

## **Beşir Fuad (1852-1887) and the Introduction of Philosophical Materialism into the Ottoman Intellectual Life**

**Serdar Poyraz<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

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On 5 February 1887, around nine o'clock at night, Beşir Fuad, a former officer in the Ottoman army and an important Turkish intellectual who had contributed significantly to the debates about science and literature in the late Ottoman period, committed suicide in the private study of his house in Istanbul. Before committing suicide, he wrote letters to his friends, explaining the reasons for his action, as well as a brief note to the police, informing them that his death was a well-planned suicide and that they should not further bother his wife with a criminal investigation. Moreover, he decided to turn his suicide into a scientific experiment, and after injecting cocaine into his left arm and carefully cutting his veins in four different places with a razor, he calmly wrote on a sheet of paper about the effects of bleeding on the body and the feeling and sensation of death that it induced. Diverging significantly from the first generation of *Tanzimat*-era Ottoman intellectuals who also advocated the study of western science but justified their positions by explicitly or implicitly referring to the Islamic tradition, Beşir Fuad never used any religious arguments whatsoever to justify his position on science. In Beşir Fuad, we also see, for the first time, an Ottoman intellectual who consciously referred to the writings of German vulgar materialists, especially Ludwig Büchner (1824-1899), in order to elevate science to an almost metaphysical level, believing that science was the ultimate arbiter of "truth" in human life. For this reason alone, his works are worth studying. In fact, I argue that Beşir Fuad was the true founder of Ottoman materialism, which would subsequently become the preferred philosophy of a significant number of influential Ottoman intellectuals and statesmen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, not to mention the founders of the future Turkish Republic. Therefore, his works and ideas are crucial to understand not only the intellectual currents of the late Ottoman and early Republican periods but also the early Republicans' rather uncompromising political attitude against religion. This paper discusses Fuad's life and major works. Relying on primary sources, I explain Beşir Fuad's philosophical materialism and put them in the context of nineteenth-century Ottoman intellectual life. Finally, I expand on Beşir Fuad's literary ideas and his hard-headed defense of literary realism.

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<sup>1</sup> Visiting Assistant Professor, Department of History, Missouri State University, Springfield, MO.

On 5 February 1887, around nine o'clock at night, Beşir Fuad, a former officer in the Ottoman army and an important intellectual who had contributed significantly to the debates about science and literature in the late Ottoman period, committed suicide in the private study of his house near the Sublime Porte in Istanbul. Before committing suicide, he wrote letters to his friends, including Ahmed Midhat Efendi (1844-1912), explaining the reasons for his action, as well as a brief note to the police, informing them that his death was a well-planned suicide and that they should not further bother his wife or the other members of his family with a criminal investigation.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, he decided to turn his suicide into a scientific experiment, and after injecting cocaine into his left arm and carefully cutting his veins in four different places with a razor, he calmly wrote on a sheet of paper about the "effects of bleeding on the body and the feeling and sensation of death that it induced." Thus we read:

"I conducted my operation and did not feel any pain. It aches a little as it bleeds. As I was bleeding, my sister-in-law came downstairs; I warded her off, telling her that the door was closed since I was studying and writing. Fortunately, she did not enter. I cannot imagine any death sweeter than this. I raised my arm abruptly to help the blood flow out. I began to lose consciousness...."<sup>3</sup>

The rather gruesome details of this bizarre suicide, as well as the serenity and the surprising objectivity with which Beşir Fuad explains the reasons for it in his letters to Ahmed Midhat Efendi, probably led Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar to argue some time ago that Beşir Fuad was a "mystic of science" (*ilim mistiği*) who did not hesitate "to record his feelings as he was dying and to offer his dead body as a present to the Imperial School of Medicine."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Beşir Fuad's suicide letters to the police and his friends, including Ahmed Midhat Efendi and his publisher Mihran Efendi, were reproduced in Ahmed Midhat's work on Beşir Fuad originally written in 1887. This work was recently republished as Ahmed Mithat Efendi, *Beşir Fuad* (Istanbul: Oğlak Yayınları, 1996). For the police report on Fuad's suicide as well as the letters, see pp. 27-45 of the recent publication. The following page numbers refer to the recent publication.

<sup>3</sup>Ahmet Mithat Efendi, *Beşir...*, 32. All translations from the Ottoman and Modern Turkish are mine.

<sup>4</sup>Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, *Ondokuzuncu Asır Türk Edebiyatı Tarihi* (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2006), 275. In another place, Tanpınar simply notes that "realism" in Ottoman literature begins with Beşir Fuad: "Beşir Fuad'la başlayan realizm davası...": Tanpınar, *Ondokuzuncu*, 534.

As I will argue below, there were some rather mundane reasons for Beşir Fuad's decision to commit suicide, and it might be misleading to argue, as Şükrü Hanioglu has done, that Beşir Fuad “cut his veins and took notes describing his deteriorating condition until he lost consciousness *in order to prove* that life was no more than a scientific phenomenon.”<sup>5</sup> It would be more accurate to say that Beşir Fuad had rather uninteresting reasons for ending his life, and probably wished to make a final modest contribution to science by recording his final experiences. In any case, he definitely did not end his life to prove a scientific point.

Beşir Fuad's suicide may have contributed to the general lack of appreciation displayed towards his works and ideas after his death in the predominantly Muslim culture of the late Ottoman Empire, which considered committing suicide, for any reason, a grave sin. However, there is no similar explanation for the continuing neglect of his works and ideas in English-speaking academic circles. With the exception of Hanioglu's above-mentioned article, there is, as far as I know, no significant study on Beşir Fuad and his ideas in English. This is a pity since Beşir Fuad was the first example in the Ottoman Empire of a public intellectual who advocated a thoroughly scientific worldview in his writings.

Diverging significantly from the first generation of Tanzimat-era Ottoman intellectuals who also advocated the study of western science but justified their positions by explicitly or implicitly referring to the Islamic tradition, such as Münif Pasha (1828-1910) and his friends writing in the *Mecmua-i Fünun* (*The Journal of Sciences*), Beşir Fuad never used any religious arguments whatsoever to justify his position on science. In Beşir Fuad, we also see, for the first time, an Ottoman intellectual who consciously referred to the writings of German vulgar materialists, especially Ludwig Büchner (1824-1899), in order to elevate science to an almost metaphysical level, believing that science was the ultimate arbiter of “truth” in human life. For this reason alone, his works are worth studying.

Moreover, Beşir Fuad wrote the first critical biographies in the Ottoman language of such important European thinkers and literary figures as Voltaire (1694-1778) and Victor Hugo (1802-1885).

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<sup>5</sup>Şükrü Hanioglu, “Blueprints for a Future Society: Late Ottoman Materialists on Science, Religion, and Art,” in Elisabeth Ozdalga, ed., *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 39. Italics are mine.

He used these publications as a springboard to further elaborate his ideas on science and literature. In literature he was an adamant supporter of realism, which he considered to be a natural extension of materialism in fine arts, and favored the realist literary works of Émile Zola (1840-1902) over the romanticism of Victor Hugo. His uncompromising defense of realism led to a number of heated literary arguments with other Ottoman intellectuals, which will be briefly explained in the following pages.

More importantly, Beşir Fuad represented perhaps the first specimen of a new type of Ottoman intellectual who would increasingly dominate discussions of politics, science and religion in the second half of the nineteenth century. He knew a number of European languages-- French, English and German to be exact-- but not the traditional Islamic languages. His education was almost completely secular in nature, and his intellectual and emotional links to Islamic culture were so weak that at one point he admitted to his friend Ahmed Midhat Efendi that he first read the Qur'an in a French translation.<sup>6</sup>

As Carter Findley argued some time ago, the gradual replacement of Arabic and Persian as the common foreign languages of the Ottoman intelligentsia by French and, to a lesser extent, German and English, is traceable to the foundation of the Translation Bureau (*Tercüme Odası*) in the early nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Although Beşir Fuad did not work for the Translation Bureau and was not employed by the government during his literary career, he was educated in the new schools created in the wake of the *Tanzimat* reforms, and his secular education, both formal and informal, certainly had a significant effect on his general outlook and worldview.

In fact, Beşir Fuad was the true founder of Ottoman materialism, which would subsequently become the preferred philosophy of a significant number of influential Ottoman intellectuals and statesmen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, not to mention the founders of the future Turkish Republic. Therefore, his works and ideas are crucial to understand not only the intellectual currents of the late Ottoman and early Republican periods but also the early Republicans' rather uncompromising political attitude against religion.

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<sup>6</sup>"He never worked on such things as hadith, tafsir (Qur'anic exegesis), kalam (Islamic theology) or tasawwuf (mysticism) and, moreover, as he confessed to me, he read the Holy Qur'an in a French translation and saw critiques of the Qur'an in European languages.": Ahmet Mithat Efendi, *Beşir...*, 22-23.

<sup>7</sup>Carter V. Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform in the Ottoman Empire: The Sublime Port, 1789-1922* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

In the following section of this paper, I provide a brief biography of Beşir Fuad and mention his major works. In the second section, I deal with Beşir Fuad's philosophical ideas and materialism and try to put them in the context of nineteenth-century Ottoman intellectual life. I emphasize the centrality of Ludwig Büchner's *Kraft und Stoff* (*Force and Matter*, later translated by Baha Tevfik and Ahmed Nebil, second-generation Ottoman materialists, into Ottoman Turkish as *Madde ve Kuvvet*)<sup>8</sup> for an accurate understanding of Beşir Fuad's ideas about science. Finally, in the third section of the paper, I expand on Beşir Fuad's literary ideas and his hard-headed defense of literary realism.

### I: A Biography of Beşir Fuad

Beşir Fuad, whose ideas, according to Mehmet Kaplan, "closed an era in the history of Turkish literature and opened a new one,"<sup>9</sup> was born in Istanbul in 1852. After attending the Fatih elementary and secondary schools in Istanbul (1856-1861), he continued his secondary education in Adana and then in the Jesuit Missionary School in Aleppo, Syria, where his father, Hurşid Pasha, was the governor (1862-1867). Beşir Fuad learned French there, and after his family returned to Istanbul he attended the Istanbul Military High School (*Askeri İdadî*) and the Imperial War College (*Mekteb-i Harbiye*), from which he graduated in 1873.

Coming from a distinguished Ottoman family with an extensive military and administrative background, he was employed in the imperial palace as one of the imperial aides (*Yaveran-ı Hazret-i Şebriyari*) to Sultan Abdülaziz between 1873 and 1876.<sup>10</sup> He saw military action in the Ottoman-Serbian War of 1875-76 and in the catastrophic Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-78 (known in Turkish as the *93 [Doksan Üç] Harbi*, short for 1293, the Ottoman financial year when the war began). He volunteered to fight in Crete during the Cretan rebellion of 1878, as well, and remained there for almost five years, during which time he studied German and English intensively.<sup>11</sup>

8Ludwig, Büchner, *Madde ve Kuvvet*, Baha Tevfik and Ahmed Nebil (tr.) (Istanbul: Teceddüd-i İlmi ve Felsefi Kütüphanesi, 1327[1910]).

9See the introduction Mehmet Kaplan wrote for Orhan Okay's excellent study of Beşir Fuad in Orhan Okay, *Beşir Fuad: İlk Türk Pozitivist ve Natüralisti* (Istanbul, Hareket Yayınları, 1969), 8.

10Orhan Okay, *Beşir Fuad*, 41.

11Cem Onur Yarar, *Ondokuzuncu Yüzyıl Osmanlı Düşüncesinde Beşir Fuad* (Ankara: Gazi Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, 2000), 4. Later Beşir Fuad would translate several linguistic primers by nineteenth-century German linguist Emil Otto on the French, German and English languages into

In 1881, he was appointed as a member of the "Inspection Commission for the Office of General Supplies in the War Ministry" (*Harbiye Levazımat-ı Umumiye Dairesi Heyet-i Teftişiyesi Komisyonu*) with the rank of *kolağası* (an Ottoman army rank above a captain and below a major).

In 1883, Beşir Fuad began to publish articles in the journal *Envar-ı Zeka* (*Lights of Intelligence*), and in 1884 he resigned from his official military posts in order to spend more time on his literary studies.<sup>12</sup> From 1884 until his suicide in 1887, he wrote intensively and published an impressive number of literary, scientific and philosophical articles for different periodicals and newspapers, including the already mentioned *Envar-ı Zeka*, as well as *Haver* (West), *Güneş* (Sun), *Saadet* (Happiness), *Ceride-i Havadis* (Register of Events) and *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* (The Interpreter of Truth). In addition to these articles and his translations of language primers on French, English and German, Beşir Fuad also translated a few plays from French into Ottoman Turkish.<sup>13</sup>

More importantly, he wrote the first critical biographies in Ottoman Turkish of Voltaire<sup>14</sup> and Victor Hugo.<sup>15</sup> In addition, he published a work on human physiology in which the human body is likened to a well-working machine.<sup>16</sup> Finally, Beşir Fuad wrote literary letters to Muallim Naci (1850-1893)<sup>17</sup> and Fazlı Necib (1863-1932)<sup>18</sup> in which he defended his literary realism, and these letters were later published in book form. In his book on Beşir Fuad, Ahmet Midhat Efendi, who was himself one of the most important literary figures of the day, recounts how he got to know the young author when Beşir Fuad visited him one day, probably around 1883-1884, in his office at *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, one of the most influential newspapers in Istanbul in the late nineteenth century.

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Ottoman Turkish. For a contemporary English translation of Otto's primer on French, see Emil Otto, *Introductory French Reader*, Edward S. Joynes (tr.) (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1877).

12Ahmet Mithat Efendi, *Beşir...*, 19.

13For a list of these plays, see Orhan Okay, *Beşir Fuad...*, 223.

14Beşir Fuad, *Voltaire* (Istanbul: Şirket-i Mürettibiye Matbaası, 1304[1887]).

15Beşir Fuad, *Victor Hugo* (Istanbul: Mihran Matbaası, 1302[1885]).

16Beşir Fuad, *Beşer* (Istanbul: Mihran Matbaası, 1303 [1886]).

17Beşir Fuad and Muallim Naci, *İntikad* (Istanbul: Mahmud Bey Matbaası [1304]1887). This book was recently republished in Beşir Fuad, *Şiir ve Hakikat*, Handan İnci (ed.) (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 1999), 347-405.

18Beşir Fuad and Fazlı Necib, *Mektubat* (Istanbul: Kitapçı Aleksan, 1305/1889). This book was also republished in Beşir Fuad, *Şiir ve Hakikat*, Handan İnci (ed.) (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 1999), 405-519.

Ahmet Midhat at that point knew Beşir Fuad only from the numerous articles he was sending periodically to *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, as well as to other newspapers and journals, for publication. He had assumed before their meeting, interestingly, that Beşir Fuad was an Arab graduate of the Imperial Medical School (*Mekteb-i Tibbiye*).<sup>19</sup>

The Imperial Medical School was, of course, a hotbed of materialistic ideas at the time, and Beşir Fuad's numerous articles on physiology, science and philosophy, as well as his name, Beşir, which was not common among the Turcophone population, probably led Ahmed Midhat to make this assumption. In any case, it became clear that Ahmed Midhat was not terribly off the mark, since Beşir Fuad was a young intellectual who had been educated, partly, in a Jesuit school in one of the Ottoman Empire's Arab provinces. At the meeting Beşir Fuad explained to Ahmed Midhat that his philosophical thoughts were entirely materialistic, which he explained as "not recognizing anything other than matter."<sup>20</sup> Ahmed Midhat writes that he tried to convince Beşir Fuad to give up his materialistic ideas but felt that his arguments did not impress the young man much.<sup>21</sup> Ahmed Midhat apparently thought very highly of Beşir Fuad's linguistic and philosophical abilities and decided to support him in his literary endeavors.

Understandably, Ahmed Midhat was devastated when his young friend committed suicide a few years later. Throughout the work that Ahmed Midhat wrote on Beşir Fuad, there is a clear sense of surprise, sadness, loss and disbelief on the issue of Beşir Fuad's suicide. Apart from the philosophical disagreements on science and religion between Ahmed Midhat and Beşir Fuad, which I will explain in the following section of the paper, they were very good friends, and Ahmed Midhat, a self-made man in the publishing business who acted as a mentor to Beşir Fuad, simply could not understand how such a well-educated and knowledgeable man from a good family with considerable financial resources could decide to commit suicide.

The long letter that Beşir Fuad wrote to Ahmed Midhat before his suicide, which Ahmed Midhat decided to append to his book, provides some clues to his motivation.

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19Ahmet Mithat Efendi, *Beşir...*, 11.

20" ...kendi efkar-i hikemiyesi 'materyalizm,' yani maddiyattan başka hiçbir şey tanınamaktan ibaret olduğunu anlattı...": Ahmet Mithat Efendi, *Beşir...*, 15.

21 Ahmet Mithat Efendi, *Beşir...*, 15.

Beşir Fuad begins his letter, titled "A Voice from the Grave" (*Mezardan bir Sada*), by referring to Ahmed Midhat as "O, Philosopher!" (*Ey Hakim*),<sup>22</sup> and explaining that he has been contemplating suicide for more than two years. Then he abruptly changes the subject to the nature of science and argues that the "truths" established by science never change. He adds that since he has "served" science throughout his life, he wants to do the same at his death and make an experiment out of his planned suicide.

As for the actual reasons for his suicide, Beşir Fuad explains that his mother had suffered a mental breakdown a couple of years earlier, which the doctors identified as "delirium of persecution" (*delire de la persecution; hezeyan-ı tazallumi*). After sending her to a mental institution and learning from the doctors whom he consulted and the medical books that he read that this illness was thought to be hereditary, he began to worry that he would eventually suffer the same fate as his mother.<sup>23</sup> The doctors he consulted, in typical nineteenth-century fashion, suggested draining the excess blood in his brain by applying a leech and advised him to try to dispel his worries by seeking entertainment. It seems that Beşir Fuad carried the doctors' advice too far, since despite being married, he acquired two consecutive mistresses, on whom he spent considerable sums of money while wasting almost two years in debauchery (*sefahat*).

He mentions that he sent his second mistress to France, from where he apparently received a letter informing him that she was about to deliver his baby. He invited her back to Istanbul and rented a house in Kuzguncuk for her and the baby. Beşir Fuad had already spent the majority of his inheritance on these affairs, and his life turned into a hell, as both his wife and his mistress began to complain continually about the situation. Mired in financial and familial problems and convinced that he would succumb to a mental illness, he writes that he could not find any solution other than suicide.<sup>24</sup>

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22Ahmet Mithat Efendi, *Beşir...*, 35.

23"I began to observe the first signs of mental problems in my case. Since, as a result of my command of medical books, I knew that madness was hereditary, my worries only increased...": Ahmet Mithat Efendi, *Beşir...*, 41..

24"When I go home, my wife complains and cries, asking me, 'Why don't you come home?' If I spend a few days at home and go to Kuzguncuk, my mistress cries, saying, 'You got bored of me!'... In the past couple of weeks, this has been my situation and I could not find any solution better than suicide to get rid of my problems." Ahmet Mithat Efendi, *Beşir...*, 43-44.

In an additional note that he wrote before his suicide to the administration of the Imperial Medical School, Beşir Fuad bequeathed his body to the school for scientific research. Not surprisingly, his family did not fulfill his wish but decided to give him a proper Islamic burial.

## II: Beşir Fuad's Philosophical Ideas

Beşir Fuad differs on a number of important points from the Young Ottomans who dominated the Ottoman intellectual climate in the second half of the nineteenth century. Unlike the Young Ottomans (and, later, most of the Young Turks), who defined their “westernism” mostly with their advocacy of parliamentary rule and constitutionalism,<sup>25</sup> Beşir Fuad devotes almost no space in his numerous works to overt discussions of politics. This fact cannot be explained simply by the routine political censure of literature and the press during the reign of Abdülhamid II. The underlying reason is that Beşir Fuad was one of the first Ottoman thinkers to come up with the idea that a thorough and meaningful “westernization” of the Ottoman lands could not be realized by a simple adoption of western political institutions, but that such a transformation required a philosophical and ideological change, as well.

In fact, one may argue that Beşir Fuad, similarly to Münif Pasha, whose stance in *Mecmua-i Fünun* (*Journal of Sciences*) was consciously apolitical, decided to concentrate his efforts on the transfer into the Ottoman Empire of what he perceived as cutting-edge western ideas about science and philosophy, instead of advocating immediate political change. These “cutting-edge” western ideas meant, for him as for many later Ottoman thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the vulgar-materialist ideas of the German philosophers, especially Ludwig Büchner.<sup>26</sup>

Following Büchner, Beşir Fuad rejected any sort of religious or philosophical speculation as meaningless drivel that should be replaced with scientific arguments.<sup>27</sup>

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25Şerif Mardin, *Jön Türklerin Siyasi Fikirleri: 1895-1908* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1996), 222.

26Serol Teber, “Ludwig Büchner ve Osmanlı Düşünürleri Üstündeki Etkileri,” *Felsefe Dergisi* 2 (1986): 5.

27Beşir Fuad, *Şiir ve Hakikat*, 453-454.

So, when a young intellectual from Salonika with whom Beşir Fuad was corresponding, Fazlı Necib (1863-1932), asked in one of his letters whether the teaching of "morality" (*ahlak*) should not be considered anterior (and thus implicitly superior) to the teaching of science for the formation of the individual, and whether the ancients (*kudema*) were not correct in their emphasis on the teaching of literature and morals to the students, Beşir Fuad replied that although the teaching of morals was important, "monstrosities" (*garibeler*) were bound to result if any philosophical or moral viewpoints detached from science were taught to people.<sup>28</sup>

Since these ideas are taken almost verbatim from Ludwig Büchner's influential work *Kraft und Stoff* (Force and Matter),<sup>29</sup> it is worthwhile to examine Büchner's thought more closely. As Frederick Gregory pointed out some time ago, "Ludwig Büchner and the other vulgar materialists of the nineteenth century, their denials aside, were certainly metaphysicians by today's standards. Materialism of the nineteenth-century German vulgar-materialist variety often entailed the following tenets:

(1) that there is an independently existing world; (2) that human beings, like all other subjects, are material entities; (3) that the human mind does not exist as an entity distinct from the human body; (4) that there is no God...whose mode of existence is not that of material entities. These are metaphysical postulates which are not necessarily implied by mechanism or reductionism."<sup>30</sup> Following the earlier philosophical musings of Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach (1804-1872), who declared God a creation of man, more specifically the "projection of human needs into the heavens,"<sup>31</sup> Büchner, whom Gregory characterizes as the "summarizer and spokesman" of the German vulgar materialists, writes in his *magnum opus*, which was once regarded as the "Bible of materialism,"<sup>32</sup> that "every item of human knowledge, every page of practical experience, every conquest of science...makes the old theistic theory of the universe, which originated in the days when mankind was still in its first childhood, appear as a mere fable."<sup>33</sup>

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28Beşir Fuad, *Şiir ve Hakikat*, 445.

29Ludwig Büchner's work was immensely popular in the nineteenth century and was translated into many languages, including Ottoman Turkish. The page numbers I use refer to Ludwig Büchner, *Force and Matter, or Principles of the Natural Order of the Universe with a System of Morality Based Thereon*, tr. from the fifteenth German edition (London: Asher and Company, 1884).

30 Frederick Gregory, *Scientific Materialism in Nineteenth Century Germany* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1977), X-XI.

31 Frederick Gregory, *Scientific Materialism...*, 5.

32 Ibid., 105.

33 Ludwig Büchner, *Force and Matter...*, XXV.

Referring to the ideas of Carl Vogt (1817-1895), another vulgar-materialist, Büchner argues in his *Force and Matter*, in the chapter entitled "Personal Continuance," on life after death and the human soul, that physiology "declares itself decidedly and categorically against individual immortality....The soul does not enter into the fetus...but is produced by the development of the brain, just the same as muscular activity is produced by the development of the muscles, or secretion is produced by a development of the glands."<sup>34</sup>

In view of Büchner's influence on him, it comes as no surprise that Beşir Fuad was fascinated with human physiology and published the first book on this subject for the general reader in the Ottoman language. In this book, Beşir Fuad criticizes the Ottoman educational system for not putting enough emphasis on teaching students about the human body and argues that "the creature named human is a mathematical equation with numerous unknowns, and there is nothing more important than the solving of this equation. The science which will actually solve this mathematical equation is the science of physiology."<sup>35</sup>

In the chapter of his *Force and Matter* entitled "Morality," Büchner argues that a new "moral law," presumably replacing the old theistic morality, which would "pitch its tents...on the new territory of a natural order of the universe left open by science...rather than on the old one of religion and of belief in spirits,"<sup>36</sup> would follow the results of scientific investigation. This, in a nutshell, summarizes Beşir Fuad's intellectual stance (and later that of many others, including Baha Tevfik, Abdullah Cevdet and Celal Nuri İleri) on the relationship among science, religion and morality. Following Büchner, these late Ottoman and early Republican authors believed that somehow, science would "discover" a new morality for human beings, making the moral fabric of old theistic ideas obsolete. Unfortunately for these authors, Büchner does not explain in his book how exactly this is supposed to happen. All he writes, at the end of his work, is that "science must take the place of religion; and belief in a natural... universal order must be substituted for a belief in spirits and ghosts, and the factitious morals of dogmas make room for a morality suited to Nature."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 402.

<sup>35</sup>Beşir Fuad, *Beşer...*,7.

<sup>36</sup>Ludwig Büchner, *Force and Matter...*, 479.

<sup>37</sup>Ludwig Büchner, *Force and Matter...*, 485.

But what does a morality “suited to Nature” mean? Even if we forget the highly relevant Nietzschean philosophical warning that “nature” seems completely indifferent to any moralistic interpretation imposed on it, Büchner's suggestion of a “natural morality” that is supposed to be discovered by science is deeply problematic for several reasons. First, it conflates fields which are not necessarily overlapping, such as science and religion, and thus makes a “category mistake” in analysis. Secondly, the suggestion of a “natural morality” opens dangerous doors to racist interpretations of morality, which were rather common in the nineteenth century, based on the assumed “natural” biological ranking of human beings.<sup>38</sup> In any case, there is no reason to assume that scientific discoveries, by themselves, will automatically lead to any moral system at all, let alone a superior morality to the existing ones. Any such moral system would necessarily be founded on either a secular philosophical or a religious ground, making the pretensions of a neutral science “discovering” this morality untenable. Science simply cannot function in a philosophical vacuum.

However, Beşir Fuad did not find anything terribly problematic in Büchner's work. In fact, he was so impressed with Büchner's work that he wrote in one of his letters to his friend Muallim Naci that “ [i]f we investigate any part of existence, in the first place, two things attract our attention: Matter and Force! In order to appreciate the importance of these two words, it is enough to say that a work named after these words created a renovation in the world of philosophy.”<sup>39</sup>

The truth of the matter, however, is that Büchner, although he was widely popular in the nineteenth century, was, relatively speaking, a philosophical lightweight; his entire work ultimately rested on a peculiar misunderstanding of science, religion and morality. It is important here to remember that it was Karl Marx, after all, who coined the term “vulgar materialist” in order to distinguish the naïve materialism of the German natural scientists following Ludwig Feuerbach, such as Ludwig Büchner, Carl Vogt and Jacob Moleschott (1822-1893), from his own “historical materialism”.<sup>40</sup>

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38For a classic treatment of the links between nineteenth-century scientific ideas and racism, see Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

39Beşir Fuad and Muallim Naci, *İntikad* (Istanbul: Mahmud Bey Matbaası 1304/1887), 70.

40For an early use of the term, see Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 231.

But, of course, what was philosophically vulgar and naïve in Germany appeared as a genuine philosophical revelation in the Ottoman Empire. It seems to me that the young Ottoman authors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were simply not philosophically sophisticated enough to appreciate the intricate moral arguments of the Neo-Kantians or Hegelians, let alone the sophisticated ideas of, say, a Nietzsche or Marx on science, society and religion, which represented the real philosophical discussion in Germany of the time.<sup>41</sup> It is important to bear in mind that there were simply no significant Ottoman Turkish “Hegelians” or “Kantians,” let alone “Marxists” or still less “Nietzscheans,” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But there were a lot of Ottoman followers of Büchner.

In that sense, one may prematurely conclude that the intellectual milieu of the late Ottoman Empire and the early Turkish Republic resembled a remake of a western film which had not attracted much of an audience in the first place, in a Third World setting, this time with local actors. However, as the following discussion of Ahmed Midhat Efendi demonstrates, the truth of the matter is much more complicated than that.

### III. Ahmed Midhat Efendi on Büchner

It should be noted that not every intellectual in the Ottoman Empire was so impressed with Büchner’s ideas on science, religion and morality. Ahmed Midhat Efendi writes in his book on Beşir Fuad that some materialists, “like Büchner, one of the notables of this school” (*Büchner gibi, bunların eazımından bulunan bazı zevat...*),<sup>42</sup> were making a philosophical mistake when they tried to reach conclusions about the non-existence of God from their observations about matter and force, which they deemed to be eternal. Their mistake, according to him, lay in the fact that they “subordinated the creative force and nature of God to the properties of matter.”<sup>43</sup>

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41One minor exception is Baha Tevfik, who wrote the first book on Friedrich Nietzsche in Ottoman Turkish.

42Ahmet Mithat Efendi, *Beşir...*, 70.

43“...derhal kuvve-i halikiyet dahi işte bu madde ile havassına müntesip bir keyfiyet olduğunu hükmediverdikleri zaman...”: Ahmet Mithat Efendi, *Beşir...*, 70

Indeed, if things like matter and force are as orderly as the materialists claim them to be, asks Ahmed Midhat, is it not at least possible that there is a higher power, namely God, who is responsible for this order?<sup>44</sup> Or, in other words, does not a mechanical universe, working like a well-wound watch, point to a watchmaker?

Of course, Ahmed Midhat's line of reasoning is also problematic from a philosophical point of view, because, first of all, it may be the case that the "order" we observe in the universe is only a local affair, confined to the particular part of the universe we are observing (and hence making our extrapolation to an "orderly universe" as a whole problematic). Secondly, and more importantly, even if the universe is orderly, these "laws" we observe may be the emergent properties of an evolving universe itself. In other words, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to go from the observation of an "apparent" order and design to a designer.<sup>45</sup>

The historical question is deeper than a simple disagreement on the finer points of religion or metaphysics between "progressive" Ottoman intellectuals like Beşir Fuad, on the one hand, and "conservative" ones like Ahmed Midhat Efendi, on the other. In his excellent article on Ahmed Midhat Efendi, Carter Findley argues that "Ahmed Midhat is easily branded a conservative, yet he had progressive traits. In contrast to the progressive ideologues who took constitutionalism as their 'symbol of western modernity,' he -while sharing some of their positivistic and Social Darwinist ideas- believed social, economic, and cultural change should come first."<sup>46</sup>

As Findley cogently implies, the crux of the disagreement between Ahmed Midhat and other Ottoman intellectuals, including Beşir Fuad, revolves around their differing conceptualizations of modernity. So, we read that towards the end of his book on the trip he made to Europe for the Congress of Orientalists in Stockholm in 1889,

Ahmed Midhat recounts a discussion in which the noted statesman and intellectual Sadullah Paşa, Ottoman ambassador in Vienna, proposed evaluating Europe's progress in terms of "material" and "moral."

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44Ahmet Mithat Efendi, *Beşir...*, 70-71.

45On these points, see the classic by Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe without Design* (New York: Norton, 1986). These ideas proposed by Ahmed Midhat Efendi, nevertheless, had certain traction in the Ottoman intellectual life.

46Carter V. Findley, "An Ottoman Occidental in Europe: Ahmed Midhat meets Madame Gülnar, 1889," *The American Historical Review* 103, No.1 (1998): 21.

Attribution to Sadullah gives this idea distinguished provenance. Yet Ahmed Midhat had already made it his leitmotif, developing it in much earlier discussions. One reason for this may have been that the moral-material duality paralleled Sultan Abdülhamid's view that Western civilization consisted of "technique" and "idea," the former helpful to Ottomans, the latter dangerous for ill-educated peoples who still needed paternal guidance. But Ahmed Midhat's use of this dichotomy gave his work more than a kind of political correctness. Explicitly applying the moral-material dichotomy to the Other suggests applying it to the Self, implying an analytical framework that transcends simplistic binarism.<sup>47</sup>

This is an extremely important point since the moral-material dichotomy proposed by Ahmed Midhat was accepted almost verbatim by later conservative Ottoman and Turkish authors, such as Şehbenderzade Ahmed Hilmi and Said Nursi, in their assessments of western modernity and the proper strategies of modernization for the Ottoman lands.

In fact, if Beşir Fuad stands at the beginning of the Ottoman materialist tradition which explicitly refused to make such a distinction and argued for adopting European modernity wholesale, Ahmed Midhat should be regarded as the intellectual father of another line of Ottoman and Turkish authors who argued for some sort of "cultural authenticity" and believed that it was possible to modernize while preserving certain aspects of Islamic culture.<sup>48</sup>

In both versions of modernization, though, modernization has been conceptualized as a defensive measure to protect the integrity of the empire (later the Republic) against the perceived imperialism of the West. Hence, not surprisingly, both the straightforward westernizers and the supporters of a culturally authentic modernization found it expedient, most of the time, to converge intellectually on a broadly conceived nationalist paradigm. The contours of this defensive ideology, of course, only gradually shifted from a vague Ottomanism (*Osmanlılık*) to Turkish nationalism.

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47Carter V. Findley, "An Ottoman Occidentalist...", 23. Ahmed Midhat's book, to which Findley refers, is Ahmed Midhat, *Avrupa'da bir Cevelan* (Istanbul: Gayret Matbaası, 1307[1889-1890]).

48 For a detailed discussion of Ahmed Midhat's ideas, see Orhan Okay, *Batı Medeniyeti Karşısında Ahmed Midhat Efendi* (Istanbul: Milli Eğitim Yayınları, 1991).

Whether non-western, multiple modernities, possibly with different historical trajectories from the western case, have been historically realized or not is an interesting theoretical question which has recently drawn the interest of some notable sociologists.<sup>49</sup> In my opinion, the idea that there is a distinctively Turkish modernity, while attractive to a lot of social scientists nowadays, is going to turn out to be a philosophical dead end. Modernity, as a process, is a *global* reality. Before 1945, it could be read as a Western threat. Ultimately, even then, it was an emergent global reality, transforming and intensifying as it evolved.

However, it seems to me that the possibility of a non-western modernization has been, simply put, *the question* for most Ottoman and Turkish intellectuals from roughly 1860 to the present. As I noted previously, different answers were given to this question. As one of the contending parties, namely the supporters of westernization *in toto*, emerged politically victorious with the foundation of the Turkish Republic and imposed their version of modernization as westernization (accompanied by Turkish nationalism) as a historical inevitability, the other group was left on the margins of nationalist historiography.

Although Beşir Fuad was crystal clear on his advocacy of a scientific worldview, he never attacked Islam directly. Whenever he wanted to criticize religion, he was careful to come up with an example from the history of Christianity in which the malevolent ideas and plans of the Christian clergy were resisted and bravely rejected by heroic philosophers and scientists. Thus, we read in one of his earlier articles that Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), one of his heroes, worked "in order to tear apart the veil of ignorance that the priests put in front of people's eyes."<sup>50</sup> Likewise, at the beginning of his work on Voltaire, he writes that it was a "party of rescuers" (*fırka-i münciye*) composed of "lovers of truth like Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Newton, Bacon, Descartes and Giordano Bruno," who resisted the prisons, torturers and executioners of the priests with their own "weapons of investigation, experiment and science".<sup>51</sup>

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49 See, for example, S.N. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," *Daedalus* 129, No.1 (2000): 3.

50 Beşir Fuad, "Tarih-i Felsefe'den bir Katre" ("A Drop from the History of Philosophy"), *Haber* No.1 (1883): 22-23.

51 Beşir Fuad, *Voltaire...*, 7-8.

In explaining the lack of direct opposition to Islam in Beşir Fuad's writings, Orhan Okay is basically right in arguing that "in the context of the Turkey of his age, we could not expect a direct anti-religious stance."<sup>52</sup> The point here is that Beşir Fuad was one of the first Ottoman authors to put forward science *as an intellectual paradigm opposed to religion*, and as such he was necessarily cautious about not appearing anti-Islamic in his writings. But even a cursory glance at his rather Manichean view of the history of science and philosophy in Europe, portraying it essentially as a struggle to the death against religious zealotry and eulogizing the "party of rescuers" of science and philosophy, makes it clear that he used Christianity as a stand-in for what he wanted to say about Islam.

This political caution was not necessary when it came to opposing romanticism and the "dreams" it created in literature as against what he believed to be "scientific" realism. His writings are much more open and direct on this subject. His general position on literature, as well as the lengthy polemics he pursued in support of literary realism against the dreams and images (*haya*) of romanticism will be the subject of the following part of this paper.

#### **IV: Beşir Fuad and Literary Realism**

When Beşir Fuad published his critical study of Victor Hugo in 1885, there was already an ongoing discussion in Ottoman literature between the supporters of the old Ottoman tradition of poetry, largely led by Muallim Naci (1850-1893),<sup>53</sup> who were mostly sympathetic towards European romantic literature, and others, more open to new ideas related to literary realism coming from Europe, led by Recaizade Mahmud Ekrem (1847-1914). Interestingly, though, Beşir Fuad's critical attitude towards Victor Hugo sparked negative reactions from both sides. There was a particularly nasty and long exchange of polemics between Beşir Fuad and Menemenlizade Mehmed Tahir.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Orhan Okay, *Beşir Fuad...*, 178.

<sup>53</sup>On Muallim Naci, see Abdullah Uçman, *Muallim Naci* (Istanbul: Toker Yayınları, 1974).

<sup>54</sup>On Menemenlizade Mehmed Tahir, see Necat Birinci, *Menemenlizade Mehmet Tabir: Hayatı ve Eserleri* (Ankara: Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı Yayınları, 1988).

Beşir Fuad sent a copy of his work on Victor Hugo for review to Menemenlizade Mehmed Tahir, with whom he had published the journal *Haver* (West) some time previously.<sup>55</sup> Mehmed Tahir responded by publishing a series of articles highly critical of the work in his new journal *Gayret* (Effort) from February to September 1886.<sup>56</sup> Beşir Fuad, in turn, published retaliatory articles in *Saadet* (Happiness) and *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* (Interpreter of Truth), and the tone on both sides became increasingly condescending and cynical. Other intellectuals, such as Muallim Naci, Ahmed Midhat Efendi and Namık Kemal (1840-1888), as well as an author using the pseudonym Ali (most probably Menemenlizade Mehmed Tahir himself), also contributed to the debate. The result was one of the most peculiar, not to say surreal, polemics in the history of Turkish literature.<sup>57</sup>

On the surface, the discussion seemed to revolve around the excessive use of literary modes of representation and figures of speech by romantic authors like Victor Hugo. The discussion began when Menemenlizade Mehmed Tahir argued that one should not analyze a poetic work as if it were a scientific one,<sup>58</sup> and that idealized figures such as Jean Valjean and Fantine of *Les Misérables*, who look a bit too perfect to exist in reality, were created by Victor Hugo mainly for didactic purposes. The pen of Victor Hugo, Mehmed Tahir argued, is similar to the moonlight, showing the silhouettes in a lofty and sublime (*ulvi*) manner, making them didactically relevant for the moral education of people, whereas Émile Zola's worked like the light of a candle, merely showing things as they are.<sup>59</sup> He added that artists and poets were as useful for humanity as scientists, since all of them worked for people's benefit and happiness.

It is interesting to note that the discussion from the very start was primarily concerned with what is useful and beneficial for people in general and for the moral education of people in particular.

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55Orhan Okay notes that *Haver* was closed because of intellectual disagreements between Beşir Fuad and Mememenlizade Mehmed Tahir: Orhan Okay, *Beşir Fuad...*, 51.

56These articles, as well as Beşir Fuad's responses to them, were recently republished in Beşir Fuad, *Şiir ve Hakikat*, Handan İnci (ed.) (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 1999), 161-286.

57I would like to thank Carter V. Findley, who kindly pointed out that this polemic was also reflected in the novels of Ahmed Midhat and Fatma Aliye, which directly refer to Zola and the meaning of realism. Findley discusses this point in his recent book *Turkey, Islam, Nationalism and Modernity: A History, 1789-2007* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 185. See also Carter Findley, "The Novel as Social Subversion: Ahmed Midhat and Fatma Aliye on Fantasy and Reality," unpublished manuscript.

58Menemenlizade Mehmed Tahir, "Biraderim Fuad Beyefendi," in Beşir Fuad, *Şiir ve Hakikat...*, 162.

59Beşir Fuad, *Şiir ve Hakikat...*, 168-169.

In his initial reply, Beşir Fuad argued that the exaggerated use of figures of speech by the Romantics stemmed from their inability to portray reality as it is,<sup>60</sup> and that even for didactic purposes, the unrealistic portrayal of characters and situations is not suitable in this age of progress corresponding to the “mature age” (*sinn-i rüşt*) of humanity.<sup>61</sup> These poetic dreams (*hayalat-ı şairane*) and their creators simply cannot be compared to science and scientists in terms of the actual benefit they provide for society.

After Menemenlizade Mehmed Tahir wrote another reply, the polemic quickly degenerated into a meaningless comparison between poetry and science. Beşir Fuad accused not only the contemporary romantics but also most of the old Ottoman poets of being ignoramuses, knowing nothing about the truth (*hakikat*) and writing exaggerated nonsense.<sup>62</sup> If the aim of novels is to purify the morality of people (*tasfiye-i ahlak*), as Menemenlizade Mehmed Tahir argues, claimed Beşir Fuad, then the novelists, instead of imagining perfect role models, should take their example from the science of hygiene (*hıfz-ı sıhha*), which examines the nature of the causes that lead to the loss of health in order to urge people to refrain from them, just as the realists do in their novels.<sup>63</sup>

Once again, the use of the language of medicine is striking. Both sides in the discussion seem content to frame the debate in a radically pragmatic manner, reducing an essentially literary discussion to a technical argument about the best way to “help” people achieve cultural and moral progress. The question of whether the works of earlier Ottoman poets may have literary value in their own right due to their literary qualities is not even raised. The sole concern is helping people to make “progress” as quickly as possible.

In his valuable study of nationalism, Gregory Jusdanis argues that nationalism is “born out of a theory of progress and that...a significant impulse for the emergence of nationalism has been the discovery by intellectual and political elites of the tardiness of their societies.

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60Ibid.,176.

61Ibid.,179.

62Ibid., 214-215.

63“Bu ilm bilakis muhill-i sıhhat olan esbabı ta'dad ve tefsir edip onlardan tevakkıyi tavsiye ediyor; işte realistler de tasfiye-i ahlak için bu usulü ittihaz ediyorlar.” Ibid., 229.

Nationalism therefore is in part a response to a condition of belatedness.<sup>64</sup> This sense of “belatedness” is likewise evident in the works of the Ottoman modernizers. Thinking that they were late entrants in the global game of nationalist modernization, they were often more than willing to suggest all sorts of social engineering projects as long as they thought that these contributed to their nation's progress. It is thus not surprising that Beşir Fuad would frame even a literary disagreement in terms of progress. He, of course, thought that such progress would be possible only if Ottoman intellectuals abandoned the “poetic dreams” of earlier Ottoman writers for the “truth,” defined as exclusively scientific.

In this light, some of the later, more radical “social engineering” projects of the early Turkish Republic become easier to understand. Perhaps one of the most significant of these was the shift from the modified Arabic alphabet used in the Ottoman Empire to Latin script in 1928. The arguments for such a change go back to the 1860s, when Münif Pasha and the Ottoman Scientific Society discussed the merits of changing the alphabet after the idea was suggested by the Iranian intellectual Mirza Fethali Akhundzadeh (1812-1878). The arguments supporting the change of alphabet throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century revolved around the twin ideas of the difficulty of teaching the Arabic alphabet to children and the better fit between the phonetic properties of the Turkish language and the Latin alphabet. Whatever the linguistic benefits of such a drastic measure may have been, there is no question that the change in 1928 also entailed an enormous cultural loss, effectively cutting the links between the new generations educated in the Republic and the vast literary output of Ottoman times.

However, as I have argued in this paper, beginning with the writings of Beşir Fuad, late Ottoman authors had already begun to argue against the “value” of this past literary heritage. And once they decided that it did not reflect the new overarching “truth” represented by science, and that it was not indispensable for the scientific and civilizational “progress” for which they yearned, it was only a matter of time before this past cultural output would be sacrificed on the altar of science, nationalism and progress.

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<sup>64</sup>Gregory Jusdanis, *The Necessary Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 7.

Nonetheless, Beşir Fuad's condemnations of Ottoman literature, as well as Romanticism, were not left unanswered. Namık Kemal, one of the most important Ottoman authors of the nineteenth century and a romantic himself, wrote a very harsh letter against Beşir Fuad, accusing him of being a literary dilettante "unable to read a couplet properly in Ottoman Turkish, yet attempting to accuse not only the best past poets of the Ottomans but also those of the French of ignorance."<sup>65</sup> Beşir Fuad wrote a weak response in which he referred to the ideas of Ludwig Büchner to justify his position on truth and literature; this was published just a few days before his suicide.<sup>66</sup> But it was already clear that the future of the Ottoman Empire would be shaped not by the culturally sophisticated opinions of the likes of Namık Kemal but by the "scientific" arguments of Beşir Fuad and his followers.

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<sup>65</sup> Namık Kemal, "Ebuzziya Tefik Bey Biraderime," *Mecmua-i Ebuzziya* No.52 (1887), in Beşir Fuad, *Şiir ve Hakikat...*,312.

<sup>66</sup>Beşir Fuad, "Yine Şiir ve Hakikat Meselesi," *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* No. 2592, 1 February 1887.