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A Few Remarks about Teaching Jewish Turkish Literature

Sometimes news from the publishing world can be a literature professor’s best friend. The publication in 2016 of a translation into English of Kürk Mantolu Madonna (Madonna in a Fur Coat, 1943) (Ali 2016), a novel by the Turkish socialist writer Sabahattin Ali (1907–1948), allows the lecturer, notwithstanding the authorial intent, to introduce two highly contentious topics to their students. The first one is a variation, with a Turkish twist, on the complex question of the definition of Jewish literature. While Sabahattin Ali is not a Jewish author and Turkish not, strictly speaking, a Jewish language, Kürk Mantolu Madonna acquaints the readers with Maria Puder, one of the most fascinating Jewish characters in modern Turkish fiction. If Jewish experiences are to be at the heart of Jewish literature, Puder’s predicaments could be considered the epitome of the Jewish bohemian experience in 1920s Berlin, as much as, or as little as, James Joyce’s Leopold Blum and George Eliot’s Daniel Deronda are representative of Jewish experiences on the British Isles. Ali’s novel is not the only literary text in Turkish which explores themes that one might define as Jewish. One of the pioneers of the republican Turkish novel, Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu (1889–1974) made ample use of biblical themes in his works and even wrote a novel entitled Sodom ve Gomore (Sodom and Gomorrah, 1928). With righteous prophetic verve the novel condemned the corruption in the Ottoman capital after the end of World War I and its occupation by French and British forces.

In any case, the fact that neither Ali nor Karaosmanoğlu had Jewish ancestry would be considered by most scholars of Jewish literature as an exclusionary factor. Beside the exploration of Jewish themes, in itself a contentious concept, self-identification as Jewish seems to be a sine qua non condition for consideration within the field of Jewish literature. Yet, here too, the Turkish literary field provides several examples that question this approach. It is true that there are several authors and poets who wrote or still write in Turkish and claim their Jewishness. Some of them, like the poets İsaak Ferera (1883–1933) and Jozef Habib Gerez avoid references to Jewish themes in their verses, while engaging with religious, cultural and historical aspects of Jewishness in their journalistic work, whereas others such as the novelist and short-story writer Mario Levi turn Istanbul’s Jewish community into the subject matter of several of their literary works. But where can one situate authors such as Bilge Karasu (1930–1995), Sevim Burak (1931–1983) and Roni Margulies who have or had a complex relationship

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with their Jewish heritage and reject or would have rejected their categorization as Jewish authors and the inclusion of their works into a corpus of Jewish literature?¹ To sum up, the challenges encountered when trying to define Jewish literature within the context of francophone, germanophone or anglophone literatures also exist in the turcophone literary context.

The question of Jewish literature is not the sole problem raised by the publication of the *Madonna in a Fur Coat*. A more general question pertaining to the definition of Turkish literature was being debated in the months Maureen Freely and Alexander Dawe published their translation. Indeed in 2015, the poet Orhan Kahyaoğlu had published his two-volume anthology of modern Turkish poetry with the title *Modern Türkçe Şair Antolojisi* meaning "anthology of modern poetry in Turkish" which was in clear contradistinction to the usual *Modern Türk Şiiri Antolojisi*, meaning "anthology of modern Turkish poetry". In English, “Turkish poetry” is ambiguous and could signify both “poetry in the Turkish language” and “poetry of the Turks”. While “Türk şiiri” (Turkish poetry) and “Türk edebiyatı” (Turkish literature), as commonly used in Turkish, imply that the literary texts in consideration are in Turkish, there is nevertheless the added implication that they, or at least their authors, are also Turkish. In order to avoid this ambiguity, Kahyaoğlu wrote in his introduction that:

[...]

Kahyaoğlu’s arguments were not new and went back to the controversy around the concept of “Kurdish poets writing in Turkish” that developed after the publication of a special feature on the topic in the literary magazine *Yasakmeyve* (The Forbidden Fruit) in 2004 (Mignon 2014, 196–199). Just like in 2004, Kahyaoğlu’s stand led to strong-worded reactions from the religious and secular nationalist establishments. In a comment that he wrote for the secularist nationalist *Aydınlık* (Enlightenment) daily, the poet Özdemir İnce condemned Kahyaoğlu’s approach as “absurd, racist and separatist, contrary to universal

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¹ For a more detailed discussion of the definition of Jewish literature in a Turkish context, see Mignon 2018, 126–130.
uses” (İnce 2016), in terms that were echoing his reaction during the debates in the early 2000s. İnce’s approach reflected the Turkish republic’s conception of citizenship which, in theory, does not recognize any ethnic, national or linguistic minorities. Hence Kahyaoğlu’s use of the concept “Türkçe şiir” was avowedly political and deeply subversive as it aimed to embrace the ethno-religious diversity of the poets who contributed to the history of poetry in the Turkish language over the years.

This is an important issue also in the field of literary historiography, as non-Muslim authors and poets have often been sidelined in the many histories of Turkish literature.² Indeed, most historians of Turkish literature seem to be equating Turkishness and “Muslimness” and only include writers of Muslim heritage in their works. Undeniably, approaches such as Kahyaoğlu’s create space for the recognition of the specificity of the contributions of Kurdish literati while also integrating non-Muslim authors, such as the Armeno-Turkish pioneers of the novel in Turkish and Greco-Turkish translators of French popular literature into the history of Turkish literature. This discussion is also of relevance in the context of the study of Judeo-Turkish literature (Turkish in the Hebrew script) and of literature in Turkish by authors of Jewish background and should be engaged with in class and lecture rooms when talking about the works of Jewish authors who wrote in Turkish.

However, before moving on to the topic of teaching Jewish literature, it might be necessary to say a word or two about the genesis of Jewish Turkish literature. Some readers may wonder whether there is such a thing as Jewish Turkish literature beyond the works of Mario Levi that have gained international fame – İstanbul bir Masalda (Istanbul was a Fairytale, 1999) having been translated in languages as diverse as Korean, Croatian and even English.

As seen above, the fact that the existence of Jewish Turkish literature is largely unknown even in Turkey is mainly due to an understanding of literary history that has overlooked non-Muslim authors, including Jews. There is however one more issue: Unlike the cases of Armeno-Turkish and Greco-Turkish (also known as Karamanlı) literatures, where native speakers of Turkish, as well as Protestant missionary organizations, were publishing texts in Turkish in communitarian alphabets, Judeo-Turkish printing was mostly the result of decisions taken by religious and secular community leaders who wanted to boost the knowledge and use of Turkish among the mainly Ladino-speaking Jewish community of Ottoman Turkey. Jewish figureheads wanted to promote greater communal empowerment in an age marked by drastic reforms in the Ottoman

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² On the topic see, i.a. Mignon 2008, 35–43.
state, the need to confront the rise of Christian antisemitism in Ottoman lands as epitomized by the blood libels in Rhodes and Damascus, new employment opportunities in the public sector for non-Muslims who were fluent in Turkish and the advent of the Alliance israélite universelle schools and their promotion of Enlightenment ideals and French language and culture.³ 

Though there are a few examples of texts in Turkish in the Rashi script, before the nineteenth century, Judeo-Turkish publications consisted mainly of ephemeral periodicals which were bilingual in Judeo-Spanish and Judeo-Turkish. The only relatively successful publication was Üstat (The Master), edited by the educator Moïse Fresko (1859–1912), which was published over two years in Izmir between 1889 to 1891. Its main aim was to promote Turkish and a better knowledge of Ottoman Turkish culture among Jews, while encouraging integration and thus showing the attachment of the Jewish community to the Ottoman state. Publications such as Üstat were primarily aimed at creating a Jewish readership for publications in Turkish and paved the way for the emergence of Jewish Turkish literature at a later stage.

From a literary point of view, the turn of the century was also a turning point in the history of Jewish Turkish literature. In 1901, Avram Naon (1878–1947) published a collection of mostly Neo-Parnassian poems entitled Kalb-i Şikeste (The Broken Heart, 1901) in Turkish in the Ottoman Turkish script, a version of the Perso-Arabic script used to write Turkish. This collection was followed a few years later by the publication of Ebr-i Bahar (Spring Clouds, 1904) and Aşina Sessler (Familiar Voices, 1914) – two volumes of poetry by İsak Ferera.⁴ Naon and Ferera were representatives of a new generation of young Jewish intellectuals who had been educated in modern Jewish and Ottoman secular schools, while the Judeo-Spanish press and literature was flourishing. It is notable that this was before Turkish started to be intensively promoted by famous intellectuals and community activists such as Avram Galante (1873–1961) and Moïse Cohen (1883–1961), alias Muhsin Tekinalp. Ferera and Naon would publish Mirat (The Mirror), an ephemeral magazine, in the Ottoman Turkish script in 1909. This periodical exclusively published Jewish authors. Unlike other Turkish publications that were published in Turkish by Jewish intellectuals in the few months of great hope after the promulgation of the Second Constitution, such as Nisim Masliyah’s İttihat (The Union, 1908) and Bohor İsrael’s Ceride-i Felsefiye (The Philosophical Magazine, 1912), Mirat openly embraced an enlightened Jewish-Ottoman identity while addressing Jews and non-Jews alike. Naon wrote in an

³ On the genesis of Jewish Turkish literature, see Mignon 2011.
⁴ For a monograph on Naon and Ferera’s poetry, see Karakartal 2006.
editorial that the magazine aimed to be a “show-window for the works of Jewish authors writing in Turkish” and that “no work could be accepted that was from the outside, from a writer who was not Jewish” (Naon 1909, 1). The publication of the magazine was a way to circumvent the discriminatory attitude towards Jews in the literary world. Some articles in the magazine show that despite their commitment to the Turkish language, Naon and Ferera faced adversity because of their Jewishness when trying to publish their work. Regardless of their early efforts to promote literature in Turkish, both poets would hardly be remembered during the republican era, as the alphabet change of 1928 rendered works in the Ottoman Turkish script inaccessible to later generations of readers, unless they had the relevant education. Nonetheless after the establishment of the Republic and the intensification of state-led Turkification policies, Turkish would slowly start to replace Ladino and French as the main language of literary expression for the Jewish community.

So, if something that can be categorized as Jewish Turkish literature exists, how can it be taught? As part of my own teaching practice, I have followed two paths. The first one is the integration of Jewish Turkish literature into a generalist Turkish literature course at both undergraduate and graduate levels. The second path is a graduate course that is focused on Jewish Turkish literature per se. Both approaches present specific challenges.

Teaching the history of Jewish literature in the context of a generalist course on the history of Turkish literature within the framework of a department of Turkish philology introduces the students to the need to deconstruct literary historiography and the canon. This, however, is true when engaging with all minor literatures in the not-unproblematic-sense given to the term by Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) and Félix Guattari (1930–1992) (Deleuze and Guattari 1976).\footnote{For a discussion of “minor literature”, see, \textit{inter alia}, Bogue 1997 and Klein 2018.}

Such an approach represents an additional challenge for the lecturer. In a Turkish university context, one can assume that students have a basic understanding of the history of Turkish literature, having been repeatedly faced with a list of great writers and poets, mostly male, who have marked the history of Turkish literature, throughout their school years. Hence students would from early on be very conscious that the evocation of the sixteenth century anonymous \textit{Tarih-i Al-i Osman} (History of the House of Osman) in the Rashi script\footnote{For a facsimile, transcription and analysis of this unusual text, see Marazzi 1980.}, the reading of a poem by İsak Ferera and the editorial of \textit{Mirat} magazine penned by Avram Naon were a challenge to what they had learned about the history of Turkish literature and the contributions of non-Muslims to that history. Hence
the teaching of Jewish literature and the critical reflection on history and historiography can progress hand in hand.

Yet, in the context of a Turkish literature course taught to students of Turkish as a foreign language, as it would be taught in universities outside Turkey and northern Cyprus, the lecturer deals with the additional task of having to teach students the canon. This is a necessity if students are to engage critically with the available secondary literature and enter in conversation with their Turkish-speaking peers. Hence while students are taught about the canon they are also learning how to deconstruct it. This provides the lecturer with the opportunity to develop a different and more inclusive history of literature during the teaching process.

Beside a discussion of Jewish literature which is “in conversation” with other aspects of literary history, exploring a variety of issues from the “romantic rebellion” in nineteenth century Turkish literature to the impact of the alphabet reform on literary historiography, there is the option at graduate level of teaching a course focused exclusively on Jewish Turkish literature. Such a course, if it is to include the pre-republican era, will need to embrace a multilingual approach as Judeo-Spanish and French remained the main languages of literary expression for Jewish literati until well into the republican period. Needless to say that the number of potential students with such linguistic skills is limited. The fact that an author such as Avram Galante who advocated the use of Turkish as a literary language within the Jewish community, also published literary works in Judeo-Spanish, while contributing articles to the French-language Archives israélites is a reminder of the difficulty of engaging with Jewish authors in only one language. However, there is nothing specifically Jewish about this. Multilingualism was the norm among the Ottoman intelligentsia, hence it was not uncommon for intellectuals to write in more than one language—an important lesson to teach also in a generalist course on Turkish literary history.

In the context of a course on Jewish Turkish literature the discussion of the concept of “Jewish literature” needs to be at the heart of the approach. From biblical themes in Turkish literature to playwright and poet Beki L. Bahar’s (1927–2011) Turkish-language works, there is much material that can contribute to a critical engagement with the concept of “Jewish literature”. In my own courses, I use a quasi-maximalist definition of Jewish literature, which means that I include any literary work created by a person of Jewish heritage, broadly defined, whether it has a Jewish theme or not. There are some restrictions though: I do not include authors who clearly refuse to be categorized as Jewish authors, unless their works deal with issues that are of relevance within a discussion of Jewish literature, for instance, Bilge Karasu’s exploration of the figure of Judas and his writings on minorities and Roni Margulies’ theoretical texts about his stance
towards Jewishness, such as his essay “Yahudi Olmak Mi Olmamak Mi” (To Be Or Not To Be A Jew, 1997) as I believe that they nourish constructively the debate.

Finally, the discussion of Turkish texts brings in the added benefit of questioning the often very western-centric approaches to Jewish literature. Indeed, there is a need to look beyond New York, Berlin and Jerusalem to the literatures and cultures outside the Americas, Europe and Israel. This leads us back to Sabahattin Ali and his *Madonna in a Fur Coat*. The novel was published in English translation in 2016 to much media interest. Yet it is worthwhile stressing that the first translation of Ali’s novel in Vietnamese had already been published thirty years before in 1986 – a reminder that translations of literary works into English are not at all representative of the international reception of literary works. Hence, in conclusion, one could argue that the study of Jewish literature in a Turkish context teaches both teachers and students to be always on the alert and to question the constructedness of history, of the canon and of identities.

**Bibliography**


