

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Edebiyat Anıları (Literary Memories) (1976)

Hüseyin Cahit Yalçın

People

Hüseyin Cahit Yalçın: He is a writer, journalist, teacher, civil servant, and political figure during the last quarter of the 19th and early 20th centuries. He launches his writing career at an early age and then engages in journalism as a side hustle. He works in different newspapers named *Tarik*, *Sabah*, *Saadet*, and *Tanin*. He builds his whole persona based on his writings. He gets to publish his first novel as a high schooler. Yet his book is a poor imitation of the literary works of traditionalist Ottoman writers. As he reads French philosophers and writers, he realizes his naivety and regrets his novel. In this regard, he presents his journey as a story of transformation; a young man with poor literary taste under the impact of traditionalist Ottoman writers turns into a freedom seeker with refined taste in literature. Under the autocratic rule of Abdulhamid II, he cannot disclose his new identity but channels his new passion into literature. He translates French texts into Turkish and writes new stories for different periodicals, out of which *Servetifünun*, an avant-garde literary and political periodical stands out. While volunteering for *Servetifünun*, he meets Tevfik Fikret, Halit Ziya Uşaklıgil, and Cenap Şahabettin, important literary figures of the period. His friendship with them makes him politicized; although he publishes a novel and short stories, he does not deal with political issues in his works because of the strict censorship rules. Throughout his writing career, he struggles with the autocratic regime and protects his position as a civil servant.

Ahmet Mithat Efendi: He is an Ottoman writer, whose presence in Hüseyin Cahit Yalçın's life is intellectual rather than physical. He is one of Hüseyin Cahit's father's favorite writers, whose novels are read aloud at home. Hüseyin Cahit meets literature by Ahmet Mithat Efendi's works and writes his first book by imitating him. However, as he meets other writers of French origin, he develops a disdain for Mithat Efendi's literary works and begins to consider them unqualified.

Artin: A bookseller who sells books on credit to Hüseyin Cahit when he was a high schooler.

Kirkor: The owner of a bookstore where young Hüseyin Cahit buys his books.

Arakel: The owner of a publishing house that refuses to publish Hüseyin Cahit's first book.

Mehmet Cavit: He is Hüseyin Cahit's classmate. When Hüseyin Cahit attempts to translate a French text on sewing to be published in *Servetifünun*, he cannot achieve it without the help of his classmate, Mehmet Cavit. That is his first published translation.

The Uncle: The unnamed maternal uncle is a young man who was exiled to Rhodes when he was a teenager. He is under the impact of another exile, Namık Kemal, a nationalist writer banished to the island by Abdulhamid II. Hüseyin Cahit meets both his uncle and the values of Namık Kemal when his uncle returns home after fifteen years of exile. He fascinates with the notions of patriotism and independence. The government sends the uncle away, but when he leaves Hüseyin Cahit is not the same person anymore.

Ahmet Şuayıp: He is Hüseyin Cahit's high school classmate. Since his father is deceased he has more freedom in life. His intriguing feature is his ability to obtain banned publications. Although he is weak in appearance he can walk on dark and dangerous roads for hours in order to get periodicals published by Ottoman dissidents living abroad.

Ahmet Ihsan Tokgöz: He is the owner of the publishing house that publishes Hüseyin Cahit's first book.

Karabet: He is a bookseller serving as a middleman between the Palace and translators. He hires translators on behalf of the Palace to translate novels into Ottoman Turkish. Hüseyin Cahit works with him as a translator for a while.

Tevfik Fikret: He is like a magnet for avant-garde writers and poets of the time. *Servetifünun* takes on a literary character under his leadership. Hüseyin Cahit and other literary figures do not hesitate to make life-changing decisions based on his inclinations. Although he is temperamental, his fondness for his family and devotion to express his patriotism through poems affect people around him.

Cenap Şahabettin: When Hüseyin Cahit and his friends begin to publish a periodical called *Mektep*, meaning school; they discover Cenap Şahabettin's poems. His poems are oriental in form but occidental in content. That causes controversy among other traditionalist literary figures. However, *Mektep* continues to publish his poems. Afterward, Cenap Şahabettin takes charge of the magazine after Hüseyin Cahit and his friends leave it because of a conflict.

Mehmet Rauf: He is another important literary figure and a close friend to Hüseyin Cahit. He is both a naval officer and writer. When traditionalist literary figures criticize Cenap Şahabettin's poems and *Mektep*, he sends a letter to support them. In time, he starts to write for the magazine and becomes the director. After *Mektep*, he works for *Servetifünun* with Tevfik Fikret and Hüseyin Cahit. He is the one who brings Hüseyin Cahit's writings to the attention of Tevfik Fikret.

Halit Ziya Uşaklıgil: He is the writer whose novels help Hüseyin Cahit realize that Turkish literature is not at the point he thinks it is. While believing that writers continue to produce in line with Ahmet Mithat Efendi, he finds Halit Ziya's novels reminding of the French literary works that he admires. He meets Halit Ziya in person when working for *Servetifünun*.

(Little) Said Pasha: He is a grand vizier who invites Hüseyin Cahit to his home to express his appreciation for the articles Hüseyin Cahit writes in response to the criticisms of the literary movement led by *Servetifünun*. Afterward, when Hüseyin Cahit is in a difficult phase in life, he asks Said Pasha as to whether he can appoint him to a better position, and he is offered a job in a high school as a vice principal.

Mihran: The owner of *Sabah*, a newspaper.

Abdullah Zühtü: He is the leader-writer in *Sabah*. He organizes the employees of *Sabah* and *İkdam* newspapers to strike when they do not get a salary increase. In the end, they decide to start their own newspaper, *Saadet*. After a short time, writers including Hüseyin Cahit have to quit *Saadet* with many debts while Abdullah Zühtü keeps his earnings to himself.

Events

Under the Impact of Inspirational Figures

Hüseyin Cahit's earliest memories are full of folk tales, like *Âşık Garip* or *Kerem and Aslı*. After dinner, his father has a cup of coffee, and then his older sister continues reading from where she left off in the book the previous evening. Yet, the most interesting stories belong to Ahmet Mithat Efendi. Hüseyin Cahit remembers that in his books, Ahmet Mithat make didactic comments on morality issues, and in these moments, his father and mother argue with each other. When they move to Serres because of Hüseyin Cahit's father's job, Hüseyin Cahit becomes a passionate reader of Ahmet Mithat. He tries to read the books from his father's library but does not understand them because they are the products of Ottoman Divan poetry. Yet there is an exception; Nasimi. Although Hüseyin Cahit does not comprehend what Nasimi says, he is impressed by his life story. Nasimi was skinned alive because he said, "Your god is under my feet." He meant the money under his feet, but the authorities were incapable of perceiving his subtle point. Hüseyin Cahit is affected by that Nasimi did not hesitate to tell what he thought although he knew that he was going to be murdered. His young memory is filled with other examples of extraordinary courage, like warrior Battal Ghazi and a former grand vizier Davut Pasha. A desire to write a novel emerges inside him as he reads these stories. His family returns to Istanbul when he is thirteen years old, and he can reach out to Ahmet Mithat's all books. His little library acquires some French crime fiction. Yet he writes his first novel, *Nadide*, under the impact of Ahmet Mithat.

He sets off on a literary journey. First, he has his manuscript examined and approved by the censor board. Second, because publishers do not publish a book without a preface at that time, he seeks a well-known writer to write one. Luckily, one of his acquaintances provides a preface written by Ahmet Mithat. Hüseyin Cahit is thrilled by his acclaim. Third, he searches for a publishing house. Arakel, the

owner of the first publishing house he applied to, does not show any interest in his manuscript. He is disappointed but does not give up and went to another one. The second publishing house is a newly established one. Its owners, Ahmet İhsan Tokgöz, and his partner decide to publish his book. With the book, the young writer Hüseyin Cahit announces a list of books to be written in the future in order to impress his potential readers. However, he would not write any of them.

Hüseyin Cahit shares some pages from *Nadide* to show that it is an unqualified work, and he says that he is happy because he did not continue to write bad fiction. Yet one of his announced books is the translation of a novel, *Hélène et Mathilde*. He makes fun of his first translation job because when he translated the book, he did not speak French very well.

Under the Impact of French Literature

He learns French by acting like a person who knows it; he reads novels and translates books. When his publisher Ahmet İhsan Tokgöz starts to publish *Servetifünun* and Hüseyin Cahit translates a French book on sewing with his friend Cavit for the magazine. Their translations are published under the heading *İğne İplik* (Needle and Thread) in separate issues. He says that Ahmet İhsan could not resist free writings and published them.

However, as he delves into French literature, his desire to write fades because he thinks that he is not qualified to write. He reads Alexandre Dumas, George Ohnet, Octave Feuillet, and Dumas Fils. One day, he buys Paul Bourget's *Terre Promise*, but he cannot understand what he reads. The book's French is at an advanced level. In the end, he gives up on it. Yet six months later, when he tries to read it again, he can understand it. Then he reads Bourget's all books and meets other important French figures, like Hippolyte Taine. He admires Bourget until the Dreyfus affair. When he learns that Bourget is in favor of kingship and religious community, he stops reading his books.

The Uncle

Hüseyin Cahit finds out that his mother has a brother, who was exiled at the age of fifteen by the government of Abdulhamid II because he supported the constitutionalist Mithat Pasha. His uncle makes an impression on him with his ideas related to patriotism and love of freedom. In their conversations, he scorns Hüseyin Cahit for his unquestioning character, and that is the way Hüseyin Cahit starts to question the things he has never questioned. He reads the books of Namık Kemal that his uncle gives him and is fascinated by the concept of patriotism. Now, he knows what national pride is.

His uncle is sent to another city by the government, but Hüseyin Cahit continues to read banned publications with the help of his friend, Ahmet Şuayıp. Ahmet Şuayıp is an interesting boy who knows how to reach out to prohibited texts. Thanks to him, Hüseyin Cahit can read the texts written by the exiled leaders of the Young Turks, like Mizancı Murat and Ahmet Rıza.

Hüseyin Cahit describes how difficult it was to go from one district to another through the dark and muddy roads in Istanbul to get a banned newspaper. He says that he and his friends were motivated by two things; patriotism and love of freedom.

A College Student

While Hüseyin Cahit and his friends prepare to be college students in the faculty of political sciences, the department decides to accept students based on an exam. Hüseyin Cahit and his friends resist taking the exam to protest the decision. They spend the whole day wandering through the streets. Because it rains the next day, they take the exam. Yet they are blacklisted by the Palace. Although the Palace is used to hire the most successful graduates, Hüseyin Cahit's cohort is deprived of pursuing a career in the Palace.

He and his friends provide banned publications through their Armenian acquaintances that are entitled to use foreign postal organizations in the Ottoman Empire without any surveillance. Hüseyin Cahit starts to consider escaping from the country at this time. He dreams of living in Paris, but it is forbidden to leave the country. He says that they were like in Paris because of their keen interest in French literature.

Abdulhamid II is also interested in French literature. Crime fiction is his favorite genre. The bookseller Karabet hires translators for the Palace. Because books are expensive for a student, Hüseyin Cahit and his friend Ahmet Şuayıp become Karabet's translators. He says that he and his friend argued whether they were doing a bad thing or not because anything related to the Palace was abject for them. Yet, at the end of the discussion, they decided that their translations were not to support the reign of Abdulhamid II, and they did not do anything wrong.

A Journalist

Six months before his graduation, he begins to worry about making a living and decides to work as a journalist. He and his friends want to revive a magazine called *Mektep*, which was published before by the bookseller Karabet. They ask Karabet to hand over the magazine to them, but Karabet does not trust young Hüseyin Cahit and his friends. Then they ask their former French teacher, Baki for help. As soon as their teacher accepts it, they start to work and then publish it. However, other magazines harbor ill will against the new outlook of *Mektep*. Especially, Cenap Şahabettin's poetry attracts attention. The established literary figures scorn his modernist style, but Hüseyin Cahit and his friends defend it.

One day, they get a letter from one of their readers appreciating Şahabettin's style and see that there are other people thinking the same way. The owner of the letter is Mehmet Rauf, a naval officer who is interested in literature. After a short time, he becomes the director of the magazine. However, when a conflict arises between Cenap and Baki, Hüseyin Cahit and his friends quit the magazine. Then the magazine is published under the directorship of Cenap Şahabettin. Hüseyin Cahit says that neither he nor his other friends condemn Cenap for this decision.

A Civil Servant, Writer, and Journalist

After he graduates from college in 1896, he becomes a correspondence officer in the ministry of education. Meanwhile, *Servetifünun* is transformed into a literary magazine under the leadership of Tevfik Fikret. Hüseyin Cahit follows the magazine but is afraid of writing. Despite his fear, he writes a story named "Röneka" and shares it with none but Mehmet Rauf. Upon listening to the story, Mehmet Rauf takes the story to *Servetifünun*. Once the magazine publishes it, Hüseyin Cahit finds the courage he needs to write other stories. Mehmet Rauf gives him the books of Halit Ziya Uşaklıgil to support his writing career. Hüseyin Cahit is surprised by Uşaklıgil's books because as he reads them he realizes that novels written in Turkish are developing in technics. Writers do not stop to lecture in the middle of the story. The novels increase his desire to write.

In time, he does not find writing once a week for *Servetifünun* satisfactory and attempts to publish a magazine with his close friends including Ahmet Şuayıp, Mehmet Cavit, and Mehmet Rauf. Inspired by *Revue Encyclopædia* they prepare a magazine, *Yeni Mecmua* (New Magazine). Hüseyin Cahit puts his father's name on the official documents and gets the permission to publish. However, they cannot achieve it despite all their hard work because of an informer's report. Hüseyin Cahit says that the informer was someone he respects and refrains from giving his name.

Because of the failure, he contents himself with *Servetifünun*. Yet the magazine is under the attack of writers he once admired. Ahmet Mithat Efendi stands out as the most aggressive attacker by calling the writers of the magazine "the decadents." Hüseyin Cahit and his friends manage to cope with all these attacks because they believe that the one who does wrong to his country is Ahmet Mithat Efendi. Hüseyin Cahit says that Ahmet Mithat harmed his country by serving an oppressor.

While struggling with attacks in the literary world, Hüseyin Cahit and his friend Mehmet Cavit start to work in a newspaper, *Tarik*, meaning route. One of his articles in *Tarik*, "Sciences that make us benefit from the Arabs" creates controversy. In the article, he criticizes the inclination to appreciate anything Arabic. He considers it as an obstacle to benefit from Western culture. This time he is personally attacked by other literary figures that are against anything Western. Other than being insulted as a decadent again, the controversy affects Hüseyin Cahit financially too. Since the government does not pay salary regularly, the civil servants borrow from a charity organization within the ministry. Because of the article, the Arab accountant refuses to lend money to Hüseyin Cahit for a while.

However, he does not give up defending his thoughts. When *İkdam* accuses Hüseyin Cahit of ignorance by changing a letter in his middle name (the third letter of Cahit is changed to "i" making the

name Cahil, meaning ignorant in Turkish), Hüseyin Cahit uncovers that *İkdam*'s correspondent Ali Kemal plagiarized some of his writings. This conflict attracts Said Pasha's attention, and he invites Hüseyin Cahit to his house to appreciate his writings. Years later, when Hüseyin Cahit is in a difficult situation he asks a favor of him, and Said Pasha helps him find a job as vice principal in Vefa High School.

Meanwhile, Mihran, the owner of a newspaper, *Sabah*, meaning morning, offers a job to Hüseyin Cahit and Mehmet Cavit to compete with *İkdam*. Since *Tarık* is closed, they accept the offer. While working for *Sabah*, the Palace bestows medals upon the birth of a prince. However, considering that civil servants are fond of medals, the Palace collects money in return. Hüseyin Cahit and his friends do not pay the money not to take the medals. Hüseyin Cahit says that people who want to understand the ethos of the period should take into account the censor board. For example, he translates Pierre Loti's *Pêcheur d'Islande* into Turkish but refrains from putting his name on the book because of the revisions of the censor that distorts the translation. Thus, being honored by the Palace is undisputedly disgraceful.

While working in *Sabah*, he revised the third edition of the French to Turkish and Turkish to French dictionary prepared by Şemsettin Sami. Because the publisher Mihran does not want to pay Şemsettin Sami he attempts to put Hüseyin Cahit's name on it. In this way, he would be able to refuse to pay Şemsettin Sami. However, Hüseyin Cahit does not accept it, and it is published with Şemsettin Sami's name. Hüseyin Cahit is offended by that Şemsettin Sami writes a preface and does not mention his efforts.

His departure from *Sabah* occurs in an unusual way. When the writers cannot get a pay raise leader-writer Abdullah Zühtü communicates with *İkdam*'s writers and organizes a strike. Although the owners of the two newspapers do not get along well with each other, they agree on this matter and do not accept the demands. Thus, Hüseyin Cahit and the two newspapers' employees resign and decide to publish a newspaper, *Saadet*, meaning happiness. Yet after a short time, they realize that they are not able to manage it. Except for Abdullah Zühtü, they quit the newspaper with many debts.

He does not get paid for his writings in *Servetifünun* but when Tevfik Fikret becomes the director he provides the writers with a small amount. They relate to each other through their shared political and literary ideals although they cannot discuss political matters openly because of the censor board. At some point, they think of escaping from the country to New Zealand because of censorship and then change their mind and plan to settle in a village in Anatolia. However, as Tevfik Fikret gives up the idea, they stay in Istanbul.

New Literature

Hüseyin Cahit thinks of launching a special publication series under the heading of *Edebiyat-ı Cedide*, (New Literature), and Tevfik Fikret and Mehmet Rauf find the idea meaningful. The first book becomes Hüseyin Cahit's *Hayat-ı Muhayyel*, (Imaginary Life) that is followed by Tevfik Fikret's *Kırık Saz*, (Broken Violin). The series has other two books written by Hüseyin Cahit; *Hayal İçinde* (In Dream), and *Hayat-ı Hakikiye Sahneleri* (Real Life Scenes). Hüseyin Cahit's initial intention is to make *In Dream* the first book of a series, but he does not continue to write.

Servetifünun without Tevfik Fikret

Tevfik Fikret quits *Servetifünun* upon a discussion with the owner Ahmet İhsan Tokgöz. While leaving he asks Hüseyin Cahit to fill the space he left. Hüseyin Cahit accepts it but in time, he realizes that Tevfik Fikret is offended that the magazine can function without him. However, when Hüseyin Cahit translates a text titled "*Edebiyat ve Hukuk*" (Literature and Law), the magazine is reported to the Palace and closed. The magazine is accused of importing the ideas of dangerous people who had murdered their king. Subsequently, they are sued and acquitted. Hüseyin Cahit praises the then minister of justice for his honesty.

After that date, *Servetifünun* continues to be published as a newspaper without literary works, and Hüseyin Cahit stops writing fiction. He spends his time preparing a Turkish grammar and syntax book in order to erase the influence of Arabic and Persian on Turkish.

After the Young Turk Revolution

He goes back to journalism and starts to work for *İkdam*. After a while, one of his friends proposes to start their newspaper with Tevfik Fikret, and Hüseyin Cahit accepts it. Tevfik Fikret gives the newspaper its name: *Tanin* (Resonance). Yet he resigns for no apparent reason. After his leave, Hüseyin Cahit continues to write and discover new names until the Balkan Wars.

He says that when he was in Malta as an exile, he suppressed his homesickness by translating Annie Vivanti's *I. Divoratori* to Turkish and later continued his translations with the same enthusiasm. He translated many books published in different disciplines to create a special series titled *Oğlumun Kütüphanesi* (My Son's Library).

Themes

Transformation: Hüseyin Cahit is a man who has changed from a traditionalist to a freedom seeker. As his inspirational figures change, his political stance changes. His first novel *Nadide* is a traditionalist text imitating Mithat Efendi's style. However, as he reads French fiction and meets French philosophers, he starts to contextualize texts. For example, his translation "*Literature and Law*" expresses that literary texts originate from the gaps in the legal order; the literary works published before 1789 are in favor of divorce. After it is legalized, the writers begin to point out the deficiencies of the amendment through their works in France. Therefore, Hüseyin Cahit learns to analyze literary works in relation to social mechanisms in time. His literary journey shows him that a writer does not need to be a moral guide.

Oppression: Young Hüseyin Cahit spends his youth under the reign of Abdulhamid II. He understands how oppression affects a man's life when he meets his exiled uncle. As he is politicized, he realizes that even reaching out to a literary text is a privilege for a person living under an authoritarian regime. Throughout his writing career, his works are always corrected and sometimes distorted for ridiculous reasons by censorship. He gives an example to show the rigidity of censorship. He says that he refrained from using the word "nose" in his translations because the censor board associated the word with the big nose of Abdulhamid II. Since the word "*burun*" means both nose and cape in Turkish, he could not translate the geographical term, cape into Turkish as "*burun*." Instead, he described it with long sentences.

Patriotism: Hüseyin Cahit meets patriotism when his exiled uncle returns home. He reads the books of the exiled writer, Namık Kemal, and intuitively grasps what national feeling is. Although he is like any other young man who has concerns about making a living, he turns his side hustle into a tool of resistance. Most of his writings in newspapers contribute to the intellectual development of his country. He underlines that he and his friends could not touch upon political matters in *Servetifünun* because writers had to convey their ideas in subtle ways without attracting the attention of the censor board at that time.

Hüseyin Cahit seeks a moral guide in the personality of the writer, and he determines whether a writer is honorable or not by looking at his political stance as in the case of Paul Bourget. Upon learning that Bourget is in favor of kingship and religious community, he stops reading his books. For him, patriotism requires intellectuals to work for independence.