



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 6, Issue 1

Spring 2023

The End of Great Periods: Late Ottoman Decadent Poetry and the End of the Ottoman Empire

Kaitlin Staudt

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 20 March 2023

Date of Publication: 24 July 2023

Citation: Kaitlin Staudt, 'The End of Great Periods: Late Ottoman Decadent Poetry and the End of the Ottoman Empire', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 6.1 (2023), 79-97.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.v.v6i1.1726.g1826

volupte.gold.ac.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

The End of Great Periods: Late Ottoman Decadent Poetry and the End of the Ottoman Empire

Kaitlin Staudt

Auburn University

This article examines late Ottoman Decadence through the 1910 *Fecr-i Atı* [Dawn of the Future] manifesto and the literary criticism of its most famous signatory, Ahmet Haşim (1887-1933). Through this case study, I explore what Kristin Mahoney has called the ‘political utility of decadence’ within the Ottoman-Turkish sphere.¹ Haşim’s writing across the Ottoman Empire-Turkish Republic divide illustrates the ways in which the aesthetic practices and linguistic register of Ottoman poetry were increasingly understood in the final decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as displaying the markers of literary greatness from a previous social order, ones which impeded the development of a uniquely Turkish national literature. In other words, for certain literary critics, deploying the aesthetic practices of Ottoman poetry became linked to a specifically Ottoman imperial decline and, consequently, also became shorthand for implying the connection between certain aesthetic practices and Turkey’s political progress in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Through the focus on Haşim, what becomes clear is the way that a pervasive discussion of decadent aesthetics is symptomatic of Ottoman literary decline, and later Turkish literary belatedness vis-à-vis Europe is also connected with disparate – and at the time diametrically opposed – positions in the debate on the modernization and reform of Ottoman-Turkish literature. As one of the potential avenues for the renewal of Ottoman letters, decadent aesthetics came under attack in the late nineteenth century but continued to thrive as an aesthetic practice well after the establishment of the Republic in 1923. However, Ottoman-Turkish poets who were denounced as decadents, *and* their detractors, are both explicit in their critical writing about the cultural traffic between Ottoman-Turkish and Western ideas and writers. Therefore, the conversation in the Ottoman-Turkish sphere is not about whether or not to engage with Western

literary traditions, but rather which specific Western literary traditions are appropriate to engage with and in what manner should they be engaged with in order to renew Turkish letters.

This article explores how a sense of literary decline in relation to Europe led to the embrace of decadent aesthetics and a motivation by certain poets to modernize poetry that existed separately from the trends of realism, vernacularization, and utility that ultimately came to define Turkish nationalist literature. The concept of ‘decadence’, as it was put to cultural work across the Empire-Republic divide, is a particularly important touchstone for examining alternatives to the prevailing version of Turkish literary history. Focusing both on the historical literary-critical conversations which put forward a definition of Ottoman decadent literature, an exploration of decadence as a literary critical term in Turkey reveals the ways in which the conversation around decadence becomes a coded discussion around the idealized participation of Turkey within international power structures that underwent substantial change during the period under study.

Decadence, Decline, and the Fall of the Ottoman Empire

Decadence has long been connected to a sense of the end or decline of empire. As Regenia Gagnier has claimed, ‘Modern decadence arose with empire and nation-states’.² As the ‘sick man of Europe’ discourse attests, in many ways the Ottoman Empire was the empire in decline *par excellence* at the end of the nineteenth century. While this perception of decline was deeply connected to the Orientalist representations of contemporary European observers, the sense of Ottoman imperial decline also has a long tradition within Ottoman historiographical practices.³ The confluence of this local historiographical practice alongside those by European Orientalist outsiders has become known as the ‘Ottoman Decline Paradigm’, which suggested that the empire had been in decline since a golden age in the sixteenth century.⁴ This perception of waning Ottoman imperial power on the global stage in the late nineteenth century precipitated a series of Westernizing reforms in the empire, which encompassed nearly every aspect of life, from legal, military, and educational reforms, extending even into the realm of literature.⁵ Known as the Tanzimat, a term meaning

reorganization, these reform processes were initiated in 1839 and ended with the promulgation of the first Ottoman constitution in 1876. Baki Tezcan has argued that Ottoman historiography produced in the Tanzimat era asserted that the previous Ottoman regime was ‘irredeemably corrupt and had been in decay since the sixteenth century’.⁶

This local use of the decline paradigm to fuel the modernizing reform of the Empire has had lasting implications on how both Ottoman imperialism and the modern have been understood in Turkey. The fact of Ottoman imperialism is frequently downplayed in scholarly literature in favour of teleologies that emphasize the late Ottoman Empire as a period of increasing Turkish national development. Christine Philiou has discussed this phenomenon as the ‘absent nineteenth century’ in Ottoman historiography, suggesting that ‘suddenly we look *back*, from the Turkish nation-state’, a shift which makes it difficult to confront ‘our deep assumptions about teleological change and normative economic and political development, to see other trajectories that may have existed’.⁷ Arif Camoğlu has described this tendency of literary scholars to read late Ottoman writers as setting the stage for the subsequent nationalist reform projects as ‘an ideological practice of inclusive exclusion whereby these Ottoman Turkish authors are admitted to the literature of the nation through the denial of the imperial affiliations’.⁸ Particularly in Anglophone scholarship on Ottoman-Turkish literature, the late Ottoman imperial state is generally portrayed as the historical precondition for the rise of a specifically Turkish nationalism.⁹

Literary criticism from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries took a similar stance toward the Ottoman literary tradition. In the literary sphere, this sense of decline has long been applied to the *divan*, or Ottoman poetic tradition. In parallel to the historical rise and fall of the empire itself, scholarly work on Ottoman literature also emphasizes a golden age of poetry in the sixteenth century which gradually falls into creative stagnation until the reform programmes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁰ While both the Ottoman and the specifically literary decline paradigms have been productively challenged in recent years, I am interested here in the pervasive sense, by no means unique to the Ottomans, that good literature is the literature

of a state with a strong political system.¹¹ In the late Ottoman Empire, this sense of political decline also corresponded with a sense of literary decline in the European literary sphere. This led to pervasive debates over how and in what ways literature should be reformed. While authors disagreed over the nature of this reformed literature's aesthetic practices, they were largely in agreement that a renewed Ottoman literature would allow the Ottomans to re-assert their cultural importance on the world stage and ultimately reclaim imperial superiority from Europe.

In this account, literature in general, but especially the novel, was envisioned as a vehicle to inculcate readers with a modernity that became increasingly coded as Western during the *fin de siècle*.¹² Historically, the rise of the Ottoman-Turkish novel has been associated with the reform processes of the *Tanzimat*, and scholars have emphasized the ways in which literature from this period advocates for increased rationality, realism, and simplification or vernacularization of literary language.¹³ For many years, the writing of late Ottoman literary history has centred around Ottoman modernization, which has valorized the aesthetic and formal literary practices that advocate for modernization-as-Westernization at the expense of other aesthetic developments happening concurrently.

The rise of a decadent aesthetic practice within the Ottoman literary sphere is deeply connected to these Westernizing reform processes. This places the Ottoman conversation on decadence squarely within an imperial framework, but with connotations of imperialism that are distinctly different from the settler colonialist experience of Anglo-European empires. The Ottoman Empire's position as an expansionist empire and the Turkish Republic's stance as a nation pursuing a kind of modernity-as-self-decolonization in the twentieth century places it in a globally unique position, one which troubles the binary account of colonized and colonizer structuring much postcolonial literary inquiry.¹⁴ As Cemal Kafadar notes, decline is not only a matter of perception; it can also be a matter of position-taking. This idea is particularly intriguing in the case of late Ottoman poetry. As Ayşe Zarakol has explored, the concepts of decline and its binary opposite, greatness, exist not only in reference to ideas of political power and material

domination. Greatness is, as she argues, ‘about manifesting certain symbolic markers’, while decline is ‘about not displaying the correct symbolic markers or displaying the markers of greatness from a previous social order as another is coming into being’.¹⁵ The late Ottoman Empire, particularly in the years surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, was very much a period in which an old social order was being dismantled and another was coming into existence.

At the same time, the ‘correct symbolic markers’ used to display sovereignty became increasingly national across the first two decades of the twentieth century, not only for the Ottoman Empire, but globally. The Empire experienced the rise of an ethnic Turkish nationalism, as opposed to the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional identities which had previously characterized it.¹⁶ In other words, ethnically homogenous nation-states based on the Westphalian model increasingly became a symbol of sovereignty in the national order, while heterogenous, multi-ethnic empires, particularly those outside Europe, were increasingly described as declining state formations. This increased focus on the nation and ethnic nationalism as the new symbolic order was also true in literature. The symbolic markers – including the language, metaphors, forms, and themes – of the Ottoman Divan tradition became increasingly stigmatized in favour of literature which signalled its participation in the reform and modernization efforts.¹⁷ The associations of Ottoman Divan poetry with imperial decline meant that the aesthetic practices, themes, and vocabulary of this imperial poetry became an important repository from which Ottoman-Turkish poets who eschewed the idea of literature’s participation in these reform processes could draw.

Ahmet Haşim and the Question of Decadence

Poet Ahmet Haşim was born in Ottoman-controlled Baghdad in 1887.¹⁸ His father was part of the Ottoman administration there, and his mother died when Haşim was very young, a loss which animates much of his poetry. He received an early education in Ottoman letters, including instruction in Arabic and Persian, languages whose vocabulary and grammatical structures made

up a substantial part of Ottoman literature at the end of the nineteenth century. After moving to Istanbul following the death of his mother, he attended the famous *Mekteb-i Sultanî*, known today as Galatasaray Lycée, a high school which was responsible for the education of many Turkish writers and intellectuals in the late Ottoman Era, including poet Tevfik Fikret and novelist Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu. Crucially, the school provided instruction in French language and literature, which is where Haşim first discovered the Symbolist movement and the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé in particular. In addition to his poetic career, Haşim was also a prolific columnist for newspapers and periodicals such as *Dergah*, *İkdam*, and *Akşam*, among others, with his critical writing far outstripping his poetic output.¹⁹ Despite being known primarily as a poet, he published only two collections of poetry during his lifetime: *Göl Saatleri* [*Hours of the Lake*], published in 1921 and *Piyale* [*The Wine Chalice*] in 1926. Additionally, he also held a post in the Ottoman Public Debt Administration, a position which ultimately allowed him to travel to Paris where he published a history of Turkish literature in the *Mercure de France*, an influential journal of the Symbolist movement.

Haşim's first association with decadence comes with his participation in the *Fecr-i Ati* group.²⁰ In 1910 this group of poets and novelists published a manifesto in the *Servet-i Fünûn* journal. Signed by Haşim, Refik Halit Karay, and Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu, among other famous Turkish writers, the *Fecr-i Ati* statement is considered the first manifesto published in the Empire. If we examine both the *Fecr-i Ati* manifesto and Haşim's later literary criticism, the idea of decadent aesthetics as a relational negotiation between empires looms large. Indeed, one of the crucial aspects of the Manifesto relates to the ways in which the *Fecr-i Ati* group align themselves in relation to European poets. The manifesto declares: "The members of Dawn of the Future will work to represent and proclaim themselves a small exemplar to their contemporary European peers in the expectation of being an emerald bower within this literary wasteland."²¹ The positioning of the *Fecr-i Ati* highlights their relationship as equals and colleagues to their European contemporaries, while their representation of the Ottoman literary sphere as a 'wasteland' suggests

that they view themselves as peerless within the Empire. Following this statement, the manifesto ends not only with a proclamation that they will translate the ideas of the West for the East, but that they will also serve as a conduit for dispersing the developments of Ottoman literature to the West.

The 1910 manifesto is both a response to a perceived sense of European civilizational and literary superiority and a call for Ottoman poets to re-assert their own identity through a specifically Ottoman type of poetry while projecting that poetry on the world stage. The signatories of the manifesto use noticeably decadent ideas (i.e., the ‘emerald bowers’) to articulate the relationship between Ottoman and European literature. Examining these documents reveals that decadent aesthetics were one of the tools Ottoman authors used to preserve a distinctly Ottoman literary power at home while advocating for the dissemination of that literature to decadent literary networks in Europe in order to project their literary vision beyond imperial boundaries in the final years of Empire and the early years of the Republic. Part of this projection of poetic vision beyond the Empire was meant to re-assert Ottoman literary power on the global (but still primarily European) literary stage. Decadent aesthetic practices thus become part of late Ottoman literature’s participation in the competing states narrative.

These ideas also circulate in Haşim’s seminal essay of literary criticism, ‘Şiir Hakkında Bazı Mülâhazalar’ [‘Some Thoughts About Poetry’]. Although this work is best known as the introduction to the second edition of *Piyale*, published in 1928, the essay was originally published in the journal *Dergâh*’s inaugural issue in 1921. The essay works to delineate what is good poetry, advocating for a mystical understanding of poetry as ‘a sacred and nameless source, buried within nights of mystery and the unknown outside the fields of perception’.²² It calls for a re-enchantment of poetry connected to the symbolic register of the Ottoman Divan tradition. Haşim configures this understanding of poetry as arising out of a debate in late Ottoman literary culture, in which his poem ‘Desire at the end of the day’ was ‘considered by some people to be more cryptic than

necessary', therefore sparking a debate about meaning and clarity within poetic expression, to which Haşim's essay is a response.

For Haşim, the emphasis literary reformers placed on clarity and accessibility undermined the essential nature of poetry and was a fundamental misunderstanding of the difference between literary genres. He argues that 'a poet's language exists not in order to explain like prose, but to almost evoke sensations, it is a language between music and words'.²³ Haşim goes on to argue that prose is the realm of 'reason and logic', associating prose with the literary currents which aimed to represent modernity and through that representation bring about modernity in late Ottoman society. In contrast to this, he argues that 'the unknown outside the fields of perception, which on occasion reflects the light of enlightened waters onto the horizons of our perception'.²⁴ His use of image and metaphorical language here not only resonates with the language of European critics of decadent and Symbolist poetry such as Arthur Symons and Walter Pater, but it also evokes the themes and imagery of the Ottoman Divan tradition. Referring to the 'gardens of poetry' and suggesting that poetry is 'like a rose in the night', Haşim draws on the metaphoric tradition of the Ottoman Divan to argue for poetry's autonomy from the currents of literary rationality, clarity, and modernization that were advocated by his contemporaries.²⁵ As prose writing, particularly the novel, became increasingly associated with Turkish national literature in the early twentieth century, these statements can also be understood as Haşim's desire to recuperate poetic practices in the face of nationalist encroachment.

Haşim's use of writer and theologian Abbé Henri Bremond's contributions to debates regarding 'pure poetry' that occurred in France illustrates how Ottoman authors drew on European poetry and criticism to affiliate themselves with European decadent networks. This debate about pure poetry, which Haşim says occurred 'a few months ago', essentially aligns with his larger arguments about poetry, which is that 'poetry's magical effects' are undercut by including the 'judgement, logic, rhetoric, coherence, analysis' which is typical of prose.²⁶ On the surface this seems fairly straightforward: Haşim is presenting recent critical developments in France to Turkish

readers and reflecting upon how European insights into literature can be applicable in the late Ottoman context. Yet, on closer examination, it becomes clear that Haşim presents the debate regarding poetry's meaning and clarity in Ottoman letters as temporally prior to the same debate in France. In other words, this is not a debate that Haşim learned about through his reading of French sources and imported into the Turkish-Ottoman context, but rather he is using a French debate to illuminate ongoing discussions germane to Ottoman poetry. As such, he reaches out to European literary criticism not to insist upon the belatedness or decline of Ottoman-Turkish poetry, but rather to demonstrate the temporal coequality of the Ottoman and European literary debates, thus positioning Ottoman poetry as both contemporary to and equal with its literary counterparts.

Haşim also addresses poetry, specifically the work of Mallarmé, in 'Sembolizmin Kıymetleri' ['The Value of Symbolism'], published in the newspaper *Hayat* on 26 May 1927. In the article, Haşim claims that 'the poet, who has no relation to the author [of novels] who is active in recording the circumstances of his time, is apart from time and location'.²⁷ This understanding of the poet as divorced from the specificities of time and space flies in the face of the nationalist movements in Turkish literature, which were highly invested in the creation of a uniquely Turkish literary form. The literary critical discussions surrounding Turkish nationalist literature emphasized realist literary aesthetics as a means of creating a literature unique to Turkey in the twentieth century. By claiming a timelessness for poetry and the poet, Haşim rejects the idea that poetry should participate in the temporal and location-bound representative practices of realist novels valorized by the government-sponsored literary reforms.

Despite his clear admiration for Mallarmé, Haşim also argues that Mallarmé's innovative force was not quite as new as many understood it: 'Nevertheless, the value that Mallarmé gave to the symbol was not entirely a new artistic principle. All of Egypt, Phoenician, Greece, all of eastern and western poetry had "symbols" centuries before Mallarmé'.²⁸ This assertion critiques the idea of European poetic primacy, dispelling the idea that Symbolism originated in France and dispersed

elsewhere across the globe. It also establishes a parallel between the two literary traditions, suggesting that they share a history of poetic use of the symbol long before the movement known as Symbolism in Europe. We also see how Haşim's understanding of Symbolism and decadent poetry are thus grounded in and read through the lens of his early education in Arabic and Persian literature, a training which would have allowed him to access the symbolic register of an older, Eastern poetic tradition. In turn, his extensive engagement with European Symbolist poetry leads him to reflect not only on the Ottoman Divan tradition, but also on how that tradition is being put to work in the early Turkish Republic.

Haşim's literary criticism in French makes Ottoman-Turkish literary developments visible to Western readers. In 1924, Haşim published 'Les Tendances actuelles de la Littérature turque' ['Recent Developments in Turkish Literature'] in the *Mercure de France*.²⁹ While the history of the journal goes back to the seventeenth century, by the early twentieth century, the *Mercure* had established itself as a prominent journal affiliated with the Symbolist movement, publishing the work of Mallarmé, André Gide, and Guillaume Apollinaire. In Haşim's article, he outlines a history of Turkish literature since the Tanzimat era, a period of modernizing and Westernizing reform that predated the establishment of the Turkish Republic. In his effort to make the development of Turkish literature legible to a Francophone readership, he links Turkish authors to their French and European counterparts, suggesting, for example, that poet Tevfik Fikret is similar to François Coppée for introducing enjambment and prose verse forms and novelist Halit Ziya resembles Mallarmé in his development of Symbolism.³⁰ Yet what is compelling about this practice is the distinction Haşim makes between imitation and reading one literary practitioner as similar to another in order to make the history of Turkish literature understandable to those writing in France. In the article he denounces the *Edebiyat-i Cedide* movement which emerged around 1890, saying that it is 'd'imitation européenne' [an imitation of European literature], accusing them of writing in a French grammar but with Turkish words and of modernizing literature through 'a tendency towards Francization'.³¹

In Haşim's literary criticism we see the development of literary decadence as an aesthetic and a literary-critical practice becoming the centre of a complex and multi-layered process of making French poetry known to Turkish readers, Turkish poetry known to French readers, and establishing a parallel between the two literary traditions without asserting European literary primacy over Ottoman letters. Yet, to understand Haşim's legacy and the reception and status of his work within Turkish literary history, we need to understand the long history of the debate on decadence in the Ottoman Empire.

Ottoman Decadence and 'Dekadanlar Tartışması'

The literary sphere in the late Ottoman Empire had a strong tradition of discussing and debating decadence as a negative quality. The most prominent of these statements against decadence is novelist and public intellectual Ahmet Midhat Efendi's well known attack on decadence in the 'Dekadanlar Tartışması', or decadence controversy, of 1897-1900.³² The debate was initiated by the publication of Midhat's article 'Dekedanlar' in the newspaper *Sabah* in March 1897. Centring around poetry published in the *Servet-i Fünun* journal, the decadence controversy helped to shape debates regarding the proper avenue for modernization and reform of Turkish literature, raising questions about the old versus the new, local versus foreign literary production, and what was national or authentic.³³ For the purposes of this article, I focus on one of the pillars of Midhat's attack on decadent literature: its adoption of a language artificially influenced by Arabic, Persian, and French, as well as its use of Divan poetic imagery.

By famously claiming that it is 'necessary to read in Turkish but think in French' in order to understand poetry published in the *Servet-i Fünun* journal, Midhat rejected the linguistic cosmopolitanism of Ottoman decadent poetry.³⁴ As an advocate for the reform of the Ottoman language, Midhat's own literary work emphasized a simplified language system and vernacularization that centred around Turkification of a language that had historically borrowed extensively from Arabic and Persian vocabularies and grammatical structures.³⁵ Ottoman decadent

poetry, as represented by the *Servet-i Funiin*, through its reliance on loan words and grammatical constructions from Arabic, Persian, and French, as well as its desire to reanimate the symbolic register of the Ottoman Divan tradition, declared itself as connected to the imperial tradition as opposed to Midhat's Turkification.

Decadent literature has often been described, in Regenia Gagnier's words, as 'literatures perceived, or self-nominated, [...] designat[ing] a temporal category of the decline away from established norms', and this is what makes the decadent poetry of the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century so interesting.³⁶ Not only was the idea of an 'established norm' for Ottoman literature entirely in flux, but in contrast to the realist and moralist literary style that Midhat both advocates and writes in, what he terms 'decadent' is closer to the 'norms' of the Ottoman poetic register in its revitalization of imagery, syntax, vocabulary, and form. In Midhat's account, decadent poetry is figured explicitly as a literature of a failing empire. In contrast, the literary currents which emphasized rationality, vernacular language, and secularization are literary qualities which have been associated with an explicitly Turkish national identity.

While the decadence controversy peaked in the late nineteenth century, decadent aesthetic practices, as we have seen in the writing of Haşim, continued to animate one branch of the search for a new Ottoman, and later Turkish, poetry. In this sense, it served a political function to advocate not only for the continued importance of the Ottoman poetic register, but it also put forward ideals of poetic cosmopolitanism, artistic autonomy, and imperial identity, in the face of increasingly nationalist currents that were gaining political and literary ground in the Empire. In the decadence controversy, two opposing views of how literature should function in society are posited: that literature should be didactic, useful, morally instructive, and expository in its explanations of modernity, and that literature should exist as an end in and of itself. As is exemplified by the *Servet-i Funiin* poets and *Fecr-i Ati* group that came after them, this call for aesthetic autonomy was a rejection of the explicitly modernizing function of literature. Within these opposing understandings there are also disparate understandings of the role of Empire. In

didactic literature, language and literacy are tools to be manipulated for the personal financial and moral success of the characters, which is often an allegory for imperial or national success.³⁷ However, in the version which advocates for aesthetic autonomy, as we see with the poetry of Haşim, empire is a repository from which archaic forms can be drawn. The later signatories of the *Fecr-i Ati* manifesto drew on this legacy in advocating for an increased connection between European and Ottoman literatures.

The kind of literary-critical didacticism exemplified by Midhat has its parallels in the Republican-era understanding of late Ottoman political culture. As Tezcan has noted, these texts reveal ‘a strong belief that opposition to the New Order and its Tanzimat could only be of a reactionary nature. The underlying assumption here is that the New Order is an instrument for reaching contemporary civilization.’³⁸ As we can see from Midhat’s writing on decadence, decadent literary practices associated with the use of Arabic and Persian loan-words as well as Ottoman aesthetic practices, were seen to undermine literature’s ability to help construct the New Order and impeded the Empire in reaching the perceived levels of contemporary European civilization.

The Reception of Decadence and the Turkish Literary Critical Tradition

Haşim never claimed the title of ‘decadent’. Yet, his friend and contemporary Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu, who penned a short biographical elegy of Haşim published a year after Haşim’s death in 1933, suggests that the larger cultural understanding of his writing was that of ‘Haşim *symbolist*; Haşim *Parnassian*; Haşim *Mallarmé-ian*’.³⁹ While Kadri ultimately disagrees with those characterizations, his assessment of Haşim is one that calls into question Haşim’s commitment to the Turkish national programme, both literary and political. Kadri indicates that Haşim ‘was not a man who believed in nationalist principles’, while also asserting that because he was from a Baghdadi family ‘he was considered to be part of the Arab race’.⁴⁰ These statements distance Haşim ethnically and politically from the Turkish nationalist project, casting him as an outsider to the nation. While to grow up in the provinces such as Baghdad was evidence of one’s imperial

cosmopolitanism, to be part of the Arab race in the Turkish Republic was to be excluded from national identity projects that enshrined ethnic Turkishness as the essential component of the new nation's identity.

However this assessment is contradicted by Kadri's claim that Haşim was 'spiritually and mentally a pure Turk [...] a child of Istanbul'.⁴¹ It is particularly interesting to consider exactly what kind of Turk he regards Haşim to be, in that Kadri positions Haşim's version of Turkishness as fundamentally Ottoman: 'Haşim was not Turkish literature's first Baghdadi poet. As far as Fuzuli and Ruhi were Turkish, Ahmet Haşim was also equally Turkish.'⁴² Here Kadri refers to two sixteenth-century Divan poets who both had connections to Baghdad and who also wrote in Turkish in addition to Persian and Arabic: Fuzuli (c. 1494-1566) and Ruhi (d. 1605).

Particularly in the case of Fuzuli, the critical reception of Ottoman poetry in the Tanzimat and early Turkish Republic was largely one of rejection. In *Mukaddime-i Celal*, Namık Kemal, an Ottoman statesman and author, identifies Fuzuli's *The Epic of Leyla and Mecnun* as evidence of the degradation of the Ottoman poetic tradition. In this article he attacks Ottoman Divan poetry, claiming that 'narratives such as *Hüsn-ü Aşk* and *Leyla and Mecnun*, they each have the characteristics of a mystical tract, given their subject matter and mode of composition'.⁴³ This mystical strand in Divan poetry, Namık Kemal argues, means that it is

based on subjects that lie altogether outside the realm of nature and reality [...] and since they are devoid of all literary requirements such as the depiction of morals, explanation of customs and description of feelings, they are not novels but pertain to the genre of old hags' tales.⁴⁴

Kemal's rhetoric highlights yet again how, in late Ottoman literary criticism, literary quality was often synonymous with literature's ability to instruct. Kadri might have been connecting Haşim to a longstanding tradition of Turkish-Baghdadi poets. Yet within the general critical backlash against the Ottoman poetic tradition during the Tanzimat era, as seen in both Midhat's decadence controversy and Kemal's denunciation of Fuzuli's Divan, this raises questions about

Karaosmanoğlu's intent behind insisting upon the connection between Haşim and the earlier Baghdadi poets.

We can see echoes of both Kadri's assessment and Tanzimat-era influence on literary criticism written about Haşim from the mid-century, particularly in a critical rhetoric surrounding Haşim's use of language. Asım Bezirci claims that the language of Haşim's early poetry is 'heavy and bombastic', in that 'the number of foreign words many times exceeds that of the Turkish words. Prepositional phrases are put together according to the rules of Persian and weigh heavily. There are too few verbs, too many adjectives.'⁴⁵ This exact critique is repeated verbatim in relation to Haşim's 1926 collection *Piyale* later in the same book. This insistence that Haşim's language is not purely Turkish – including Bezirci's tally of Turkish versus Persian words – echoes Midhat's earlier injunctions against the use of non-Turkish words in poetry and his consequent dismissal of such poetry as decadent. Here again we see how a poet displaying the linguistic and aesthetic register of an earlier social order results in a critical dismissal in that, for Bezirci and other critics, the use of Persian vocabulary and grammar renders Haşim's identity as a Turkish poet suspect. Yaşar Nabi has also suggested that Haşim drew from both Arabic and Persian sources, yet goes one step further in arguing that by doing so Haşim 'remained always foreign'.⁴⁶ Consequently, according to Nabi, Haşim was not part of the national literature [Milli Edebiyat] movements.⁴⁷

In this sense both Nabi and Bezirci insist upon Haşim's essential Ottomanness as opposed to Turkishness. Not only does he use non-Turkish language, but that language distances him from the very people that art and literature were supposed to address in the Turkish national literary movement. Bezirci stresses the difficulty of Haşim's language, especially to contemporary ears, arguing that it 'appeals not to the people, but to the *havas*, the highest strata, to intellectuals'.⁴⁸ At the time Bezirci was writing, to appeal to intellectuals at the expense of the people went against the nationalist injunctions to take art and literature 'halka doğru', or to the people.⁴⁹ These things in conjunction with an insistence on him being referred to as 'Arab Haşim', make clear his mid-century reception was also one which distanced him from nationalist movements and identities.

To put another kind of nail in the coffin of Haşim's poetic greatness, Bezirci claims:

In all of the poems there is an air of sorrow, of pessimism. [...] Anxiety, desolation, desperation, grievance at being alone, searching for the mother, waiting for the beloved, yearning for love and a desire to die are main themes. The influence of the *Servet-i Fünun* is visible.⁵⁰

This emphasis on the mood of Haşim's poetry alongside the statement of *Servet-i Fünun*'s influence is a clear and critical insistence on the essential decadence of his poetry. At the same time, 'waiting for the beloved' is a consistent theme within Ottoman Divan poetry.⁵¹ Yet again we see criticism that insists upon Haşim's essential Ottomanness: he is foreign (i.e., of the Empire, not actually Turkish); he does not participate in National Literature movements; he uses the imagery and themes of Divan poets; he uses the multiple languages and grammars of Empire; and he is influenced by one of the most famous decadent movements in Turkish literary history, the *Servet-i Fünun*. As we can see here, Republican-era literary critics in Turkey have relied heavily on the central assumptions of Tanzimat-era literary critics, particularly those published by the novelist and ideologue Midhat, in the evaluation not only of literary decadence, but of Turkish literature as a whole.

Conclusions

Focusing on the aesthetic practices of a later cohort of writers brings into sharp distinction the political stakes of decadence across the Empire-Republic divide in Turkey. In particular, literary decadence in poetry was defined contra the emerging nationalist literary tradition. As such, it was seen to undermine the nationalist re-assertion of Ottoman-Turkish literary power on the global literary stage in ways that were directly connected to the projection of Turkish political power. Yet, as articulated in Haşim's critical writing, decadent aesthetic practices were still deeply invested in bilateral cultural exchange with similar literary movements in Europe while simultaneously reanimating the thematic and linguistic register of an earlier imperial tradition. This highlights a key understanding of the role decadence plays in the connection between the Ottoman Empire

and Europe as a conduit for literary relations. We have ample scholarly evidence that Ottoman authors, such as Midhat, saw their original writing as an act of making Western ideas legible to Ottoman readers and played a significant role in the development of Ottoman-Turkish literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, what is less obvious and revealed by Ottoman decadence, are the ways in which Ottoman poets worked to make their poetics and literary development legible to European audiences. Focusing on both sides of the equation, we can understand the crucial role of not only decadent literature, but decadent literary criticism, within inter-imperial relations.

Returning to the questions that animated this journal issue's focus on decolonizing decadence, Ottoman-Turkish literary decadence has an unusual relationship with predominantly Western myths of progress and modernization. On the one hand, it can be seen as a reaction against the aesthetic practices of Turkish literary nationalism which equated realist literature with modernity and progress according to the Western model. On the other, Ottoman-Turkish decadence also engaged European aesthetic practices in order to assert a different narrative of Turkish literary development, emphasizing the parity and fundamental exchange of literary relations between Europe and Turkey. The reliance of decadent aesthetics on the linguistic and thematic registers of the Ottoman imperial Divan tradition means that its connections to imperialism came to be seen as 'manifesting' the symbolic markers of the previous, imperial social order at the same time the national social order was taking shape. Furthermore, the state-sponsored promulgation of Westernizing reform processes that spanned the Empire-Republic divide highlights that anti-Western political movements did not always go hand-in-hand with processes of nationalization as they did in other decolonial movements across the globe. As literary scholarship on Ottoman-Turkish literature continues to grapple with the unique status of Ottoman imperialism as existing simultaneously as an empire with colonial holdings, such as the Baghdad of Haşim's youth, and as a political entity that was encroached upon by European imperial expansion,

we can begin to tease out the larger implications of Ottoman decadence's reliance upon the imperial tradition.

¹ Kristin Mahoney, 'Taking Wilde to Sri Lanka and Beardsley to Harlem: Decadent Practice, Race, and Orientalism', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 49.4 (2021), 583-606 (p. 590).

² Regenia Gagnier, 'The Geopolitics of Decadence', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 49.4 (2021), 607-20 (p. 609).

³ For more on this see Donald Quataert, 'Ottoman History Writing and Changing Attitudes towards the Notion of "Decline"', *History Compass*, 1 (2003), 1-9; Jane Hathaway, 'Problems of Periodization in Ottoman History: The Fifteenth through the Eighteenth Centuries', *The Turkish Studies Association Bulletin*, 20.2 (1996), 25-31; Alp Eren Topal, 'Against Influence: Ziya Gökalp in Context and Tradition', *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 28.3 (2017), 283-310; Ayşe Zarakol, *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); and Baki Tezcan, 'Lost in Historiography: An Essay on the Reasons for the Absence of a History of Limited Government in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 45.3 (2009), 477-505.

⁴ The decline paradigm is summarized in Quataert, 'Ottoman History Writing', and Bernard Lewis, 'Some Reflections on the Decline of the Ottoman Empire', *Studia Islamica*, 9 (1958), 111-27.

⁵ See Erik Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (London: Bloomsbury, 1994).

⁶ Tezcan, 'Lost in Historiography', p. 478.

⁷ Christine Philliou, 'The Ottoman Empire's Absent Nineteenth Century: Autonomous Subjects', in *Untold Histories of the Middle East: Recovering Voices from the 19th and 20th Centuries*, ed. by Amy Singer, Christoph Neumann, and Selcuk Aksin Somel (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 143-58 (p. 143).

⁸ Arif Camoğlu, 'Inter-imperial Dimensions of Turkish Literary Modernity', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 64.3 (2018), 413-57 (p. 449).

⁹ Texts on Turkish literature that situate the rise of the Turkish novel within the late Ottoman Empire include Ahmet O. Evin, *The Origin and Development of the Turkish Novel* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1983), and Azade Seyhan, *Tales of Crossed Destinies: The Modern Turkish Novel in Comparative Context* (New York: Modern Language Association, 2008).

¹⁰ See Victoria Holbrook, *The Unreadable Shores of Love: Turkish Modernity and Mystic Romance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

¹¹ For work that challenges the idea of stagnation in the Ottoman literary sphere, see M. Kayahan Özgül, *Dîvan yolu'ndan Pera'ya selâmetle: modern Türk şiirine doğru* (Ankara: Hece Yayınları, 2006).

¹² For more on the connection between the Turkish novel and the modernization process, see Kader Konak, *East-West Mimesis: Auerbach in Turkey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Ayşe Özge Koçak Hemmat, *The Turkish Novel and the Quest for Rationality* (Boston: Brill, 2019); and Şehnaz Tahir Gürçağlar, *The Politics and Poetics of Translation in Turkey: 1923-1960* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008).

¹³ See Seyhan, *Tales of Crossed Destinies*; Nergis Ertürk, *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Monica M. Ringer and Etienne Charrière (eds), *Ottoman Culture and the Project of Modernity: Reform and Translation in the Tanzimat Novel* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2020).

¹⁴ Historiographical work under the umbrella of Ottoman Orientalism, Orientalism *alaturca*, or Ottoman colonialism has emphasized how the Ottoman state pursued models of sovereignty which increasingly mirrored European colonial discourses of imperial expansion and practices of rule towards imperial subjects on the peripheries of the empire in places like Yemen, Libya, Iraq, and Albania. See Mostafa Minawi, *The Ottoman Scramble for Africa: Empire and Diplomacy in the Sahara and the Hijaz* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); Ussama Makdisi, 'Ottoman Orientalism', *American Historical Review*, 107 (2002), 768-96; Selim Deringil, "'They Live in a State of Nomadism and Savagery': The Late Ottoman Empire and the Post-Colonial Debate", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 45 (2003), 311-42; Isa Blumi, *Rethinking the Late Ottoman Empire: A Comparative Social and Political History of Albania and Yemen, 1878-1918* (Istanbul: Isis, 2003); and Milen V. Petrov, 'Everyday Forms of Compliance: Subaltern Commentaries on Ottoman Reform, 1864-1868', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 46 (2004), 730-59.

¹⁵ Zarakol, *Before the West*, p. 36.

¹⁶ For more on ethnic Turkish nationalism see Hugh Poulton, *Top Hat, Grey Wolf, and the Crescent: Turkish Nationalism and the Turkish Republic* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

¹⁷ See Seyhan, *Tales of Crossed Destinies*, and Ertürk, *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey*.

¹⁸ For more on Haşim's life, see Beşir Ayvazoğlu, *Ömrüm Benim Bir Ateşti Ahmet Haşim'in Hayatı, Sanatı, Estetiği, Dramı* (Istanbul: Kapı Yayınları, 2016); İbrahim Demirci, *Abmet Hâşim'in Nesirleri* (Istanbul: Ebabil, 2017); İnci Enginün and Zeynep Kerman (eds), *Abmet Haşim Bütün Eserleri*, vols I-IV, *Dergah Yayınları* (Istanbul, 1991). In addition to monographs there are also special issues of the literary journals *Kitap-lık* and *Hece* dedicated to Haşim:

Kitap-lik no. 95: Ahmet Haşim ve Modern Şiir, Haziran [June] 2009; *Hece*, no. 241: Ahmet Haşim, Ocak [January] 2017.

¹⁹ Haşim's newspaper articles are collected alongside his poetry and book-length prose in the four-volume edition of Haşim's collected works, edited by İnci Enginün and Zeynep Kerman and published by Dergâh Yayınları.

²⁰ Despite the fact that Haşim signed the *Fecr-i Atî* manifesto, there is some debate over the full extent of his participation in the group. Beşir Ayvazoğlu's biography of Haşim suggests that he distanced himself from the group after signing, while İbrahim Demirci suggests that Haşim engaged with group members by publishing reviews of their poetic works and criticizing the *Servet-i Fünûn* generation.

²¹ *Servet-i Fünûn*, no. 977, 11 Şubat 1325 [24 February 1910], p. 38.

²² "Some Thoughts About Poetry" in *Global Modernists on Modernism*, ed. by Alys Moody and Stephen Ross (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 194-98 (p. 194).

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 196 and 198.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.195.

²⁷ Ahmet Haşim, 'Sembolizmin Kıymetleri', in *Ahmet Haşim Bütün Eserleri: Gurababane-i laklakcan, diğer yazıları*, ed. by İnci Enginün and Zeynep Kerman (Istanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 1991), pp. 294-95.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

²⁹ Ahmet Haşim, 'Les Tendances actuelles de la Littérature Turque', *Mercure de France*, 627 (1 August 1924), 641-55.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 644.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² For more on the decadence controversy, see Fazıl Gökçek, *Bir tartışmanın hikayesi: dekadanlar* (Istanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 2014); Saliha Paker, 'Ottoman Conceptions of Translation and its Practice: The 1897 "Classics Debate" as a focus for examining change', in *Translating Others*, ed. by Theo Hermans, 2 vols (Manchester: St Jerome Publishing, 2006), II, pp. 325-48; and Nergis Dolcerocca, 'Ottoman Tanzimat and the Decadence of Empire', in *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 245-63.

³³ Gökçek, *Bir tartışmanın hikayesi*, p. 17.

³⁴ Ahmet Midhat Efendi, 'Dekadanlar', *Sabah*, 2680, 10 Mart 1313/22 [14 March 1897].

³⁵ In reference to vernacular and Turkification in the works of Ahmet Midhat Efendi, Nergis Ertürk's 'Words Set Free' in *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey*; see Seyhan's *Tales of Crossed Destiny*, A. Holly Schissler, 'Afterword', in *Felâtn Bey and Râkîm Efendi: An Ottoman Novel*, trans. by Melih Levi and Monica M. Ringer (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2016).

³⁶ Regenia Gagnier, *Literatures of Liberalization: Global Circulation and the Long Nineteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 132.

³⁷ Canonical early Ottoman novels including Ahmet Midhat Efendi's novel *Felâtn Bey and Rakîm Efendi* and Recaizade Mahmud Ekrem's *Araba Sevdası [The Carriage Affair]* often present characters who either conform to this idea as an illustration of virtuous, productive Ottoman modernity or represent characters whose departure from these ideals leads to their downfall. See Nurdan Gürbilek, 'Dandies and Originals', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 102.2/3 (2003), 599-628; and Melis Hafez, 'Imagining Ottoman Dandies and Industrious Effendis', in *Inventing Lazînes: The Culture of Productivity in Late Ottoman Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 147-93.

³⁸ Tezcan, 'Lost in Historiography', p. 481.

³⁹ Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu, *Ahmet Haşim monografi* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2020 [1934]), p. 12.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 32 and 31.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Quoted in Ahmet Ö. Evin, *Origins and Development of the Turkish Novel* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1983), pp. 19-20

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Asım Bezirci, *Ahmet Haşim – Şairliği ve Seçme Şiirleri* (Istanbul: Gözlem Yayınları, 1967), p. 28.

⁴⁶ Yaşar Nabi, *Ahmet Haşim: Hayatı, Sanatı, Eseri* (Istanbul: Varlık Yayınları, 1952), p. 9.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁴⁹ The phrase 'halka doğru', or towards the people, comes from ideologue of Turkish nationalism Ziya Gökalp's *Principles of Turkism*. In the book he suggests that the Turkish nation needs to go both towards the people and also towards the West ['Batıya doğru'].

⁵⁰ Bezirci, *Ahmet Haşim*, p. 66.

⁵¹ For more on the representation of the beloved in Ottoman Divan poetry, see Walter G. Andrews, *Poetry's Voice, Society's Song: Ottoman Lyric Poetry* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985).