

From Silvio Pellico to Selahattin Demirtaş:

Prison Literature and Literary Polemics in Turkey

In an article published in the socialist daily *Evrensel* (Universal) on February 18, 2020, the poet Hakan Keysan noted that “the history of Turkish literature is also the history of intellectuals and writers who were formed in prison. Selahattin Demirtaş, too, has gained the status of a writer with [his] works, having leaped into the field of literature from prison.” Keysan wrote this piece entitled “Politik bir Figür Olarak Yazan Siyasetçiler ve Selahattin Demirtaş Kitaplığı” (Politicians who Write as Literary Figures and the Selahattin Demirtaş Corpus) upon the publication of Demirtaş’s first novel *Leylan* (2019) and reviewed the novel as well as his two earlier short story collections *Seher* (2017) and *Devran* (2019). While Keysan noted that his aim was to focus on questions of literary aesthetics, he nevertheless concluded his article by maintaining that “writers [...] who nourish the hopes of the people will continue to stand stubbornly on the side of the people, on the side of those who produce and on the side of virtue. They will have no difficulty in finding a language and a window to shout out, even if they are out of breath. Literature and art have been the strongest pillar of this type of resistance throughout history and continue to be so today.”ⁱ Keysan, who during many years was also responsible for publishing the literary magazine *Sunak* (The Altar), pointed to important issues that had marked the history of literature in Turkishⁱⁱ in Ottoman then republican Turkey, namely the place of prison literature in its development and the complex interplay of politics and literature which marked the Turkish literary field at least since the second half of the 19th century.

Whichever way prison literature is definedⁱⁱⁱ, Selahattin Demirtaş’s works belong to the genre of prison literature. His works are not directly about his prison experiences, even though their weight can be felt in his three collections of short-stories, for instance in the magical realist

“İçimizdeki Erkek” (The Man Inside) and the satirical “Cezaevi Mektup Okuma Komisyonuna Mektup” (Letter to the Prison Letter Reading Commission), and his two novels, where incarceration, lawsuits and the repressive state are factors affecting the characters’ lives. In the latter instance, however, the case could be made that those aspects are less informed by the experiences of the author in jail than a reflection of life in Turkey. What strikes the reader, however, is that humor is such a significant aspect of Selahattin Demirtaş’s prose. This has undeniably contributed to the commercial success of his first collection *Seher*^{iv}, even though the background of many of the short-stories is rather dark and refers to endemic poverty, the oppression of women and political repression. Even if less present in his second short story collection *Devran* where the social realism of some of the stories leaves little room for comic relief, humor is again very much at the heart of his newest collection *DAD* published in 2023. The significance of Demirtaş’s humor can only be grasped when taking his status as a political prisoner into consideration. Indeed, one could argue that the use of humor, far from being, as the French saying goes, “the politeness of despair”, is an expression of revolutionary optimism addressed at the outside world. This situates his work in line with the socialist poet Nâzım Hikmet (1902-1963), whose many works written in jail, such as *Pirâye İçin Yazılmış: Saat 21-22 Şiirleri* (Poems Written For Piraye Between 10 and 11 p.m.) or *Memleketimden İnsan Manzaraları* (Human Landscapes From my Countries) tend to be full of hope, humor and tenderness, despite their author’s dire living conditions in prison.^v Prison literature is a broad genre and Demirtaş is undeniably one of those writers who pursues aesthetic aims in his fiction, which does not stop him from denouncing the various types of oppression that exist in Turkey. While there is no denying that Demirtaş’s works are, to borrow Claire Westall’s characterization of prison writing “bridges between the ‘inside’ [i.e. jail] and the ‘outside’ [i.e. wider society]”^{vi}, it is the paratexts, more specifically the acknowledgements at the end of the books, that provide glimpses, perhaps not always of

life, but, at least, of writing behind bars. Of course, the freedoms of an author still incarcerated and at the mercy of prison guards and censors are limited, compared to those who publish after their liberation. Demirtaş acknowledges the difficulties to write in jail, without being too specific, and recognizes that his ability to publish his works is exceptional, as “binlerce tutsak arkadaşımın içeride yazdığı edebi üretimler imkânsızlıklar nedeniyle okurla buluşamıyor” [the literary productions written of thousands of my imprisoned companions will never reach a reader because of impossibilities.]^{vii} A recurrent theme is that the writing, production and publication of his works were very much a communal effort. Thus the author opens a window upon his support network that includes fellow inmates –his early readers–, the lawyers who take care of the court cases, friends outside, and, above all, family members. Hence the act of writing and publishing becomes indeed an act of resistance that connects the “inside” to the “outside”. It challenges effectively the judicial edict by reconnecting the inmate with the society and environment he has been removed from as part of his punishment.

A remark in the acknowledgements of Demirtaş’s second novel *Efsun*, published in 2021, mentions the fact that the Covid pandemic and the lockdowns had turned everyone into prisoners into their own homes. However, a succinct sentence at the end of the first paragraph evokes how the pandemic and the ensuing measures had crippled the support networks mentioned in each volume: “Cezaevlerinde avukat ve aile ziyaretleri askıya alındı.” [In prisons the lawyer and family visits were suspended]^{viii}. The author does not provide any more details apart from telling that he had engaged in an intense letter exchange with his wife – who until then had been a regular visitor –and daughters. Readers can only imagine the mental and emotional suffering of this further separation –another one of those moments that bridge the inside and outside worlds.

The Polemical Reception of Selahattin Demirtaş's Works in Turkey

Politically engaged literature often leads to politically engaged criticism, where the aesthetic value of a literary work is mostly relegated to the background and political sympathy brought to the fore. This situation is also representative of the reception of Selahattin Demirtaş's work in Turkey, even though the latter's case is, arguably, far from characteristic for prison literature in Turkey. Indeed unlike poets such as Nazım Hikmet, whose trials and travails are well known outside Turkey, and Hasan İzzettin Dinamo (1909-1989), or the novelist Sevgi Soysal (1936-1976) who were established literary figures at the time of their imprisonment, and whose literary works too were used in their indictments, Selahattin Demirtaş was not a published author at the time of his imprisonment, but a political figurehead who discovered his literary vocation in jail. The political standing of the figure was soon to lead to some fierce discussions in the literary world in Turkey. Upon the publication of *Efsun* (2021), the second novel by Selahattin Demirtaş, some critics, such as Ayşen Uysal in her weekly column for the *Evrensel* daily celebrated Demirtaş's novel as "the voice of resistance of a person that some want to suppress, to be forgotten and to be annihilated politically. It is an indicator of the forms that resistance can take against oppression".^{ix} Others, also on the left, while not denying the political importance of the work as a symbol of resistance, were more critical of its literary value as a work of political literature. Emirhan Ertaş, a guest writer on the progressive cultural *Niçin.biz* website, deplored that issues such as "the literary value of the work, the linguistic competence of the author and the narrative structure" played no role in the assessments of critics who chose to salute the author as a political activist and paid little attention to the literary work.^x His criticism was more particularly directed at the fact that the novel was largely, at least according to him, apolitical, something that Demirtaş would not have denied.^{xi} Ertaş did not question Demirtaş's status as a party leader and militant, whose politics he admired, but he regretted the critics' inability to differentiate

between their political sympathies and the literary value of the work. The reception of Demirtaş's work was thus shaped by his status as a political prisoner.

Whether Ertaş's criticism was fair is open to discussion. A few years earlier, there had been examples of critics and publications who had reached beyond the ideological divide to embrace Demirtaş's work. In February 2018, the well-established short story journal *Heceöykü*, an Ankara-based publication close to religious conservative circles, published a review article by Kemal Gündüzalp assessing the state of the Turkish short story in 2017. In his article, the critic noted that Demirtaş had published a first collection of short stories which "was successful from a literary point of view." Gündüzalp, himself a versed poet, author and literary critic, usually writing in liberal publications, also added that "in Turkey and similar countries, it is a known fact that prisons produce writers, or rather allow their emergence. One might have thought that this was a reality of the past, that it would not happen again. Unfortunately, it is prison that revealed again a talent, that was perhaps hidden."^{xii} He argued further that it might be interesting to see how Demirtaş's writing might flourish if he is released from jail. The article, noticed by some avid tweeters, was soon to cause an outcry among pro-government newspapers and websites. Gülcan Tezcan, a journalist for the pro-government *Star* daily newspaper asked rhetorically whether the praise of terrorism had become an integral part of literary criticism."^{xiii} More columns and articles that refused to make a distinction between literature and politics, and a social media storm forced Hece Yayınları, the publisher of the literary magazine, to release a press announcement referring to the twenty year long history of *Heceöykü*, its Islamic roots, but emphasizing also its intellectual openness to voices from other ideological backgrounds. Hence Gündüzalp's views were his own, they said, but as publishers of the journal they condemned terrorism and its supporters.^{xiv} In other words, the publishers espoused the stance of the religious-nationalist government towards Demirtaş and Kurdish national aspirations. But Gündüzalp and

Demirtaş, the writer if not the politician, were not without supporters in the religious conservative milieu. Mehmet Ocaktan, writing for the daily *Karar*, close to the supporters of former Prime minister Ahmed Davutoğlu who is critical of Erdoğan's regime, regretted in an article meaningfully entitled "Dindar Yazarların Fanatizmle Olan İmtihanı" (The Challenge of Fanaticism for Religious Writers) that the focus was on Demirtaş's politics but not his literary talent. He went on: "This is the eclipse of reason... You may not agree with Selahattin Demirtaş's ideology, you may even struggle with him intellectually. But being hostile to a collection of short stories is something else and certainly not the work of normal people whom God has endowed with reason. If we have come to the point of setting tests of patriotism in between the lines of poets' and writers' writings on art, literature and aesthetics, then we are living in a state of total madness."^{xv}

In effect Gündüzalp's detractors were denying Demirtaş the right to be considered a writer and they condemned literary critics who approached his works in a professional capacity. In other words, they excluded the Kurdish writer from the corpus of contemporary literature in Turkish for political reasons. The denial and exclusion also pose important questions to scholars of literature in Turkish, more specifically for those working on its history. The problem is not new in the context of scholarship about "Turkish literature" at least in the Turkish Language and Literature Departments of Turkish state universities. These departments had been marked by political conservatism and faculty members tended to avoid working on writers and poets from the left. Yet, Mehmet Kaplan (1915-1986), during long years an influential figure in the field, when faced with the dilemma of working on Nâzım Hikmet, who had been stripped of his Turkish citizenship in 1951 and declared a traitor to the nation, nevertheless chose to analyze some of his works, hence to consider him as part of "Turkish literature". While there is no denying the derogative tone of his analysis of Hikmet's poem "Makinalaşmak" (Mechanization)^{xvi}, the very fact that he chose to engage

with his poetry despite his opposite political convictions – Kaplan was a cultural conservative and nationalist – and Hikmet’s condemnation by the Turkish authorities, is significant. In a later piece written on September 14, 1982, as Turkey was still ruled by a military junta after the 1980 coup d’état, he maintained that:

We cannot expect a person who does not feel Turkish at heart to be a Turkish nationalist. Since communism essentially rejects nationalism, I do not find it strange that Nâzım became a communist, and when he became a communist, he became subservient to Moscow. But this does not prevent me from saying that Nâzım Hikmet is a poet, even a good poet. A poet is a person who uses language the best... A great poet is a person who uses all the possibilities of language. ^{xvii}

Kaplan’s stance shows that even during the Cold War, there was space for a public intellectual of his standing on the political right to engage professionally with a writer such as Hikmet who had been a *persona non grata* and whose books had been regularly banned in the Republic of Turkey. In today’s Turkey, however, Demirtaş, admittedly an influential political leader, is being denied a similar literary respectability. While it is legitimate to make the case that Demirtaş’s contribution to Turkish-language fiction is not comparable to the impact that Hikmet had on the development of poetry in Turkey, the reception of Demirtaş’s books is an invitation to scholars of literature in Turkish to discuss his works in a broader historiographical literary context. Indeed the polemics surrounding his work are a reminder of the role of both literary polemics and prison literature in the development of literature in Turkish.

Fundamentally the debates both on the left of the political spectrum and on the religious right were variations on the theme of whether arts could or even should prevail over politics. They were intensified by the very particular status of Selahattin Demirtaş and the sensitivity of the

Kurdish question in Turkey's heightened nationalist environment. While those often polemical exchanges on the relationship of politics and literature focusing on Demirtaş's works did not really provide any new insights into this age-old discussion –whether politics in a literary work really only is pistol shot in the middle of a concert –they were interesting not only because they showed that in a Turkish context, literature still matters to the point of being a regular talking point in columns in daily newspapers.^{xviii}

Indeed, polemics have played a major role in shaping literary developments from the period of the Tanzimat to the present day.^{xix} Passionate debates on the nature of realism -the *hayaliyun-hakikiyun*- debates of the late 19th century or on the opaque poetry of the *İkinci Yeni* (Second Renewal) in the second half of the 20th century combined personal attacks with political controversy nevertheless contributing to new directions in the literary sphere.^{xx} There were more of course. The rich history of literary polemics in a Turkish context creates a space to discuss Demirtaş's reception beyond political polemics as a contemporary literary event and create connections with other events throughout the 19th, 20th and 21st century.

The Polemical Reception of Silvio Pellico's *Le mie prigionie* in Turkey

The fact that the polemical reception of Selahattin Demirtaş's literary works connected two significant aspects of the development of modern literature in Turkish, namely prison writing and literary polemics, is an opportunity to look at what was arguably the first polemic to focus on prison writing in the Turkish-language literary field and thus also to situate Demirtaş's works in the context of literary history. Indeed, the heated reception of his short story collections and novels was not the first time that a work of prison literature led to a strong-worded reaction that was to leave its mark on the development of literature in Turkish. The translation of Silvio Pellico's (1789-1854) *Le mie prigionie* (My Prisons, 1832) in 1874^{xxi} led to the publication of a strong rebuttal entitled "*Mes prisons Muahezenamesi*" (A Criticism

of *Mes prisons*)^{xxii} by the leading Young Ottoman writer and activist Namık Kemal (1840-1888). That the translator was Recaizade Mahmut Ekrem (1847-1914), his disciple, at least in matters of literary innovation, and still at the onset of a remarkable literary career is indicative of the significance of this reaction that combined in an Ottoman Turkish context, perhaps for the first time, a discussion of prison literature and questions of aesthetics. It must be noted, however, that Ekrem, chose not to respond to Kemal, though, in his later years, the former would be known not to dislike the odd bit of controversy.^{xxiii}

His choice to translate Pellico might seem a rather incongruous decision, even if the Italian writer's prison memoirs had attracted much attention all over Europe. Reformist Ottoman Turkish literati were, up to a point, keen followers of literary fashions in France. Moreover, Pellico was known in Ottoman Turkey as a leading member of the Carbonari revolutionary society that had been ruthlessly repressed by the authorities of the Habsburg empire. What was perhaps less known in Istanbul, was that his prison memoirs had disappointed revolutionaries all over the continent. Many were dismayed by Pellico's religious conversion to a form of dolorist Catholicism, his forgiveness of his oppressors and what appeared to them as his submissiveness. In France, the translation into French of *Le mie prigionieri* might have been a bestseller, but it was above all a bestseller in the milieus close to Roman Catholic conservatism.^{xxiv} Interestingly, Ekrem, in his youth, seems to have shown a particular fondness for narratives with a distinct Catholic lilt, though it must be said that he never elaborated much on the reasons that led him to translate certain texts. Two years before he published his translation of *Mes prisons*, he had published a translation of another romantic favorite, Chateaubriand's (1768-1848) *Atala*, a novella that, notwithstanding its literary qualities, was promoted, not the least by its author, as a work of Christian edification.^{xxv} The extent to which the Christian subtext of those two literary works influenced Ekrem's desire to translate them is open to discussion as he gives little information about his motives and motivation.^{xxvi}

In the revised second edition of his milestone *Ondokuzuncu Asır Türk Edebiyatı Tarihi* (History of Nineteenth Century Turkish Literature, 1956), Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar (1901-1962), as fine a literary scholar as he was a novelist and poet, argues that Ekrem's decision to translate Pellico's work about his prison experiences might have been a way of expressing his protest at Namık Kemal's banishment to Famagusta in Cyprus. Kemal's arrest had happened in the aftermath of the popular success of his play *Vatan yahut Silistre* (The Motherland or Silistre, 1872) that had been warmly received by the patrons of Güllü Agop's (1840-1902) theatre in Gedikpaşa in Istanbul.^{xxvii} The audience's patriotic slogans "Long live the motherland, long live Kemal" spooked the government of Sultan Abdulaziz, not least as Kemal was known to associate with people suspected of plotting to overthrow the despotic ruler.^{xxviii} Ekrem very much saw a mentor in Kemal and always paid heed to his words, even when they were unduly harsh—Kemal being known for rarely mincing them. Tanpınar's hypothesis might well have been close to the truth, despite Ekrem, though very daring in literary matters, tended to be much more restrained when it came to politics. Hence the severity of Kemal's criticism, which as the latter noted was more directed at Pellico than it was at his translator, must nevertheless have come as a bolt from the blue. This might explain that Ekrem chose not to respond to Kemal, explaining to the latter that he would do so at a later stage once his health had improved. At the time, Ekrem was in Vienna receiving treatment for what doctors suspected to be tuberculosis. However, Ekrem would never find the time to respond, perhaps because Kemal's scolding words did not leave much room for self-justification: "*Mes prisons*'u okudum. Sair eserlerinden aşağı buldum. Efkâr-ı ahrranesi senin mertebende bulunanlar için doğru söz dokunaklı da olsa yine elbette müdahaneden ziyade makbule geçer" (320). (I have read *Mes prisons*. I found it inferior to your other works. For those whose intellect is at your level, a truthful word, even if it is stringent, is of course more appropriate than flattery.) Indeed, there would be little flattery in the pages that

followed as Kemal expressed his dislike of Ekrem's vocabulary and language, at times too profane, at others too Persianate.^{xxix} Aware that Ekrem had translated and serialized the initial part of the text, years earlier at a time when he was still a relatively inexperienced writer, Kemal was emphatic in his disapproval: "Tercümenin şive-i ifadesi şimdiki asarından aşağıdır. Vakıa bu faslı bizim lisana naklettiğin zaman senin kuvve-i kalemin değil hatta milletin edebiyatı şimdiki asarında görülen mertebe-i istikmale vasıl olamamıştı. Şu kadar var ki eserini tashih edebilirdin" (322). (Stylistically the translation is inferior to the style of your current works. In fact, when you translated this chapter into our language, not only the power of your pen, but even the literature of the nation had not reached the level of perfection seen in your current works. At least, you could have edited your work.) Kemal might have had a point here. In any case it mattered to him to remain in the position of the teacher –the more so as Ekrem did not seem to mind being seen as the disciple: Kemal's disciple, which was a badge of honor in literary circles that were advocates of new literature. It appears that Ekrem was far from impermeable to Kemal's criticism. In a letter that Kemal had addressed to Ekrem from his exile in Famagusta in 1874, he had stressed that he found that for someone with "a pen as powerful as his [Ekrem's], it was not appropriate to be busy with translations"^{xxx}, an interesting remark that reveals that for Kemal, literary translation was the realm of lesser pens. Remarkably, after the publication of the first part of *Mes prisons*, Ekrem would not publish any other translation in book form, even though he continued to publish translations of poems and various fragments in a range of journals.^{xxxi}

But, as noted above, the main bulk of Kemal's criticism was not directed at Ekrem, but rather at Silvio Pellico. Indeed in the introduction he wrote that "tarizatımın ekseri sana değil müellife aittir. Çünkü hemen bir dereceye kadar sergüzeştimin mirat-i initafı olan öyle bir eserin mevzuunu bir tarafa bırakıp da elfazıyla uğraşmaya gönlüm razı olmadı" (320). (Most of my criticism is addressed at the author, not at you. This is because I do not have the heart

to leave aside the subject matter of such a work, which almost reflects my own experiences, and to deal solely with matters of eloquence.) This is indeed a significant aspect of Kemal's text, as he contrasts his own experiences in jail and exile with those of Pellico's.^{xxxiii} Mainly he belittles the Italian writer's circumstances, and up to a point, uses them as an opportunity for self-aggrandizing statements. For instance, while Pellico noted his inability to sleep during his first night in jail, Kemal stressed that he had never slept so well. Kemal reminisces that Ahmet Midhat Efendi, another acclaimed author who had also been arrested during the crackdown following the staging of Kemal's play, had said: "Galiba sizin kabahatiniz, millete lazım olan vücudunuzu uykusuzlukla harap etmekmiş de buraya sizi rahat etmeye göndermişler" (323). (I think that your crime was to have ruined your body with sleep deprivation out of love of the motherland and that you were sent [to jail] so you can rest.) What really disturbed Kemal was the romantic self-pity of Pellico's narrative. From the outset he declares his disdain for Pellico's crying and the many tears he sheds throughout his memoirs. They were, according to the Ottoman poet, unworthy of a true patriot who should embrace his trials and tribulations for love of the motherland: "Şüheda-yı hürriyetin giryesi yaralarından dökülen hun-ı nahaktır. Hubb-ı vatan dedikleri timsal-i ruhaniye meftuniyetle mecruhü'l-fuat olanların vakt-i iptilada gözlerinden yaş değil ateş saçılır" (322). (The tears of the martyrs of freedom are like impure blood running from their wounds. Those whose heart has been wounded with the spiritual concept of the love of the motherland do not shed tears from their eyes but flames.) Beside Kemal's arguably legitimate concerns about Pellico's political change of heart, there is no doubt that he did not take sufficiently the conventions and clichés of Romantic literature and of the dolorist Catholic discourse into consideration when discussing Pellico's narrative and took him, perhaps, a little too literally. Pellico's tearful accepting of suffering and his all-embracing compassion might have been as much literary topoi as they were autobiographical statements.

In fact the *muahezename* is revealing, not only of Kemal's passionate patriotism, but also of his antipathy towards Christianity, at least aspects of its theology. This prevented him from producing a more empathic reading of Pellico's memoirs. Kemal has little sympathy for Pellico's conversion, not because he considered it as in concurrence with revolutionary aspirations, but because the discovery of faith when faced with hardship is suspicious in his eyes: "Fakat zaman-ı asayiş ve saadette umur-ı diniyesini düşünmeyip de bir felakete uğradığı gibi hani din derler bir şey var idi, bir de oraya müracaat edeyim; belki necatıma vesile olur, diyerek diyanetle tecrübe-i tali'e kalkışmak da dinsizlikten aşağı kalır denaetlerden değildir" (326). (But the behaviour of those who do not think of religious matters in times of peace and felicity, yet when faced with a calamity say 'oh, there was something they called religion, let me try it out, perhaps it will save me' and thus start to practice religion is an attitude no less ignominious than unbelief.) Kemal's own approach leaves little room for atonement and redemption, as he questions the sincerity of the convert. But the possibility of redemption is not the only Christian belief that Kemal questions. The doctrine of the Trinity leads him to show more understanding for one of Pellico's pen friends going by the name of Julian, in reference to the Roman emperor who rejected Christianity, than for Pellico: "[Julian]'ın dinsizliğini de o kadar ta'yib edemem. Çünkü ekânım-i selase üzerine mübteni olan Hristiyanlık mezhebi hiçbir akilin kabul edeceği akaitten değildir" (334). (I cannot blame Julian's unbelief that much. The Christian religion that is built upon the Trinity is a religion that cannot be espoused by any wise man.) Redemption is not an idea that Kemal identifies as specifically Christian, but rather he associates Pellico's belief in it as one of the many personal failings of the author. However Kemal's disapproval turns out to be directed at what are fundamental Christian values, leading to what he sees as personal weakness and a lack of patriotism. On top of this ideological difference, he grafts Ekrem's linguistic failings. Hence, his long attack is also rooted in his concern about the nefarious

influence that the text could have in an Ottoman Turkish context: “Muahezede bu kadar uzun lakırdılar söyleyişim memleketimizde henüz yetişmekte olan hubb-ı vatan arasında Avrupa inkılap taraftarlarından en acizinin kendi itirafıyla müspet olan tercüme-i halini meydana koymaktan efkar-ı milliyeye bir hayli su-i tesirler hasıl olabileceğini layıkıyla ispat içindir” (322). (The reason I have spoken at such length in my criticism is to demonstrate adequately that in our country where the love of the motherland is still unfolding, the expositions of the memoirs consisting of the confessions of the most impotent of all European supporters of revolution might have a negative influence on the patriotic ideas.)

The combination of arguments regarding the aesthetics of the literary work – in the case of the *muahezename* pertaining mostly to the language of the translation –and ideological disagreements, of which religious beliefs provided the bulk, for even what Kemal considered to be Pellico’s personal failings were actually Christian topoi, set the frame for later literary controversies combining politics and aesthetics, when often literary failings ended up being seen as symptoms of political failings more generally. The case of “*Mes prisons muahezenamesi*” is complex though, as the aesthetic criticism focuses on a translation, not on the original text. However, Kemal makes it clear that he considers the publication of the translation in Turkish as detrimental to the development of patriotism in Ottoman Turkey. He analyses the work as a literary work in Turkish, whose formal aspect must be discussed in conjunction with its ideological content. Arguably, this makes the translation into Turkish of Pellico’s *Le mie prigioni*, an early example of a long list of works, evoked by Keysan and Gündüzalp, that could be defined as prison literature and gave rise to significant debates among literati in Ottoman and republican Turkey. That Pellico’s first Ottoman Turkish critic should have been himself an author and activist who was time and again repressed, incarcerated and exiled for his political views and engagement, namely Namık Kemal, shows not only how essential prison literature was in the development of modern literature in

Turkish, but also how debates, polemics and criticism arising in the wake of prison literature works have marked the literary field. Selahattin Demirtaş's works and the strong responses that they have elicited are thus at the very heart of literary developments in Turkey.

Kemal's *Muahezename* too was an example of prison literature, written in jail and referring to his ordeal. Interestingly it was piece of prison literature about prison literature. But though he had little sympathy for Pellico, whose frame of mind he deplored, and whose ideology he despised, he chose to discuss Ekrem's translation and took it seriously as a literary work. This is the kind of engagement that many have wanted to deny Demirtaş's work. Yet the fact that he, just like Kemal and Pellico, wrote in jail and reached out to the outside world via his literary works provoking several debates, that had often little to do with literature, requires us to situate him within the broader framework of the history of literature in Turkish, at the side of Kemal, Hikmet, Kısakürek and other authors mentioned in this article. As an author of not less than five works of fiction, whose publication has turned each time in a literary event, Demirtaş is a writer that needs to be taken seriously. He himself has increasingly been reflecting on his status as author. In an interview with journalist Yeşim Özdemir for a podcast on the website *Kısa Dalga* on January 30, 2023, Demirtaş said:

You know that there are street musicians. I like them a lot, maybe I am trying to be a street writer too. A street writer who writes his stories on a sidewalk and shares them with the public, trying to bring literature to ordinary people with big hearts, to large masses! I think I can touch the hearts of many more people in this way. I am talking about an impact far beyond the impact of a political declaration.^{xxxiii}

Laurent Mignon

University of Oxford

i Hakan Keysan, “Politik bir Figür Olarak Yazan Siyasetçiler ve Selahattin Demirtaş Kitaplığı,” *Evrensel*, February 18, 2020, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/397503/politik-bir-figur-olarak-yazan-siyasetciler-ve-selahattin-demirtas-kitapligi> (accessed May 13, 2023).

ii I use a language-centred understanding of “literature in Turkish” (Türkçe edebiyat), rather than the ethno-nationally demarcated concept of Turkish literature (Türk edebiyatı). This enables the inclusion of a wide range of literary texts written in Turkish, while recognizing that authors who write in Turkish, such as Demirtaş, do not necessarily self-define as Turks. The term goes back to a debate on poetry initiated by the Turkish Cypriot poet Mehmet Yaşın who made the case for the usage of the term “Türkçe şiir” (poetry in Turkish) in a series of essays for the influential literary magazine *Adam Sanat* between December 1994 and September 1995. The essays were later collected in a volume entitled *Poeturka* (1995). Far from seeking political controversy, Yaşın argued that the term was pragmatic and allowed him to embrace the poetic production in Turkish in all its breadth, including Turcophone poets in Cyprus and former Yugoslavia, ethnoreligious minorities writing in Turkish in the Ottoman empire as well as poets who do not self-define as Turks in modern Turkey (Mehmet Yaşın, *Poeturka* (Istanbul: Yitik Ülke Yayınları, 2018). It should be noted, however, that the usages “Türkçe edebiyat” and “Türkçe şiir” remain extremely controversial in Turkey. For a succinct overview of the history of the term and the debates surrounding it, see Mesut Varlık, “Tartışılmayacak bir Tartışma: Türkçe Edebiyat,” *K24*, November 1, 2020, <https://t24.com.tr/k24/yazi/tartisilmayacak-bir-tartisma-turkce-edebiyat>, 2920 (accessed May 13, 2023). For a discussion of recent controversies around the term, see Erol Köroğlu, “Türk Edebiyatı mı, Türkçe Edebiyat Mı? Ne Yapmalı? Nasıl Tartışmalı?”, *artigerçek*, January 30 2023, <https://artigercek.com/makale/turk-edebiyati-mi-turkce-edebiyat-mi-ne-yapmalı-nasil-tartismali-237279> (accessed May 13, 2023) and “Türk Edebiyatı Mı Diyeceğiz, Türkçe Edebiyat Mı?”, *artigerçek*, February 6, 2023, <https://artigercek.com/makale/turk-edebiyati-mi-turkce-edebiyat-mi-ne-yapmalı-nasil-tartismali-ii-237999> (accessed May 13, 2023). I share Yaşın’s pragmatic approach as the term creates space for the recognition of the ethnoreligious diversity of authors who have contributed to the development of literature in Turkish, while also acknowledging that Turkish-language production is not restricted to authors and poets based within what is today the Republic of Turkey.

iii In this article, I use the term as referring to works written by authors who are or were incarcerated. The works can be directly about jail, or informed by the experience of incarceration, or simply having been written while the author was behind bars, the latter characterizing Selahattin Demirtaş’s literary production.

iv Within a year the book, published on September 16, 2017, had sold 250,000 copies in Turkey, which is a considerable number in the Turkish publishing world. (“Demirtaş’ın *Seher*’i Tüm Dünyada: 12 Dile Çevrildi!”, *gazete duvar*, December 18, 2017, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/kitap/2018/12/18/demirtasin-seheri-tum-dunyada12-dile-cevrildi> (accessed May 13, 2023).

v In contrast, it is notable that the religious-nationalist poet and activist Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (1904-1983) chooses not to hide his deep despair and mental struggle during his multiple incarcerations. In his prison memoirs revealingly entitled *Cinnet Mustatili: Yılanlı Kuyudan* (In the Rectangle of Insanity: From the Snakepit, 1955), unlike Demirtaş who evokes in various paratexts the solidarity and community within and without the prison walls, Kısakürek describes his solitude in compelling terms: “Korktuğum başıma geldi. Evvelce, Allaha dua ederek ve kullara yalvararak istediğim yalnızlık bana verilince, her gün biraz daha gelişe gelişe içimde büyüyen ve nihayet beni kaplayan şey... Kendi kendimi dişlemek, parçalamak, ikiye bölünmek ve her parçamın öbürünü yediğine şahit olmak korkusu...” (Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, *Cinnet Mustatili: Yılanlı Kuyudan* (Istanbul: Büyük Doğu Yayınları, 1986 [1955], 89). (“What I feared has happened to me. When I was given the solitude that I had asked for by praying to God and begging [his] servants, the thing

that grew in me day by day, and finally overwhelmed me... The fear of gnawing myself, tearing myself apart, splitting in two and witnessing each part of me eating the other...”). While the temperament of an author, their aesthetic choices and the genre explain up to the point the mood of those works written in jail, the importance of the projected literary genealogy should not be underestimated in the highly politicized context of the reception of Demirtaş’s literary work. Nazım Hikmet remains a powerful symbol for the left in Turkey, including in the Kurdish movement, while Kısakürek is an emblematic figure in the religious-nationalist milieu.

vi Claire Westall, “Introduction: A Wide and Worlded Vision of Prison Writing,” in *Prison Writing and the Literary World: Imprisonment, Institutionalization and Questions of Literary Practice*, ed. Michelle Kelly and Claire Westall (New York: Routledge, 2020), 1.

vii Selahattin Demirtaş, *Devran* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2021 [2019]), 137.

viii Sehattin Demirtaş, *Efsun* (Istanbul: Dipnot Yayınları, 2021), 241.

ix Ayşen Uysal, “Efsun’un Büyüsü,” *Evrensel*, October 6, 2021, <https://www.evrensel.net/yazi/89587/efsunun-buyusu> (accessed May 13, 2023).

x Emirhan Ertaş, “Efsun Bir ‘Politik Edebiyat’ Ürünü Olarak Tanımlanabilecek Nitelikte mi?,” *Niçin.biz*, November 1, 2021, <https://www.nicin.biz/efsun-bir-politik-edebiyat-urununu-olarak-tanimlanabilecek-nitelikte-mi/> (accessed May 13, 2023).

xi Indeed, in an interview he gave to Anıl Mert Özsoy from *gazete duvaR*, an independent news site, Demirtaş had explained that, unlike in his three previous books that were more personal and political, he chose to “take refuge in literature and, remaining within the rules of literature, I tried as far as possible to withdraw my voice” with his latest novel. Much of the interview, however, is focused on literature as resistance and on its political nature. See, Anıl Mert Özsoy, “Selahattin Demirtaş: Buradayım ve Eskisinden de Fazlayım,” *gazete duvaR*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/selahattin-demirtas-buradayim-ve-eskisinden-de-fazlayim-haber-1538716> (accessed May 13, 2023).

xii Kemal Gündüzalp, “2017 Yılında Yayımlanan Öykü Kitapları,” *Heceöykü* 85 (February 2018): 103-122.

xiii Gülcan Tezcan, “Terörist Güzellemesi Edebiyat Sığar mı?,” *Star*, February 25, 2018, <https://www.star.com.tr/pazar/terorist-guzellemesi-edebiyata-sigar-mi-haber-1313601/> (accessed May 13, 2023).

xiv Hece Yayınları ve Dergileri, “Kamuoyuna Açıklama,” *Twitter*, February 27, 2018, <https://mobile.twitter.com/heceyayinlari/status/968398837118394368> (accessed May 13, 2023).

xv Mehmet Ocaktan, “Dindar Yazarların Fanatizmle Olan İmtihanı,” *Karar*, March 6, 2018, <https://www.karar.com/yazarlar/mehmet-ocaktan/dindarlarin-fanatizmle-imtihani-6389> (accessed May 13, 2023). Notably, he argues further that a journal such as *Hece*, while “Islamist” in character, had always been open to publish “all the colours of the left [...] without any ideological restraint.” This, he argued, was an approach that had not been reciprocated by left-wing publications. While not being entirely without a basis, the latter point is open to debate. See for instance, *i.a.* the article “Yeni Türk Şiiri ve Eleştirisi” in Metin Celâl, *Yeni Türk Şiiri: 80’li Yıllar*, (Istanbul: Çizgi Yayıncılık, 1999) and Barış Büyükokutan, *Bound Together: The Secularization of Turkey’s Literary Fields and the Western Promise of Freedom* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2021).

xvi Mehmet Kaplan, *Şiir Tahlilleri II: Cumhuriyet Devri Türk Şiiri* (Istanbul: Dergâh Yayınları, 1998 [1965]), 330-344.

xvii Mehmet Kaplan, *Kültür ve Dil* (Istanbul: Dergâh Yayınları, 1982), 239.

xviii Here it should be noted that columnists have often manifold identities, as it is not unusual for published poets, authors and critics, to have regular columns in the daily press.

xix The literary journal *Hece*, which happens to be the (elder) sister-publication of *Heceöykü*, has devoted an extensive if not exhaustive 888-page special issue to the topic that is a reference work in the field: “Türk Edebiyatında Polemikler” [Polemics in Turkish Literature], *Hece* 258-259-260.

xx Beşir Fuat (1852-1887), one of the *hakikiyun* (realists) who can be seen as the instigator of the debate on realism was soon to be criticized for his philosophical materialism and positivism, moving the debate away from a question of literary aesthetics to one of political ideology and personal belief. As for the debates on the modernist *İkinci Yeni* movement, notwithstanding the political identity of the poets who were often on the left, their, arguably, individualist and opaque poetry, not without surrealist touches, was seen by some socialist poets, such as Attila İlhan (1925-2005), as the official poetry of the conservative Democrat Party government (1950-1960), because it questioned socialist realist principles.

xxi It is notable that Ekrem did not translate Pellico’s work from the original Italian, but from one, or perhaps several, unspecified French translations. The publication history is complex. Initially he serialized the opening sections of Pellico’s memoirs in the journal *Terakki* (Progress) between August 1869 and May 1870. He then published the first half of the memoirs in book form: Silvio Pellico, *Mes prisons Tercümesi*, vol.1, trans. Rezaizade Mahmud Ekrem (Istanbul: Matbaa-i Tasvir-i Efkâr, 1874 [h. 1291]. He never published the second volume.

xxii Just like the translation into Turkish, Kemal’s criticism has had a complex publication history. Originally a letter addressed at the translator, the *muahezename* would be published twice in Ebuzziya Tevfik’s *Mecmua-i Ebuzziya* (Ebuzziya’s Review), a first time in 1884, that included solely the linguistic and aesthetic arguments, understandably in view of the strict censorship under the rule of Sultan Abdülhamit II (1876-1909) and a second time, complete and uncensored, in 1912. See Selçuk Atay, “Meprizon (Mes Prisons) Muahezenâmesi ve bu Bağlamda Namık Kemal’in Tenkit Anlayışı Üzerine,” *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi* 19 (2020): 313. In this article Atay provides the first complete critical edition and transliteration of the “*Mes prisons muahezenamesi*” (“Meprizon (Mes Prisons) Muahezenâmesi...,” 318-338) which I will refer to throughout the article. However, I have adapted the transliteration according to the rules of the *Türk Dil Kurumu*, the Turkish Language Institute.

xxiii His more theoretical works *Talim-i Edebiyat* (The Tuition of Literature, 1882), originally meant as a teaching manual while he was a lecturer at the Mekteb-i Mülkiye –the Civil Administration School –and *Takdir-i Elhan* (The Appreciation of Songs, 1885), a book length review of a poetry collection by Memenlizade Tahir (1863-1903), led to strong reactions because of the radical new understanding of literature that they promoted and were to prepare the way for the poets and writers gathering around the journal *Servet-i Fünun* (The Wealth of the Arts and Sciences). On the topic see Selçuk Atay, *Üstat Ekrem* (Ankara: Hece Yayınları, 2021), 56-72.

xxiv Jean-Claude Vilmont notes that between 1833 and 1914, the French translation was reedited not less than 150 times. As to its readership, he notes that the book was celebrated among the religious conservatives part of the Italian nationalist movement. Romantics too appreciated the book, especially those with a leaning towards dolorist Catholicism, an interpretation of the faith that celebrated suffering and agony as signs of divine election. As for the Catholic clergy, it saw in this testimony of a man finding in faith the strength to withstand adversity, a useful message that it chose to promote among the youth. Jean-Claude Vimont, “Silvio Pellico, *Mes prisons* : un ‘best-seller’ de l’édification,” *Criminocorpus* [En ligne], Justice et détention politique, published online June 25, 2012, consulted on Octobre 5, 2022. URL : <http://ezproxypd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:3919/criminocorpus/1946>.

xxv Ekrem went even further and published a dramatized version in Turkish of the novella in 1873: *Atala yahut Amerika Vahşileri* (Istanbul, 1873). On Ekrem's engagement with *Atala* and the Ottoman Turkish reception, see Laurent Mignon, *Uncoupling Language and Religion: An Exploration into the Margins of Turkish Literature* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2001), 71-78.

xxvi For sake of completeness, it should be noted that in those years, Ekrem also translated a text by Voltaire (1694-1778), who was known for his critical stance towards Christianity. It was the entry on animals in his *Dictionnaire philosophique*, which Ekrem translated as "Hayvanat" for the journal *Dağarcık* (Repertoire), edited by Ahmet Midhat Efendi. However, he fell short of translating the final sentence of the article: "Le philosophe qui a dit : 'Deus est anima brutorum', avait raison ; mais il devait aller plus loin" (The philosopher who said, 'Deus est anima brutorum', was right; but he should have gone further). In a follow-up article, Ekrem maintained that Voltaire discussed the question of the soul of animals, but that it was not possible to reach a verdict on the topic. See, Voltaire, "Hayvanat," trans. Mahmut Ekrem, *Dağarcık* 2 (1871 [1288]): 63-64 and Rezaizade Mahmut Ekrem, "Hayvanatın Hissi Hakkında Ekrem Bey'in Mütalaası," *Dağarcık* 3 (1871 [1288]): 66-68.

xxvii Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, *Ondokuzuncu Asır Türk Edebiyatı Tarihi* (Istanbul: Çağlayan, 1997 [1956]), 477.

xxviii Şerif Mardin, *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought: A Study in the Modernization of Turkish Political Ideas* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000 [1962]), 67.

xxix For a discussion of Namık Kemal's main arguments, see Selçuk Atay, "Meprizon (Mes Prisons) Muahezenâmesi ve bu Bağlamda Namık Kemal'in Tenkit Anlayışı Üzerine", *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi* 19 (2020): 309-338.

xxx Fevziye Abdullah Tansel, *Namık Kemal'in Hususi Mektupları*, vol. 1 (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1967), 345.

xxxi For an assessment and bibliographical list of Ekrem's translations, see Zeynep Kerman's article "Rezaizade Ekrem'in Batı Edebiyatından Yapmış Olduğu Tercümeler," reprinted in her *Yeni Türk Edebiyatı İncelemeleri* (Ankara: Akçağ, 1998), 342-350.

xxxii Notably "*Mes prisons* Muahezenamesi" was also read as an important text providing information about Kemal's biography and more specifically his time in Famagusta. Fevziye Abdullah Tansel published relevant passages of the text under the title "Magosa Hatıraları" (Famagusta Memories): Fevziye Abdullah Tansel, "Namık Kemal'den Parçalar," *Ülkü* 16, no. 94 (1940): 326-335.

xxxiii Yeşim Özdemir, "Selahattin Demirtaş, Kısa Dalga'ya Yazarlığını Anlattı: 'Birçok İnsan Bilmez Yaralarımı'", *Kısa Dalga*, January 30, 2023, https://kisadalga.net/haber/detay/selahattin-demirtas-belki-ben-de-bir-sokak-yazari-olmaya-calisiyorum_54169 (accessed May 13, 2023). Notably Demirtaş provided the answers to the questions of the journalist via his lawyers. His answers were then read out by an actor for the podcast. In some ways, then, it seems that his incarceration has led to the multiplication of his voice.