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Literature Against Life: Communication and Evil in the Writings of Ömer Seyfettin (1884–1920)

Hayata Karşı Edebiyat: Ömer Seyfettin'in (1884–1920) Yazılarında İletişim ve Kötülük

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Abstract

Ömer Seyfettin is a pivotal figure in the emergence of Turkish national literature, responsible not only for a vast corpus of short fiction but, through his 1911 "New Language" manifesto, in part the originator of modern literary Turkish. At the same time, the darker themes of his writing—above all, the frequent depiction of explicit sadistic violence—have been ambiguously situated vis-à-vis his aesthetic, literary, and political project. Responding to Veysel Öztürk's recent claim that sadistic evil is both instrumentalized and, at time, undermines Ömer Seyfettin's nationalist politics, this article instead maintains we must disaggregate sadism from evil in his thought. This article proposes that Ömer Seyfettin viewed sadism as a vital, natural force associated with the preservation of reproductive futurity, a notion he developed through his engagements with nineteenth-century medical literature; against it, he juxtaposed the sterility and narcissism of an Ottoman literary culture that had developed under Persianate influence. By reading his fiction alongside a notion of "communication" derived from the thought of Georges Bataille, it proposes that for Ömer Seyfettin sadomasochism offered a possible path out of the deadlock of Persianate narcissism. It concludes by arguing for the central role of desire and enjoyment in his oeuvre.

Keywords

Ömer Seyfettin, Georges Bataille, sadism, evil, communication, the Persianate

Öz

Ömer Seyfettin, yalnızca geniş kısa hikâye külliyatıyla değil, 1911 tarihli "Yeni Lisan" manifestosuyla modern edebî Türkçenin oluşumunda da belirleyici bir rol oynamış, Türk millî edebiyatının ortaya çıkışında merkezi bir figürdür. Bununla birlikte, yazılarında öne çıkan karanlık temalar—özellikle açık sadistik şiddetin sıkça tasviri—onun estetik, edebî ve politik projesiyle ilişkisi bakımından belirsiz bir konumda kalmıştır. Veysel Öztürk'ün yakın tarihli çalışmasında sadistik kötülüğün hem araçsallaştırıldığı hem de kimi zaman Ömer Seyfettin'in milliyetçi siyasetini zayıflattığı yönündeki iddiasına yanıt olarak, bu makale sadizm ile kötülüğün onun düşüncesinde birbirinden ayrılması gerektiğini ileri sürmektedir. Çalışma, Ömer Seyfettin'in sadizmi, on dokuzuncu yüzyıl tıp literatürüyle kurduğu ilişki üzerinden geliştirdiği bir anlayışla, üreme geleceğinin korunmasıyla bağlantılı, yaşamsal ve doğal bir güç olarak kavradığını öne sürer; buna karşılık, Farsî etkiler altında gelişmiş Osmanlı edebî kültürünün kısırlık ve narsisizmini bu anlayışın karşısına yerleştirir. Onun kurmacasını Georges Bataille'ın düşüncesinden türetilen bir "iletişim" kavramıyla birlikte okuyan bu makale, Ömer Seyfettin için sadomazoşizmin, Farsî etkili narsisizmin açmazından çıkış için olası bir yol sunduğunu ileri sürer. Sonuç olarak, bu çalışma, onun külliyatında arzu ve haz kavramlarının merkezi rolünü vurgular.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Ömer Seyfettin, Georges Bataille, sadizm, kötülük, iletişim, Farsî etki

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> Humans can only "communicate"—live—outside of themselves, and since they must communicate, they must want this evil, this desecration which, putting the being within themselves at risk, renders them penetrable to one another... Thus: all communication partakes of suicide and crime. [1]
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> —From "Discussion on Sin," Georges Bataille, 1944.

Introduction

On March 5, 1944, in the final months of occupied France, Georges Bataille (1897–1962) gave a brief, private lecture to an audience of philosophers and Catholic priests so distinguished that merely their surnames still suffice: among them, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Camus, Merleau-Ponty, Hyppolite, Blanchot, Klossowski, Marcel, and Massignon. The topic of the lecture and subsequent discussion was the nature and function of sin. Yet in the process of building upon the Nietzschean critique of Christianity's notion of good and evil, Bataille also succinctly articulated a number of concepts that would become central to his own broader project: above all, his idiosyncratic notion of communication. It is evident in his later works, for instance, that communication refers to an ecstatic experience in which the isolated subject violently shatters at "the height of anguish; in a surge of despair."[2] As a line of scholarship from Blanchot, Jean-Luc Nancy and Adriana Cavarero has proposed, Bataille's notion of communication was driven by a need "to think a subjectivity that is no longer shut up in the arrogance of the self-sufficient individual of modernity but rather open, passively exposed to the other and disposed to encounter it in a reciprocal exposure that has its essential cipher in the sharing out of death."[3] In "Discussion on Sin," however, Bataille uses the paradigmatic example of the Crucifixion to show the specific relation of communication to *evil*. As he writes,

> Things took place as if creatures were able to communicate with their creator only through a wound that lacerates integrity... God wounded for human guilt and men who wound their guilt in relation to God find, painfully, the unity that seems to be their conclusion ... Humanity attains the summit of evil in the crucifixion. But it is precisely in having attained this summit that humanity ceased being separate from God. From here we understand that 'communication' cannot take place from one full and intact being to another: communication wants beings with their being at stake, placed at the limit of death, of nothingness; the moral summit is a moment of risk taking, of the suspension of being beyond itself, at the limit of nothingness.[4]

This notion of communication as the "summit of evil" must of course be placed within Bataille's particular constellation of terms: sacrifice as useless expenditure, sovereignty, the limit of

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1 Georges Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall (University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 28.

2 Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (State University of New York Press, 1988), 54.

3 See Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*, trans. William McCuaig (Columbia University Press, 2011), 52.

4 Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge,* 28.

experience.[5] But what we may get from it is an idea that it is precisely through an act of supreme violation, of opening oneself up to dismemberment by the Other, that communication may be established between otherwise isolated entities; in the case of the Crucifixion, between humanity and God. But the same, Bataille argues, is true more generally: "communication happens only between two beings at risk."[6] Frederic Baitinger, citing Bataille on this passage, writes that "human beings, without the presence of evil, would be encapsulated within themselves, locked up in their independent sphere."[7] But this, Bataille argues, places humans in a dilemma: "if it doesn't communicate, being destroys itself in the void that is life isolating itself. If it wants to communicate, it equally risks losing itself."[8]

I was reminded of this brief passage in Bataille's writings when reading Veysel Öztürk's remarkable article, published in *Nesir* in April 2025, on the theme of evil in the short stories of Ömer Seyfettin (1884–1920).[9] Ömer Seyfettin must, of course, be counted among the most consequential writers in modern Turkish literature. It is not only that the hundreds of stories, poems, plays and journalistic pieces he wrote over his brief career were, even before his death, considered "without peer" (*emsalsiz*), but that through interventions like his 1911 "Yeni Lisan" (New Language) manifesto, he in large part shaped the contours of the modern Turkish language itself; at least in contrast to the high literary language of *divan* poetry and the aestheticist Edebiyat-ı Cedide (New Literature) movement, both of which collapsed in the wake of his thundering criticism.[10] Insofar as his stories, written in clear, accessible language, continue to form core texts of the national educational curriculum in Turkey, there is a certain aspect of recapitulation to this pathbreaking role.[11] His writing is at once located historically at the birth of Turkish national literature and yet, by virtue of being read by almost every schoolchild in Turkey, also serves to a certain extent as one's official, nationalized introduction to literature itself. This, of course, was

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5 It should be noted that the later articulation of this concept by Nancy, among others, is somewhat ill at ease with Bataille's usage; as Nancy notes, "rigorously, this word is untenable. I retain it because it resonates with "community," but I would superimpose upon it (which sometimes means substitute for it) the word "sharing." See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, et al. (University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 157.

6 Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge,* 29.

7 Frédéric Baitinger, "A Perverse Fascination for Death and Jouissance: Bataille, Lacan and the Anti-Social Turn in Queer Theory," in *Lacan's Cruelty: Perversion beyond Philosophy, Culture and Clinic*, ed. Meera Lee (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 91.

8 Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge,* 29.

9 See Veysel Öztürk, ""Genç Kalem"in Karanlık Dili: Ömer Seyfettin'in Hikâyelerinde Kötülük," *Nesir: Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi* 8 (April 2025), 153–73.

10 These include 163 short stories, 87 poems, three plays, and hundreds of articles, prose pieces, and translations. For his acclaim before his death, see Nüzhet Hâşim, *Millî Edebiyata Doğru* (Istanbul: İstanbul Cemiyet Kütüphanesi, 1918), 87.

11 For his use in educational contexts, see Erol Ogur, "Ortaokul Türkçe Ders Kitaplarında Ömer Seyfettin ve Hikâyeleri," in *Vefatının 100. Yılında Ömer Seyfettin'e Armağan*, ed. Alev Sınar Uğurlu and Selçuk Kırlı (Türk Ocağı Yayınları, 2020), 329–46.

hardly his intention. Although often featuring children as protagonists in his stories, and though he expounded regularly on pedagogical themes in his journalistic writings and essays, the use of his fiction in education was more a matter of circumstance than suitability.[12] In the absence of an extensive corpus of children's literature in modern Turkish his stories, however grim, served a necessary, stopgap role; one that, more than a century later, has since become entrenched. This pedagogical role is hardly limited to children; I myself was first taught Ottoman script by reading his "Diyet" (Blood Money), in which to pay a blood price a man severs his own arm.[13]

And therein, as Öztürk notes, lies the strangeness of Ömer Seyfettin: that a writer who, regardless of his aims, has been adopted into the canon of Turkish children's literature, should also, at the same time, be among the most lurid narrators of dismemberment, murder, rape, necrophilia, cannibalism, sadism—in short, of *evil*—in all of Turkish literature.[14] Were it possible to quarantine these writings as the private obsession of some other, dark side of Ömer Seyfettin, undoubtedly the official discourse surrounding him would have done so. But as Öztürk aptly demonstrates by reading together his 1909 short story "Busenin Şekl-i İptidaisi" (The Primitive Form of the Kiss), the harrowing 1914 war story "Beyaz Lâle" (The White Tulip), and his late, 1919 sketch "İlk Cinayet" (First Murder), these are themes which suffuse his entire oeuvre, spilling forth even into the most innocuous narrative contexts. Thus, literary criticism of Ömer Seyfettin has, hitherto, largely followed two main tendencies. By far the dominant strand has argued that such imagery in his stories was a simple, documentary depiction of the cataclysmic times in which he wrote: a period of near-continuous war, mass murder, and societal collapse to which Ömer Seyfettin, as a frontline officer in the Balkan Wars, bore eyewitness.[15] Literary historian İnci Enginün, for instance, notes that the myriad horrors depicted in "Beyaz Lâle," along with other similarly gruesome war stories of the period, served to record the war crimes of the Bulgarian and Greek armies and the various cruelties they exerted upon Turkish civilians.[16] In this reading, Ömer Seyfettin's interest in forms of sadism and evil must be understood as simply one facet of his broader commitment to a politics of veracity, plainspokenness, and national solidarity; a thematic complement to his linguistic emphasis on the description of the "simple and plain character of

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12 I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this important point.

13 For a discussion of the theme of dismemberment and decapitation in his works, see Duygu Oylubaş Katfar, "Ölümlülük ve Ölümsüzlük Stratejileri Bakımından Ömer Seyfettin Hikâyelerinde Kesilmiş/Parçalanmış Ölü Bedenler," *KARE*, no. 11 (2021): 257–73.

14 As noted by Öztürk, evil takes two forms in these stories; it can be instrumentalized for some political project, as in his war stories, or it takes the form of a "pure evil" which appears to have no purpose other than its own enjoyment. See Öztürk, ""Genç Kalem"in Karanlık Dili," 155.

15 For these war experiences, see Tahir Alangu, *Ömer Seyfettin: Ülkücü Bir Yazarın Romanı* (May Yayınları, 1968), 212–65.

16 İnci Enginün, *Edebiyatımızda Dört Ebedî Doruk: Namık Kemal, Ahmet Mithat, Mehmet Âkif, Ömer Seyfettin* (Dergâh, 2022), 361. For a similar argument, see also H. Fethi Gözler, *Ömer Seyfettin: Bütün Yönleriyle* (Çağdaş Yayınevi, 1976), 90.

reality," and his 1911 call for a new literature to "save a nation whose worldly political and social existence is about to be wiped out."[17]

Other critics, particularly within leftist strain of Turkish literary criticism, have been understandably suspicious of this easy reading and its political implications. Already in 1975, Selim İleri sharply questioned the idea that Ömer Seyfettin's "rather dark language" and violent rhetoric were merely direct responses to his circumstances. Noting the explicit fusion of state and society in his writings and the exaltation of race and blood, İleri pondered whether Ömer Seyfettin perhaps held "an unconscious passion for an emergent fascism."[18] Although İleri would retreat from this stance, two other leftist intellectuals of the same generation, Murat Belge and Halil Berktay, continued this line of critique in their later writings. I will come to Belge's provocative reading of "Beyaz Lâle" shortly, for it forms the basis of my own intervention below; for now, it is enough to say that Belge identifies a key characteristic of Ömer Seyfettin's writing as a combined hatred for, and erotic identification with, the external enemies of the Turks.[19] Berktay's own engagement with Ömer Seyfettin was considerably more sustained, but it likewise hinged upon the disturbing eroticization of mass violence in his works. Was Ömer Seyfettin's extreme nationalism, Berktay pondered, simply an ideological veneer for "very deep and powerful sexual obsessions" which would otherwise find some other expression?[20] Berktay sought a social cause, theorizing that the imagery of both victimhood and sadism in his work were the "involuntary spasms and outward manifestations" of a Janus-faced Turkish masculinity that had fundamentally defined itself against "the demimonde of Christian-Levantine femininity in the public sphere."[21] Berktay's assertions, as might be expected, provoked a furious response on the part of nationalist literary historians, who implied that Berktay was reading his own personal perversions into these scenes "to humiliate the whole Turkish nation by subjecting some of the stories of Ömer Seyfettin, who saw and experienced all these atrocities first-hand in Macedonia and Bulgaria as an officer during the Balkan Wars, to a very malicious interpretation."[22] My sympathy, it may be clear, is with Berktay's thesis, but it is also true that both strands of historiography have tended to sideline the literary and aesthetic dimensions of Ömer Seyfettin's oeuvre in favor of its political utility.

Thus, the best of recent scholarship, to my mind, has largely set aside examining the historical veracity of Ömer Seyfettin's accounts, and turned instead towards the narrative function of evil in

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17 For the original publication, see Ömer Seyfettin, "Yeni Lisan," *Genç Kalemler* 2, no. 1 (April 11, 1911): 1–7. For the remainder of this article, I will cite from the text included in the 1999 transliterated edition of *Genç Kalemler* journal. İsmail Parlatır and Nurullah Çetin, eds., *Genç Kalemler Dergisi* (Türk Dil Kurumu, 1999), 80.

18 See Selim İleri, "Ömer Seyfettin ve Faşizm Tutkusu," *Birikim* 8 (October 1975), 7.

19 Murat Belge, *Sanat ve Edebiyat Yazıları* (İletişim, 2009), 98–103.

20 Halil Berktay, *Özgürlük Dersleri* (Kitap Yayınları, 2010), 108.

21 Berktay, *Özgürlük Dersleri*, 111.

22 Nuri Sağlam, "Hümanist Bir Tarihçinin Özgürlük Dersleri'nde Milliyet Düşmanlığı ve Ömer Seyfeddin Demonolojisi," in *Ömer Seyfettin İçin*, ed. Nâzım H. Polat and Filiz Ferhatoğlu (Türk Ocağı Yayınları, 2020), 183.

his fiction, criticism and essays. Notable among these include Fatih Arslan's evocation of the "demonic desire" for evil in Ömer Seyfettin's writings, Nergis Ertürk's remarkable observation "that Seyfeddin produced literature in fear of literature," and Öztürk's recent piece, which argues that evil is a primal force in stories like "Beyaz Lâle" that exceeds and transcends its instrumentalization within nationalist polemic.[23] For Öztürk, evil is above all a source of obscene enjoyment, to use a Lacanian term, that lies at the dark heart of the social; the intoxication of evil is shared between the otherwise disparate figures of Major Radko Balkaneski, the sadistic Bulgarian commando of "Beyaz Lâle," and the supposedly innocent Turkish child of "İlk Cinayet." Öztürk's emphasis on transgressive enjoyment in Ömer Seyfettin's writing is shared by an emerging interest on the part of Ottoman queer studies which, in a different mode, has highlighted positive depictions of trans identity in stories like "Eleğimsağma" (The Rainbow), from 1917.[24] And yet it seems to me that it is precisely in critiquing the ready conflation of transgressive enjoyment with *evil* that queer theory opens up a different reading of the same sources Öztürk examines.

There is, of course, a school of antirelational queer theory that embraces the notion of evil as the basis for its critique of heteronormativity; this, for example, is part of Lee Edelman's project, and his understanding of queerness as the refusal of reproductive futurity will inform the last part of this article.[25] But on a more fundamental level, what is shared by all the strands of historiography discussed above is an insistence that, for Ömer Seyfettin, evil is essentially *sadistic*: that Ömer Seyfettin's morality in this regard is essentially conventional, even as his literary fixations pushed this moral sensibility to its breaking point. To be sure, Öztürk cites Bataille on precisely this point: "sadism is Evil," he writes in his late essay collection *Literature and Evil,* and Sade himself "loved Evil."[26] But we must put this statement in the context of Bataille's admiration for Sade as a model of sovereignty, and his general agreement with Sade's understanding of sexual desire; as he concludes in that same essay, "the Bastille, where Sade did his writing, was the crucible in which

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23 See Fatih Arslan, "Daemonik Arzudan Örtük Kurguya... Ömer Seyfettin'in Açaranlatı Değerleri," in *Sonsuza Uzanan Ses: Ömer Seyfettin*, ed. Hülya Argunşah, Abdullah Şengül, and Murat Gür (Dergâh, 2020), 415–24; Nergis Ertürk, *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 73–4; Öztürk, ""Genç Kalem"in Karanlık Dili," 170.

24 See, for instance, in Serdar Soydan, ed., *Ah Bu Sevda! Türk Edebiyatında "Öteki" Cinsellik Öyküleri: 1872-1928* (Sel Yayıncılık, 2020), 151–8; or Ercan Gürova, "Ömer Seyfettin's Short Story "The Rainbow": A Precursor of Transgender Narratives," *Söylem* 9, no. 2 (2024): 924-936. This is perhaps not dissimilar from the interest of queer studies in rehabilitating Bataille; see, for example, Shannon Winnubst, "Bataille's Queer Pleasures: The Universe as Spider or Spit," in *Reading Bataille Now*, ed. Shannon Winnubst (Indiana University Press, 2007), 75–93. I will briefly return to this question in the conclusion.

25 As Edelman writes, "Truth, like queerness, irreducibly linked to the ''aberrant or atypical,'' to what chafes against ''normalization,'' finds its value not in a good susceptible to generalization, but only in the stubborn particularity that voids every notion of a general good." See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2004), 6.

26 Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (Marion Boyars, 1985), 18, 111.

the conscious limitations of being were slowly destroyed by the fire of a passion prolonged by powerlessness."[27] Further, as Alison Moore has demonstrated, the conflation of sadistic enjoyment with a sort of transcendental evil was itself a contingent product of nineteenth-century sexology, early-twentieth century psychoanalysis, and mid-century critical theory, culminating in the now almost banal claim that Sadean pleasure is the perverse face of Kantean universal ethics.[28] It certainly does not preclude other approaches to sadism, nor, as Moore notes, is it an especially clear reading of Sade, for whom taking delight in cruelty was not an perversion of universal reason but simply mirrored the elaborate and pervasive cruelty of nature.[29] Indeed, it is precisely this sense of cruelty as *natural* and *productive* that one finds throughout Ömer Seyfettin's writings, from his domestic dramas to war stories like "Beyaz Lâle." Sadomasochism does not appear in his work, except perhaps in the early "Busenin Şekl-i İptidaisi," as an aberration from the human norm: it is instead always framed as a reversion to nature, a valuable atavism (*atavizm*) that restores a natural vitality to an exhausted society.

This, to be sure, was also the approach to Sade taken by Bataille; as Geoffrey Roche has noted, throughout Bataille's writings he, citing Sade as his authority, declares sadism a universal characteristic and inseparable from human sexuality.[30] Two differences in the outlooks of Ömer Seyfettin and Bataille—and these are crucial—are that eroticism for Bataille is independent of reproduction, and, as Roche argues, Bataille's theory of male sexuality cannot implicitly accept the existence of a female equivalent, although as Zeynep Direk shows there is considerable disagreement on this point.[31] Both, as we shall see, are evidently different in Ömer Seyfettin's erotics. But as I will argue below, Ömer Seyfettin's inversion of moral values similarly places sadism on the side of an authentic and vital desire, and as a mode of communication in the sense meant by Bataille between otherwise isolated subjects. The true evil which sadism confronts in his writings is, I will argue, introversion, fantasy, and narcissism, all of which he associated with the linguistic and literary tradition that the Ottoman Turks had inherited from the Persianate cultural sphere. It is in this sense that Ömer Seyfettin's erotics must be understood as part and parcel of his broader aesthetics; if the Persianate style in "Yeni Lisan" was at once a problem of language, literature and desire, then the solution could only be a new language buttressed by a radical shift in the prevailing mode of eroticism. Sadism is thus juxtaposed against Ottoman literature itself, in its fantastical and isolating character. Let us, after all, remember the brief phrase Major Radko

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27 Bataille, *Literature and Evil,* 125.

28 Alison M. Moore, *Sexual Myths of Modernity: Sadism, Masochism, and Historical Teleology* (Lexington Books, 2016), 8. See also Alison M. Moore, "The Invention of Sadism? The Limits of Neologisms in the History of Sexuality," *Sexualities* 12, no. 4 (August 2009), 486–502.

29 As Moore writes, "because nature herself is cruel and destructive, cruel and destructive libertine desires can only arouse more pleasure as nature's reward for honoring her." Moore, *Sexual Myths of Modernity*, 126.

30 See Geoffrey Roche, "Black Sun: Bataille on Sade," *Janus Head* 9, no. 1 (2006), 160.

31 See Zeynep Direk, *Ontologies of Sex: Philosophy in Sexual Politics* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 47, 54.

utters to wake himself from a reverie, in which his sadism is briefly tempered by mercy: *edebiyat yapmayalım* (lit. "let's not do literature").[32] The irony of this remark, from a figure in many respects aligned with Ömer Seyfettin's own views, is at the core of the essential tension in his literary project.

My aim here, to be clear, is not merely to counter one reading I regard as anachronistic with another; to offer Bataille as a sort of skeleton key to Ömer Seyfettin's oeuvre. The particularity of Bataille's philosophy, including his notion of communication, cannot be extricated from its own historical context, emerging from his initial entanglements with surrealism and tracking the consolidation of fascism; one cannot understand his readings of Sade and especially Nietzsche absent a desire to recover these figures from fascist appropriation, although critics from Breton and Arendt to Habermas have long charged that in the process he either aesthetically aligned himself with fascism or even exceeded it.[33] Although these tendencies were coalescing in earnest towards the end of Ömer Seyfettin's life—the emergence of Dada in 1916, for instance, and the founding of D'Annunzio's proto-fascist dictatorship of Fiume at the end of the war—Ömer Seyfettin's influences were fundamentally of the fin-de-siecle, responses to the prewar crises of aestheticism and symbolism and contemporaneous with the Futurist rejection of all historicisms.[34] Rather, what I suggest here is that we may think of a triangulation between Ömer Seyfettin and Bataille in their *specific* relation to Sade and sadism; what both share, I argue, is a rejection of sadism as either a pathology or as the distortion of reason, and a confrontation with the political implications of a universalizable sadomasochism. Bataille's notion of communication, I propose, was an explicit formulation which may be read in productive juxtaposition with what I regard as implicit and emergent in Ömer Seyfettin's oeuvre, rather than a totalizing explanation which should override our previous readings of his work.

In the first part of this article, I explore the general scope of Ömer Seyfettin's writings on sadomasochism and speculate as to the origins of his particular approach. Both "Beyaz Lâle" and "Busenin Şekl-i İptidaisi," as the only works of Seyfettin's that use the term "sadism" [*sadizm*] directly, are key sources in this regard, but my interest here is more on the broader association made between sadism and fecundity in later stories like "Horoz" (The Rooster) (1919), "Dünyanın

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32 See Ömer Seyfettin, "Beyaz Lâle," *Hitam* 61, no. 13 (28 September 1914), supplemental section, 5; for the rest of this article, I will cite from collected edition of Ömer Seyfettin's stories edited by Nâzım Hikmet Polat; see Ömer Seyfettin, *Bütün Hikâyeleri*, ed. Nâzım Hikmet Polat (Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2020), 448.

33 For this line of criticism, see Andrew Stein, "The Use and Abuse of History: Habermas' MisReading of Bataille," *Symplokē* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1993), 21–58.

34 Notably, his contemporary, the Persianist Edward G. Browne, explicitly likened the "insane vandalism of the "New Turanian School" in Turkey" to "the literary and artistic vagaries of Marinetti and the Italian Futurists." See Edward Granville Browne, *The Press and Poetry of Modern Persia* (Cambridge University Press, 1914), xxxix.

Nizamı" (The Order of the World) (1919), and "Harem" (The Harem) (1918).[35] I propose that certain common tropes in these texts, including the image of the sadistic rooster, may be traced both to his reading of Sade as well as to the writings of the German biologist and intellectual Ernst Haeckel, an important influence on Ömer Seyfettin's thought.[36] The linkage between sadism and procreative capacity also draws upon period sexological literature; I speculated here that it may be related to the simultaneous normalization of sadism by the Ottoman psychiatrist Nâzım Şakir, whose 1910 treatise *Aşk-ı Marazî* (*Morbid Love*) also frames sadistic pleasure as atavistic return to nature.[37] In the second part of this article, I examine the more pernicious evil that this sadism was intended to overcome. I read Ömer Seyfettin's project in "Yeni Lisan" fundamentally as an attempt to break through what, from the era of the Young Ottomans onwards, was consistently described as the "Persianate style" (*tarz-ı Acemâne*), "Iranian accent" (*İran şivesi*) or "Persophilia" (*Acemperestlik*) of Ottoman literary culture.[38] Yet where "Yeni Lisan" differed from previous formulations of the Persianate style was in directly linking the problematics of artificial language, literary ornamentation, and perverse desire into a coherent psychological and sociohistorical thesis, centered around a libidinal economy of narcissistic enjoyment. It was the intransigency of this problem that led Ömer Seyfettin to sadism as its cure; I conclude with a rereading of "Beyaz Lâle" which centers a notion of communication that, akin to the Bataillian usage, demands a radical acceptance of risk.

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35 For the uses of *sadizm*, see Ömer Seyfettin, *Bütün Hikâyeleri*, 115–17, 439. In "Busenin Şekl-i İptidaisi," Ömer Seyfettin also borrows the French *Sadique* (*sadik*) for the present term "sadist."

36 As Serkan Özdemir notes, "it is clear that the author was greatly influenced by the Marquis de Sade, especially in terms of gender, male—female relationships, sexuality, and sexual impulses." Whether or not Ömer Seyfettin drew his biological notions directly from Darwin or from Haeckel is somewhat contentious, but it his clear that his formulations owe far more to Haeckelian neo-Lamarckism than to Darwinian evolution; as Halil Berktay argues, "Ömer Seyfettin was also an admirer of Haeckel. He particularly knew the theory of evolution through Haeckel's interpretation and thought it was identical with Darwin's." Although Nuri Sağlam is correct that Ömer Seyfettin does not cite Haeckel directly, I am in complete agreement with Berktay on this point. See Serkan Özdemir, "Ömer Seyfettin'in İdeolojik ve Edebî Kaynakları," in *Ömer Seyfettin İçin*, ed. Nâzım H. Polat and Filiz Ferhatoğlu (Türk Ocağı Yayınları, 2020), 263; Halil Berktay, "Bir İttihatçı ön-faşistinin insaniyet düşmanlığı," *Taraf*, 20 September 2008, 90; Sağlam, "Hümanist Bir Tarihçinin Özgürlük Dersleri'nde Milliyet Düşmanlığı ve Ömer Seyfeddin Demonolojisi," 177.

37 See Nâzım Şakir, *Aşk-ı Marazî* (Matbaa-ı Hayriye ve Sürekası, 1910). For an excellent contextual examination of this work alongside other psychologists of the period such as Mazhar Osman, see Gözde Kılıç, "From Mystical to Morbid Love: The Emergence of Sexual Science and Gender Ideology in the Late Ottoman Empire and Early Turkish Republic," *Max Weber Programme Working Papers*, 2023, 1–27.

38 For this notion of Persophilia, see Erik Blackthorne-O'Barr, "Dangerous Bodies, a Corrupted Tongue: Tracing the Queer Persianate in Late Ottoman Literature," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 65, no. 1, Special Issue: Queer Turkish and Ottoman Literature (2024): 1–25. This article may be read as an extension and closer examination of the themes addressed there.

"Cruelty is a Blessing:" Seyfettin and Sade

Let me begin, then, with a curious aspect of Major Radko Balkaneski, the protagonist of "Beyaz Lâle," given to the story's protagonist. As recounted in the story, Radko is a fervent nationalist who dreams of establishing a great Bulgarian empire; on a lesser level, he spends his time composing increasingly bizarre forms of rape, torture, and necrophiliac acts, and then implementing them on captive civilians including, in the novel's climax, a beautiful young Turkish woman named Lâ'lî. It is in these scenes that Ömer Seyfettin most approaches writers like Sade, Bataille or Céline in the luridness of his subject matter, the constant evocations of evil, filth, and disgust, and at the same time an extraordinary, lascivious detail.[39] Befitting what Deleuze argues is the Sadean literary form, scenes of extraordinary sadism are interspersed in "Beyaz Lâle" between lengthy monologues and rhetorical dialogues by Radko on the essential logic behind his acts. These conversations, largely between Radko and his lieutenant Dimço, his civilian victims, and with Lâ'lî, are not really dialogic in the sense of providing competing theses; their aim is instead, as Deleuze suggests, "something quite different, namely to demonstrate that reasoning itself is a form of violence, and that he is on the side of violence, however calm and logical he may be."[40] What is most remarkable is that, whomever he is supposedly conversing with, Radko repeatedly addresses instead an unseen Turkish audience:

> We will not believe in lies such as civilization, humanity [*insaniyet*], mercy, which are harmful rather than just empty and meaningless [*manasız*]. We will act with our minds and thoughts, not with our hearts and nerves. […] Look at the Turks, then. The stupidity of these men is such that they not only do not accept the principles of ethnicity, but they also do not believe that there is such a thing as "nationality" in the world. They even vehemently deny their own nationalists. Their history is full of curses against their greatest emperors, such as Genghis and Hulegu. Because of this lack of national feeling, the Turks who were left without literature, art, civilization, power, family, and tradition, could not understand even the simplest truths. […] We should not have been deceived by the lies, empty theories, and socialist dreams of the Europeans. The idea of "humanity" was the greatest, oldest, most irrelevant and disgraceful nonsense in the world. Before Christianity, it had entered some minds like a plague and caused the destruction of many nations and societies.[41]

As Murat Belge asks, "is this what the Bulgarian nationalist Radko Balkaneski says, or is Ömer Seyfettin speaking through his mouth?"[42] It is not only that he, for no narratively clear reason, begins to address the Turkish nation; it is that his very worldview, including in its attack on Christianity, owes everything to Ömer Seyfettin's own, as expressed in innumerable stories, articles, and critical pieces. As Belge continues, "Ömer Seyfettin did not even bother to camouflage

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39 Indeed, what Julia Kristeva says of Céline we might also say of Ömer Seyfettin: that "the writer, fascinated by the abject, imagines its logic, projects himself into it, introjects it, and as a consequence perverts language—style and content." See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia University Press, 1982), 16.

40 Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, trans. Jean McNeil (Zone Books, 1999), 18.

41 Ömer Seyfettin, *Bütün Hikâyeleri*, 429–30.

42 Belge, *Sanat ve Edebiyat Yazıları*, 101.

himself. He easily made Radko say many things he said on his own behalf in all of his stories and writings. The fact that he said the same things—as an enemy of the Turks—did not bother Ömer Seyfettin very much. It is actually quite difficult to decide what he does not share."[43] This convergence, of course, may be read ironically; this is how Berktay approaches it, arguing that it is only the blinding ideology of nationalism that prevents Ömer Seyfettin from seeing how his own project mirrors Radko's.[44] But I do not think that is quite the case. Consider the terms in which Radko defends the act of massacre and further castigates against mercy:

> If the Turks had listened to their elders when they first conquered these lands and slaughtered all of us, would there today be a Bulgaria? Would we have been able to drive them out like this? They made a mistake. They didn't kill our women and children when they had the chance. The Bulgarians who weren't killed mated and multiplied [*çiftleşe çiftleşe çoğaldılar*] and grew stronger. They rose up against their merciful, that is to say, their weak rulers. And now they have overthrown them.[45]

There is a certain association made here. Mercy, humanism, and civilization are, of course, on the side of moral weakness, but they are also linked to a sort of intellectual and physical infirmity: notions of mercy and egalitarianism infect societies like a disease and bring about their physical collapse. By contrast, the Bulgarians, comfortable with cruelty, evince an extreme fecundity, multiplying under Ottoman rule until their numbers and strength are overwhelming. To be sure, we may simply read this as another of Radko's mendacious justifications for following his desire. Yet it is a theme which is strikingly common throughout Ömer Seyfettin's oeuvre, and which thus leads us to repeat Murat Belge's question: who is really speaking here?

Of course, the answer is not quite as clear as Belge suggests. "Beyaz Lâle" is, to use James Phelan's formulation, an evident example of narrative as rhetoric, and its aim in this regard cannot be extracted from the immediate pre-First World War context in which it was written.[46] There can be no doubt that, within the circumscribed world of its narrative, Radko is utterly monstrous: he and his soldiers "were suffering from the most terrible deliriums of sadism (*sadizm*) and dreamt up the most vile, unthinkable fantasies (*fanteziler*)."[47] He is filthy, vile, ugly, an animal; La'lî is absolute purity and innocence. As a work of rhetoric, "Beyaz Lâle" leads the reader to understand the necessity of total war against the national enemy; particularly insofar as peace with Bulgaria had already been established by the time of its writing, and that the Ottoman Empire would subsequently enter the war as its ally, "Beyaz Lâle" thus constitutes a zero-sum world in which any community outside the national body is inherently and necessarily suspect regardless of temporary, contingent allegiances. By emplacing the reader alongside Radko, by allowing Radko to expound in detail upon the ruthless logic of his actions, no room is left for doubt; behind the façade of any foreigner may lie his viciousness and perversity. But note that the reader is also left

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43 Belge, 102–3.

44 Berktay, *Özgürlük Dersleri*, 91.

45 Ömer Seyfettin, *Bütün Hikâyeleri,* 428–9.

46 See James Phelan, *Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology* (The Ohio State University Press, 1996); I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this crucial point.

47 Ömer Seyfettin, *Bütün Hikâyeleri,* 439.

no room to reject Radko's logic, no place from which to refute his rejection of humanism; what Radko says of Christian morality one might likewise say of Islamic mercy. Undoubtedly the horror of the story is precisely that the reader is similarly impelled to atrocity by the inescapability of Radko's conclusions. It is, to use Elena Gomel's term, a "bloodscript" both preparing the reader and implicating them in the violence that is to come.[48] Taken alone, "Beyaz Lâle" cannot be said to celebrate sadism; it is merely recognized as terrible fact. But how, then, do we read it against Ömer Seyfettin's domestic stories, in which sadomasochism consistently appears as a fulfilling, vital relation? We may question the need to do so at all, and to simply state that these represent two separate spheres of his oeuvre, written in different political and historical contexts. But it is perhaps here that my position as an intellectual historian rather than literary critic comes to the fore. What are the roots of these two, seemingly opposing views of sadism in his work? What fundamental assumptions do they share? And can they be brought together into a coherent thesis?

Consider, for instance, the aforementioned "Busenin Şekl-i İptidaisi." As detailed by Öztürk, the story depicts an encounter between an unnamed male client suffering from neurasthenia, and a female sex worker who cannot bear to be kissed. The client arrives yearning for a past "before history and before religion," in which "Cleopatra would kill a lover after sleeping with him, hundreds of thousands of men would strangle each other for a woman and her love, would fight wars not for years but for centuries… would tear each other apart, just like our tailed forefathers who lived in forests."[49] Upon their meeting, however, the woman immediately identifies him as a sadist. The sex worker, "more knowledgeable than our youngest neuropsychiatrists and gynecologists," then explains that sadism is an ancestral affliction, present in all animal life but most prominent in birds:[50]

> This sickness, this condition also exists in animals. It is as if all beaked animals are afflicted with this disease. The rooster beats the hen he loves the most, the pigeon terrorizes its mate with that famous love extolled by all poets... Pheasants are particularly terrifying from this perspective. Farmers often find the poor female dead in her cage, her feathers plucked, her head torn off. What kills her is the male's beak, the male's morbid love [*aşk-ı marazî*], or rather his sadism [*sadizm*].[51]

She explains that she refuses to be kissed because of it activates a hereditary memory of its ancient roots: "our forefathers who lived in ancient ages were terrible sadists. They were biting our mothers like those pheasants that kill their females with their beaks." The evolved eroticism of the kiss, Ömer Seyfettin writes, is a mere attenuated trace of the "atavism" of the bite, "the memory of virgin and primitive forests, savagery, animality, and vulgarity that men have not been able to rid

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48 Gomel locates such scripts wherever there are "cultural configurations in which human beings apprehend the fact that they are capable of making other human beings bleed." See Elana Gomel, *Bloodscripts: Writing the Violent Subject* (The Ohio State University Press, 2004), 205.

49 Ömer Seyfettin*,* 112.

50 This may be an adaptation of Sade's claim that prostitutes are "the only authentic philosophers." See Marquis de Sade, *Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom and other Writings*, trans. Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse (Grove Press, 1965), 275.

51 Ömer Seyfettin, *Bütün Hikâyeleri,* 115.

themselves of for forty centuries…the fatal pleasure (*zevk-i marazî*) of sadist men who do not recognize women's rights, who deny feminism, who consider women as slaves and fruitful instruments of pleasure and procreation."[52] Finally, she identifies this disease with the figure of Sade himself, citing her reading of Sade's 1791 *Justine, or The Misfortunes of Virtue*, which she gives in Turkish translation as *Justine, yahut Faziletin Felâketleri*.[53] The client initially pretends to be a masochist to assuage her fears, which delights her, but the story ends as the client resumes his ancestral sadistic role, kissing and biting the woman as she whispers for mercy "but does not resist."[54]

For contemporary intellectuals often cited by Ömer Seyfettin, such as Max Nordau, the apparent rise in sadomasochistic behaviour was essentially a problem of fin-de-siecle decadence. In *Degeneration*, for instance, Nordau imagined a horrific future in which sadomasochism had entirely replaced love and "sadists, 'bestials,' nosophiles, and necrophiles, etc., find legal opportunities to gratify their inclinations."[55] As noted by Moore, many sexologists and psychologists of the period such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, who coined the terms "sadism" and "masochism" in his 1886 treatise *Psychopathia Sexualis*, constructed these categories as specific pathologies and attributed them historical etiologies: sadism was regarded as a regressive throwback to earlier barbarism, "an animal tendency held at bay within the civilized European man," whereas masochism—and, above all, male masochism—appeared as a novel degeneracy exacerbated by the nervous exhaustion of modern life.[56] As further noted by Moore, a motif of this discourse was the notion that "all sexual impulses were really forms of cannibalistic hunger," and that kissing, in so far as it represents a symbol of romantic love, was in truth the recapitulation of millions of years of natural violence; what appeared outwardly as civilized was, in fact, a vestige of cannibalistic excess.[57] All these elements appear strongly in "Busenin Şekl-i İptidaisi," as does the language of disease, affliction, and fatal pleasure. Sadomasochism is depicted as something essentially primal, a universal characteristic among "beaked animals," "our tailed forefathers," and atavistic men. Yet if the aim of Nordau and Krafft-Ebing had been to locate this reversion within

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52 Ömer Seyfettin, 117.

53 To my knowledge, the text had not been translated into Turkish at that time, and it is likely Ömer Seyfettin was instead referencing the French original.

54 Ömer Seyfettin, *Bütün Hikâyeleri,* 118.

55 Max Simon Nordau, *Degeneration* (D. Appleton and Company, 1895), 539.

56 See Moore, *Sexual Myths of Modernity,* 24; for Krafft-Ebing's theory of sadism, see Richard von Krafft-Ebing, P*sychopathia Sexualis: With Especial Reference to Antipathic Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Forensic Study* (Rebman, 1899), 78–80. It should be noted that others strongly rejected any grounding of sadism in atavism and instead regarded it wholly as a modern pathology; for instance, the French psychologist Charles Féré would write "that the cases in which the sadic act is the equivalent of coition, which it replaces, prove that this anomaly is not a return to an ancestral manner of making love. If there be any analogy between sadism and the brutality in the means of conquest among animals and savages, it is altogether superficial." See Charles Féré, *The Evolution and Dissolution of the Sexual Instinct* (Charles Carrington, 1904), 153.

57 Moore, *Sexual Myths of Modernity,* 32.

a specific pathological type, it is clear that "Busenin Şekl-i İptidaisi" follows alienist psychiatry of the period in attributing sadomasochism a more universal nature.[58] Neither character, at the outset of the story, identifies with their "authentic" mode of desire; it is only in their encounter that their ancestral roles are revived. Within the world of the story, notions of feminism and gender equality persist only as thin veneers over an entrenched, hereditary regime of misogynistic sadism that, at the moment of recognition, becomes immediately overwhelming. Here, too, we may identify a certain parallel evolution with Bataille's thought, in how sadism appears here in the mode of the Bataillian general economy: the pleasure of sadism is, above all, in its excessive and wasteful character, its casual expenditure of effort and life.[59]

Insofar as "Busenin Şekl-i İptidaisi" is essentially a brief sketch, it is possible to regard it, as Öztürk does, as being without a social thesis. But it is when both it and "Beyaz Lâle" are read in light of two of Ömer Seyfettin's later stories—"Horoz" and its sequel, "Dünyanın Nizamı"—that their shared elements appear to constitute a coherent program.[60] "Horoz" depicts an adolescent girl who is labelled as neurotic by her family for refusing to consider marriage; she replies that she alone knows the true nature of men. Whilst tending chickens in their coop, she comes to adore their selflessness and innocence. Yet within this Edenic world is a demonic presence:

> But as if this nobility, this morality, were a sin, God has inflicted a terrible curse upon these poor creatures: the rooster... This proud king of the coop is a tyrannical Nero who takes pleasure in nothing but cruelty. He knows nothing of duty, sacrifice, love, compassion, or mercy![61]

In its casual brutality towards the hens, she comes to find that this rooster reminds her of her own abusive and cruel father, and in a fit of revenge ultimately kills the rooster with a stone. She dreams of a world free of patriarchal tyranny and as a result rejects to consider the various suitors her

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58 See Harry Oosterhuis, *Stepchildren of Nature: Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry, and the Making of Sexual Identity* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 204–5.

59 As Bataille writes, eroticism "demands a boundless energy which, stopping at nothing, limits the destruction. In its ordinary form, it is the vice to which physicians gave the name sadism; in its reasoned, doctrinaire form, elaborated by the Marquis de Sade himself in the interminable solitude of the Bastille, it is the pinnacle, the fulfilment of limitless eroticism…" See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Volumes Two and Three*, trans. Robert Hurley (Zone Books, 1991), 162–3. The question of whether Bataille was likewise in favor of an atavistic return to a more vital erotic regime is difficult. On one hand, as Nancy notes, Bataille's search for communication represented a last-ditch effort "now that the figures of religious or mystical communities belonged to the past and the too human face of communism had crumbled;" on the other, Nancy strongly rejects (as he does for Nietzsche and Heidegger) that Bataille mourned "the "loss" of the sacred only then to advocate its return as a remedy for the evils of our society." One may note a tension in the desire for a radical novelty which can only be linguistically described in terms of primeval experience. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 22, 34.

60 Ömer Seyfettin, "Horoz," *Vakit*, no. 764 (22 December 1919), 3; Ömer Seyfettin, "Dünyanın Nizâmı," *Vakit*, no. 769 (27 December 1919), 3. All further citations will come from the collected edition of his fiction.

61 Ömer Seyfettin, *Bütün Hikâyeleri*, 1284.

family proposes for her: "what is the point of being confined to a new coop, of being pecked by the beaks of strange roosters?"[62] By the time of "Dünyanın Nizamı," which is set a month later, the young woman has changed her mind completely as a result of a vivid nightmare. She first dreams of the rooster she killed, who increasingly comes to resemble a soldier in its appearance and commands to know why he was murdered. When she attempts to respond that she acted on the hen's behalf, the rooster mocks her:

> "Cruelty to the chickens? Oh, you stupid girl…" he said, filling the room with a laughter that sounded human. "Cruelty to chickens… This cruelty is a blessing, a gift, a delicacy to them. They rejoice when they are beaten. Their enjoyment increases as they are pecked. Under my careful eye, they can neither fight amongst themselves nor chatter away. When I am not around, they stop laying eggs and become disgusting gluttons…[63]

Left to their own devices, the rooster explains, the hens would simply be "dying while alive" (*diriyken ölmek*). Following his own, Radko-like speech, he in turn bites, mutilates and kills her. She awakes from her nightmare in ecstasy, now content with "the order of the world" and whispering of the "sweet, beautiful, spiritual agony" she experienced, and "the distinct pleasure of pain, of being beaten, being oppressed, bitten, and torn to shreds. A pleasure felt by the oppressed, which the oppressor cannot even imagine!"[64] She finds that the rooster had been correct: without his cruelty, the hens had lost their former vitality and productivity and could no longer lay eggs or hatch chicks. She resolves to return a rooster the coop and to get married, concluding that "a chicken coop without a rooster is like a graveyard, after all!"[65]

Ten years after "Busenin Şekl-i İptidaisi," then, Ömer Seyfettin has written its complement from the masochistic perspective.[66] Here, too, a protagonist initially unaware of their true positionality comes to adopt it through a sadomasochistic encounter; in this story, too, the feminist political project almost immediately collapses in the face of atavistic pleasure. Although, as I will argue in the following section, Ömer Seyfettin's gender politics is somewhat more complex than these four stories would suggest, there can be no doubt that, contrary to much prior historiography, he can hardly be counted a feminist author. At his most sympathetic, for Ömer Seyfettin feminism consists merely of a tragic rearguard action against the inbuilt "order of the world." Yet what is key in the trilogy of "Busenin Şekl-i İptidaisi," "Beyaz Lâle" and "Dünyanın Nizamı" is that sadism now appears as a social force beyond mere excess, becoming critical to the procreative function. Societies that abandon cruelty in favor of mercy, like the Ottoman Turks or the rooster-less coop, wither away and die; those that instead ennoble cruelty, like the Bulgarians, multiply endlessly. If we take these stories together as espousing a coherent thesis—an assumption, to be

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62 Ömer Seyfettin, 1289.
63 Ömer Seyfettin, 1292.
64 Ömer Seyfettin, 1292.
65 Ömer Seyfettin, 1294.
66 To my knowledge, the most extensive study which has put these stories together is by Ekin Erdem; see Ekin Erdem, *Ömer Seyfettin Hikâyelerinde Siyasal İdeoloji ve Toplumsal Temalar: II. Meşrutiyet'in Türkçü Eleştirisi* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Uludağ Üniversity, 2015), 88.

sure, but one that I hope will lead us somewhere new—then it becomes untenable to regard this framework solely as Major Radko's flimsy justification for his own conduct. To be sure, this does not mean that his own views did not evolve in the years between 1909 and 1919. But there is such a striking continuity of imagery—above all, that of the sadistic rooster—that it is difficult not to see the four stories as constituting a social program. Taken alone, "Beyaz Lâle" indeed aligns sadism and evil, but it seems to me "Horoz" and "Dünyanın Nizamı" make this easy association more fraught. It is rather, for Ömer Seyfettin, a fact of nature with both productive and destructive effects, and—insofar as it invests reproduction with pleasurable excess and arrests the slide into decadence—ultimately a positive social force.

From where did Ömer Seyfettin derive these notions? On one hand, as noted above, the evidently gendered aspect of sadomasochism and its relationship to animal procreation, especially in birds, were common themes of medical writing on the subject. One source which we know Ömer Seyfettin drew directly upon was the writings of the German physiologist Ernst Haeckel, whose neo-Lamarckian adaptation of Darwinian evolutionary theory would become overwhelmingly popular among Young Turk intellectuals by the late 1890s.[67] Although preceding the nominal invention of sadism by two decades, his 1868 book *Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte* (translated to English as *The History of Creation*) implicitly introduced the motif of the sadistic bird in his discussion of sexual selection: as he wrote, "among gallinaceous birds, where for one cock there are several hens, a severe struggle takes place between the competing cocks for as large a harem as possible."[68] Key among Haeckel's innovations was the notion that "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," meaning that earlier stages of evolutionary development were recapitulated in the development of an individual organism, or in the articulation of a social body: thus, for Haeckel, the violent procreation of lower lifeforms had its echoes in the chivalric contests of the Middle Ages, where it was "the bodily struggles to the death—tournaments and duels—which determined the choice of the bride."[69] Haeckel evinced a strong belief that among so-called "civilized" societies, such behavior had been transcended, and genetically reinforced, by an increasing preference for intellectual and romantic love. Haeckel heavily influenced the subsequent generation of sexologists, but his belief in the forward direction of evolutionary progress was by then increasingly undermined by the fin-de-siecle fixation on the notion of degeneration and regression. Joseph-René-Raoul Lasserre's 1898 treatise *Origine animale, innéite et éclosion de la perversion Sadique* (*The Animal Origin, Innate Traits, and the Emergence of Sadistic Perversion*),

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67 As M. Şükrü Hanioğlu notes, "the Young Turks were impressed not only by his and his monist followers' bioorganistic ideas but even more so by his theories proposing to liberate the Germans from western civilization." See M. Şükrü Hanioğlu, *The Young Turks in Opposition* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 209.

68 Ernst Haeckel, *The History of Creation, Volume 1* (Henry S. King & Co., 1876), 266–7.

69 Haeckel, *The History of Creation*, 289. For a discussion of Haeckel's neo-Lamarckism and its broader influence, see Stephen Jay Gould, *Ontogeny and Phylogeny* (Harvard University Press, 1977), 76–85. For its legacies in sexological writing, see Moore, *Sexual Myths of Modernity, 47.*

for example, similarly located sadism within nature and even directly associated it with procreation, writing:

> This disposition, seemingly contrary to the will of nature, has as its purpose and effect the making of the male more ardent; it awakens in him a multitude of faculties that would otherwise have remained forever dormant; it perhaps also increases the secretion of the seminal glands, thus increasing the chances of fertilization… it is especially the polygamous species, the gallinaceous birds among others (roosters, pheasants, peacocks, and so forth), that prove to be the most tyrannical, the most ferocious towards their mates. Almost all brutally seize them by the head with their beaks and inflict wounds upon them.[70]

For Lasserre, sadism was only mitigated, but not abated, by the effects of civilization: among what he termed the "primitive races," an animal sadism prevailed, and among "middle races" like the Arabs, Mongols, Kalmyks, and Circassians, it persisted in barely disguised cultural practices. It was only among Western Europeans that this elemental sadism had been confined to criminals, alcoholics, the sick and the insane, although it could be reawakened at any time by the primitivizing effects of the crowd or mass hysteria.[71] It is certainly possible that Ömer Seyfettin may have been inspired by this text or something similar, not only in its specific imagery, but in the way it argues that Semitic and Turanian "middle races" possess a stronger connection to this vital sadism: as I will argue through my reading of "Harem" in the following section, sadism appears in this story as a middle path between barbarous polyamory and the sterility of European bourgeois domesticity. But perhaps an even more proximate source, with a similar tone, may be found in the 1910 Ottoman sexological text *Aşk-ı Marazî* (*Morbid Love*), by the physician Nâzım Şakir. Although published after "Busenin Şekl-i İptidaisi," which similarly utilizes the notion of "morbid love," it shows that similar ideas were already evident within Ottoman Turkish medical discourse. For example, like Lasserre, Nâzım Şakir identified sadism as natural and omnipresent, held at bay only by the intellect:

> Sadistic love is the outgrowth of a natural feeling [*bir his-i tabii*]. Some lovers want to dominate all the feelings and actions of the women they like. If this ability to dominate a loved one is used for good, it will remain at the level of intimidation […] Without his brain, a man would want to follow a woman and possess her with a fierce feeling like an animal.[72]

Although most of the text is based off the French psychologist Emile Laurent's 1891 *L'amour Morbide,* the scholar Gözde Kılıç has pointed out that this sentence appears to be Nâzım Şakir's own addition, for it appears nowhere in Laurent's original.[73] Regardless, this is all to say that Ömer Seyfettin was not necessarily radically novel in regarding sadism as natural, and hardly evil in and of itself. When we, as Moore suggests, attempt to analyze the notion of sadism from the perspective of its nineteenth century origins, we see that it had existed within a range of moral schema and

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70 Joseph-René-Raoul Lasserre, *Origine animale, innéite et éclosion de la perversion Sadique* (Imprimerie du Midi, 1898), 21.

71 Lasserre, *Origine animale, innéite et éclosion de la perversion Sadique*, 31–3.

72 Translation by Gözde Kılıç. See Nâzım Şakir, *Aşk-ı Marazî,* 164–5.

73 See Kılıç, "From Mystical to Morbid Love," 18.

conceptual frameworks, from a base, animalistic desire transcended by civilized conduct, to a specific pathology of the criminal classes, to the product of elite decadence. Where Ömer Seyfettin was truly innovative, I would argue, was not so much in drawing upon the already multifarious discourse surrounding sadomasochism evident by the 1910s, but rather in juxtaposing sadism against the libidinal investments of Ottoman literature and language: above all, in its Persianate aspect.

"Dim Lives Hurtling Towards Certain Death:" The Problem of Persianate Evil

Let us return, then, to Major Radko's brief remark: *edebiyat yapmayalım.* Of course, this is a colloquialism: a way for Radko to bring himself down from a fantasy of mercy and the emancipation of true love back to the brute reality of war. But there is also a striking subtext to this phrase. For if Ömer Seyfettin is known for anything beyond his short fiction, it is for his 1911 "Yeni Lisan" declaration, and the immense legacy it left for the reform of the Turkish language. "In a single, decisive thrust," writes literary historian İnci Enginün, "this article ended all of the vacillation on the language issue;" although Ömer Seyfettin "would not live to see his victory" due to his early death from diabetes, it was nevertheless the case that the battle to save Turkish from the high Ottoman style had already been won.[74] The reputation of "Yeni Lisan," heavily reinforced by the subsequent writings of Ömer Seyfettin, Ziya Gökalp and Ali Canip, the core ideologues at the Salonica-based journal *Genç Kalemler* (*The Young Pens*), was of a wholesale rejection of Ottoman's Persian and Arabic heritage and call for the radical reinvention of literary Turkish upon the model of the spoken Istanbulite vernacular.[75] In fact, a deeper examination of the text shows that this is not quite accurate. In linguistic terms, "Yeni Lisan" aimed to chart a middle path between the radical purificationists (*tasfiyeciler*), who sought to completely remove Arabic and Persian vocabulary and grammar from Ottoman Turkish, and the Edebiyat-ı Cedide (New Literature) and Fecr-i Âti (Coming Dawn) movements, who aimed to phrase European aestheticism and symbolism through novel Perso-Arabic grammatical constructions. Rejecting both these options as "suicide," Ömer Seyfettin, Ziya Gökalp and Ali Canip instead simply advocated for the suppression of certain common Persian and Arabic grammatical forms, the usage of a consistent Turkish plural suffix, and the avoidance of some prepositions in favor of their

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74 See Enginün, *Edebiyatımızda Dört Ebedî Doruk*, 7.

75 See, for example, Agâh Sırrı Levend, *Türk Dilinde Gelişme ve Sadeleşme Safhaları* (Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1949), 350–53; Kâmile İmer, *Dilde Değişme ve Gelişme Açısından Türk Dil Devrimi* (Türk Dil Kurumu, 1976), 72–73. The initial and final thirds of the manifesto were by Ömer Seyfettin. The middle portion was shared between Ali Cânip and Ziya Gökalp. See Cevat Özyurt, "Dilde ve Edebiyatta Uluslaşma: Genç Kalemler ve Yeni Lisan Hareketi," *Muhafazakâr Düşünce* 2, no. 5 (2005): 68.

Turkish equivalents. Regarding vocabulary, they were remarkably sanguine: as Ömer Seyfettin wrote, "there is no need to omit Arabic and Persian words. If we need them, we need them."[76]

Instead, the innovations of "Yeni Lisan" were rhetorical. If the challenge of post-Tanzimat literature had been to relocate Turkish literary culture from the Persianate cultural sphere to a European one without simply lapsing back into vacuous mimicry, "Yeni Lisan" argued that this was impossible without fundamental sociocultural change.[77] The result of this imitative tendency was an artificial language and literature which could only measure up to these models through extreme mannerism, tortured metaphor and excessive ornamentation. But what was the root cause of this lack of literary selfhood? According to "Yeni Lisan," it was the custom of gender segregation, attributed by Ziya Gökalp to the dualistic cosmology of ancient Iran, that blocked the normal course of social development.[78] Those cultures that fell under the sway of Iran were thus prevented from "falling into that wonderful, pleasurable, disaffirming whirlpool into which all peoples that have made progress have fallen into."[79] Unlike the nomadic Arabs and ancient Turks, where poets were able to experience true love, among the Persianate literati neither "genuine nor morbid loves could emerge" (*hakiki ve mariz aşklara meydan kalmamış*).[80] Instead, Ömer Seyfettin wrote, "poets started to fall in love with their own fantasies. In their poems, contrary to the simple and plain character of reality, the grandiosity and extreme variegation of imagination's empty artificiality was brought into being."[81]

It is clear from the list of works constituting the Persianate canon in "Yeni Lisan"—erotic poetry by the Ottoman poets Nedim, Sünbülzade Vehbi, Enderunlu Fazıl, Osman Rahmi, and a posthumously-published play by the poet Muallim Naci—that what was at stake for Ömer Seyfettin was not so much a problem of language but of a mode of corrupting desire. Others have argued that this was homoeroticism.[82] I believe instead, based on my reading of the above passage and the cited texts, that what Ömer Seyfettin had in mind was something closer to narcissism: a term that had only been coined in 1899 by the psychiatrist Paul Näcke, and only articulated as a universal phase of sexual development by psychoanalysts like Sadger, Rank and Freud after

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76 Nâzım Hikmet Polat, *Ömer Seyfettin: Bütün Nesirleri (Fikralar, Makaleler, Mektuplar ve Çeviriler)* (Türk Dil Kurumu, 2016), 244.

77 For these debates, see Zeynep Seviner, "Thinking in French, Writing in Persian: Aesthetics, Intelligibility, and the Literary Turkish of the 1890s," in *Ottoman Culture and the Project of Modernity: Reform and Translation in the Tanzimat Novel*, ed. Monica M. Ringer and Etienne Charrière (I.B. Tauris, 2020), 19–36.

78 For the attribution of gender segregation to "Magian Iran" via Byzantium, see Ziya Gökalp, *The Principles of Turkism*, trans. Robert Devereux (Brill, 1968), 43. However, these ideas were already present in the thought of writers like Fatma Aliye and Ahmet Ağaoğlu.

79 See Parlatır and Çetin, *Genç Kalemler Dergisi*, 76.

80 Parlatır and Çetin, 76.

81 Parlatır and Çetin, 76.

82 Laurent Mignon, *Uncoupling Language and Religion: An Exploration into the Margins of Turkish Literature* (Academic Studies Press, 2021), 181.

1908.[83] Although not using the term directly, a notion of *hodbinî* (lit. "self-seeing," or "egoism") was shared among Turkish intellectuals of the period and, in the writings of the Genç Kalemler, took on a narcissism-like character; indeed, a close reading of "Yeni Lisan" shows us that the fantastical character of the Persianate style was the result of a libido sublimated fully into the extreme articulation of language itself, transforming literature into a realm of self-sufficient narcissistic enjoyment. But on a social level, the fantasy of linguistic plenitude results in what André Green has termed "death narcissism:" a "self-withdrawal" from life and an abandonment of all externality, all futurity.[84] This was to be the central critique of Ottoman Persophilia, from both Ömer Seyfettin and other intellectuals of the period, like Halide Edip, Ziya Gökalp, and Mehmet Fuat Köprülü: that it represented a turn away from the living world in favor of an enthralling but ultimately lifeless fantasy.[85] But its origins in fact lay in the initial, most radical break with the Ottoman literary tradition, in the writings of Namık Kemal, Ziya Pasha, and Ahmet Mithat. As early as his 1866 article "Lisan-ı Osmanînin Edebiyatı Hakkında Bazı Mülâhazâtı Şâmildir" ("Some Thoughts Regarding the Literature of the Ottoman Language"), Namık Kemal had laid out the essential parameters of what he termed the "Iranian manner" in Ottoman: whereas Arabic, which he termed "the greatest part of our language," was beautiful because its meanings were grounded in ontological truth, Ottoman literati had early fallen under the sway of a Persianate aesthetic which, in its "exaggerations and ambiguities was the enemy of truth and despiser of nature."[86] Although Namık Kemal largely praised the Persianate poetic canon—figures like Ferdowsi, Attar, Sadi, Rumi, and Hafez—he nevertheless pointed to the exaggerated proportions and flat perspective of Persian painting to show that this abandonment of nature was not only a problem of literary language but of an entire Persianate mode.[87] But most importantly, this mode

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83 See R. Horacio Etchegoyen, "'On Narcissism: An Introduction': Text and Context," in *Freud's "On Narcissism: An Introduction*," ed. Joseph Sandler (Karnac Books, 2012), 56–57.

84 André Green, *Life Narcissism Death Narcissism*, trans. Andrew Weller (Free Association Books, 2001), 28.

85 As Mehmet Fuat Köprülü would write, "[our poets] stopped their ears in order not to hear the voices that burst forth from the soul of the nation; they closed their eyes so as not to see the world outside; finally, blind and deaf, they considered the pretentious, false realm that they had seen in the old Persian divans their true neighborhoods, and they plunged into indifferent chants among its roses, nightingales, streams, and butterflies." See Mehmet Fuat Köprülü, *Bugünkü Edebiyat*, ed. Mehmet Akif Çeçen and Ahmet Balcı (Akçağ Yayınları, 2007), 89.

86 See Kâzım Yetiş, *Namık Kemal'in Türk Dili ve Edebiyatı Üzerine Görüşleri ve Yazıları* (İstanbul Edebiyat Fakültesi Basımevi, 1989), 14; for the most comprehensive studies of Namık Kemal's views on Persian influence, see M. Kaya Bilgegil, *Harâbât Karşısında Nâmik Kemâl: Nâmik Kemal'in Eski Edebiyat İtirazları* (İrfan Yayınevi, 1973); or Fatih Altuğ, "Modernity and Subjectivity in the Literary Criticism of Namık Kemal" (Ph.D. dissertation, Boğaziçi University, 2007).

87 See Yetiş, *Namık Kemal'in Türk Dili ve Edebiyatı Üzerine Görüşleri ve Yazıları*, 15. The emphasis on Persianate miniature painting as summative of Persianate literary aesthetics would also be taken up later by Köprülü and Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar.

was from the start associated with an almost demonic warping of desire and morality into bizarre and fantastical pleasures. As he wrote,

> In all of our works of prose, there is not a single book natural in thought and expression [*efkâr u güftari tabii bir kitab*], such that under the influence of nature it might offer some service to the ornamentation of morality. Given that the main foundation of our poems is hypocritical exaggeration [*mübâlâgât-ı riyâkârâne*] and unconventional temperament [*meşreb-i kalenderâne*], they have made the corruption of morality [*fesâd-ı ahlâk*] so acceptable that if one were looking for a poetic explanation as to why, in the New Persian dictionary, *divân* is given as the plural form of *div* [*dîv*, "demon"], simply looking at our *divân*s would be sufficient.[88]

What was the specific character of this corruption? In Kemal's private correspondence he had drawn a connection between Persophilia and pederasty, writing that boys should only learn Persian after growing a beard and moustache, and declaring that "this blessed language must no longer be seen at the gate of the school, alongside its incipient moustaches, its kisses and lovers, and its boy beloveds."[89] Here, too, he drew upon an earlier Ottoman rhetoric, directed largely against the prominent role of poets and mystics in Persian-language pedagogy. Yet this aspect was never fully integrated into his own critique of Persophilia, and remained largely on the level of mere polemic. By Ömer Seyfettin's time, however, the emergence of psychology and sexology as discrete sciences and the arch dominance of materialism in the realm of linguistics offered a considerably more coherent and totalizing basis for theorizing the corrupting Persianate. Namık Kemal could argue that Persian literature had contaminated Ottoman culture and that pederasty was among its symptomatic vices; in the writings of Fatma Aliye, misogyny and gender segregation too appeared among these adverse effects.[90] But it was the organismic principle of late nineteenth-century science, as well as the notion of degeneration, that could constitute these symptoms as an autocatalytic processes, with language corrupting morality and morality thereby corrupting language.[91] When we examine Seyfettin's own, specific engagements with late nineteenth-century linguistics—Ernst Haeckel, of course, but also the biologism of Schleicher and neo-Lamarckism of Abel Hovelacque—the urgency of substituting Persianate narcissism for a more productive mode of eroticism becomes even clearer. The Turks, as he wrote, must "abandon that ornate language, fit only for the subjects of pleasure and desire," or face imminent social, cultural, and even demographic collapse.[92]

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88 Yetiş, *Namık Kemal'in Türk Dili ve Edebiyatı Üzerine Görüşleri ve Yazıları*, 9.

89 Fevziye Abdullah Tansel, *Namık Kemal'ın Mektupları III (Midilli Mektupları II)* (Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1973), 115.

90 See, for example, Fatma Aliye, *Tezâhür-i Hakîkat* (Çizgi Kitabevi, 2016), 235–36.

91 Indeed, as Ömer Seyfettin wrote shortly after the publication of "Yeni Lisan," "organism (*uzviyet*) is the world of life, the eternal law of morphology that encompasses everything that exists." See Ömer Seyfettin, *Vatan! Yalnız Vatan...* (Rumeli Matbaası, 1911); see also Polat, *Ömer Seyfettin: Bütün Nesirleri (Fikralar, Makaleler, Mektuplar ve Çeviriler)*, 263.

92 For Ömer Seyfettin's citation of Schleicher and Hovelacque, see Özdemir, "Ömer Seyfettin'in İdeolojik ve Edebî Kaynakları," 270; for this quote, see Parlatır and Çetin, *Genç Kalemler Dergisi*, 81.

My suggestion, then, is that already in this early period there was an implicit dichotomy being constructed between the introverted, fatalistic autoeroticism of Persianate Ottoman literature, and the vitality and excess enjoyment of sadomasochism: between artifice and nature, so to speak. If "Yeni Lisan" had argued that the Turks should abandon the literary imitation of Iran and Europe and strike out an independent, authentic path, so too in the realm of eroticism did sadomasochism offer an escape from the traps of both Persianate narcissism and the increasing sterility of Western bourgeois morality. This notion was perhaps not fully articulated at this point, nor would it ever be directly stated in such terms. But here I would like to examine a late story of Ömer Seyfettin's—the domestic farce "Harem"—as presenting an allegory for precisely this choice.[93] The story is an epistolary narrative, in which the unhappy married couple of Sermet and Nazan read aloud each other's diaries after accusing each other of adultery. Though these entries, we learn how they have descended into petty bickering, jealousy, and mutual contempt due to their awkward, ape-like imitation of formal, Europeanized bourgeois manners. There are echoes here, perhaps, of Freud's criticism of "civilized sexuality" and his condemnation of "the spiritual disillusionment and bodily deprivation to which most marriages are thus doomed;" to this is added the ridiculousness of their abject mimicry of a foreign sensibility, as well as the real demographic peculiarities of Istanbulite Muslim families as examined by Alan Duben and Cem Bahar.[94] At a literary salon, Nazan encounters another couple, Meliha and Refi, who appear sexually fulfilled. As they become close, Meliha begins to regale Nazan with her own erotic fantasies, in which she dresses in men's clothes "to be stronger, more masculine, more free, more equal, more violent in my love... Women's clothes are the uniform of helplessness. Even if I cannot prevail over my lover, I want to be equal to him, to plead before him, to kiss him first, to be more jealous than him."[95] Nazan and Sermet discuss opening up their marriage to a form of polyamory, but discard this idea on the grounds that it resembles the orgiastic "savagery and primitiveness" of "communities like the Kızılbaş."[96] Instead, to save their relationship, Nazan demands that they revert to the practice of *harem-selamlik* gender segregation; a plan which fails too, when she finds that this isolated domestic life "is a chicken coop, a barn, a den, a cave… no, it's a prison!"[97] By a series of coincidental encounters, Sermet ends up inviting Meliha to their home just as Nazan ends up inviting Refi, with each cross-dressing to enter the harem. Meliha dresses, as she had fantasized, in male clothes, wearing dark

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93 See Ömer Seyfettin, *Harem* (Türk Kadını Mecmuası Yayınları, 1918).

94 Sigmund Freud, "'Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IX (1906–1908): Jensen's "Gradiva" & Other Works* (Random House, 2001), 194. As Cem Bahar and Alan Duben show in their pathbreaking study, fertility rates among Muslims in nineteenth-century Istanbul were extraordinarily low for a pre-industrial context, and Istanbulite Muslims also married very late, with it not being uncommon for men to first marry in their mid-thirties, and women a few years earlier. See Alan Duben and Cem Behar, *Istanbul Households: Marriage, Family and Fertility 1880–1940* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 3–5, 122, 159–93.

95 Ömer Seyfettin, *Bütün Hikâyeleri*, 797.

96 Ömer Seyfettin, 799.

97 Ömer Seyfettin, 801.

sunglasses and carrying a whip. When Meliha discovers Nazan with Refi, she presumes that they have been carrying on an affair and proceeds to flog Nazan, just as Refi is in turn beaten by Sermet. Yet far from being embarrassed, Nazan finds that this whipping has restored her libidinal investment in her marriage; having "found their old enjoyments [*eski neşeleri*] again," they abandon their letters and proceed to have sex until the next morning."[98]

In "Harem," then, there is a very direct elevation of sadomasochism over both European bourgeois marriage and the gender segregation of the Persianate household; on a second level, it is precisely the intervention of sadism that allows Nazan and Sermet to break through the false, epistolary realm they have constructed and to finally recognize each other. The harem, in the absence of sadistic enjoyment, resembles the barren chicken coop, and it is only when this force is introduced does procreative desire make its reemergence. What is striking in this story is not only its strong tonal contrast with the depiction of sadism in "Beyaz Lâle," for instance, but the complete absence of any condemnation for the figure of Meliha. Whereas the position of the female sadist, alongside that of the male masochist, was almost universally regarded within sexological literature of the period as a modern aberration from the natural order, here it is clear the Ömer Seyfettin does not regard sadism and masochism as essentially sexed modes, but rather as aspects of gender identity: Meliha's depiction is entirely positive, and it is precisely her sadistic desire that undergirds her claim to masculinity.[99] A comparison with the similar figure of Küçük Ayşe in "Eleğimsağma" suggests that while in Ömer Seyfettin's narratives femininity is generally despised and masculinity praised, the sex of those who embody these gendered positions can in fact be rather fluid. Above all, what "Harem" showcases is that in the late writing of Ömer Seyfettin, the somewhat pathological and instinctual sadomasochism of "Busenin Şekl-i İptidaisi" has given way, as in "Horoz" and "Dünyanın Nizamı," to a considerably more universal and agential depiction.

It is this, then, that brings me back to Bataille, and the "Discussion on Sin" that opened this article. For there is, at first glance, no necessary opposition between sadomasochism and narcissism: one may easily imagine a narcissistic sadist or masochist, for instance. Nor does Ömer Seyfettin's sadomasochism seem to overcome what Freud would identify as narcissism's problematic libidinal economy. For, to use Freud's terms, on one hand the descent into auto-erotic fantasy no longer demands an "energetic exertion of force," thus economizing upon physiological and psychic energy; whilst "in the phantasies that accompany satisfaction the sexual object is raised to a degree of excellence which is not easily found again in reality."[100] Insofar as sadism is aligned with procreation, it is certainly opposed to the sterile, hallucinatory literary enjoyment of the Persianate mode, and in this sense we may regard Ottoman literature as the queer negative of

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98 Ömer Seyfettin, 811.

99 As Moore notes, "so alien was dominance to late nineteenth-century visions of woman's nature that a female sadistic agency was only conceivable as a kind of monstrosity." See Moore, *Sexual Myths of Modernity,* 35.

100 Freud, "'Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness," 199.

sadism's reproductive futurity, in Edelman's formulation.[101] But how precisely does the turn to sadomasochism prevent a mere relapse into narcissistic Persophilia? It is here that Bataille's later notion that "communication happens only between two beings at risk" may be illuminating. The dilemma posed by Bataille in 1944 was a choice between life destroying itself in an isolated void and the risk of annihilation by the Other: communication is necessary to be fully human, but "communication wants beings with their being at stake, placed at the limit of death." As Zeynep Direk notes, "in his fictions, Bataille's subjects can connect and communicate through interrupting acts of violence that shatter the illusion of coincidence of the subject with itself."[102] And, as for Ömer Seyfettin, acts of violence and sadism that would normatively be considered evil thus take on a different character: they may represent leaps at authentic communication, set against the fate of being mere morbid *survivance*, a fate Ömer Seyfettin likened to "lifeless dim lives hurtling towards certain death."[103] This is, to be sure, most evident in his domestic stories. It is here most clearly that violence and sadomasochistic pleasures appears, to use Elana Gomel's words, as "the liberation from the "prison-house of language" and as "communion with the Real, beyond the shifting illusions of the Symbolic."[104] In "Busenin Şekl-i İptidaisi," both characters enter the story quite definite in their symbolic identities; it is possible at the moment of their encounter that both shall get what they want and leave completely unsatisfied. It is only by means of placing these identities at risk — the masochist man by giving way to his inner sadism, and the prostitute by allowing herself to be devoured by his cannibalistic frenzy—that both come to understand each other and arrive at a kind of erotic truth; the same may well be said of Nazan and Sermet, who, through Meliha's intervention, establish an authentic connection stripped of the social expectations of their marriage. "Horoz" and "Dünyanın Nizamı" may perhaps be distinguished in the sense that the rooster's intervention compels the protagonist into submitting to society's oppressive, patriarchal order; yet what is key is that the young woman accepts her position not for the sake of the social order, although this does in part constitute the rooster's argument, but because she has tapped into a reserve of self-shattering masochistic enjoyment. It is this private, obscene enjoyment that forms the unspoken grounding of the social, and which establishes a relation of communication between the woman and her previously confounded mother:

> I turned back to my mother. "It's not just the order of the henhouse that mustn't be broken," I said, "but other rules as well!" My mother didn't understand. She looked at my face carefully.
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> "..."

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101 As Edelman writes, "If, however, there is no baby and, in consequence, no future, then the blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning and therefore as responsible for the undoing of social organization, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself." I would submit that this is similar to what Ömer Seyfettin has in mind in his criticism of the moribund character and narcissism of the Persianate mode. See Edelman, *No Future*, 12–3.

102 Direk, *Ontologies of Sex*, 53.

103 See Ömer Seyfettin, "Edebiyatta Artta Kalış (Survivance)," *Turan*, no. 1398 (18 September 1915), 1.

104 Gomel, *Bloodscripts*, 198.

> "It's not right to disrupt the order of the world..." I burst out laughing. I ran upstairs. Without a doubt, she understood what I meant. She must have been smiling behind me, saying, "Crazy girl! Crazy girl!" She doubtlessly had raised her long, thin eyebrows and slowly shook her head, as she always did when she was about to act all cocky![105]

How, then, do we read "Beyaz Lâle" in this light? We may understand rhetorically why Ömer Seyfettin so strangely oscillates between the role of torturer and victim in his fiction, apparently without regard for national identity, why Radko addresses an unseen Turkish audience in his Sadean monologues, and why Ömer Seyfettin seems to put his own ideology in the mouth of gruesome tormentor and murderer of innocent Turkish civilians: it is to demonstrate for the reader the absolute perversity of the foreign enemy and the zero-sum nature of the war for national survival, such that mercy is transformed from the highest virtue to the most debasing vice. Radko certainly communicates a message: that one must be as cruel as him, must abandon fantasy, literature, and the fictions of civilization in favor of an atavistic, embodied enjoyment, or else one must die. Yet by virtue of Ömer Seyfettin's lascivious narration and Radko's detailed descriptions of his atrocities, the reader is continuously impelled to partake in his enjoyment; when the narration describes Radko's delectation at the smell of roasted corpses, for instance, we too begin to taste it alongside him:

> Radko took a razor from the table. Just as they would split chestnuts before roasting them so that they would not crack, he would split the body of the man he was going to burn in the oven. An unsplit man would not burn quickly. If split open, on the other hand, he would burst into flames, emitting a sweet sizzle, turning to ash, releasing a blue and taupe-tinged smoke. This blue-brown smoke... Radko loved its smell even more than its sight. And this smell varied according to the nationality of the man being roasted. Radko had paid careful attention to it and had tested it. Even now, if he smelled a roasted man from a distance, he could tell perfectly what nation he belonged to. Bulgarian peasants would smell of roasted garlic, the Serbs of burnt potatoes, the Greeks of fried fish and wine. He had not yet roasted a German, an Englishman, a Frenchman. He did not know their smell. But the Turks... These strongest and bloodiest men of the Balkans gave off a strong smell of milk and butter.[106]

Insofar as it is impossible for us not to, in some way, be reminded of our past enjoyment of garlic, milk, and butter, we are involuntarily thrown into his position on a more fundamental level; we begin to savor his pleasure all the while knowing that we are to be his victims. It is this transposition, I think, that leads us to a place similar to Bataille's notion of communication. I do not say it is the same; above all in the sacral dimension of Bataille's theorization, and in what he terms the "fundamental connection between religious ecstasy and eroticism—and in particular sadism."[107] An encounter which actually resolves in death is, for Bataille, no failure, like the victim of slicing torture he valorizes in *The Tears of Eros*; indeed, as noted by Nancy, Bataille's critique of Sade is precisely that the Sadean torturer refuses the mutuality of destruction, whereas for Bataille "the republic of crime must also be the republic of the suicide of criminals, and down to

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105 Ömer Seyfettin, *Bütün Hikâyeleri*, 1294.
106 Ömer Seyfettin, *Bütün Hikâyeleri*, 437.
107 Georges Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, trans. Peter Connor (City Lights Books, 1989), 206.

the last among them-the sacrifice of the sacrificers unleashed in passion."[108] By contrast, Ömer Seyfettin is invested in a project of reproductive futurity and the fate of Lâ'li remains a catastrophe. The tragic risk of Radko's communication is that one's outcome may be that of Nazan, or that of Lâ'li. Yet this very message, if received by the audience Radko addresses, would also entail Radko's own imminent torture and death; it precisely through this communicative act that, as Direk continues, his sadism no longer "keeps intact the enjoying subject while piercing the borders of the others' bodies" but instead becomes a kind of sovereign wager.[109] And so, perhaps rather than regarding sadism as evil or not, in this particular reading of Ömer Seyfettin's project what matters most is a question of choosing between two utterly fraught options: a pleasant but certain doom, or a horrific chance at authentic life.

Conclusion

Öztürk ends his remarkable article by arguing that Ömer Seyfettin, "who is valued in literary criticism for his unique place in the construction of national identity, or else devalued as a mere nationalist propagandist, deserves to be evaluated beyond ideological motives."[110] This article has been inspired by the space opened up by this important contribution, and I wholeheartedly agree that a major limitation of current historiography on Ömer Seyfettin has been to read his oeuvre solely as the anticipation of the later course of Turkish nationalist ideology; by coming to stand in for the literary-linguistic dimension of Turkish nationalism as a whole, the idiosyncrasies of Ömer Seyfettin's writing and the particularities of his fiction come to disappear. There is no possibility in this literature, as Öztürk suggests, for a narrative theme in his work to transcend its political context. Either evil in his works must be instrumentalized and attributed to some real, foreign enemy, or it must be the necessary consequence of his own politics; it cannot, in this sense, have narrative autonomy. Where then can we speak about *desire* in his oeuvre, and Ömer Seyfettin's peculiar erotics? For even the critic who has attempted most extensively to locate Ömer Seyfettin's eroticism at the core of his broader project—that is to say, Halil Berktay— nevertheless only engaged with his sadism in an essentially polemical manner. For Berktay, the tragedy of Turkish national literature was that it supplanted the humanism, internationalism and refined aesthetics of a prior figure like Tevfik Fikret in favor of the brute violence and sexual perversion of Ömer Seyfettin; the task of the left, from Nâzım Hikmet onwards, has been to recover the universalism of a literature that was born, with "Yeni Lisan," already possessing a "complete demonology" of foreign and internal enemies.[111] In such a scheme, Ömer Seyfettin's sadism can only appear as the premonition and root cause of this nationalism's eventual crimes. In other, similarly insightful studies of Ömer Seyfettin's oeuvre, the question of desire appears to drop out completely. When

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108 See Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, 204–207; for a brief commentary on this image, see Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Picador, 2003), 98–99. For the necessarily mutual aspect of communicative destruction, see Nancy, *The Inoperative Community,* 32.

109 Direk, *Ontologies of Sex*, 70.

110 Öztürk, ""Genç Kalem"in Karanlık Dili," 171.

111 Berktay, *Özgürlük Dersleri,* 75.

Nergis Ertürk writes perspicaciously of Ömer Seyfettin's "literature in fear of literature," and argues that "the new national writing, from which the stakes of deviation are so high, produces an entirely joyless, perhaps even deathlike state," we are nevertheless forced to ask— why, then, was he so *compelled* to write?[112] When, in his famous 1911 letter to his Young Pens colleague Ali Canip, he mirrors Radko by remarking "I wrote that I hate literature and that this hatred is of a disgusting, vile kind," we must ask—why then does he throw himself into becoming a litterateur, and to the thankless task of remaking literary language?[113] What is the libidinal investment in literature and language such that the act of writing, which he describes in terms of mental suffering, nervous exhaustion, dry mouth and loss of circulation, becomes for him a constant companion, all the way to his deathbed?[114] One may only surmise that there is a kind of *enjoyment* here, in the Lacanian sense, of a sadomasochistic relation to Turkish itself.

This article, however, represents only an initial foray into the question of desire and enjoyment in Ömer Seyfettin's writing, and concerned instead with the much more limited task of disaggregating evil from sadism across his corpus. I have argued that sadism, in stories like "Busenin Şekl-i İptidaisi," "Beyaz Lâle," "Horoz," and "Dünyanın Nızamı" was not necessarily synonymous with evil and was in fact regularly aligned with nature, fecundity, and reproductive futurity, an association that he developed through his own engagement with Sade, Haeckel, and likely fin-de-siecle French and Ottoman Turkish sexological literature. And, based upon my reading of "Yeni Lisan" and "Harem," I have argued that the true evil sadomasochism was intended to overcome was instead the isolating, fantastical dreamworld of Ottoman literature in its Persianate mode: "that ornate language, fit only for the subjects of pleasure and desire." To be clear, my aim here has been simply to offer an alternate reading of these texts, rather than a challenge to Öztürk's illuminating article; indeed, I would submit that my argument is all the more inelegant in comparison. Nor should this article be interpreted as an attempted apologia for Ömer Seyfettin's sadism, or the implications of his broader political, aesthetic and linguistic project. Whether or not it is worthwhile to reclaim some part of this project for emancipatory ends is rather debatable; although there is certainly something to his positive depictions of trans identity, for instance, even this seems suffused by a misogyny that may be inexorable. It may be, as Walter Benjamin once said of Bataille, that Ömer Seyfettin's ideas work towards fascist ends, even if this was never his specific aim; certainly, in some respects, Ömer Seyfettin's opinions were considerably more palatable than Bataille's.[115] That is a question far beyond this brief article; it is my hope only that, as the writings of Berktay, Arslan, Ertürk, and Öztürk have opened up a more

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112 Ertürk, *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey,* 73.

113 Polat, *Ömer Seyfettin: Bütün Nesirleri (Fikralar, Makaleler, Mektuplar ve Çeviriler)*, 996.

114 See Ertürk, *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey,* 73. Although deeply engaged with Derrida's grammatology and his notion of the "dangerous supplement," I would add to Ertürk's commentary that the physical symptoms induced in Ömer Seyfettin by writing are precisely those attributed to compulsive onanism in nineteenth-century medical literature.

115 See Giorgio Agamben, "Bataille and the Paradox of Sovereignty," trans. Michael Krimper, *Journal of Italian Philosophy* 3 (2020), 247–53.

multifaceted discussion of evil in the works of Ömer Seyfettin, this contribution may help to open up a further question of desire.

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No AI-assisted tools were used in the preparation of this work. All content has been created solely by the author(s), who take full responsibility for its integrity.

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