
The Literati and the Letters: A Few Words

on the Turkish Alphabet Reform

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Abstract

This paper explores the varied reactions of the Turkish literati and intelligentsia to the adoption of the Roman script imposed by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1928. Though alphabet reform had been on the agenda for almost 75 years, few intellectuals and bureaucrats had been supportive of romanisation in the years preceding the move. However after the implementation of the reform, opponents remained silent or were seemingly converted. This article discusses the reasons behind the silence and conversion of the elites and the strategies of opposition developed by more radical defenders of the Ottoman script. Finally it records the impact of the reform on the literary world and literary historiography.

Let us open with an anecdote. This incident supposedly took place around 1928 in one of those tavernas haunted by Istanbul's intelligentsia and Bohemia. A "young poet", arguably Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (1905–1983), was reading out a new poem; Professor Mustafa Şekip Tunç (1886–1958), a conservative exponent of Bergsonism, interrupted the recitation and exclaimed that the "young poet" was on the "road to genius". Peyami Safa (1899–1961), who was by then a celebrated novelist and would later become a leading intellectual of the nationalist-conservative right, entered the discussion: "This is easy to check! . . . Tell us, poet. Are you in favour of romanisation and have you ever bought a national lottery ticket?" Taken by surprise, the "young poet" hesitantly asked for an explanation. The novelist replied that this was a test that he had devised in order to measure the intelligence of his interlocutors: "Whoever answers yes to those two questions is, according to me, a fool". The whole assembly laughed and drank to the good health of everybody present.¹

This scene is taken from Kısakürek's highly autobiographical narrative *Bâbîâli* (1975) and points to an understudied dimension of the Turkish alphabet reform of 1928 – the attitude of literati towards the adoption of the Roman script. Though a few studies have discussed the debates that occurred in the years before its implementation and the critical stance of bureaucratic and intellectual circles otherwise favourable to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's westernising policies², the attitude of writers and poets whose literary works would be

¹Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, *Bâbîâli* (Istanbul, 1994 [1975]), pp. 14–15.

²Most sources are in Turkish. However, Geoffrey Lewis gives a general survey of the history of and the debates about the so-called "alphabet revolution" (*harf inkılabı*) in his study of the Turkish language reform *The Turkish Language Reform: A Catastrophic Success* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 27–39. More favourable is François Georgeon's

rendered indecipherable to younger generations by the reform has yet to be explored. Little is known about the feelings of the literati concerning the adoption of a western alphabet. Most monographs on literary figures and literary histories ignore the topic altogether and, to be truthful, most writers remained silent on the issue once the Roman script was adopted. The novelist Halide Edip Adivar (1884–1964) is a rare exception, but her criticism was not aimed at romanisation but at its speedy and authoritarian implementation. It is worthwhile noting that she chose to express her concerns in an English-language publication in 1930 and not in Turkish.³ However this is a topic that certainly deserves further investigation. The presence of Peyami Safa and Mustafa Şekip Tunç at the above-mentioned assembly and their apparent uneasiness with the reform sharply conflicts with what is generally known about their stance on the question, mainly through their own published writings. In his *Approaches to the Turkish Revolution* (Türk İnkılabına Bakışlar, 1938), Safa considered alphabet reform to be one of several necessary civilising moves that would catapult Turkey into modernity.⁴ Tunç went even further and argued in an article published shortly after the announcement of the reform that “the new Turkish alphabet would not only improve alphabetisation but it would help Turkey, paralyzed until now under the domination of Arab and Persian standards, advance and develop, full of life and science”.⁵ The wordy prose of the professor left little doubt that he considered romanisation as an expression of an unchained Turkish *élan vital*.

The excerpt from Kısakürek’s *Bâbü’lî* seems to indicate that there is an untold side to the story of alphabet reform in Turkey, which sharply contrasts with the celebratory texts published during and after the implementation of the reform. One could, of course, argue that the poet might not be the most objective narrator of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s politics. Indeed having espoused the teachings of the Nakshibendi shaykh Abdülhakîm Arvasî (1860–1943) in 1934, Kısakürek became the advocate of an Islamicist discourse that directly challenged the official Kemalist narrative of the early republican era.⁶ Thus to show advocates of those reforms railing in private at what they praised in public might have been part of his strategy of undermining Republican historiography.

However from the 1990s onwards, scholars, researchers and journalists have gained greater freedom to explore controversial issues of Turkish historiography and to question the official discourses on the Kemalist revolution. Recent publications on leading Turkish literary

article ‘Des caractères arabes à l’alphabet latin: Un pas vers l’occident?’ in *Des Ottomans aux Turcs: Naissance d’une nation* (Istanbul, 1995), pp. 199–221. In the context of his comparative study of the revival of Hebrew and the Turkish language reform, İlker Aytürk offers a critical analysis of the alphabet debate in his unpublished PhD thesis: *Language and Nationalism: A Comparative Study of Language Revival and Reform in Hebrew and Turkish* (Unpublished PhD dissertation, Brandeis University, 2005), pp. 202–229. See also the forthcoming article by the same author: İlker Aytürk, ‘Script Charisma in Hebrew and Turkish: A Comparative Framework for Explaining Success and Failure of Romanization’, *Journal of World History*, forthcoming.

³Halide Edip Adivar is known to have been very uneasy with Atatürk’s autocratic style. Regarding the reform she wrote that “the martial way it was rushed into effect, the martial orders given for the time limit by a mentality which was purely that of a staff officer, indicated a lack of understanding of the most far-reaching change ever carried through in modern Turkish history”, *Turkey Faces West* (New Haven, 1930), p. 234.

⁴Peyami Safa, *Türk İnkılabına Bakışlar* (Ankara, 1981 [1938]), p. 93.

⁵Mustafa Şekip Tunç, ‘Yeni Harflerimize Dair’ in *Tanzimat’tan Günümüze Alfabe Tartışmaları*, ed. Hüseyin Yorulmaz (Istanbul, 1995), p. 308.

⁶In *Ideolojya Örgüsü* (The Interweaves of Ideology, 1968), a political work, Kısakürek devoted a section to the “alphabet cause” (*harf davası*) and expressed his belated doubts about the necessity of the reform by questioning the reform’s impact and its cultural consequences. Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, *Ideolojya Örgüsü* (Istanbul, 1994 [1938]), pp. 322–325.

figures, some of whom are part of the Republican canon, seem to suggest, albeit timidly, that most writers, just like Halide Edip Adıvar, were not happy at all with the speed and the way the romanisation reforms were implemented or even with the principle itself, even if they did not have the opportunity, or maybe the courage, to express those ideas in writing.

Characteristic of this new state of mind is the nationalist writer and publisher Ergun Göze's addition of a few lines on Safa's position regarding the alphabet reform in a revised edition of his tendentious monograph on the dispute between Safa and the communist poet Nâzım Hikmet (1902–1963).⁷ Apparently Safa, an epileptic, confessed to Göze that after the promulgation of the alphabet reform he had remained shut in his room and had felt smothered.⁸ No mention of this event was made in the first edition of the book in 1969. Read in conjunction with Kısakürek's anecdote, this passage reveals that Safa was unhappy with the reform, even though he was an advocate of westernisation and a defender of most of Atatürk's policies.

There are even more striking examples. Yahya Kemal Beyatlı (1884–1958), a neo-classical poet close to the regime⁹, seems to have expressed serious doubts about the change even though he chose not to express them openly in writing. According to a recent biography by one of his disciples, the poet was asked about his views on the reform in 1928 or 1929 by Atatürk. According to the author, he courageously answered with “the passion of the poet”: “But Your Excellency, what will happen to the huge Turkish library, to Turkish culture?”¹⁰ Atatürk did not respond. This incident shows that Beyatlı, who in the early 1920s expressed his belief in the need for an alphabet that was better suited to Turkish phonology than the current script based on the Arabic alphabet, had reservations regarding the consequences of romanisation.¹¹ Beyatlı's close friend Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar (1901–1962), an accomplished writer and poet and the author of a seminal history of nineteenth-century Turkish literature, seems to have been pessimistic about the impact of the reform on literature too. Even though he did not publish anything negative on the topic after the promulgation of the alphabet law, he openly expressed his doubts during his lectures at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Istanbul. According to the lecture notes taken by Gözde Saġnak, his student between 1953 and 1954, Tanpınar claimed that the alphabet change was one of five instances where Turks had lost contact with their sources: “Turkish literature does not feed on itself. Folk literature is all that is left. That is just a handful. That is not sufficient”,¹² he complained.

Neither Safa, Beyatlı nor Tanpınar were opponents of the Kemalist regime and can not be categorised among those “fundamentalists” or “reactionaries” who are usually presented by official historiography as the main opponents of the westernising reforms. Though Safa's later intellectual journey to the nationalist-conservative right and Beyatlı's neo-classical sensitivity sometimes put them at odds with some of the westernising policies of the regime, these

⁷The book was originally published in 1969: Ergun Göze, *Peyami Safa Nâzım Hikmet Kavgası* (Istanbul, 1969).

⁸Ergun Göze, *Peyami Safa Nâzım Hikmet Kavgası* (Istanbul, 1995 [1991]), p. 78.

⁹Beyatlı was ambassador for the newly founded Republic of Turkey in Poland (14.06.1926–14.03.1929), Spain (22.05.1929–25.03.1932) and Pakistan (13.01.1948–27.12.1948). From 1934 to 1943 he was a Member of Parliament for the ruling Republican People's Party. After three years as “Advisor on Aesthetics” (Estetik müşavir) for his party, he was re-elected in 1946.

¹⁰Sermet Sami Uysal, *Şiire Adanmış bir Yaşam: Yahya Kemal Beyatlı* (Istanbul, 1998), p. 200.

¹¹Yahya Kemal Beyatlı, ‘İmlâya Dâir Güft ü Gü’, *Edebiyata Dâir* (Istanbul, 1971), pp. 90–96. The article was published originally in *Dergâh* magazine in 1922.

¹²Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, *Edebiyat Notları* (Istanbul, 2004 [2002]), pp. 214–215.

two authors remained, throughout their life, committed to the Republic. Tanpınar, on the other hand, had been a member of Parliament for the Republican People's Party in 1941 and supportive of Kemalist policies. This might be a partial explanation of why, at the time, these writers, like many others, chose not to publish their ideas about a reform they disagreed with partly or completely. However there are other dimensions that must be taken into consideration when appraising their silence, such as the long history of the alphabet debate and the quasi-unanimity regarding the need for a reform, the shock tactics of Atatürk and indeed political repression.

By 1928, when romanisation was finally carried out, the reform of the alphabet had been on the agenda for almost 75 years. Though throughout those years romanisation was seen by most literati as too daring a move, everyone agreed that the alphabet had to reflect the phonology of Turkish in order to facilitate the alphabetisation of the largely illiterate Muslim population of the Ottoman Empire. Addressing the Ottoman Scientific Society (Cemiyet-i İlimiye-i Osmaniye) in May 1862, Antepli Münif Pasha reminded his audience that the letters كورك could be read in six distinct meaningful manners¹³, namely *gevrek* (crisp), *görün* (see), *körük* (bellows), *körün* (the blind man's), *kürek* (oar) and *kürk* (fur). Obviously homographs did not facilitate alphabetisation. During the years that followed the westernising Tanzimat reforms, talks about the alphabet were part of a greater debate regarding the need to bridge the gap between the elaborate written language full of Arabisms and Persianisms and the spoken language. Alphabetisation and the simplification of the written language were necessary for intellectuals to fulfil their role as self-appointed educators of the nation. The debate regarding the alphabet intensified or weakened according to the political conjuncture, with some high points being the proposal of two reformed alphabets to the Ottoman Scientific Society by the Azeri writer Mirza Fath-Ali Akhundzâde (1812–1878) in 1863, the adoption of the Latin alphabet by Albanian Muslims after the Manastiri Congress in 1908, the development by Enver Pasha (1881–1922) in 1913 of a special alphabet to facilitate military communication using only the final forms of the Arabic letters with no ligatures and showing all the vowels, and finally the presentation of a motion in favour of the adoption of the Latin script at the Izmir Economic Congress by three worker-delegates in February–March 1923, which enraged conservative politicians and intellectuals. As Atatürk had always been interested in the alphabet debate, it was not really surprising that the discussions should gain a new impetus after the establishment of the republic. Interestingly all the arguments in favour of and against the reform had already been spelled out during the nineteenth century: as the Arabic script was not adapted to the peculiarities of Turkish pronunciation, a reform of the script was needed. This would have a positive impact on alphabetisation and literacy. Those opposed to the reform countered that better schooling policies and infrastructures would help to improve literacy levels, while reforming the Arabic alphabet or in particular romanisation would estrange younger generations from their literary and intellectual heritage. Even literate people would have to be alphabetised, if they did not know the Roman alphabet. Debates on romanisation, moreover, focused on the symbolical meaning of the alphabet and its power of evocation. Did the Roman script symbolise modernity and progress or Christianity? Despite

¹³ Ağâh Sırrı Levend, *Türk Dilinde Gelişme ve Sadeleşme Evreleri* (Ankara, 1972 [1949]), p. 154.

those important nuances, almost everybody agreed that there was a need for reform.¹⁴ And once somebody had the courage to act, it became increasingly difficult to propose alternatives.

However it is fair to say that the decision to implement the reform took everyone by surprise. On the evening of 9 August 1928, the president of the republic Atatürk introduced the new Turkish alphabet, based on the Roman script, to the people who attended the yearly Gala of the Republican People's Party at Gülhane Park in Istanbul. Most people who were present, among them several government and party officials, were flabbergasted. A few months earlier, on 23 May 1928, the Council of Ministers had set up the *Dil Encümeni* –the language commission– with Mustafa Kemal's approval. Its aim was to “explore the possibility and the ways of applying the Latin script to the [Turkish] language”.¹⁵ Among the nine original members of the language commission were three MPs with literary pretensions – the novelist Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu (1889–1974), the chronicler and essayist Falih Rıfkı Atay (1894–1971) and the essayist Ruşen Eşref Ünaydin (1892–1959). The commission was later enlarged and the poet Celal Sahir Erozan (1883–1935) was one of the five new members.¹⁶ On 1 August 1928, Atay submitted a report to Atatürk which introduced the romanised Turkish alphabet, while proposing two alternative plans for its implementation. The first plan foresaw complete romanisation within five years. The second plan was more moderate and proposed a gradual introduction of the Roman script over a period of fifteen years. But Atatürk rejected both proposals and argued that romanisation should be implemented within three months. He thought that a gradual introduction would lead to the failure of the project. Even Atay, who defined himself as a “radical revolutionary” and was a staunch supporter of the reforms, was stunned.¹⁷ Eight days later Atatürk announced the ground-breaking reform in front of a bewildered crowd. The choice of Gülhane as a venue at which the announcement was made had symbolic importance. The edict proclaiming the westernisation reforms of the *Tanzimat* in 1839 had also been read out at Gülhane Park. One could argue that, to a certain extent, Mustafa Kemal aimed at putting the emphasis on the continuity of reformist policies while announcing a final reform which, in practice, would cut off new generations from the accumulated writings of past centuries. During the speech Atatürk considered the promotion of the alphabet as every citizen's duty: “Citizens, quickly learn the new Turkish script. Teach it to the whole nation, to the peasant, the shepherd, the porter and the boatman. Consider this as a patriotic and nationalistic duty”.¹⁸ The definiteness of the speech and the determination of the orator left no space for discussion. Though it seems that the decision to romanise the script had already been taken by Atatürk in the autumn of 1927¹⁹, there had still been room for debate regarding the method, the speed of the implementation and the need for romanisation before August 1928. After the establishment of the republic, when the debate was at its

¹⁴The major texts about the alphabet debate can be found in Yorulmaz (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 308.

¹⁵Quoted in Ağah Sırrı Levend, *Türk Dilinde Gelişme ve Sadeleşme Evreleri* (Ankara, 1972), p. 401.

¹⁶The complete list of members can be found in Bilâl N. Şimşir, *Türk Yazı Devrimi* (Ankara, 1992), p. 88.

¹⁷Falih Rıfkı Atay, *Çankaya* (Istanbul, 2004 [1968]), p. 479.

¹⁸Bilâl N. Şimşir, *Türk Yazı Devrimi* (Ankara, 1992), p. 161.

¹⁹İlker Aytürk, ‘The First Episode of Language Reform in Turkey: The Language Council from 1926 to 1931’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, Vol. 18, Part 3 (2008), pp. 279–280; Aytürk, ‘Language and Nationalism’, p. 224.

height, several leading intellectuals from across the political spectrum had formulated their reservations against the reform for a variety of reasons, repeating the arguments put forward ever since the idea of alphabet reform had been first mentioned. But literary figures who had marked the history of literature openly expressed their doubts as well. In a survey with the title “Should the Latin script be adopted or not?” published in the daily *Akşam* in 1926, a great majority of interviewees opposed the move.²⁰ Among the interviewees were Halit Ziya Uşaklıgil (1866–1945), one of Turkey’s leading novelists, and Ali Ekrem Bolayır (1867–1937), the son of the famous Young Ottoman man of letters, Namık Kemal (1840–1888). Both Uşaklıgil and Bolayır, otherwise in favour of westernisation, were against romanisation. Uşaklıgil reminded the readers that non-Muslim communities, mainly Catholic Armenians and more rarely Jews, used to write in Turkish using their own alphabets – the Armenian script and the Hebrew script respectively. Rightly he argued that the Armenian script was probably best adapted to represent all Turkish sounds.²¹ The Roman script on the other hand would have to be modified, just like the Arabic script. Hence it would be best to reform the current Arabic script. Moreover it was doubtful that romanisation would foster alphabetisation and literacy. However it was certain that it would cause headaches to all those who were trained in the old script.²² In this context it is also important to note that even though the reception of the elaborate prose would be harmed by the simplification movement in literature, Uşaklıgil supported the simplification of the Turkish language and later took an active part in the romanisation and the ‘Turkification’ of some of his works. The question of the transcription of the works written in the Arab script was of course an important issue that caused a lot of concern, among others, to Bolayır.²³ His concern was quite understandable. The complete works of his father had only started to be published after the proclamation of the second constitution in 1908. Some of them had been censored during the ruthless reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1842–1918) who ruled from 1876–1909. A script change could potentially condemn them once again to partial oblivion.

But Atatürk’s *Gülhane* speech put an end to all discussions. From then on everything went very fast. Having adopted a new persona as the teacher of the nation, Atatürk travelled widely throughout the country to familiarise the nation with the new script. And finally on 1 November 1928, less than six months after the announcement, the Turkish parliament voted in the “Law on the Adoption and Implementation of the Turkish Alphabet” (*Türk Harflerinin Kabul ve Tatbiki Hakkındaki Kanun*), which imposed the romanised script for official and private purposes by June 1929.

Another issue is that the political climate of the time made any outspoken expression of dissent with the policies and the figure of Atatürk a rather temerarious enterprise. In 1928 the Law on the Maintenance of Order – the ill-famed *Takrir-i Sükûn Kanûnu* – which had been passed on 4 March 1925, was still in force and allowed the government to silence the opposition by banning the press and other publications and by trying writers deemed unsympathetic to the regime in Independence Tribunals (*İstiklâl Mahkemeleri*).²⁴

²⁰The texts of the responses are available in Yorulmaz (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 194–232.

²¹Some writers, such as Macid Pasha, even argued that the Armenian alphabet should be adopted. See, Rekin Ertem, *Elişe'den Alfabe'ye* (Istanbul, 1991), p. 258.

²²Halit Ziya Uşaklıgil, ‘Latin Harfleri Kabul Etmeli Mi, Etmemeli Mi?’, in Yorulmaz (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 206–213.

²³Ali Ekrem Bolayır, ‘Latin Harfleri Kabul Etmeli Mi, Etmemeli Mi?’, in Yorulmaz (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 195–197.

²⁴Dilruba Çatalbaşı, ‘Freedom of Press and Broadcasting’, in *Human Rights in Turkey*, ed. Zehra F. Kabasakal Arat (Philadelphia, 2007), p. 22.

Hence every form of opposition had been silenced, if not crushed. Islamicist writers who feared that romanisation would lead to a break with the rest of the Muslim world had been gagged. Heavy censorship made it impossible for them to express freely their views on the reforms, including the alphabet reform. The journal *Sebilürreşad* (The Path of the Righteous), which was the flagship of the Islamicist movement, had been forbidden in 1925. One of its leading writers, the poet Mehmed Akif Ersoy (1873–1936), who had supported the war for independence and the broad front led by Atatürk, had grown disenchanted with the westernising reforms and the secularist revolution and he had emigrated to Egypt in 1925, arguably in order to escape police surveillance.²⁵ From Egypt, he chose to observe his homeland with silent dismay.

Moreover, the few writers who could have opposed the move for literary and, perhaps aesthetic reasons, became some of the most outspoken defenders of the changes, either because they were politically discredited and saw the praise of the reform as an opportunity that could lead to their absolution or because they were sincerely convinced of the rationality and legitimacy of romanisation. Sometimes both reasons intermingled. The poet Cenap Şahabettin (1870–1934) is a case in point. An exponent and fervent practitioner of Neo-Parnassianism, Şahabettin had advocated elitist principles in literary matters and fought several battles of words with the representatives of the nationalist neo-folk movement who favoured the use of the spoken language and the syllabic meter of the folk tradition in poetry. Şahabettin was opposed to the democratisation of the literary language – its simplification and Turkification. His position was original. Even though he argued that the suppression of Arabic and Persian vocabulary would lead to an irremediable impoverishment of the Turkish written language, he was in favour of the adoption of the Roman script. This is because his point of reference was not classical Ottoman literary culture but France. As early as 1919, he had argued in an interview that “the adoption of the Latin alphabet was the shortest way to reach the western circle of civilisation”.²⁶ In later years too, he continued to defend the idea of the adoption of the Roman script.²⁷ But even if Şahabettin had not been an early advocate of romanisation, it is doubtful that he would have expressed antagonist views on the issue. Always weary of populist movements, he had contributed to the Anglophile liberal Ali Kemal’s (1867–1922) *Peyam-ı Sabâh* newspaper in the years that followed the Allied occupation of Istanbul. During those years he wrote several articles against the Kemalist resistance movement. After a late, and not quite convincing, conversion towards the end of the war of national liberation, he spent the rest of his life trying to be accepted by the new regime.

The case of Hüseyin Cahit Yalçın (1875–1957) also deserves some more scrutiny. Known as a *garbci*²⁸, an advocate of radical westernisation, he too was close to the *Servet-i Fünûn* journal and the *Edebiyat-ı Cedide* (New Literature) group which propounded an elitist conception of literature that owed much to French Parnassianism and symbolism. A prolific polemicist and journalist, he was also a novelist and short-story writer who introduced the concept of

²⁵Dücan Cündioğlu, ‘Akif Niçin Mısır’a Gitti?’, *Âkif’e Dâir* (Istanbul, 2005), pp. 12–15.

²⁶Quoted in Rekin Ertem, *Elifbe’den Alfabe’ye* (Istanbul, 1991), p. 167.

²⁷He reiterated his faith in the necessity of romanisation in his article ‘Lisanımızın İhtiyaçları’ (The Needs of our Language), published in *Servet-i Fünûn* on 27 August 1925. (Yorulmaz (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 187–193).

²⁸On radical advocates of westernisation see M. Şükrü Hanioglu, ‘Garbcılar: Their Attitudes toward Religion and their Impact on the Official Ideology of the Turkish Republic’, *Studia Islamica*, 86 (1997), pp. 133–158.

utopia in modern Turkish fiction²⁹ and he was one of the very first devotees of prose-poetry in Turkey. He was also a leading figure in the *Union and Progress* party that led Ottoman Turkey into the First World War and he was sent into exile to Malta by the allied forces after the Ottoman defeat. Throughout the war for independence he kept his distance from the independence movement and only returned to Turkey in 1922. After the establishment of the republic, he became one of Atatürk's staunchest critics as the editor of the oppositional *Tanin* newspaper, and, though he was convinced of the need for westernising policies, he attacked some of the reforms, among others the abolition of the caliphate.³⁰ His concern was not religious, but he believed that the suppression of the caliphate would harm the standing and influence of Turkey as the leader of the Islamic world and thus diminish the country's importance in the eyes of the major European states. His stance on the caliphate would lead to his being tried by the Independence Tribunals even though he was acquitted in 1924.

However in matters of the alphabet reform, he seems to have been in agreement with Atatürk. In September 1922, during a meeting between Atatürk and the press, Yalçın had even encouraged the Kemalist leader to undertake the alphabet change. Atatürk responded that it was too early.³¹ A year later, Yalçın published an article where he argued that romanisation was a *sine qua non* condition for a successful alphabetisation policy. Moreover he stipulated that there were neither religious nor national impediments to the use of Roman characters.³² Thus he too referred to the major problematics highlighted during the alphabet debates: education and civilisation. Being even more fervent in his belief in the need for romanisation than he was in his criticism of Atatürk, he could not be expected to attack the president on this particular question.

The case of Ahmet Haşim (1887–1933), one of the last masters of the metrical prosody of the classical tradition is more curious. Author of a neo-symbolist manifesto entitled “A Few Considerations on Poetry”, published in his 1926-collection *Piyâle* (The Chalice), Haşim had shown little sympathy for the various attempts to ‘Turkify’ or ‘simplify’ the literary language. At one time he was close to the *Fecr-i Atî* (Rise of the New Dawn) literary group which favoured a French-influenced elitist conception of literature. He was opposed to populist attempts to ‘nationalise’ poetry. In his manifesto, he argued that intelligibility was the concern of minor poets, but that true poets were on a quest for music, not meaning.³³ Needless to say he had little time for the debates on democratisation of the literary language. He sincerely believed that poetry was the preserve of higher spirits and should remain so. The populace would be content with the verses of Mehmed Emin Yurdakul (1869–1944), the father of neo-folk poetry, whose “short breath, flat spirit, mediocre sensitivity, [and] lack of imagination”³⁴ he pinpointed in a French-language article on Turkish poetry in the

²⁹The short story ‘Hayât-i Muhayyel’ in the collection of the same name is a remarkable variation on Thomas More’s *Utopia*. Hüseyin Cahit, ‘Hayât-i Muhayyel’, *Hayât-ı Muhayyel* (Istanbul, 1898).

³⁰Ö. Faruk Huyugüzel, *Hüseyin Cahit Yalçın’ın Hayatı ve Edebi Eserleri Üzerinde Bir Araştırma* (Izmir, 1984), p. 35.

³¹Geoffrey Lewis, *The Turkish Language Reform* (Oxford, 1999), p. 32.

³²Hüseyin Cahit had been invited by the editor of *Resimli Gazete*, who opposed romanisation, to publish this article. It was printed on 22 September 1923 (Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 3). The article can be found in Yorulmaz (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 94–107.

³³Ahmet Haşim, ‘Şiir Hakkında Bazı Mülâhazalar’, *Piyâle* (Istanbul, 1926), pp. 4–13.

³⁴Ahmet Haşim, ‘Les tendances actuelles de la littérature turque’, *Bütün Eserleri: Gıvabahâne-i Laklaklan Diğer Yazıları* (Istanbul, 1991), p. 196.

prestigious *Mercure de France*, published in July 1924. Unlike Şahabettin, he was concerned with issues related to continuity with the Ottoman tradition. Hence it is surprising that he should have become one of the fiercest defenders of romanisation in his chronicles after Atatürk's Gülhane speech. A possible explanation for his stance might be that he might have wished to draw the attention of the government to his own fate. Ostracised by the nationalist intelligentsia throughout his life because of his Arab origins, he had only found employment in institutions such as the the *Tütün Rejisi*, the Tobacco Monopoly financed with foreign capital, and later the *Düyun-ı Umûmiye İdâresi*, the office of the public debt of the Ottoman Empire and after its suppression the *Banque Ottomane*. All of them were institutions which were eyed suspiciously by the nationalists. Throughout his life, he craved financial stability and might well have hoped that an openly Kemalist stance could have attracted him the favours of the government. Haşım, whose poetical universe consisted of shades and shadows, turned into the herald of industrial modernity. Once an elitist aesthete, he did not tolerate the advocates of the Arab script who were only "interested in the beauty of calligraphy". They were like those "maniacs who complained that the train had replaced the caravan, the transatlantic, the sailing boat and the car, the horse".³⁵ To be against romanisation meant to be against progress. One of his articles on the issue was particularly virulent and reminded the readers that he was one of Turkey's major polemicists. He stipulated that the suppression of the old script would lead to the disappearance of antiquated knowledge. Hence the population, alphabetised thanks to the reform, would be spared the danger of reading the "piles of worthless books that had been produced until now".³⁶ It is not clear whose works he had in mind, but his words echoed the stance of some of the more radical defenders of the alphabet change. Celal Nuri İleri (1877–1939) too had argued a few months earlier that the works that might be condemned to oblivion by the change were not worth caring for and that their destruction could potentially be more advantageous than their preservation.³⁷

But history is full of cruel ironies and literary history is no exception to this rule. It is interesting to note that Celal Nuri İleri, Cenab Şahabettin, Hüseyin Cahit Yalçın and, to a lesser extent, Ahmet Haşım were among the writers whose works were undermined by the alphabet reform. That they did not produce any literary works after 1928, except for some very unfortunate verse by Şahabettin, is very revealing. None of Celal Nuri's literary works have been transcribed into the Roman script and become accessible to contemporary readers. Only one of Hüseyin Cahit's short story collections – *Niçin Aldatılmış?* (Why do They Betray?) – was re-edited after 1928. It was published in 1943. One could argue, of course, that both İleri and Yalçın were only minor literary figures who put more emphasis on non-fiction than on creative works. That might well be so, but Yalçın's above-mentioned innovative writing and some chapters of İleri's experiment in futurology, *Tarih-i İstikbâl* (History of the Future, 1913–1914) are literary texts that did not deserve to be sidelined and forgotten. Cenab Şahabettin's complete poems were only re-edited, for the first time, in 1984 by Istanbul University Press. Ahmet Haşım, who unlike Cenab Şahabettin never opposed the Kemalists, was slightly luckier. His poems were already transcribed and re-edited in 1933.

³⁵ Ahmet Haşım, 'Harf İnkılâbı', *Bütün Eserleri: Bize Göre İkdâm'daki Diğer Yazılan* (Istanbul, 1991), p. 152. The article was published originally on 22 August 1928.

³⁶ Ahmet Haşım, 'İntikal devri', *op.cit.*, p. 161.

³⁷ Celal Nuri İleri, 'Latin Harfleri Meselesi', in Yorulmaz (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 298–299.

But critics were not optimistic regarding the reception of Haşım's poetry in republican times, because the literary language had changed so dramatically. Nurullah Ataç (1898–1957), an influential critic, wrote that “once [his generation] has passed away, probably nobody will read books such as *Göl Saatleri* [Hours of the Lake] and *Piyâle* [The Chalice], because nobody will understand the language. [...] Tomorrow's youth will think that it is strange. It would not make sense in translation either”.³⁸

With the literary opposition silenced, or seemingly converted, how could the alphabet reform be criticised after its implementation? The answer to this question can only be speculative. However the fact that Mehmed Akif Ersoy and Refik Halit Karay (1888–1965), two men of letters who were among Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's most prominent critics, continued to publish their new works after 1928 using the Ottoman script is worth a notice. Karay was one of one hundred and fifty people banished from Turkey after the establishment of the republic because of their collaborationist stance during the occupation of Istanbul. He was a leading journalist but also a celebrated short-story writer and novelist whose realist works and use of plain Turkish had been ground-breaking. Until a pardon was granted in 1938, he lived in Beirut and then in Aleppo, where he published a play *Deli* (The Madman, 1929), two collections of short essays and columns *Bir İçim Su* (A Sip of Water, 1931) and *Bir Avuç Saçma* (A Handful of Absurdities, 1932) and a novel *Yezidin Kızı* (The Daughter of the Yazîdî, 1937.) These works were printed with the Arabic script at the Araks printing office in Aleppo. As he was *persona non grata* in Turkey, it is obvious that he did not have the possibility to publish his works in his homeland, even though he had authored a few articles that were in favour of the Kemalist reforms in *Vahdet* (Unity), a Turkish-language newspaper published in Aleppo.³⁹ One cannot help but wonder whether the publication of works using the Arabic script was due to technological constraints – the unavailability of a press which could print the romanised Turkish script – or a conscious political choice.

The case of Mehmed Akif is slightly different. Throughout his voluntary exile in Egypt, he kept close contacts with his unarmed “brothers in pens” in Turkey. Moreover the Turkish government had asked him to write an authorised translation of the *Qur'ân* in Turkish, which he first agreed to do, but later renounced.⁴⁰ Nonetheless this incident shows that he had also regular contacts with officials and their emissaries. Though little is known about his attitude towards the alphabet change after 1928, it is easy to imagine that he did not support the reform. In April 1924 *Sebilürreşad*, the Islamicist journal to which he was close, had published an article that had harshly condemned the proposal that had been made regarding the alphabet change during the Economy Congress in Izmir. The article also mentioned General Kâzım Karabekir's (1882–1948) view that the Roman alphabet did not transcribe Turkish sounds appropriately. A few weeks later, the journal published another anonymous article that regretted the adoption of the Roman script in Azerbaijan and described it as “an expected catastrophe”. The article also warned against romanisation in Turkey.⁴¹ Hence,

³⁸Nurullah Ataç, *Günce* [1953–1955] (Ankara, 1972), p. 16. Ataç underlines that poets such as Ahmet Haşım had been the heralds of literary modernity, but that modernity estranged contemporary readers from them.

³⁹Serif Aktas, *Refik Hâlid Karay* (Ankara, 1986), p. 35.

⁴⁰There is a lot of uncertainty on the issue whether he actually finished the translation. Moreover there is another controversy regarding the reasons that led him to refuse to submit the translation. A summary of this discussion can be found in Cündioğlu, *Âkîf'e Dâir*, pp. 16–26.

⁴¹Zeki Sarihan, *Mehmet Akif* (Istanbul, 1996), p. 204.

Ersoy's decision to publish the seventh volume of his poetry collection, *Safahat* (Pages), with the Arabic script in 1933 was probably a symbolic yet politically orientated move. The poetry collection was published in Cairo at the *Shabâb* printing house. As he had kept in touch with literary circles in Turkey and received regular visitors from his homeland, he could have organised the publishing of his latest work with the new script in Turkey, had he wanted to. The perpetuation of the Arabic script could be interpreted as a cry of protest. However it was, once again, a silent cry.

The literati's silence, whether imposed or chosen, came to cost them dear. One of the avowed aims of the reform was to facilitate the study of the language and thus to play a central role in the alphabetisation of the country. The extent to which this aim was fulfilled in the first years after the reform is quite debatable. The first general census undertaken in Republican times in 1927 indicated that 1,111,000 people out of a population of about 12,000,000 had claimed to have reading skills in Turkish. This did not necessarily mean that they had writing skills.⁴² A few years later the level of literacy was only slightly higher, probably more because of the development of the schooling system and the setting up of a new type of school targeting elder pupils and adults, the *millet mektepleri* (schools of the nation) in 1929, than as a result of alphabet change.

However romanisation caused grave problems in the publishing world. Not only did publishers and printers have great difficulty obtaining new typesetters, but they could no longer find any readers. The reform had rendered illiterate the majority of that ten per cent of the population who had actually possessed reading skills; newspaper sales dropped drastically.⁴³ In *Asmalimescit 74: Bohem Hayati*, a vaguely autobiographical narrative published in 1933, Fikret Adil Kamertan (1901–1973), a journalist and essayist, confirms that the alphabet reform had a negative impact on the economic standing of those who lived by writing: “The crisis that suddenly emerged because of the adoption of the new alphabet had torn us apart. In order to earn my living I was now obliged to work simultaneously as an investigator and translator in two or three newspapers”.⁴⁴

Though it is difficult to get hold of numbers regarding book-sales, Peyami Safa provides interesting information in his travelogue *Büyük Avrupa Anketi* (The Great Europe Inquest) published in 1938. Basing himself on the sales numbers mentioned by “Aziz the bookseller”, he notes that after fourteen years, about five hundred copies of Abdülhak Hamit Tarhan's (1852–1937) play *Eşber* (1924) were still unsold; two thousand copies had been originally printed, a high number that can be explained by Tarhan's status as the *Şâir-i Azâm*, the great poet. Only six hundred copies of Süleyman Nazif's (1870–1927) *Malta Geceleri* (Maltese Nights, 1925) had been sold. About half of a three thousand run of Halide Edip Adıvar's novels *Vurun Kahpeye* (Hit the Bitch, 1928) and *Dağa Çıkan Kurt* (The Wolf which Escaped to the Mountain, 1922) had sold, even though the author was celebrated as one of the heralds of liberation war literature. The play *İlk Gözâğnsı* (First Love, 1924) by Faruk Nafiz Çamlıbel, 1898–1973) another semi-official writer, was not yet out of print, even though only one thousand copies had been printed. According to Safa, the status of books was “ten

⁴² İlker Aytürk, ‘Script Charisma in Hebrew and Turkish’, *Journal of World History*, forthcoming.

⁴³ For an analysis of the impact of the reform on the press see Şimşir, *op. cit.*, pp. 225–228.

⁴⁴ Fikret Adil, *Asmalimescit 74: Bohem Hayati* (Istanbul, 1988 [1933]), p. 76.

times worse now, than ten years ago".⁴⁵ In an earlier article published in *Tan* newspaper in July 1935, he had denounced the fact that there was less consideration for books than for "cigarette butts, old shoes, empty bottles and even pieces of broken wood and metal extracted from rubble". The article was entitled "Books on the Pavement" and protested against the depreciation of books in the Arabic script.⁴⁶ Safa's pessimistic assessment should be tempered by adding that there was a considerable rise in printed books in the years between 1928 and 1938. 16,303 books were published during those years, whereas 6,376 had been printed between 1918 and 1928. This dramatic rise is not really surprising since school-books in the new script had to be printed as well as other standard reference works.⁴⁷

In the early years of the so-called "revolution of the letters", experienced authors had little to which to look forward, since their works, published for the most in a now illegal script, were becoming inaccessible for the new generations. However, the reform provided literary historiographers and canon-makers with huge opportunities. Devising what "national literature" is, writing its history and establishing a "national" literary canon are phenomena that interact closely with nation-building. Hence the *tabula rasa* in literary matters that resulted from the reform was a dream-come-true for those who wanted to engineer the library of a modern Turkish nation that had severed its links with its Islamic past.

On the other hand, supporters of romanisation answered to those who were concerned about the preservation of the Ottoman-Turkish literary heritage that major works would be transcribed and thus preserved for future generations. Not everyone believed like Celal Nuri İleri that the Ottoman literary heritage "should be destroyed, not preserved".⁴⁸ A series of interviews aptly named "What are we going to read?" published in *Vakit* newspaper in 1930 reveals the concerns of leading intellectuals regarding the state of publishing and reading. The novelist Peyami Safa was representative of the fears of many when he indicated that "it is not possible to republish the most necessary works for future generations. The publishing budget of the Ministry of Education for twenty years would not be sufficient. [...] The library we will leave future generations will only consist of a few school manuals and a few decent literary works. I feel pity for those future generations who will inherit such a destitute culture".⁴⁹ The debate went on for years. Often the tone was condescending toward pre-Republican literature, as can be seen in Ahmet Haşim's following words: "I am convinced that once the content of the ancient library will be transcribed into the new script for the new generation, only few works will successfully cross the line of divide".⁵⁰

But which works should cross the divide and who would decide on it? It is important not to draw any hasty conclusions regarding this debate, as this is a topic in need of further investigation. Though some, such as Falih Rıfkı Atay, evoked the necessity of establishing lists of books that should be transcribed, his words were not transformed into acts.⁵¹ The government did not have a programme of transcription, nor would it have had the economic

⁴⁵Peyami Safa, *Büyük Avrupa Anketi* (Istanbul, 1938), p. 160.

⁴⁶Quoted in Beşir Ayvazoğlu, *Peyami: Hayatı, Sanatı, Felsefesi, Dramı* (Istanbul, 1998), p. 105.

⁴⁷Meral Alpay, *Harf Devriminin Kütüphanelerde Yansıması* (Istanbul, 1976), pp. 52–53.

⁴⁸Celal Nuri, 'Latin Harfleri Meselesi', in Yorulmaz (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 299.

⁴⁹Ergün Göze, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

⁵⁰Ahmet Haşim, 'İntikal Devri', *op. cit.*, p.161.

⁵¹Rekin Ertem, *op. cit.*, pp. 359–360.

means to fulfil it. Transliteration and translation were important issues that were discussed during the first Turkish Publishing Congress in 1939. Various delegates and organisations proposed lists of works to be published, including translations and transcriptions from the Ottoman, but no concrete measures were taken.⁵² In the early years after the reform, the focus was on the translation of works from Western literatures, not on the transliteration of Ottoman–Turkish classics. In the years between 1928 and 1938 only fifty works were transcribed. However about two hundred and fifteen works were translated into Turkish, mainly from French and English.⁵³

Authors who had published before the romanisation law and had remained literarily active after it, such as the novelists Halit Ziya Uşaklıgil, Hüseyin Rahmi Gürpınar (1864–1944) and Halide Edip Adıvar played an active role in the transliteration of their own works and used the opportunity to revise the language and, sometimes, even the plots of their works. The language issue was quite central in their considerations. Exacerbated by the alphabet reform, the move towards the ‘Turcification’ of the literary language that had started during the Tanzimat period, but went through a series of ups and downs, took a dramatic turn in the 1930s and rendered early twentieth-century works not only indecipherable but even unintelligible for a new generation of readers who studied in republican schools.

Though there was no official line or publishing policy, it is striking that the works of writers who were ideologically close to the nationalist regime, such as Ömer Seyfettin (1884–1920) and Ziya Gökalp (1876–1924), or who were seen as its heralds such as Namık Kemal, have been re-edited several times after 1928. The works of non-Muslims, left-wing opponents and Islamicist authors, on the other hand, have been overlooked. The works, among others, of İsak Ferera Efendi (1883–1933), Avram Naon (1878–1947), Garbis Fikri or the socialist woman poet Yaşar Nezihe Bükülmez (1880–1971) and the Islamicist Molla Davudzade Mustafa Nazım, author of a utopian science fiction, have yet to be transcribed. The existence of their works makes a new evaluation of the cultural history of the late Ottoman Empire and early Republic Era necessary, in particular in regard to the official discourse on non-Muslim minorities, the role of women in the socialist movement and the nature of Islamicism. Interestingly enough, the works of pre-Republican women writers and poets too have been to a large extent ignored, maybe because their existence, potentially, challenges the official historiography regarding the position of women in pre-Republican society. It is only in recent years that the works of novelists such as Zafer Hanım, Fatma Aliye (1862–1936), Makbule Leman (1865–1898) and Emine Semiye (1866–1944) have started to be transcribed. One could argue that some form of cleansing has taken place during the establishment of the new library, a cleansing that was certainly not based on literary criteria. While all of this may sound rather speculative and certainly requires further research, it is an important dimension of the reform that should not be underestimated.

The fact that the works of early socialists and other progressives are today inaccessible because of a reform, partly legitimated in the name of progress, is certainly a cruel twist of history, though it is not the only one. Even today the alphabet reform continues to have an impact on the literary world. Several authors who were born in the early twentieth century

⁵²The minutes and proceedings of the Congress were published in *Birinci Türk Neşriyat Kongresi* (Ankara, 1939).

⁵³Rekin Ertem, *op. cit.*, p. 362.

kept the habit of writing with the Arabic script. Aziz Nesin (1915–1995), the celebrated satirist and short-writer, and one of the standard-bearers of the secular left, was one of them. Today the Aziz Nesin Foundation which has inherited thousands of pages of notes, including unpublished works, is in need of interns and assistants who could transcribe the manuscripts,⁵⁴ but it has immense difficulties finding them. As the Ottoman script is not taught at school and its study is associated by many Turks with political reaction, young admirers of Nesin rarely know the so-called ‘old script’. On the other hand, young people who have learned the script are often conservative and they do not wish to work on an author who condoned the translation of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* into Turkish. Hence Aziz Nesin’s manuscripts remain unread and unpublished, which is probably a great loss for literature and its history.

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⁵⁴‘Aziz Nesin’ in ‘Yeni Türkçeye Çevrilecek Yapıtlar’, <www.nesinvakfi.org> (accessed 25 July 2009).