worldly, *raffiné*—and this combination of characteristics suggests that he empathized with the personalities from which he drew his types: children, villagers, hermits, migrants, outcasts, gossips, laborers, crooks, writers, and anonymous lonely Istanbullus. Abasıyanık occupies a prominent position within the Turkish consciousness, in the sense that each Turk recalls one or another of his stories because everyone had to read them in school. And yet he doesn't appear either in the 2010 Charles Eliot Norton Lectures *The Naive and Sentimental Novelist* or in the essay collection *Other Colors* by the 2006 Nobel Laureate in Literature, Orhan Pamuk; nor does his name occur amid the Choir of Discordant Voices, the literary figures who haunt novelist Elif Şafak's feminist memoir *Black Milk:* indeed, the internationally distributed, commercially successful books by these two celebrated contemporary Turkish writers don't seem to owe anything at all to Abasıyanık. The anglophone reader who wants to imagine him in his own time and place has to do so by another avenue. The poet Nâzim Hikmet (1902–1963), perhaps the third most recognizable Turkish author in the U.S., was a contemporary of Abasıyanık (1906–1954): given the U.S. intelligentsia's relatively early interest in Hikmet (see the 1975 selected poems *Things I Didn't Know I Loved,* translated by Mutlu Komuk and Randy Blasing, with blurbs by Denise Levertov and W.S. Merwin) and its disregard of Abasıyanık (until now, that is, with Archipelago Books' *A Useless Man,* the short story selection translated by Alexander Dawe and Maureen Freely)—a comparison between the poet and the storyteller may orient us.

Abasıyanık and Hikmet differ most notably when it comes to engagement. Here is Hikmet in the 1950 poem "Evening Walk": "The grocer Krabet's lights are on. / This Armenian citizen has not forgiven

/ the slaughter of his father in the Kurdish mountains. / But he loves you, / because you also won't forgive / those who blackened the name of the Turkish people." The 1915–1922 massacre of approximately 1.5 million Armenians, by the governments of the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey, remains a fraught subject, and as recently as 2005 it was a criminal offense in Turkey to make a public statement about the Armenian Genocide. Hikmet served an eighteen-year prison sentence and lived abroad as an exile for much of his life; his writing was banned at home from 1938 until after he died. It seems likely that amid the domestic ferment resulting from the atrocious U.S. role in the Vietnam War (1955–1975), the *engagé* quality of Hikmet's poetry, evident in the above excerpt, provided some academics in the United States with a reason to acquaint themselves with these works that originate in very different conditions and traditions. Hikmet's poems proved to be an abiding or recurring interest for U.S. readers: Konuk and Blasing published an expanded edition of their translations in 1994, shortly after the catastrophic First Gulf War (1990–1991). By contrast with the poetry of the *engag*é Hikmet, Sait Faik Abasıyanık's short stories possess an aestheticism that marks them as *dégag*é and an affective intensity that invokes the fabulist spirit of common people living in Turkey during the early-to-mid-twentieth century. His work suggests that the everyday experiences of his characters are those of all human beings anytime and anywhere.

In an afterword, Dawe and Freely propose that Abasıyanık's prose shows a kinship with the writing of Melih Cevdet, Oktay Rifat, and Orhan Veli—the poets of the 1941 *Garip* manifesto (translated into English by Efe Muradhas and Sidney Wade), which addresses, among other topics, "the act of representing the subconscious" by cultivating "the qualities of plainness and simplicity." To this reviewer, who cannot read Turkish, Abasıyanık's stories also seem to be aligned with the novels of Bilge Karasu and Ahmet Hamdi Tanpinar. Works of the imagination that come from a nation and culture different from one's own will always resist domestication, to some degree; nevertheless it's worthwhile to seek out familiar points of reference, the better to understand a foreign artwork's contours and its creator's cast of mind. As for international influences upon Abasıyanık's art: in the Preface to *Portrait of a Lady,* Henry James distinguishes between the impulse to delineate a character and the impulse to relate a plot; a third possibility, Edgar Allan Poe asserts in "The Philosophy of Composition," is the impulse to affect the consciousness: positioned somewhere between a prose sublime and an epiphany, this method of commencing with the consideration of an effect (or something like it)—which may have

reached Abasıyanık through French literature by way of Poe's translator, Charles Baudelaire—is the technique of *A Useless Man;* we might call the results *lyric fiction.*

In Abasıyanık's stories, the erotic is pure sensuality without hedonism, and although society threatens and wounds his characters for the forms of their desire, the author never chastises them because sex is universal, and therefore normal. The objects of desire are male. "The Silk Handkerchief":

> In summer, and right through to the end of walnut season, boys' hands smell only of peaches and plums in this place and their chests give off the aroma of hazel leaves as they roam the streets half-naked in their buttonless striped shirts.

In the early stories an indefinite sexuality pervades the world of children as they fumble toward independence and identity. Within a single prolonged moment, "My Father's Second House" presents a convergence of relations—social, generational, natural, familial, cultural—centered on the recollections of a young man who long ago accompanied his father on a mysterious visit to some relatives en route to his mother's family home. A desirable boy ushers in the cascade of detail within the narrator's remembrance:

> When my horse stumbled—only once or twice—I could see the wind ruffling my father's eyelashes. He didn't even blink. Had our eyes met like this on any other day, he would have mocked me with a fixed, false smile. His own horse never stumbled. When we reached that village house, there was a boy waiting for us. He was as delicate as lace. He took charge of our horses. Thinking that I was admiring the carnation he'd fastened to his cap, he offered it to me. Whereas I'd been looking at his eyes, which made me think of wet hay, which was the same color. Who knows, maybe he gave me the carnation because he knew he could never offer me the rest. Just then, my father turned his back. First I sniffed the carnation. Then, after I'd placed it between my cap and my ear, I saw my father looking back at me. He wasn't smiling. But he wasn't frowning either. His face was without expression. He was oddly calm. I could have taken offense, it seems to me. I fixed my eye on a male turkey. This creature must be very strong, I thought.
>
> "Come on now, you fool," said my father under his breath.

These stories de-emphasize plot and incident in favor of an intensity that unfolds from circumstances within the consciousness of a protagonist. The central character often treats his fellow human beings kindly, and not always in his own interest. "On Spoon Island" portrays a group of boys on summer vacation:

> Yakup said to Odisya:
>
> "Just to be sure, you stand guard there by the door until the sun comes up. You can sleep during the day, and we'll wait for you. Maybe the savages will attack!"
>
> Odisya wasn't a fool. But he was happy to play the part of one if that meant being a hero or doing a good deed for someone else.
>
> Half asleep, I looked over and saw that Odisya was still awake. But before the sun came up, I lay down next to him and took his hand. Abruptly he rested his warm head on my chest and said:
>
> "If my dad wasn't some grunt of a gardener I'd be a real man like you guys, I'd go to school, and if I knew how to read I'd keep reading and never sleep."
>
> I lifted his head to the left. There were tears in his eyes. He let go of my hand. He got up and walked over to the pomegranate tree.
>
> "I can't sleep, Odisya," I said. "Why don't you get some sleep now." He lay down under the pomegranate tree. I lit what was probably the second or third cigarette I had smoked in my life. And he had already fallen asleep.

When the other boy later masks his vulnerability with a brutish coarseness, the narrator makes no comment except "I kept thinking of how I had kissed Odisya. I kept peeling the skin off my lips." These stories about childhood conjecture that we don't lose innocence; instead, we espouse the convention of the loss of innocence to assuage our bitterness over having made the decision to put childish things away. We abandon innocence, Abasıyanık suggests, as soon as possible and for our own reasons. In "The Bohça," a repressive adult enforces a backward norm by separating her bourgeois son from a proletarian girl who might have loved him:

> "Girl!"
> "What's wrong, young sir?"
> "Nothing!"

"Young sir!"

"What's wrong, girl?"

"Nothing . . ."

We were standing together under the mulberry tree. We never did have a chance to talk to each other about nothing being wrong. But it seemed as if we had. She had her head in my lap, and her scent all around me. It was a summer afternoon when my mother caught us there. I scrambled through the garden gate, ran down to the shore and stayed in the warm water till evening. Later I was back in the garden with the boys from the neighborhood. But this time I had nothing to be excited about. Pretending to listen, I kept glancing over at the garden gate. But she never came out for me. Eventually the boys left. I went to look for her in the kitchen, but she wasn't there.

Likewise "The Barges" depicts two men in a retrograde society who never consummate their desire for each other:

> No matter what film was showing, it left them happy and smiling. They didn't say a word on their way home. And that night one of them would dream of kissing his Galata friend like the tough guy in the film. Meanwhile, the other dreamed of taking his friend to the darkest street of Sehzedebaşı and burying his nose in the palms of his hands and kissing them. These dreams would rob them both of sleep and make wrecks of them.

Of all the stories in *A Useless Man* only "Wedding Night" depicts sexual fulfillment. The encounter is heterosexual and sanctioned by the institution of marriage, and yet the young couple only marry by arrangement: their union exempts the boy from conscription in the army. In a social calculus reminiscent of Thomas Hardy, Abasıyanık presents his vision of a humanity that stands distinct from sanctioned definitions of personhood.

Turkey declined from imperial status during Abasıyanık's lifetime, and we associate him not only with an Istanbul that resides at the crossroads of pan-Mediterranean culture—the meeting place of Judaic, Arabic, Hellenic and European worlds, also including Byzantium and the Seljuk, Anatolian, and Ottoman heritages, along with the sites of ancient Troy and Cappadocia—but also with Istanbul the world city, a modernist capital that had its own halfworld. Abasıyanık's

prose takes the metropolis itself as a subject. Here is "Nightwork":

> They arrived at an all-night coffeehouse. From the outside it looked as if it were lit by a gas lamp, but there was just one twenty-five watt light bulb, and the people inside could barely see each other. But once inside, the overwhelming stench of misery needed no illumination.

Abasıyanık the urban chronicler indicates the broader context of a Hugoesque, Dickensian underclass in this sketch of the Dolapdere district:

> You run into all sorts in this neighborhood: remorseful pickpockets; heroin addicts just out of the hospital; fortunetellers; Balkan immigrants from 1900 and 1953; old-world thespians; handsome young toughs with bob knives; petty crooks, con men and gigolos; mothers pimping daughters and husbands seeking customers for their wives; the smell of lamb cutlets, hunger, rakı, love, lust, good, evil, and the opposite of every word.

Misery—understood not as a test of humankind's potential, nobly undergone and heroically surmounted, but rather as a condition that reveals our character—makes up a significant portion of the social fabric of this fictional world.

The stories in *A Useless Man* are arranged in chronological order, and we can trace an evolution in Abasıyanık's conception of authorship through a number of portrayals of writers that the translators have included in their selection. The protagonist of "I Just Don't Know Why I Keep Doing These Things" skulks his way through existence, racked with guilt because he partakes of the simple things of life differently from other people:

> The other night we were seated at our usual places. He was reading his paper, and I was scribbling down a few thoughts. Then, suddenly, I looked up. The coffeehouse has mirrors running along its walls, and I was looking into one of them. This man wasn't looking at me, this I could see, but I could also see why from his vantage point he would be driven to accuse me—and stranger still, when I looked at the way I was sitting, I could see something in me of the brazen thief who could pull off this sort of thing and still keep his cool. So I

took a close look at myself. Yes, I did look as if I'd stolen his prayer beads. You know how children will sometimes insist they didn't do something bad. And they really haven't. But there's something in their face that says they did. It's because they haven't done it that they can't look natural. So that's what I was like. Like one of those children.

This view of the artist as a misunderstood man-child registers the author's anxiety but doesn't venture to state why people write stories in the first place. Similarly "In the Rain" depicts the writer-reader relationship as a one-sided conversation in which a man talks to a woman in French while following her through the city during a downpour:

> But I sensed she was smiling and that she had suddenly made the decision not to turn around. I slowed down a little. The rain was pelting down now. I started again:
>
> "I just threw together what I was going to say. But now I can't remember anything, and since you're not turning around I'll say whatever comes to mind. It's like this: I love a girl. She looks like you, or maybe not. But that's not the point. She doesn't love me at all. But that's not the point either. Who could I find to talk to in this rain. Who would listen? Everyone's buried in their papers, or drinking rakı at a table with friends. Everyone has something to say. But who'll sit and listen to me? And if someone did, I'd only feel ashamed the next day after having confessed everything. But I could tell you everything: how I love her and how she doesn't love me. You'll never see my face. We wouldn't even recognize each other if we met again. You're the most beautiful friend this rain could have given me. Now I'm not even thinking of my lover. Your friendship is enough. But don't take this as a declaration of love! No! I'm just telling you how I feel. But then again, I don't want you to think you aren't worthy of someone's love. You're more beautiful than the rain. Pretending to listen to me like this is true friendship and devotion."

In these characterizations of the artist in society, we notice a recurrent motif, the shame that the protagonist feels when confronted with the presumed gaze of an Other whom he has encountered in isolation. These stories represent verbal instances of psychological projection rather than the practice of a mature literary art. An artist's solitude is distinct both from loneliness and isolation, and it cannot be reduced

to solipsism, precisely (and paradoxically) because it is not rooted in social relations. The artist lives, and is engaged, in a particular society and holds a stake in it, and yet the impetus to artistic creation comes from elsewhere. The distinction among solitude, loneliness, and isolation animates an excerpt from the novella "A Cloud in the Sky," the longest piece in *A Useless Man*. The main character's shame remains, but now it originates in provincialism, philistinism, snobbery, and prejudice. The narrator identifies these attitudes as external to himself, the oppressive forces of an unjust society. He has located his self-loathing in a reaction to stimuli, and this recognition mitigates the debilitating depression of the earlier writer-protagonists. The character now takes pride in being a writer and knows the agency and the limits of his vocation:

> So that was the story the postman spun. I can only admire his knack for making a story out of nothing because serious writers like me can only dream of it.
>
> Let me say what I think is underneath it all:
>
> On the surface, it might look as if he is divulging great secrets in exchange for small favors—a ten here and a soda there. A shave, a small glass of rakı, a bunch of grapes . . . But if you ask me, these trifles are not what keep him serving up secrets. I figured this out when I noticed that if he could find no one else to confide in, he would go to Zafiri, who is a quiet soul and hates gossip and cannot afford a coffee for himself, let alone anyone else, and can barely speak Turkish. Or he'll go and sit with Zeynel Efendi, the retired ticket salesman, who is as quiet as he is disdainful of gossip.
>
> The postman hungers after secrets because he longs to grasp the world he can see only in his imagination.
>
> And there are times, many times, when I think he goes too far. First he strings up the dirty laundry, and then comes the laundry that he's soiled himself. The innocent truth is never enough for him. Never—but then what are we to do? He's the one who has to pay the price. It's a risky business, building a house of lies, even if it sits on a foundation of facts . . . I'd end up forgetting what the postman's said about whom, and soon I'd even forget what he's said, and at that point I'd move on. As we all do, eventually. Some days, we believe what people tell us, and the next day, we don't.
>
> I do not hide the fact that I am a writer. It's nothing to be ashamed of! But I don't like to announce it. Now if I choose

to sit and write in the corner of a gazino every morning, that is why. In the old days I would go and write under a pine tree. Now I have my own table. And they bring me a coffee. Girls stroll past. I can write whatever I wish . . .

What I am trying to say is that the postman has proved very helpful!

"He sits under the pines and writes letters . . . Who knows who he's writing to . . . or what he's saying?"

But oh, the things he has inferred from the stories I have written and then torn up! It shames me just to think of them. Once I nearly got into a fight over it. They all descended on me, saying, "This brute has the gall to write about our lives! Who does he think he is?"

I have gone on far too long about the postman. Let's just accept him as he is. Let's leave it to others to decide if he is good or bad. But let's not smear him, since he has proved useful.

Inventing secrecy where there is none, this story states, is different from acknowledging privacy where one finds it. The postman and the writer don't imagine the same things at all. But does the protagonist come any closer to fulfilling the desire he shares with the postman, that of *grasping*—a brilliantly ambiguous translation—what only the imagination can hold? What is the difference between "the innocent truth" and "a house of lies"? A work of art that offers an image of this difference is valuable, especially when it contains such graces as the narrator's deadpan "Now I have my own table"—an accolade that's worth the boast.

Translating Abasıyanık poses the problem of creating, not an equivalent to the original, but its double—a style that's recognizable to the English reader as a vernacular but isn't domesticated, exoticized, or literary. No one speaks English like the characters in these stories. But that's not because Abasıyanık lifted his Turkish from the parlance of institutions, it's because he abstracted it from the language that his people spoke. This middle style, as it might be called, is difficult to achieve. Reading it, we derive pleasure from perceiving the illusion that underlies its clarity. Such a style is not unheard of in English, and Alexander Dawe and Maureen Freely have added a new name among its practitioners—that of Sait Faik Abasıyanık.