

Towards A Turkish Novel¹

The question of how the Turkish novel came into being has often been confused with the circumstances under which it made its appearance. It is difficult to delineate in concise terms the stages of development leading to the formation of the Turkish novel, for as a genre it either evolved out of an existing tradition in the Turkish literary or cultural context, nor could it have been created simply as a replica of European fiction. Obviously the tastes, beliefs and world view which prevailed in Ottoman Turkey differed widely from those prevailing in Europe. But it is not the problems of acclimatizing a genre fundamentally connected with the values and stratification of European bourgeois society to the Turkish society of the Tanzimat period that is the focus of this chapter. This will be taken up in the next chapter in connection with the ideological manifestations of Westernism. What we shall focus on is the much narrower topic of immediate antecedents: what kind of literary products and which characteristics in the execution of these literary products can be identified as precursors to the Turkish novel. We start out, therefore, with a distinction between the source of influence (which is clearly European literature) and the nature of the immediate antecedent.

To explain further, a distinction between the conscious adoption of the novel and the kinds of writing that anticipated and paved the way for it must be made. While the conscious adoption of the genre was a matter of intellectual choice and literal intention, it cannot be divorced from the more general background of Westernizing movements that had gained momentum in the nineteenth century. But the adoption was made possible by the trends formed and technical expertise gained through prior developments which are referred to as antecedents. Because the appearance of the novel in Turkey did not follow a long process of evolution, such as was the case in the West, its antecedents must be searched for among the innovations introduced in the Tanzimat period. Inasmuch as the development of the European novel can only be understood in terms of a historical process in which fictional perspective is gradually shaped by changes in the way reality is apprehended,² the emergence of the Turkish novel, much to the contrary, ought to be seen as a manifestation characteristic of a certain epoch; an epoch in which, besides all else, "the appearance and constitution of the

¹ Quoted from Ahmet Ö. Evin, "Towards A Turkish Novel", in *Origins and Development of The Turkish Novel*, (Minneapolis, 1983), pp. 41-50.

² I agree that the central issue concerning the development of the novel in the West bears on a changing perception of the universal order, "the transformation of man's reality." Erich Kahler, *The Inward Turn of the Narrative*, (Princeton, 1973), pp. 3-7.

Turkish language and literature change constantly and become enriched with new elements and correspondences."³

The activities during the 1860s in the fields of journalism and translation are significant in respect to their contribution towards the emergence of the novel. As will be recalled, in 1859 was published Şinasi's translation of French poetry, *Tercüme-i Manzume*.⁴ Reminiscent of Ottoman literary biographies (tezakir), which would only contain a few memorable lines from the *divan* of a poet, this book consisted of selections and excerpts from the works of a few French poets. The organization of this book reflected very much an Ottoman attitude toward poetry in its disregard of the wholeness of a poem; however, these translations were the first to convey Western literary aesthetics and taste into the Turkish language.

In the same year was translated Abbé Fénelon's *Télémaque* by Yusuf Kâmil Paşa, later to serve as grand vizir and a person of great influence whose house provided a salon for the intelligentsia.⁵ The manuscript, which had been widely circulated, was published three years later.⁶ Due to its popularity, a second edition appeared in 1863, published this time, not surprisingly, by Şinasi. *Tercüme-i Telemak* is important in several respects. One is that it was the first translation into Turkish of an example of Western fiction. Although it would be an exaggeration to consider *Télémaque* as being representative of the European novelistic genre, it nevertheless provided an insight into the imaginary world of Western fiction. The geography presented in this work, the comprehensive accounts of the places visited by the young Telemaque rendered with an eye for ordinary details of everyday life, made it stand out in bold contrast against a tradition of fantasy and fable described earlier.⁷

Although the translation was intended as a political treatise much in the same vein as the Ottoman mirrors of princes, *Tercüme-i Telemak* was far more vivid and therefore engaging than the moral stories in the Ottoman tradition. Because of these qualities and the order of imagination that the work reflected, it had an influence on the literary innovators. Namik Kemal's formulation of utility and entertainment seems to have derived largely from a careful consideration of *Télémaque* in contrast to *Ahlâk-i Alâi*, a sixteenth century book of

³ Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, *Ondokuzuncu Asır Türk Edebiyatı Tarihi*, 3rd ed. (Istanbul, 1967). p. 224.

⁴ See Chapter I, n. 10, *supra*.

⁵ İbnülemin Mahmut Kemal İnal, *Osmanlı Devrinde Son Sadrazımlar*, 4th ed. (Istanbul, 1969), pp. 236-38.

⁶ Şerif Mardin, *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought* (Princeton, 1962), p. 241: the editions of the Turkish translations of *Télémaque* were, Yusuf Kâmil, *Tercüme-i Telemak* (Istanbul, 1862); 2nd ed. (Istanbul, 1863), further eds. 1867, 1869. Abridged ed.: *Cümel-i Hikemiye-i Telemak* (Istanbul, 1892-93).

⁷ Mardin, *Genesis*, p. 242

ethics which had become widely popular in the nineteenth century.⁸ Inasmuch as he found the latter book stifling, he was impressed with the order and organization of the former, and in comparing the didactic value of the books, he stated that "learning from *Ahlâk-i Alâi* is like improving oneself in a penitentiary but to derive benefit from stories such as *Télémaque* is like attending class in a well-organized garden."⁹ This translation was the first work to call attention to the qualities of Western fiction among the Tanzimat intelligentsia who, -until then, had been caught up in reading Western philosophy.¹⁰

Yusuf Kâmil Paşa chose to translate the book because it communicated so well the ideas of the Enlightenment which impressed the Turkish intelligentsia. The way in which these ideas were stressed and presented in the translation, and how they contributed towards the shaping of Young Ottoman thought is described elsewhere in English¹¹ Suffice it to say that by describing the rights and privileges of the rulers and the subjects, by discussing education and commerce, and by showing the evils of corruption and intemperance, *Télémaque* not only took up the three great themes of post-Tanzimat reformism—the maintenance of political order, the curing of the economic malaise and the criticism of moral disintegration in the society-but also showed for the first time how these themes could be effectively treated in fiction.

Unfortunately, the style in which the book was translated recalled the mirrors of princes. Yusuf Kâmil Paşa, who was anxious lest his intention of providing a serious political treatise be misunderstood, employed the lofty style of high Ottoman prose and further explained that a vizir of such a high standing as himself would translate a work such as this one, despite its deceiving resemblance to a story because of the value of the moral contained therein.¹² In trying to give *Tercüme-i Telemak* an appearance like that of an Ottoman treatise on ethics, Yusuf Kâmil Paşa ignored the discrepancy between the conventional formality of high Ottoman prose and the expressiveness required of fiction, and his choice of style thus detracted from what may have been otherwise a more significant move away from the tradition.

⁸ Kınalızade Ali Çelebi (1510-1572) wrote *Ahlâk-i Alâi* in 1564; its revival occurred after it was published in book form in Egypt (Bulaq, 1248/1833), The treatise is an example of "mirror for princes" a genre which the Ottomans derived from the Indo-Persian tradition and it dealt primarily with the subject of statecraft.

⁹ Namık Kemal, *İntibah*, Mustafa Nihat Özön, ed. (Istanbul, 1971), pp. 24-5.

¹⁰ A third book of translations made in 1859 contained dialogues from Voltaire, Fontanelle and Fenelon: *Muhaverat-ı Hikemiye*. Münif Efendi, tr. (Istanbul, IS59-iSO).

¹¹ Mardin. *Genesis*. pp. 243-4.

¹² Mustafa Nihat, *Türkçe'de Roman* (Istanbul, 1936), p. 144

But the translation was undertaken with no intention of literary innovation, and the influence of *Tercüme-i Telemak* as an example of prose fiction was purely coincidental. Even so, the book played an important role in the development of modern Turkish literature by becoming a topic of dispute between progressives and traditionalists and causing the argument to spill into the literary field. The traditionalists accepted the work as a book of ethics but when they questioned the necessity of translating one from a Western language while the traditional library was full of such works, the progressives defended the value of the translation. The dispute later developed into a polemic concerning the value of fiction as a proper vehicle for moral teaching. The fact that Namık Kemal's views on *Tercüme-i Telemak*, quoted above, were written in 1876 in response to criticism still coming from reactionary quarters shows how seriously the book continued to affect literary circles fourteen years after its publication. *Télémaque*, ultimately, did not serve as an example for the Turkish novelists, but pointed to the novel by engendering such a polemic, as a result of which the progressive intelligentsia also became sensitive to the significance of their role as literary innovators.

A fuller notion of the European novel emerged as a result of other translations made after 1862. That year, an abridged translation of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* began to be serialized in a newspaper.¹³ *Robinson Crusoe* was translated by the imperial chronicler Lutfi, oddly enough from the Arabic, and was published as a book in 1864. At the end of the decade, translation activity was spurred by a younger group of writers gathering around newly established papers and journals. The serialization in 1869 of Chateaubriand's *Atala*, in 1870 of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* and the next year of Dumas père's *Monte Cristo* shows the increasing romantic tendencies among this younger group which included Recaizade Ekrem and Sami Paşazade Sezai. Beginning in the early 1870s there was a gradual shift in the publishing industry and more emphasis was placed on publishing books. Among translations of Western novels that appeared in book form prior to 1876 were Dumas père's *Pauline* (1871), René LeSage's *Le Diable boiteux* (1872), Paul de Kock's *Monsieur Choublonc à la recherche de sa Femme* (1873), Anne Radcliffe's *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* (1873), Eugene Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* (1875) and Xavier de Montepin's *Les Mystères de l'Inde* (1875). A translation of Longus's *Daphnis and Chloë* that appeared in 1873

¹³ In *Ruzname-i Ceride-i Havadis*, a regular supplement to the newspaper owned by an Englishman, Winston Churchill, beginning on 19 October 1862.

must also be mentioned in connection with the interest, discernible throughout this period, in Western classics as the basis of Western culture.¹⁴

At first sight, the foregoing list may be viewed as showing degradation of taste following Yusuf Kâmil Paşa's idealism translating Fénélon, but it accurately reflects the formation of notions, expectations and attitudes concerning the novel. It conveys at the same time, the effects of the rise of commercial publishing and proposals for a new understanding of fiction. The publication of such adventure and mystery novels as those by Defoe, Duma' Radcliffe, and Montepin, regardless of the discrepancy of genre and literary value, followed naturally the publication of Eastern tale and *meddah* stories; the established audience for popular fiction assured their commercial success. These publications also helped further increase the audience and create the habit of reading for pleasure among the middle classes.

The interest in Eugène Sue and Paul de Kock stemmed from the fact that these writers depicted in great detail Parisian life; Sue, the underworld and de Kock, the bourgeoisie. In the second half of the nineteenth century, certain upper classes in Istanbul tried to fashion their life in imitation of the Parisian society and there was a great curiosity or nostalgia for Paris depending on whether an individual had been there. While Paris set the tone for Istanbul's *haut société*, it was also looked upon as the center of learning by the intelligentsia. Ideas, like fashions, came from Paris and changed the intellectual atmosphere and social ambiance of the post-Tanzimat Istanbul. But the interest in Paul de Kock, and to a lesser extent in Eugene Sue, had another dimension as well. The idealistic aspect of the latter's novels in depicting the pathetic situation of the lower classes had its appeal to the reformists. More importantly, it was the manner of depletion of both novelists that captured the imagination of the Turkish writers, who first began noticing the crucial technique of placing events in a well-described physical milieu through reading de Kock. The insistence on Le Sage also suggests a similar quest for novelistic discipline. Thirteen years after the appearance in Turkish of *Le Diable boiteux*, itself originally an adaptation from Spanish, Ahmet Vefik Paşa, translator of Molière, turned to *Gil Blas de Santillane*. This early eighteenth-century novel, first translated into English by Tobias Smollett in 1749, bridged the gap between the Spanish picaresque and realism. In a sense, it anticipated Balzac's technique in presenting the personality of characters through a description of their appearance. These early translations intensified and directed the search for realism, and pointed the way to Alphonse Daudet, the Goncourt

¹⁴ The first book to introduce ancient Greek philosophy to Turkish readers was Cricor Chumarian, *Ahrégé de la vie des plus illustres philosophes a l'antiquité* (Izmir, 1854), bilingual French and Turkish text.

Brothers and eventually to Zola. But the technique of the French realists did not enter the atelier of the Turkish novelists until the end of the 1880s.

The influence of the newspaper in paving the way for the novel was significant in different respects. As has been pointed out earlier, the rise of Turkish journalism was correlated with the desire of the intelligentsia to create a modern political community¹⁵ by spreading the notions of rights and privileges espoused as a result of the Tanzimat reforms. The decade of the 1860s witnessed a concerted effort in this direction. Although the first unofficial newspaper in Turkish, *Ceride-i Havadis* was founded by William Churchill in 1840, the establishment of *Tercüman-ı Ahval* by Şinasi and Ağâh Efendi in 1860 is commonly acknowledged as the real beginning of Turkish journalism, partly because of the fact that the former paper eschewed critical editorial policy and R'BS dependent on government subsidies, and partly because of nationalist sentiments in the writing of cultural history. In the introduction to the first issue, Şinasi wrote: "The people living in a social body, being charged with so many obligations . . . have also the right to express their opinion as a part of their general vested rights. . . . If this statement needs a proof, it suffices to point to the political newspapers of nations whose minds have been enlightened by the force of education."¹⁶ Once more must be noted the consistent themes of the Tanzimat intellectuals: the cohesiveness of the body politic (at the roots of Turkish nationalism to emerge later was this transition from Islamic community to modern citizenry), the role of education in achieving progress, and the proven superiority of Europe in these two respects. The novels of what may be called the didacticist-realist movement between 1875 and 1893 as exemplified by the work of Ahmet Mithat would consist of interpolations of these themes as well as the contrapuntal theme of the moral superiority of Islam as compared to the depravity of Christian Europe.

The emphasis on the political, setting the tone of Turkish journalism, is another aspect of Şinasi's introduction that must be noted. The generation of the 1860s took for granted the basic principles of the Tanzimat reforms. Hence, they developed a critical view and gradually took a stand against the growing autocracy of the higher bureaucrats, whom they saw as betrayers of these very principles of basic freedom¹⁷ Journalism was the first stage of the politicization of Tanzimat idealism and it anticipated the formation in 1865 of a secret society, the Patriotic Alliance, by the Young Ottomans. But the first half of the decade, before a

¹⁵ For the concept and development of modern "political community" see Reinhard Bendix, "Social Stratification and Political Community," *Embattled Reason* (New York, 1976), pp. 222-49, 378.

¹⁶ Translated and quoted in Kemal Karpat, "The Mass Media; Turkey," in *The Political Modernization of Japan and Turkey*, R.E. Ward and Dankwart Rustow, eds. (Princeton, 1964). p. 258.

¹⁷ For attitudes of the Tanzimat bureaucrats, see Carter V. Findlay, *Bureaucratic Reform in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, 1980), pp. 212-18,

movement began in the direction of organized political dissent, was the time to assess the implications of Tanzimat and to extend a new consciousness to the people.

In this respect, newspapers complemented the educational reform undertaken since the 1830s; they became the most effective means of public instruction as attested to by the rapid rise of readership. By 1865 there were four dailies and five other periodicals published in Istanbul, and the circulation of one of them even reached 24,000.¹⁸ This figure compares with the 7,830 students attending a total of 108 secular intermediate schools throughout the empire in 1867.¹⁹ In 1874, there were only 261 students attending the four civilian secondary schools established in Istanbul by the Ministry of Education.²⁰ These figures reveal the significant role of the press in disseminating ideas and knowledge; concepts such as fatherland, nation, humanity, justice and freedom reached the public consciousness through newspapers before educational reforms even began affecting the masses.²¹

The didacticist intentions behind publishing newspapers also pointed to the need for developing a language appropriate for the clear expression of ideas. In the same introduction as quoted earlier, Şinasi wrote: "Just as speech is a gift of nature intended to enable communication, so too composition, the best discovery of the human intellect, consists of the art of describing speech in writing. In consideration of this truth, therefore, a warning is now entered, in connection with [the editorial responsibility of] this office concerning the necessity of deploying increasingly in this paper an order of language comprehensible to all people."²² Rendered into English as literally as possible, this communique itself demonstrates how crucial the linguistic problem was. Almost all the editors of progressive papers and journals that appeared in the 1860s were aware of the need to simplify the written language in order to express clearly complex new ideas. Münif Efendi, later Paşa, who in 1860 published translations of selected dialogues by Voltaire, Fontanelle and Fènèlon,²³ also wrote in the introduction of the first issue of *Mecmua-i Funun*, the journal of the Ottoman Scientific Society, established in 1861, that the periodical would employ "simple phraseology in a way that everybody would understand."²⁴

A mode of public discourse compatible with the mission of the intelligentsia to popularize ideas presented a formidable challenge to the rhetoric of classic Ottoman, and

¹⁸ Karpat., *op. cit.*, p. 259.

¹⁹ Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, vol. II (Cambridge, 1977), p. 112.

²⁰ Osman Nuri Ergin, *Türkiye Maarif Tarihi*, new ed., vol. 1-2 (Istanbul, 1977), p. 500.

²¹ Tanpınar, p. 224.

²² Quoted in Ağâh Sırrı Levend, *Türk Dilinde Gelişme ve Sadeleşme Safhaları* (Ankara, 1949), p. 99.

²³ See no. 10, *supra*.

²⁴ Levend, p. 99.

along with it, to the elitism of the "high" literary tradition. The early newspapers thus served as ateliers in which a new language was being created. In the 1860s practically the entire corps of Turkey's progressive intellectuals was involved in journalism and collectively they searched for clarity of expression often echoing one another's remarks. Yet opposition to simple and direct style came from the same quarters that objected to literary innovation. Just as the polemics on the value of fiction helped crystallize the opinions of the innovators, so too, the polemics on language led to a clearer notion of what needed to be done. Novelists figured prominently in the debates on language. By 1871, Ahmet Mithat would offer a radical solution to earlier proposals made by Şinasi and Narmık Kemal by declaring that the language of the people ought to be used in writing.²⁵ His views anticipated the basic principle around which the Turkish language reform movement would be organized in the twentieth century.²⁶ Not all the progressive intellectuals of the period shared Ahmet Mithat's degree of radicalism insofar as language simplification was concerned; some would cringe at the thought of compromising the aesthetics of prose on account of populism. But the prose style of the first novelists was shaped during their apprenticeship as journalists, as a result of which they acquired a facility of expression that enabled them to address large audiences. A journalistic style thus developed also paved the way for variegated types of didactic novels in which description of events took precedence over depiction of situations.

As the peculiar nature of its antecedents reveal, the Turkish novel did not initially develop out of the kind of urge to capture life which one finds controlling and directing artistic creativity in Europe after the Renaissance. It was inspired by a motivation on the part of the intelligentsia to say something about life. As Tanpınar has pointed out, the first authors who wrote novels in Turkey were not born with the imagination of a novelist;²⁷ they began by imitating a genre which lent itself well to their purposes. The early translations had shown how much more appropriate the novel was for commenting on specific and concrete aspects of contemporary life than were the fable or the parable. The emerging populism of the era required a clarity of message, and, therefore, not only the language but the very intention behind the early Turkish novel had to clash with the Neo-Platonism of the classical Ottoman allegory that operated, to borrow a phrase from Robert Dunnington, "through a veil which half reveals, in the very act of half conceding," a deeper meaning. The obsession with clarity pointed to the opposite extreme; episodes in the abridged translation of *Les Misérables* were

²⁵ *Basiret*, no. 639, 23 May 1871; cf. Levend, p. 141.

²⁶ For an account in English, see Uriel Heyd, *Language Reform in Modern Turkey* (Jerusalem, 1954).

²⁷ Tanpınar, p. 265.

each written in the same style as the criminal reports, issued by the Ministry of Gendarmerie, that appeared in the papers of the period.²⁸ And so with the early *romans à thèse*, the tone of which either revealed the commitment of the idealist or the eagerness of the journalist.

The first indications of a Turkish novel came from a different direction in the form of shorter narratives that attempted to bridge the gap between the popular stories of the *meddah* tradition and the novel proper, before fiction was freely co-opted to serve, a more serious purpose than mere entertainment by the Young Ottoman generation. In 1871 was published Ahmet Mithat's *Letaif-i Rivayat* (Finest Stories); the next year appeared the first of the seven long stories collectively called *Musameretname* (Night Entertainment) by Emin Nihat and *Taaşukk-ı Talat ve Fitnat* (The Love of Talat and Fitnat) by Şemseddin Sami. Although in many respects all three works recalled the simple-mindedness of popular stories, they were nevertheless based on themes taken directly from contemporary life and contained direct commentary on some of the social issue of the period. In these stories is found for the first time in Turkish literature a concern with the destiny of the commonplace individual.

²⁸ Mustafa Nihat, *Türkçe'de Roman*, p. 156.