

volupté

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 4, Issue 2

Winter 2021

Wasted Youth and Reunion in Death: Imperial Decline and Decadent Aesthetics
in Fin-de-Siècle Ottoman Culture

Özen Nergis Dolcerocca

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 December 2021

Date of Publication: 21 December 2021

Citation: Özen Nergis Dolcerocca, 'Wasted Youth and Reunion in Death:
Imperial Decline and Decadent Aesthetics in Fin-de-Siècle Ottoman Culture',
Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies, 4.2 (2021), 1–18.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.v.v4i2.1585.g1699

volupte.gold.ac.uk



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

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Wasted Youth and Reunion in Death: Imperial Decline and Decadent Aesthetics in Fin-de-Siècle Ottoman Culture¹

Özen Nergis Dolcerocca

University of Bologna

The one and only play of Ottoman writer, translator, and critic Muallim Naci (1850-1893), *Heder* [*Loss*], was published in 1909.² Alternating between prose and verse, it makes significant use of Naci's signature refined poetics and combines polished, classical Ottoman poetic forms with a melancholy aesthetic. The play concerns the pessimistic and sensitive protagonist Hazım, an idealist poet who works as a clerk in a courthouse, gradually loses his will to live, and suffers an emotional breakdown. Throughout, the play conveys a sense of crisis and rapidly approaching demise. Although it begins at a dinner party among inebriated guests, the lively opening scene is contrasted with the morbid conversation between Hazım and his family friend Kamil, and is laden with uncanny metaphors that involve cold-blooded murderers, patricide, gravediggers, and doomsday. Hazım's father has been unjustly exiled from Istanbul to a remote Anatolian town for speaking against corruption in public administration. With a pervasive sense of resentment against society and its moral decay, we – along with his grieving mother – watch this young and passionate man grow more and more depressed, fraught, passive, and physically ill. As the title *Heder* suggests, upon hearing the news of his father's death, Hazım passes away. Despite the undertones of social melodrama, the play has noteworthy decadent elements, including elevated and overrefined language, the romantic image of an idealist failed artist, a dead father, a mother-in-mourning, intoxication, resentment, and lyric death.

When *Heder* was published, the Ottoman Empire had been enduring a profound political and financial crisis for fifty years. The nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire saw military coups, frequent changes of monarchs and grand viziers, economic subjugation by Western powers with the establishment of the Ottoman Public Debt Administration, and pervasive corruption at all levels of the imperial administration. Conflict between the ruling class of the imperial system and

the rising class in support of a nation-state had come to a head with Sultan Abdülhamid's period of autocracy (1878-1908). Although the constitution was re-established in 1908 with much enthusiasm and hope, it did not prevent the rapid dissolution of the empire. The optimism was immediately crushed under further uprisings, wars, and financial ruin. Thus, at the turn of the century, the Ottoman Empire was withstanding a massive systemic crisis on an unprecedented scale.³

In contrast to the political upheavals, the Ottoman cultural scene had never been as dynamic and prolific as in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁴ It saw the burgeoning of modern theatre and performance culture initiated by the Armenian community; a rapid increase in the number of literary periodicals and newspapers; and a vibrant intellectual scene that gave rise to key cultural debates including the famous 'decadence controversy' (1897-1900). For the first time, *tebaa* [subjects] of the empire – evidently those who had the privilege of literacy – produced, translated, and read literature in many languages, among which were Turkish, Greek, Armenian, Arabic, Hebrew, Persian, and Bulgarian. Within this cultural scene and in the face of imperial decline, modernist and decadent tendencies emerge.⁵ During the last years of the Ottoman Empire, a form of decadent culture developed, particularly inspired by French Symbolists and Parnassians. Most of these writers, including Recâizâde Mahmut Ekrem (1847-1914), Tevfik Fikret (1867-1915) and Halid Ziya (1866-1945), gathered around the literary journal *Servet-i Fünun* [*The Riches of Science*]. These authors developed an excessively elaborate language and featured fin-de-siècle decadent motifs, styles, and themes in their works.

Ottoman decadence: a methodological predicament

While the *Servet-i Fünun* group employed decadent themes and techniques, these intellectuals never identified with or subscribed to a well-articulated movement or programme of decadence. In fact, when accused of being 'degenerates' during the decadence controversy, many shied away from identifying with the term.⁶ Additionally, most of their works (though not all) lacked many defining

avant-garde aspects, such as an exploration of the abnormal, extreme eroticism, or anarchic individualism. The question thus arises: how decadent were these Ottoman writers? Given the self-professed belief of Naci's protagonist in an ideal Ottoman-Turkish society, could we really consider *Heder* a decadent play? These are part of larger methodological questions in comparative literature and cultural history which I will not examine in detail in this article. However, it is important to point out two potential fallacies in methodology about understanding peripheral aesthetics on the one hand, and the politics of aestheticism on the other. The first fallacy is an assumed logic of resemblance or equivalence between the centre (as in the core canon of decadence) and the periphery as a basis of comparison. To put it simply, this perspective would produce such problematic research questions as 'who is the Oscar Wilde of Ottoman literature?' The second issue is what I term the dissociation bias: the preconception that aestheticism implies total dissociation from political, economic, or social matters. That is, any aberration from extreme individualism, or sign of political commitment, would disqualify a work from being categorized as decadent. This last point has of course been rightly challenged by many scholars of decadence.⁷ It is nonetheless still relevant to peripheral aesthetics, particularly to the Ottoman-Turkish literary field, where a belated social process of individualization is commonly taken as a sign of inauthenticity in modern literature.⁸

Despite recent scholarly efforts to overcome them, these methodological predicaments still trouble our understanding of literary history. To explore decadence in Ottoman modern theatre, which is the main subject of this article, we need to treat decadence as an aesthetic historical category and historicize it within the Ottoman-Turkish context. As Matei Calinescu suggests, 'the concept of decadence should be used very cautiously and only in very precisely defined and circumscribed cases, any generalization being potentially misleading and harmful'.⁹ Following Adam Alston and Alexandra Bickley Trott's transnational approach in this volume, Jane Desmarais and David Weir's current effort to expand decadence studies geographically, and the recent edited volume on 'Global Decadence' in *Feminist Modernist Studies*,¹⁰ I will discuss decadent elements in

Ottoman theatre, focusing particularly on Naci's *Heder* and Rezaizade Mahmut Ekrem's *Vuslat* (1874).¹¹ Instead of narrowing decadence down to a strictly limited time period and geography (i.e., the late Victorian period and fin-de-siècle France), I suggest that we regard Ottoman decadence as the expression of a precise historical moment at the turn of the century, right before the fall of the empire.

***Dekadanlar*: A fin-de-siècle malady**

Decadent aesthetics capture the melancholy spirit of Ottoman intelligentsia, especially following the great losses suffered in the Russo-Turkish war (1877-1878), Abdülhamid's despotic reign, and the quick disintegration of the 1908 revolution. Many historians trace the roots of this crisis back to the seventeenth century.¹² So, by the turn of the century, the imperial tradition had already been in gradual 'decline' for almost three centuries. Yet the sense of urgency in the empire's rapidly approaching end was most felt in the 1890s. The pervasive effects of imperial decadence included: the revocation of social and political ideals of the empire; loss of loyalty of its subjects; the waning legitimacy of the sultanate, patrimonial rule, and state authority; failure of reformation efforts; and widespread corruption both in administrative and social relations.¹³ There is of course no simple correspondence between these historical factors and art. I would argue that the relation is instead mediated, which is particularly visible in two aspects. First, the literary and artistic field responded to the historical crisis with restlessness and a need for self-examination regarding its own identity. Authors discussed Western and Eastern elements in literature at length, considering how to synthesize them, and how to achieve an authentic national or imperial identity. The decadence question in the Ottoman Empire thereby became a common ground for intellectual debate about language, style, form, translation, and authenticity. Secondly, decadence found artistic expression in aestheticism, with inspiration from French Symbolists, decadents, and Parnassians, on one side, and elevated classical Ottoman poetic forms, on the other. Many works engaged with its signature elements such as consciousness of crisis, resentment, exhaustion, morbidity, ennui, and malaise.

While many authors who employed these strategies were part of the *Edebiyat-ı Cedide* [New Literature] movement, there were others, like Naci, who had fundamental disagreements with this group in his early career and pursued an aestheticism closer to classical Ottoman literature in his poetry.¹⁴

What later came to be known as the *Dekadanlar Tartışması* [Decadence Controversy] was sparked by the most prolific author and translator of the era, Ahmet Midhat (1844-1912). In his 1897 article titled ‘Dekadanlar’, Midhat attacked *Edebiyat-ı Cedide* authors for writing in an extremely ornate language and artificial style that alienated its readers, and he accused them of imitating the French decadents.¹⁵ The debate lasted for over two years, with several actors involved, and it became an effective ground for theoretical and critical discussions on literary language and identity. Decadence sparked a heated debate concerning authenticity in the Ottoman literary field due to the inspiration *Edebiyat-ı Cedide* authors drew from French decadents, which led to concerns about foreign influences and the ‘cult of artificiality’ that lies at the heart of decadent poetics. The first concern, which we may call an ‘anxiety of influence’ – exemplified in Midhat’s accusation of imitation – has been a common thread in Ottoman-Turkish criticism as well as in fiction. Let me give a widely-discussed example: Ottoman intellectuals’ anxiety about originality found expression in the figure of the *züppe* [dandy] – the over-Westernized, arrogant, wastrel character ridiculed by all. Many authors, spearheaded by Midhat, mocked those inspired by the West for expressing imitated desires, copied attitudes, decadent sensibilities, or derivative plots. The genuine, original *milli* [native]¹⁶ thought was described only with respect to this strawman called *züppe*.

Edebiyat-ı Cedide writers, however, were alert to this fallacy, which brings us to the second aspect of decadence that attracted these intellectuals: the ‘cult of artificiality’. Instead of giving in to easy binaries between East vs. West, local vs. foreign, original vs. copy, these writers renounced such idealist notions as authenticity (as in achieving an authentic local/national literature) and originality. Decadent aesthetics, in this context, offered expressive possibilities for pushing the boundaries of speech and aesthetic conventions while embracing elusiveness, contradictions, and

deflections. Ekrem's novel *Araba Sevdası* [*Carriage Affair*] (1898) is a good example for such a reading of *dandyisme*. As many critics have pointed out, Ekrem's text is a unique work among Tanzimat novels.¹⁷ It stages the failure of any attempt at authenticity and communicability of the artwork, through and together with its protagonist Bihruz, the over-Westernized and failed author-translator dandy. Nergis Ertürk argues that 'it is with *Araba Sevdası* that Ottoman Turkish literature takes as its task not the fabrication of national representations but the figuration of a non-identitarian social *despite and with* modern alienated self-consciousness'.¹⁸ While traditionalist writers used the figure of the dandy to caricature those influenced by the West, such as Midhat in his novel *Felâtnun Bey ile Râkım Efendi* [*Felâtnun Bey and Râkım Efendi*] (1875), Ekrem turned it against itself, negating the ideal of authenticity implied in such caricaturizing.

Although it is Midhat who initiated the decadence controversy, the debate originates in a dispute between Naci and Ekrem, the two authors addressed in this article.¹⁹ Reading Ekrem alongside Naci within the context of literary decadence might therefore surprise some of those familiar with Turkish literary history. Naci, who was well-versed both in Divan and Persian poetic tradition, and in modern French literature, came under attack for being a traditionalist, hostile to linguistic modernization. As A. H. Tanpınar argues in his history of nineteenth-century Turkish literature, most of these claims about Naci's orthodoxy and conservatism were unjustified.²⁰ Naci in fact sought innovation within traditional forms. The Ekrem-Naci debate is not within the scope of this study, but it is important to point out that, despite their professed difference over poetic innovation, both writers engaged with an aesthetics of decadence in different ways. However, before going into the discussion of Ekrem's *Vuslat* and Naci's *Heder*, let us briefly look at theatre during the Tanzimat era in the capital of the Ottoman Empire.

Modern drama in the Tanzimat era

Modern drama, or European-style theatre, in the Ottoman cultural scene dates back to the eighteenth century, when non-Muslim communities formed amateur groups and European

troupes that regularly visited Istanbul.²¹ The early nineteenth century saw many theatrical experiments in the European style spearheaded by Armenian groups.²² With major modernizing reform attempts known as *Tanzimat* [reorganization], just as we observe in the literary and print culture, theatre in the imperial capital flourished with many production companies, actors, playwrights, and critics. However, this vibrant theatre culture went largely unnoticed by scholars, as Hülya Adak and Rüstem Ertuğ Altınay demonstrate in their special issue of *Comparative Drama* on performance in Turkey:

Turkey's complicated relationship with Europe has resulted in its exclusion from studies of European theatre. In many cases, Turkey is also ignored in studies on Middle Eastern theatre, which is dominated by works on Arab, Israeli, and Iranian theatre and performance cultures.²³

While there have been recent studies on this subject in Turkish, particularly on the Ottoman Armenian theatre, the dramatic scene of the Tanzimat period still needs scholarly attention.

After the declaration of the Gülhane edict (1839), historian Metin And reports that four theatres opened in the city, which established a lively performance scene with hundreds of plays, both original and in translation, produced mainly in Armenian and in Ottoman Turkish.²⁴ It is important to note that theatre in its non-Western form had always been an important part of Ottoman culture. Different genres such as *meddah*, *ortaoyunu*, *Karagöz*, and puppetry were regularly performed in public spaces practically all over the empire.²⁵ In the nineteenth century, these traditional forms, known as *halk tiyatrosu* [popular people's theatre] and *köy oyunları* [village plays], met European style drama: an encounter which produced its own particular, yet productive, tensions, negotiations, and syntheses. This synthesis would become extremely useful during Abdülhamid's autocracy (1878-1908), when state oppression and censorship, as well as ongoing wars, disrupted the theatre scene. In the middle of the century, actors developed a new genre called *tuluat*, which brought together traditional *ortaoyunu* style improvisation and European style subjects. By performing *tuluat*, many troupes avoided official concessions (granted to Güllü Agop by the Porte) and censorship. Luckily for the playwrights and actors of the time, and sadly for literary

historians, *tuluat* plays went unpublished, partly due to their improvisatory nature, and partly to avoid censorship.²⁶

The 1908 revolution, which ended Abdülhamid's autocracy by re-establishing constitutional monarchy, resuscitated the literary scene. A great number of periodicals and publishing houses were established, with an unprecedented number of published materials made available to the reading public. Many theatrical groups were formed at the same time. The theatre scene in the empire had never seen as much dynamism as in its final decades. Leading intellectuals established drama clubs and written plays for them to perform. A National Theatre and a Conservatory of Music were established six years later in 1914.

Political and intellectual currents following this period saw fundamental controversies between modernizers, conservatives in support of an Islamic-imperial identity, and nationalists arguing for establishing a nation-state. The predominant issues discussed among these groups were the causes of the imperial decline; Western civilization and the scope for Westernization in the reforms; the quest for a revolutionary change; institutional reforms concerning the state, religion, family, economy, and education; and, finally, modernization of the literary and cultural field, with emphases on language, script, literature, and art.²⁷ Theatre was also a dominant subject in these debates: what should modern theatre look like? What was its function? Was it just entertainment or could it be used to educate the public? Modern theatre was a new cultural experience. For the first time, performance required a specific venue, instead of coffeeshops or public squares; it required its own theatrical building; and the theatre became professional and institutionalized.²⁸ It also demanded a certain type of etiquette from its audience, who mostly consisted of urbanites (predominantly in Istanbul, but also in Izmir and Bursa) adapting to a new modern lifestyle. Critics and playwrights discussed this new cultural experience in periodicals and in the introductions to their own plays. They were well versed in '*La querelle du théâtre*' of eighteenth-century France, including Denis Diderot's moral theory of the theatre, Louis-Sébastien Mercier's arguments on its didactic function, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's violent criticism.²⁹

The leading writer and political activist of the time, Namık Kemal, wrote extensively on European-style theatre and authored several plays, including *Vatan Yahud Silistre* [*The Motherland, or Silistra*] (1873). Many critics consider the eventful performance of this play in 1873 as a milestone in Ottoman theatre due to the police raid and an ensuing censorship on theatre that was to last until 1908.³⁰ In this regard, Ekrem's *Vuslat* and Naci's *Heder* need to be considered as products of two different eras: published in 1874, *Vuslat* partially follows Kemal's dramatic understanding that combines romanticism with social melodrama. It is an early example of dark and sentimental domestic drama that brings together the traditional theme of an impossible unity between lovers, and elements of European-style drama with a female protagonist, who is a slave and an artist in conflict with social norms. Naci's *Heder*, published posthumously in 1909 – right after the revolution that ended Abdulhamit's autocracy – was part of a more liberal political and cultural atmosphere. Debilitated with a sense of hopelessness, *Heder's* protagonist is consumed in his resentment against corrupt society. The play openly discusses the imperial degeneration through the noble alienation of the artist from the crowd.

Reflections of imperial decline in Ottoman theatre took different forms. On the one hand, many playwrights wrote what And classifies as romantic dramas.³¹ Some took up mythological or historical narratives, such as Ahmet Midhat's *Siyavuş yahut Fırs-i Kadîmde Bir Facia* [*Siyavush or a Tragedy in Ancient Persia*] (1883) and Kemal's *Celâleddin Harzemşah* (1876); while others explored love and passion with symbolism and complex and excessive imagery, such as Abdülhak Hamit's *Finten* (1916) and *Zeyneb* (1909).³² On the other hand, writers who were interested in exploring the human psyche and the relationship between individual and society wrote domestic family dramas. Ekrem's *Vuslat* and Halid Ziya's *Kabus* [*Nightmare*] (1918) are among the most notable examples of the genre, along with Naci's *Heder*. Despite the fact that Naci was a vocal critic of Ekrem and *Servet-i Fünun*, all three writers favoured refined artistic forms in different manners. They were concerned with problems of technique and style, and they employed dramatic form in search of a new poetic language. If he had been alive, Naci probably would have been scandalized to be considered within

the historical and aesthetic context of decadence. Nevertheless, these writers' professed alliances and identifications do not alter the fact that their works converge around fin-de-siècle pessimism and decadent aesthetics. Unlike the romantic-revolutionary dramas of Kemal, the entertaining and didactic plays of Midhat, or the straightforward melodramas of Mehmet Rifat, plays with decadent elements were marked by their over-refined language, idealistic aspirations, gloomy perspectives, melancholy, and death.

Wasted youth and reunion in death: *Heder and Vuslat*

The full title of Ekrem's 1874 play is *Vuslat yahut Süreksiz Sevinç* [Reunion or Ephemeral Joy]. The title comes from the protagonist's name Vuslat, a name derived from Persian, meaning unity, union, or reunion with one's beloved. The title clearly refers to the tradition of mystic romance, in which the union of love signifies union with the divine. The plot is quite straightforward: Vuslat is a *halayık* – a domestic slave bought off at an early age – who falls in love with the son of her owners. Her love is reciprocated, and the lovers compose poems and songs for each other. Vuslat is then sold to a merchant who moves to Cyprus, after which both lovers fall sick with a mysterious illness. When they finally reunite on their death beds in Istanbul, they die hand in hand. The audience was certainly no stranger to this romantic plot, not only thanks to Divan and mystic love epic traditions, but also to Ekrem's intertextual references to Kemal's *Zavallı Çocuk* [Poor Child] (1873).³³ However, beyond its 'love lost to death' trope, the formal, stylistic, and thematic elements of Ekrem's play require closer examination.

Ekrem's first plays, which were European-style dramas titled *Afife Anjelik* (1870) and *Atala* (1873), were heavily criticized for imitating French literature. The former is loosely based on the medieval legend of 'Geneviève de Brabant', which Ekrem certainly knew from Jacques Offenbach's operetta first performed in Paris in 1859, and from its 1868 translation into Ottoman Turkish by Memduh Paşa titled *Tercüme-i Hikaye-i Jeneviev*.³⁴ The latter, *Atala*, was directly based on Chateaubriand's novel with the same title, which Ekrem translated into Ottoman Turkish in 1871.

Ekrem, an early literary modernist, did not seem to mind these attacks, as we can see in his tongue-in-cheek introduction to *Vuslat*.³⁵ He notes that he suddenly had the urge to write a *milli* play, that is, a story that takes place in the Ottoman Empire and involves local characters. *Vuslat* takes place in an upper-class Istanbul household and the melancholy love story between *Vuslat* and *Muhsin* unfolds against a backdrop of social issues regarding Istanbul nobility, domestic slavery, and the status of women in Ottoman society.

The play opens with *Naime Hanım*'s appraisal for her domestic slave, who would soon be sold and married off to a rich suitor. She discusses in detail with her older *azatlı cariye* [freed slave] how much she should ask for *Vuslat*. The first act consists of this business trade, in which the so-called suitor's mother assesses *Vuslat*'s worth, while *Vuslat* performs her reading, writing, and singing skills. The act establishes the hypocrisy of the slave-owning family who claims that *Vuslat* is 'like a daughter' to them, and yet quickly sell her off to a total stranger. *Vuslat* is clearly Ekrem's response to contemporary debates on slavery and the slave trade.³⁶ Like many other Tanzimat writers, including *Midhat*, he supports abolition. Moreover, Ekrem places a drama of sensibility and domestic tragedy within the ideological world of the fin-de-siècle empire. *Vuslat* has unusual traits for a dramatic protagonist: a woman, a domestic slave, a desiring subject, and an artist. She composes music, reads extensively, and writes letters. The play within the play in the first act shows us *Vuslat* reluctantly performing her skills in front of slave-traders (her mistress and the suitor's mother). This performance estranges us – the play's audience – from the audience within the play, while we empathize with the slave girl. In Act Two, we get to know *Vuslat* more intimately, while she cries and reads her letters in her bedroom.

Vuslat is pictured as an individual, a desiring subject who is exposed to brutal and violent threats: taken from her mother as a toddler and sold off as a slave, only to be sold off again to further domestic (and possibly sexual) slavery. A desiring subject implies dynamism and transformation, which is also present in the subtitle 'ephemeral joy'. As opposed to the static state of the traditional Ottoman society, in which the idea of self-determination is beyond the bounds

of possibility for a woman or a slave, Vuslat, as a creative individual with passions, implies novelty and social change. However, Ekrem's decadent imagination negates this dynamism (joy) and turns it toward destruction and death. The lovers can only metaphysically unite in a collectively created artwork: Vuslat composes a song and Muhsin completes it with lyrics, which Vuslat performs to her traders. This creative force that finds expression in Vuslat and Muhsin's reunion is sublimated at the end of the play. The word *süreksiz* in the subtitle signifies negation (with the affix *-siz* meaning *sans* and the stem *süre+k* meaning continuance, duration). Once the lovers' health gradually deteriorates and they eventually pass away, the dynamic force (joy) of the desiring subjects is negated and transformed into a static and infinite being. 'Vuslat' – as lovers' reunion, as a creative possibility of an artwork, and as an ideal of beauty – has no duration; it instantly decays and disintegrates starting from the moment of its conception. This metaphysical dimension in *Vuslat* can also be read as a reflection of the historical moment. It marks the rapid decline of the empire, uncertainty in the face of wars, economic ruin, and fears for the future.

In Ekrem's play, a traditional romantic love tale, which the title *Vuslat* clearly evokes, meets modern drama and decadent aesthetics. Dialogues of passionate confessions between lovers, Vuslat's soliloquies, her soul-searching reflections, and lyrical interludes reminiscent of mystic love narratives, fully converge with the decadent elevation of creativity and imagination against instrumental reason; obsessive passions turning into madness; and longing for a higher life that is more beautiful and more profound. Vuslat is a melancholy character who seems to take delight in her misery and pain: 'Şerh şu letafetiyle şu hazinliğiyle ebedi devam etse. Ben de şuracıkta Muhsin'imi düşünüp ebedi ağlasam!!' [If only dawn could continue forever with its grace and tristesse. If only I could dream about my Muhsin and cry forever!].³⁷ In a lyric passage she passionately recites with tears in her eyes, love is described in conflicting terms, both a *helecan* [thrill] and an *ızdırab* [affliction]; *zevke u sefâ* [blissful joy] and *büzün ü melâl* [absolute sorrow].³⁸ Love understood as masochistic pleasure also leads to obsession with one's own death. Vuslat, even before being sent away, refers to herself as *zulmet* [darkness], *na-muradlık* [disillusionment], *mihnet*

[distress], *teşrih* [a corpse], and *ölüm* [death].³⁹ When she is sent off to her new owner, Vuslat reports that ‘mezar gibi karanlık, mezar gibi soğuk, mezar gibi dehşetli bir yer idi’ [it was dark like a grave, cold like a grave, dreadful like a grave].⁴⁰ The image of the dead bride in a coffin also evokes the trauma of slave experience and its non-narratability.

One final significant element in Ekrem’s play is the aesthetics of decadence specific to the Ottoman dark romance. As opposed to the late Victorian and French canon of decadent literature, in the Ottoman Turkish scene we hardly encounter excessive eroticism, voluptuousness, immoralism, or amorality. While this is partly due to a set of moral standards in society and print culture, it also has to do with historical circumstances surrounding decadent aesthetics. Although traditional Ottoman Turkish romance abounds in sensuality, voluptuousness, and homosexual imagery, representation of such themes could hardly penetrate narrative verisimilitude, which became prevalent in the nineteenth century. I will not dwell on the sublimation of eroticism in Ottoman literary history here. The important aspect in this absence in Ottoman decadence, for the purposes of this article, lies in the function of decadent theatre. In reaction to the bourgeois theatre that ostensibly resolves social contradictions to create a sense of harmony, decadents used performance art to shock and scandalize a respectable bourgeoisie. In the Ottoman-Turkish literary field, we can hardly talk about a bourgeois theatre. Although Ottoman decadents did aim to scandalize their readers, the false harmony against which they wrote had to do with the patrimonial rule, rather than the ruling bourgeoisie. Some Ottomanist reformist authors, spearheaded by Midhat, aimed at smoothing over social, ethnic, and religious contradictions and conflicts under an imagined imperial Ottoman identity. *Edebiyat-ı Cedide* writers challenged any cultural or political ideal of this sort. And, in the absence of bourgeois theatre, decadent aesthetics in Ottoman Turkish drama found expression in aestheticism, pessimism and withdrawal from life.

The aesthetic presentation of suffering in both *Vuslat* and *Heder* appears in the form of physical and psychological distress. In both plays the main characters die of consumption, a pervasive trope in nineteenth-century sentimental fiction. As Susan Sontag demonstrates in *Illness*

as *Metaphor*, the romantic allure of consumption lies in its association with the inner identity of the sufferers.⁴¹ It is a symbol of beauty, artistic creativity, and refined sentiments. Together with the sufferer's emaciated body, flushed cheeks, and pale skin, consumption becomes the physical manifestation of decadence. It is not clear how the characters die, as at this point the dramatic narrative abandons verisimilitude. Death comes in the form of an inexplicable and merciless power, a reflection of ideological pessimism in the face of a collapsing and arbitrary political system. Yet, it is aestheticized and feminized: Hazım's servant in *Heder* admires the beauty of his master's dead body: 'Nasıl da güzel! Yanakları al al olmuş!' [how beautiful he is! His cheeks are red!].⁴²

The thirty years that separate Ekrem's *Vuslat* and Naci's *Heder* span the Hamidian regime. If Ekrem's play bears witness to the cultural and political climate of the first years of his reign, Naci's reflects the damage it left behind: exhaustion, total loss of economic independence, and decades of oppression and censorship. *Heder* fits in perfectly with Calinescu's idea of the deceptive spirit of decadence.⁴³ The protagonist Hazım is an idealist poet; he envisions a world of truth and *hakikat* [authenticity] and settles for no less. Set against truth, which he and his exiled father stand for, are *sabtelik* [artificiality] and *şarlatanlık* [charlatanism, fraud] spread across every institution and area of life. Yet, Hazım remains paralyzed; unable and unwilling to act. He masquerades his hatred of life as admiration of a higher life, with refined sensibilities, beauty, and truth. He presents himself as a *matemzede* [person inflicted with mourning] who wants to die but cannot.⁴⁴ Being alive is a torment; his body is only a source of *vücut ıbtılası* [agony]. In his eyes, the world is divided into two opposites: the 'heder olmakla mahkumlar' [ones who are doomed to perish], and opportunist hypocrites.⁴⁵ 'Bakın içinde bulunduğumuz hal hâdim-i ağrâz olanlara nasıl fırsat-ı galebe veriyor' [The state we are in today hurts and destroys those of us who serve the truth] Hazım tells his friend Kamil.⁴⁶ He passively accepts being hurt and remains entirely resigned, except for writing a satirical poem against his director at the office. Süreyya, a corrupt colleague, calls him *müteriz* [unbending, dissident] and *zâmane ukalası* [present-day know-it-all].⁴⁷ While Hazım takes pride in his ethical and

aesthetic superiority, just as we see in Calinescu's analysis, he makes 'weakness look like force, exhaustion like fulfillment and cowardice like courage'.⁴⁸

To a certain extent, the play could be portrayed as sensationalist and melodramatic. The opposition of virtue and vice, innocent hero and corrupt society, leads to a highly romanticized vision of suffering and pathos. It inevitably ends with the degradation and death of the fallen hero, as the title *Heder* suggests. The noun *heder* signifies loss, and the wasting of something worthy that is misused and thrown away. Hazım's youth, idealism, creativity, and ethical superiority are all wasted due to the decadence and corruption that pervade Ottoman society. Naci's text encourages such readings based on social criticism. After all, the play is populated with social commentaries, political opinions, and aesthetic judgements.

A social romanticist narrative though it may be, *Heder* dramatizes a vision of the young artist trope that goes well beyond sentimental imagination. Overburdened by consciousness of his own alienation as an artist, Hazım, a fin-de-siècle intellectual, has abandoned any hope for the future. After the death of his father, an image associated with paradise lost, melancholy is his only comfort. Despite his idealist speeches, which are delivered either when he is drunk or in tears, he gradually adopts a nihilistic attitude, asserting the senselessness and aimlessness of existence. Hazım, quite like Vuslat, is fascinated with his own destruction. In an extremely dramatic scene, he cries in his mother's arms on the bed of his dead father. Naci's unmistakable invocation of Hamlet is undercut by Hazım's stasis. Even his close, homoerotic friendship with Nuri, also a poet and a clerk, would not be enough to save Hazım from his neurosis.

Ömer Seyfeddin (1884-1920), a prominent and prolific author and critic at the time, wrote a disparaging review of *Heder* in the journal *Yeni Lisan* [*The New Language*], calling it 'disgusting and immoral'.⁴⁹ Seyfeddin was part of the group of authors committed to forming a new national literature. As the journal title suggests, these authors championed a new national language, based on the Istanbul vernacular, and cleared of its Arabic and Persian elements. Seyfeddin's attack against *Heder* had to do with its elevated language that 'possibly no one understands', written in

‘Eastern’ poetics, full of ‘Alas-es!, Oh-s!, Ghazals and tears’.⁵⁰ He implies that the play is degenerate and erotic. Naci’s *Heder*, in this historical context, showcases the empire’s final decade, in which the artist sees no future within reach, nor any possibility for rebirth or redemption. Seyfeddin’s criticism of the play is emblematic of the transformation of the intellectual climate from pessimism in the face of imperial decline, to the dynamism of a quest for a national identity.

Conclusion

The decadence question in the Ottoman Empire, as this study has demonstrated, became a common ground for intellectual debates about language, translation, and authenticity at the turn of the century. It was part of the manifold translational processes among French, high Ottoman, and the rising Ottoman vernacular, as well as the unexpected circulations of literary movements and genres in the Ottoman literary field. The decadents and the conservative modernizers – who were all cosmopolitan author-translators – negotiated and transformed Eurocentric norms of literariness and, by using local forms, introduced new genres and styles into the emergent field of modern Ottoman-Turkish literature. Recontextualizing Ekrem’s *Vuslat* and Naci’s *Heder* within the literary history of decadent aesthetics primarily allows us to revisit Ottoman literary historiography, which follows Midhat’s view on decadence as degeneration and over-Westernization – and therefore does not sufficiently discuss aesthetic decadence in Ottoman Turkish literature. It reorients Naci’s work within innovative currents and offers a uniquely nuanced reading of both Ekrem and Naci’s plays. Finally, this study introduces decadent performance of the late Ottoman Empire to global decadence studies, underlying its inner social, political, and aesthetic dynamics.

¹ I would like to thank Zeynep Hazal Sevinç for her assistance in the archives at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul.

² Muallim Naci, *Heder* (Dersaadet: Kanaat Kitaphanesi, 1326 [1908-1909]).

³ For more information on economic and political crises at the turn of the century, see Niyazi Berkes, *Türkiye’de Çağdaşlaşma* (Istanbul: YKY, 2002), pp. 309–428.

⁴ See Mehmet F. Uslu and Fatih Altuğ, eds, *Tanzimat ve Edebiyat: Osmanlı İstanbul’nda Modern Edebi Kültür* (Istanbul:

Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2014), p. vii.

⁵ For more information on the subject, see Özen 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), <<https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190066956.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780190066956>> [accessed 19 December 2021].

⁶ For a detailed analysis of the debate, see Fazıl Gökçek, *Bir Tartışmanın Hikayesi Dekadanlar* (İstanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 2015).

⁷ See Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987); David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996); and Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁸ For a compelling discussion of this problem in Turkish literary criticism, see Nurdan Gürbilek’s introduction to her article ‘Dandies and Originals: Authenticity, Belatedness, and the Turkish Novel’, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 102.2 (2003), 599–628.

⁹ Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 206.

¹⁰ Jane Desmarais and David Weir, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*; Dennis Denisoff, ed., *Feminist Modernist Studies*, 4.2 (2021), full issue.

¹¹ Recaizade Mahmut Ekrem, *Vuslat Yahud Süreksiz Sevinç: Üç Fasil Üç Perde Tiyatro Oyunu* (İstanbul: Şark Matbaası, 1291 [1874]). Translated as ‘Vuslat Yahud Süreksiz Sevinç’ in *Piyaslar*, ed. by Hakan Sazyek et al. (Kocaeli: Umuttepe Yayınları, 2020). Subsequent page references to *Vuslat* use the translated edition.

¹² See Niyazi Berkes, *Türkiye İktisat Tarihi* (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2013); Fatma Müge Göçek, *Rise of the Bourgeoisie, Demise of Empire: Ottoman Westernization and Social Change* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Halil İnalcik, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age, 1300-1600* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973); and Reşat Kasaba, *The Ottoman Empire and the World Economy: The Nineteenth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

¹³ See Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (London: Hurst & Company, 1998), pp. 253–88.

¹⁴ Naci used poetic forms from Divan Literature, including gazelle and kaside. While he pursued novelty in prose language, in his early career he became the pioneer of traditional Ottoman poetry in the periodical *Tercuman-ı Hakikat* (A. H. Tanpınar, *XIX. Asır Türk Edebiyatı Tarihi* (İstanbul: Çağlayan Basımevi, 1988), p. 598). For detailed information on Muallim Naci’s poetics see Abdullah Uçman, *Muallim Naci* (İstanbul: Toker Yayınları, 1998). For Gökay Durmuş’ introduction to a recent edition in Latin alphabet, see Muallim Naci, *Heder*, ed. by Gökay Durmuş (İstanbul: Ekin Yayınları, 2017).

¹⁵ Ahmet Midhat Efendi, ‘Dekadanlar’, *Sabah*, 2628, 22 March 1897, pp. 2–3.

¹⁶ Before gaining its contemporary meaning ‘national’, the adjective *milli* in the late Ottoman Empire was used to convey the meaning native, indigenous, and original, without foreign influence. For a study on the transformation of the concept, see Elif Daldeniz, ‘From an Empire to a Nation State: Importing the Concept of Nation into Ottoman/Turkish Thinking’, *Meta*, 59.1 (2014), 72–96.

¹⁷ For compelling analyses of Ekrem’s novel, see Jale Parla, *Babalar ve Oğullar: Tanzimat Romanının Epistemolojik Temelleri* (İstanbul: İletişim, 1990); Gürbilek, ‘Dandies and Originals’, and Nergis Ertürk, *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Much has been written on the figure of the dandy in late-Ottoman literature, and as it is not directly related to the subject of this study, I limit my discussion of *zıpppe* to the imitation vs. aestheticism axis in question.

¹⁸ Ertürk, *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey*, p. 58. Italics in original.

¹⁹ For an analysis of the Naci and Ekrem debate, see Fevzite Abdullah, ‘Muallim Naci ile Recaizade Ekrem Arasındaki Münakaşalar ve Bu Münakaşaların Sebep Olduğu Edebi Hadiseler’, *Türkiyat Mecmuası*, 10 (2010), 159–200.

²⁰ See A. H. Tanpınar’s analysis of Muallim Naci’s efforts in finding a new poetic voice in *XIX. Asır Türk Edebiyatı Tarihi*, p. 599.

²¹ For a history of theatre during the Tanzimat era, see Metin And, *Tanzimat ve İstibdat Doneminde Türk Tiyatrosu (1839-1908)* (Ankara: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 1972).

²² For detailed analyses of the history of Armenian theatre groups in the Ottoman Empire, see Lewon Zekiyan, *Venedik’ten İstanbul’a Modern Ermeni Tiyatrosunun İlk Adımları: Ermeni Rönesansı ve Mukhtaristlerin Tiyatro Faaliyetleri*, trans. by Boğos Çalgıcioğlu (İstanbul: Bgst yayınları, 2013), and Fırat Güllü, *Vartonyan Kumpanyası ve Yeni Osmanlılar* (İstanbul: Bgst yayınları, 2008).

²³ Hülya Adak and Rüstem Ertuğ Altınay, ‘Introduction: Theatre and Politics in Turkey and Its Diasporas’, *Comparative Drama*, 52.3 (2018), 185–214 (p. 187).

²⁴ Metin And, *Başlangıcından 1983’e Türk Tiyatro Tarihi* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2011), pp. 67–68.

²⁵ In traditional Ottoman theatre, *meddah* is a public storyteller who entertains audience with stories, animations, and impersonations. *Ortaoyunu* refers to improvisational theatre, commonly performed in squares or coffeehouses for public entertainment. *Karagöz* is a specific shadow play with stock characters in satirical mode and vulgar diction.

²⁶ And, *Tanzimat ve İstibdat Doneminde Türk Tiyatrosu*, p. 283.

- ²⁷ See ‘Three Proposed Roads to Reconstruction’, in Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (London: Hurst & Company, 1998).
- ²⁸ For the changing venues of performance art, see Nazlı Ümit, ‘Çadırlardan Saraylara, Türk Tiyatrosunun Sahneleri (Venues of Turkish Theatre; From Tents to Palaces)’, *Art-Sanat Dergisi*, 1 (2014), 47–72.
- ²⁹ Metin And, *Başlangıcından 1983’e Türk Tiyatro Tarihi*, p. 73.
- ³⁰ See Metin And, *Tanzimat ve İstibdat Doneminde Türk Tiyatrosu (1839-1908)* and Refik Ahmet Sevengil, *Türk Tiyatrosu Tarihi* (İstanbul: Alfa Yayıncılık, 2015).
- ³¹ Some critics in Turkey do not agree with And’s classifications, finding them too broad. I will use And’s historiography, which is the most detailed account written on Ottoman theatre, as the classification question does not relate to the issues dealt with in this study.
- ³² Both *Zeyneb* and *Finten* were reportedly written in the 1880s but were published in 1909 and 1916 respectively, after the Young Turk Revolution in 1908. Tanpınar, *XIX. Asır Türk Edebiyatı Tarihi*, p. 507.
- ³³ Namık Kemal’s *Zavallı Çocuk* had great influence on many playwrights of the period. Recaizade Mahmut Ekrem’s *Vuslat* and Abdülhak Hamid’s *İçli Kız* [*Sensitive Girl*] (1874) are among the plays that were directly influenced by *Zavallı Çocuk*. See And, *Başlangıcından 1983’e Türk Tiyatro Tarihi*, p. 112; and Mehmet Fatih Uslu, ‘Melodram ve Komedi: Osmanlı’da Türkçe Ve Ermenice Modern Dramatik Edebiyatlar’ [Melodrama and Comedy: Turkish and Armenian Modern Dramatic Literatures in The Ottoman Empire] (unpublished dissertation [PhD], Bilkent University, 2011), pp. 103–15.
- ³⁴ Alphonse de Lamartine, *Tercüme-i Hikâye-i Jönivev*, trans. by Memduh Paşa (İstanbul: Tatyos Divitciyan Matbaası, 1285 [1868]).
- ³⁵ Recaizade Mahmut Ekrem, ‘Mukaddeme’, in *Vuslat*, pp. 2–5.
- ³⁶ See İsmail Parlatır, *Tanzimat Edebiyatında Kölelik* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1987).
- ³⁷ Recaizade Mahmut Ekrem, *Bütün Eserleri 4, Piyeler*, ed. by Betül Solmaz, Hakan Sazyek, and Esra Sazyek (Kocaeli: Umutepe Yayınları, 2020), p. 112. All translations of Ekrem’s and Naci’s plays are my own.
- ³⁸ Ekrem, *Bütün Eserleri 4, Piyeler*, p. 104.
- ³⁹ Ekrem, *Bütün Eserleri 4, Piyeler*, p. 111.
- ⁴⁰ Ekrem, *Bütün Eserleri 4, Piyeler*, p. 121.
- ⁴¹ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Picador, 2005).
- ⁴² Muallim Naci, *Heder*, ed. by Gökay Durmuş (İstanbul: Ekin Yayınları, 2017), p. 94.
- ⁴³ Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 180.
- ⁴⁴ Naci, *Heder*, p. 79.
- ⁴⁵ Naci, *Heder*, p. 90.
- ⁴⁶ Naci, *Heder*, p. 77.
- ⁴⁷ Naci, *Heder*, pp. 79–87.
- ⁴⁸ Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 180.
- ⁴⁹ Reported in İnci Enginün and Zeynep Kerman, *Yeni Türk Edebiyatı Metinleri 3* (İstanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 2011), p. 1014.
- ⁵⁰ Enginün and Kerman, p. 1014.