Introduction

I

'While in Germany, I used to be head over heels for a woman called Frolayn* Puder,' wrote Sabahattin Ali to a female friend in 1933. 'Walking down the street, I'd constantly lose myself in her features rather than watch where I was going. She'd turn to me with a tender smile as if to tell me that she forgave my boorishness. Among all the people I've fallen in love with, none treated me as kindly as this woman. She never even let me catch a scent of her fingertips, but neither did she offend me. She knew exactly how to maintain a constant, never-widening, never-closing distance between us.'

These lines were written seven years before Ali serialized *Madonna in a Fur Coat*, his third and final novel, in the daily newspaper *Hakikat* ('Truth'), where it ran from December 1940 to February 1941. And ever since its publication, much of the debate surrounding *Madonna* has concerned how autobiographical it is. Did Ali really meet a woman named Puder during his studies in Germany? Was she really as tantalizing as she appears in the novel? And did Ali secretly carry a torch for her the rest of his life, even as he, just like his protagonist Raif, got married and became a father?

* Turkified version of the German *Fräulein*, or 'Miss'.

For anyone with more than a passing interest in the life of Sabahattin Ali, such questions can seem annoyingly trivial. In Turkey, after all, Ali is a figure of gravitas. He is among the country's most accomplished authors, his fiction translated and read around the world. He was also an outspoken critic of the Turkish state, a devastatingly incisive observer who harnessed the power of his prose to expose the country's social and political injustices. And finally, he went down in history as a symbol of tragedy, one who paid for the sharpness of his pen and the force of his convictions with his life.

Born in 1907 in an Ottoman province soon to gain independence as Bulgaria, Ali was the eldest son of a military family, his grandfather and father serving as officers in the Ottoman navy and infantry. Ali's father was a progressive thinker who named his two sons after the aristocrat and decentralist politician Prince Sabahaddin and the celebrated poet and atheist Tevfik Fikret, both of whom he counted among his friends. A life of pomp and circumstance, however, was not on the cards for the young Ali as his family's fortunes were reduced by the consecutive shocks of the First World War, the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, and the foundation of the Turkish Republic. In 1928, not long after completing an education marked by many interruptions, a fair share of disciplinary trouble, and tentative steps towards a literary voice, Ali managed to obtain a scholarship from the Turkish state to study language in Germany, where he stayed until 1930.

Shortly after his return to Istanbul, a twenty-three-year-old Ali walked into the offices of the journal *Resimli Ay* ('Illustrated Month') with the manuscript of a short story in hand. The journal was run by the wife-and-husband-team of Sabiha and Zekeriya Sertel, leftist intellectuals who had encountered the work of thinkers such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels while studying in the US in the late 1910s. Upon returning to Turkey,

the Sertels became active in journalism and publishing, gathering around them a motley crew of left-leaning youngsters that, in due time, would come to read like a who's who of modern Turkish literature. *Primus inter pares* was the poet Nâzım Hikmet, who had studied in the Soviet Union and was just embarking on the Herculean task of revolutionizing Turkish poetry with the themes of social realism and the aesthetics of free verse.

It was Nâzım Hikmet who took the fledgling author under his wing. He encouraged Ali, who so far had written only short pieces, to try his hand at a novel, and nudged his protégé from romanticism towards realism. Ali's first novel, *Kuyucaklı Yusuf* ('Yusuf from Kuyucak,' 1937), was an unsparing exposé of poverty and exploitation in the Turkish countryside, written in intense consultation with the trailblazing poet and printed by the *Resimli Ay* press. 'Throughout the printing process,' Sabiha Sertel recalls in her memoirs, 'Nâzım stood by the machines and watched. The day the first copy was complete, he brought it to the office in delight and showed it to all of us. The look in his eyes all but proclaimed, "I created this novelist".'

As the thirties went by, the Sertels and their milieu grew into the main progressive opposition to the single-party state that ruled the Republic of Turkey from its establishment in 1923 until after the Second World War. They called attention to the country's wide range of open wounds, from the absence of democracy to a gaping urban–rural divide in opportunity and power. They were persecuted for their troubles, with Ali himself repeatedly serving time for his writings, including in 1932 when he was incarcerated for a poem lampooning the country's ruler, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. But imprisonment was not the only consequence of Ali's outspokenness. Like most authors past and present, Ali could not live off his writing alone – he depended on teaching and administrative posts in

the Turkish bureaucracy. Released from prison after ten months, he found himself blacklisted from state employment and was unable to secure a steady income until 1934, when he published a eulogy to the insulted leader, as grand in its praise as it was modest in quality.

Aspiring to a more stable life, Ali moved to Ankara, re-entered the civil service, and married in 1935, welcoming a baby daughter two years later. He published steadily, including his second novel, *İçimizdeki Şeytan* ('The Devil Within Us'), in 1940. But while his finances improved, the controversies surrounding him continued to sharpen. Many of his writings were banned or provoked intense legal and political debate. Ali reached the peak of his notoriety when he started publishing – with renowned author Aziz Nesin – the satirical political journal *Marko Paşa* in late 1946. As Sertel puts it, 'The alliance of two prodigious forces such as Sabahattin and Aziz Nesin yielded a groundbreaking type of satirical journal . . . *Marko Paşa* became the most successful journal of its day. With a print run of 60,000, it was read in villages, towns, and cities alike.'

The success, however, came at a price. *Marko Paşa* was repeatedly shut down by the authorities, with Ali and Nesin relaunching it under different names such as *Merhum Paşa* ('The Deceased Pasha') and *Malum Paşa* ('The Known Pasha'). The journal lasted about a year, at which point Ali was back in prison, this time for his role as publisher. Upon his release, he once again found himself barred from gainful employment and without any outlet for his writings. Convinced it was only a question of time before he was jailed again, he applied for a passport to leave the country. When his request was denied, he clandestinely attempted to cross the border to Bulgaria. It was during this last adventure that he fell victim to an assassination, still unresolved today but plausibly ascribed to the Turkish

state. His family and friends only learned of his death from the papers.

As an author, Ali left an enduring mark on the world of Turkish letters with his myriad non-fiction articles, a treasure trove of short stories and poems, and his three novels. As a person, he was perhaps best remembered for the ceaseless hope, indefatigable passion, and impish sense of humour with which he embraced life. A friend recalled once sighting a rainbow while on a trip with Ali. 'If I ran,' Ali supposedly said, 'do you think I could pass underneath it?' When he passed, he was only forty-one.

2

Unsurprising, then, that *Madonna in a Fur Coat* – along with the romantic rumours around it – has often been dismissed as a slightly vexing footnote in the story of a man of big letters and even bigger ideals. A throwaway trifle, this little book, written perhaps with an eye to the market at a time of personal financial hardship, motivated perhaps by a desire to print something that, for once, wouldn't land its author in court as soon as it appeared. But *Madonna* cannot be wished away that easily. No matter how acclaimed Ali's other work is, and no matter how hotly debated his politics remain, *Madonna in a Fur Coat* is still the Sabahattin Ali novel that everyone reads. What is it, then, that makes this book so popular? Why did Ali write it in the first place? And is it really as worlds apart from the rest of his work as it appears?

Let's start by conceding that *Madonna* truly is among the most autobiographical of Ali's works. Still, the novel's reflection of Ali's life should perhaps be sought less in its romantic details than in its overall themes and progression. In the

anonymous narrator and the protagonist Raif, Ali builds not just one, but two alter egos into the novel. Like Ali, both characters are struggling communicators. They are keen observers of humanity, offering piercing and ruthless analyses of others and themselves. They wish to share their observations, the narrator in stories and poems, Raif in paintings and memoirs. And, ultimately, their hopes are frustrated: they are derided by the people around them, the narrator's writings fail to catch on, and Raif abandons his artistic ambitions, choosing to write only for himself.

In terms of age, Sabahattin Ali lands somewhere between his two characters, with Raif playing an older Ali who shares his experience with the younger Ali of the narrator. Indeed, as the novel progresses, Raif and the narrator gradually merge. The narrator becomes obsessed with Raif, replicating his motions, reflecting his behaviours, and even assuming his sickly skin complexion. At one point, Raif and the narrator lock eyes, both weeping as they regard each other, the mirroring between them complete. 'I am just embarking on the journey that you are close to finishing,' the narrator tells Raif. 'I want to understand people. Most of all I want to understand what people did to you.' In the end, the only communication the two characters manage to establish is with each other, giving us a sense of the frustration Ali must have felt in his efforts to stir the hearts and minds of his compatriots.

It is Raif's life story that shows the closest factual parallels to Sabahattin Ali's own. Both the writer and his protagonist are born in the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century. Both enjoy an auspicious start, with Raif the scion of local landlords from the fertile Aegean coast and Ali a military brat with family connections all the way to the palace. Both suffer the destruction of their world as adolescents, coming of age during the First World War, the collapse of the Ottoman

Empire, and the ensuing Turkish–Greek War. Both are partially absent as a new world – the Turkish Republic – replaces the old in the twenties, Raif sent by his father to study the German soap industry, Ali on a state scholarship to study the German language. And both return to the new Turkey with high hopes, just to face alienation, marginalization, and hardship.

But Raif is much more than a mere stand-in for Ali. He is, at the same time, a romantic cliché. Hyper-sensitive in both character and constitution, he is plagued by a Hamlet-like tendency to second-guess himself and a penchant for self-pitying introspection. His love affair with Maria Puder ticks all the boxes of a textbook tragic romance: a capricious and unpredictable love interest; bad omens and portentous daydreams; anxious soul-searching and suicidal thoughts; physical separation and respiratory disease. These conventions of the romantic novel, of course, were not invented by Ali. They were inherited from a list of authors who are duly name-checked in the story and include nineteenth-century greats such as Alexandre Dumas and Victor Hugo from France, Ivan Turgenev from Russia, and Heinrich von Kleist from Germany, the latter among the many authors whom Ali translated into Turkish. And neither did the Turkish interest in romanticism start with Ali. It began in the nineteenth century itself, when Ottoman intellectuals first engaged with Western literature.

It was a heady time in the Ottoman Empire. After centuries of military dominance over their European and Middle Eastern rivals, the Ottomans had started losing ground in the eighteenth century due to Western industrial advancements and colonialist expansion. By the nineteenth century, the empire had entered a process of disintegration, with state coffers empty and many key provinces, including Greece and Egypt, attaining various degrees of independence. It was in

this context that a new generation of Ottoman elites – such as Ali's father – turned to the West for models of social and political reform that could give the struggling empire a new lease on life. Part of their efforts was the translation and emulation of Western novels to help European ideas cross over to Ottoman society.

Raif bears a striking resemblance to these late Ottoman intellectuals, plenty of whom spent extended time in the capitals of Europe. Once exposed to Western worldviews, however, many of these would-be reformers found it hard to re-enter the Ottoman mainstream. While their practical skills, such as languages, were highly sought after, their cultural attitudes were frequently regarded as alien or even degenerate, and their intellectual contributions were met with fierce conservative resistance. Often, they found themselves socially isolated, politically exiled, and publicly ridiculed in early Ottoman novels such as Ahmed Midhat's *Felâtun Bey ve Râkım Efendi* (1875) and Recaizade Mahmud Ekrem's *Araba Sevdası* ('A Passion for Carriages', 1898), delightfully vicious send-ups of the Westernized Ottoman dandy.

Despite his weak and desultory pretensions of Turkishness – a modern national identity that does not predate the twentieth century – Raif is an Ottoman at heart, born in the Ottoman Empire, called by an Ottoman patronymic instead of a Turkish family name, and expressing himself in the Arabic letters of the empire rather than the Latin alphabet of the republic. And Raif is not just literally Ottoman. He is also a symbolic manifestation of the empire as 'Sick Man of Europe', caught between past and present, tradition and change, wallowing in romantic hopes of progress and reform while the world prepares to condemn 600 years of Ottoman statehood to the dustbin of history in a mere matter of decades.

Echoing Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu's debut novel *Kiralık*

Konak ('A Mansion for Rent', 1922), Raif's grand but decrepit family mansion represents the Ottoman state, crumbling in its foundations while a nice reception room is maintained to impress the few guests that still bother to drop by. Its inhabitants – Raif's wife, children, and in-laws – stand for the bulk of society, parasitically living off Raif's labours while denying him any meaningful connection. And the failure of Raif's European adventure mirrors the plight of Ottoman modernization, with a Europe that doesn't really want to teach (the German soap-makers' 'company secrets') and an Ottoman who doesn't really want to learn, preferring to chase after pipe dreams rather than submit to the discipline of rigorous training. The novel's symbolic scaffolding is completed by Raif's father, representing the glorious but moribund Ottoman past, and Maria herself, who stands for a Westernized future always more ideal than real.

3

Now, this may all be well and good, but why would Sabahattin Ali choose to pick up this bundle of late Ottoman clichés and recycle it for a novel published in 1940s Turkey? Was he hoping that the familiarity of the genre would attract readers? Or that the established tropes of the genre would protect him against the political controversy of his more daring literary endeavours?

The latter idea seems borne out by the character of Raif, for surely it is hard to imagine a more apolitical protagonist at a more political moment. This moment – the transition from the crumbling Ottoman Empire to the nascent Republic of Turkey – is not only the most storied period in Turkish history, but also the one most thoroughly steeped in narratives of martial heroism, patriotic self-sacrifice, and utopian visions of the

future. And while Raif nurses fantasies of himself as a latter-day Mucius Scaevola, the semi-mythical Roman assassin who burned off his own right hand in defiance when captured by Rome's enemies, he himself could not be further removed from even the basics of political awareness, let alone such grand patriotic gestures.

It was this apolitical stance that led Nâzım Hikmet, Ali's literary mentor and political hero, to express his dissatisfaction with Raif's memoirs, that is to say, the bulk of the novel. In a letter written in 1943 from prison, where he had been incarcerated for the previous five years on spurious charges of 'spreading communist propaganda', the great poet told Ali that 'proceeding to the second part, one involuntarily notes what a shame it is that the very original, truly accomplished beginning of the novel, and the opportunities it offered, have been wasted for nothing'.

But what if, to the contrary, the very lack of the political in *Madonna* is one of Ali's boldest political statements? What if Ali's transposition of Ottoman clichés onto modern Turkey was not historical escapism but an oblique way of pointing out that the issues plaguing the empire had been carried over, largely unchallenged, to the republic? And what if Raif is apolitical not because he just can't be bothered, but because he can find nothing in Turkey's 'national struggle of liberation' that inspires him to action?

An intertextual reading seems to support this interpretation. Many late Ottoman authors turned to romantic themes because the stifling censorship under Sultan Abdulhamid II (r. 1876–1909) prevented them from taking up overtly political issues. Ali's choice of a topic and protagonist more at home in the Hamidian era seems to imply that a similar regime of censorship obtained when *Madonna* was written, a verdict confirmed by events such as the 1945 *Tan* raid, in which

government-instigated mobs looted the premises of three newspapers, including the Sertels' daily *Tan*, permanently silencing the most effective oppositional publications in the country. State oppression was so palpable that Ali's friends didn't even dare to attend his funeral following his assassination. 'They wanted to lure us out,' Sabiha Sertel writes, 'so they could claim we were staging a communist demonstration at Sabahattin's funeral. Perhaps they would even arrest us all.' In 1950, shortly after being released from prison following a hunger strike, Nâzım Hikmet fled to the Soviet Union to avoid sharing Ali's fate; the Sertels followed him into exile the same year. Neither Nâzım nor Sabiha were ever able to return.

To the attentive reader, Raif's memoirs reverberate with subtle rumblings of discontent. Noting the depreciation his family estate has endured in his absence, Raif tells us that the 'olive groves were of little value. They were offered for even less to buyers wealthy enough to invest in derelict property.' During a visit to Turkey, Raif's former co-lodger Frau Döppke observes that 'I have never seen a country embrace foreigners so warmly.' Scattered throughout the novel, such seemingly innocuous remarks add up to a steady subterranean stream of sociopolitical critique. The young republic's promise of social reform has merely resulted in a redistribution of wealth from dispossessed non-Muslims to a new crony elite. Post-war ideals of national independence have been abandoned to welcome the same foreigners who were plotting to split up the Ottoman Empire in the First World War. And the average person's say in all this has hardly increased from sultan to single party. For Ali and his comrades, voicing such inconvenient truths was not just a matter of politics but one of conscience, and even in a novel as seemingly apolitical as *Madonna*, the same message can be spotted haunting the margins of the romantic narrative.

But Ali is not just critical of modern Turkey; he is equally unsparing in his assessment of 'Europe'. Raif sets out for Weimar Germany in high hopes of finding advanced civilization. He expects to feel at home, to come out of his shell, perhaps even to begin a new life. But these dreams are crushed rather quickly as Europe turns out not to be so different from Turkey after all. 'So this is Europe,' Raif notes drily. 'Why all the fuss?' There is, in fact, quite a lot to fuss about, but hardly in the way Raif had imagined. With the hindsight of 1941, Ali has Raif describe the social degradation and economic destitution of the Weimar Republic, with responses ranging from anti-Semitism to the clamouring for a strongman to make Germany great again. This historical perspective couldn't have been timelier in the early forties, when the Turkish and German states were engaged in heavy flirting and dissenters like Ali were all but shouting from the rooftops to alert their compatriots to the realities of the Nazi regime.

Even here, though, I suspect that the main target of Ali's critique is not Germany but Turkey itself. Many of Raif's observations are equally applicable to both countries, allies in the First World War and faced with similar ordeals in its wake, including political instability and a monstrous wealth gap, manifested in symptoms such as a nihilistic indulgence in sensual hedonism (Ali's Berlin recalls Yakup Kadri's Istanbul in *Sodom ve Gomore* [1928]) and plenty of fruitless dinner conversations about 'how Germany [read Turkey] was to be saved'.

As far as anti-Jewish sentiment is concerned, Raif denies its existence in Turkey, but Ali knows his protagonist is lying. In December 1941, two years before *Madonna* came out as a book, the ship *Struma*, carrying 800 Jewish refugees from Nazi-allied Romania, arrived in Istanbul. Its engine inoperable, the ship was blocked by the Turkish authorities from discharging its

passengers and towed back out to the Black Sea, where it was sunk with all hands by a Soviet submarine. And in November 1942, still before *Madonna* appeared in book form, Turkey passed the *Varlık Vergisi* (Wealth Tax), a discriminatory tax on fixed assets that deliberately ruined large parts of the country's remaining Jewish and Christian minorities, forcing many into bankruptcy, others into exile, and those who couldn't pay or flee into detention and labour camps.

The final – and perhaps most unspeakable – parallel Ali implies between Germany and Turkey is, of course, the enthusiastic reception of strongman rulers to right the social ills resulting from agonizingly protracted periods of war and deprivation. While Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Turkey's original strongman, had already died in 1938, his place was taken by his deputy İsmet İnönü, whose unremarkable stature only made him embrace the strongman-dictator cult all the more wholeheartedly. It was under İnönü that Turkey entered into ever closer collaboration with Nazi Germany, and under his rule that some of the worst atrocities of the Turkish single-party state were committed, including not only the *Struma* incident and the Wealth Tax, but also the incarceration of Nâzım Hikmet, the *Tan* raid, and Sabahattin Ali's murder.

If *Madonna* is not, then, an apolitical novel after all, perhaps Raif's politics need to be reinterpreted from a perspective closer to the twenty-first century than to contemporaries like Nâzım Hikmet. Perhaps Raif does not so much lack a political stance as that he assumes a stance of apathy, a more or less conscious disengagement from the political as the latter becomes dominated by abstract, ominous forces over which the individual seems to lack any reasonable control. And who could fault Raif for being apathetic when Ali's life story seems to teach us that the alternatives were prison, exile, and assassination?

4

This engagement, however oblique, with the topic of political apathy is not the only way in which *Madonna* seems ahead of its time. Especially for the twenty-first-century reader, the novel contains another timely surprise, namely a refreshingly unorthodox dissection of gender. The relationship between Raif and Maria is a complex one, and its complexities place it firmly outside the norms of Western and Turkish societies alike, whether in the twenties, the forties, or today.

It is with a good dose of opprobrium that Raif talks about gender in Berlin, a city he paints as a degenerate, immoral, gender- and age-fluid demimonde. Maria's cabaret performances are at best morally dubious, at worst a mere step from prostitution. At one point, Raif mentions trans sex workers soliciting outside the famous KaDeWe department store, referring to them as 'young men dressed in red boots whose faces were painted like women . . . flashing flirtatious looks at the people passing by'. At another, he describes the 'Romanisches Café', where older women gather at night for the pleasurable company of young gigolos.

But in dismissing these manifestations of gender diversity with a whiff of moral superiority, Raif does protest too much. True, the Ottoman culture from which he hails upheld a strong degree of gender segregation, with flirting a risky endeavour, and with men and women usually finding partners through arranged marriage. Less widely known, however, is the fact that, until the late nineteenth century and its influx of Western ideas, Ottoman society was anything but heteronormative.

Unfettered by the stifling categories of hetero- and homosexuality, the sexual practices of many Ottoman subjects could, in today's terms, only be described as fluid. While arranged