



## Section 5. Literary theory

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### FROM IMPRESSIONISM TO SOCIOLOGY: THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND DIVERSIFICATION OF LITERARY CRITICISM IN THE REPUBLICAN ERA

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#### Abstract

This article examines the transformation and diversification of literary criticism in Turkey during the Republican era (post-1923). It traces the evolution of critical thought from its initial struggles for legitimacy – debating its own purpose and nature – to its flowering into a complex and varied field of intellectual inquiry. The study analyzes the foundational debate on the nature of criticism between pioneers like Nurullah Ataç (who championed subjective, impressionistic criticism) and figures like Sabahattin Eyüboğlu and others who sought more objective, historical, or sociologically grounded approaches. It further explores how the socio-political climate shaped criticism, especially the rise of the National Literature movement, the ideological debates around “revolutionary literature,” and the subsequent emergence of distinct schools, including Marxist and academic criticism. By focusing on the period from 1923 to the 1950s and beyond, the article demonstrates how criticism evolved from a passionate but often polemical activity into a professionalized, multi-faceted discipline, essential for understanding and shaping the trajectory of modern Turkish literature.

**Keywords:** *Turkish Republican Literature, Literary Criticism, Nurullah Ataç, National Literature, Marxist Criticism, Westernization*

#### 1. Introduction

The proclamation of the Republic in 1923 inaugurated a period of radical and top-down modernization in Turkey. The new regime, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, aimed to break sharply with the Ottoman past and

build a secular, Western-oriented, and national identity (Berkes, 1978; Karpas, 2011). This mission was a central driver for the literature and, consequently, the literary criticism of the era. The nation was now a primary theme, with writers and critics tasked not

only with creating a new literature but also with defining its purpose, form, and scope (Enginün, 2007). This article will explore how these ideological and political shifts led to the professionalization and diversification of literary criticism in the Republican era, analyzing the major figures, schools, and debates that emerged (Tural, 2006).

In the early Republican period, there was a widespread perception that genuine, Western-style literary criticism was absent in Turkey. This “lack” became a major subject of debate (Gövsä, 1935). The problem was not that there were no critical voices, but rather that criticism was often informal, personal, and lacked a clear methodology (Ataç, 1932).

**Nurullah Ataç**, the most prominent critic of his time, claimed that Turkish writers could not practice true criticism; they could only offer praise (*takriz*) or insults (Ataç, 1991). He argued that this was because Turkish society had not yet undergone the necessary cultural transformation to appreciate and produce proper criticism. According to Ataç, the problem was a deep-seated one: a lack of familiarity with Western aesthetic sensibilities and a tradition of assessing work based on personal relationships rather than objective criteria (Ataç, 1939).

One of the most defining features of the Republican era was the intense debate between proponents of two different critical methods: subjective/impressionistic criticism and objective/scientific criticism (Tural, 2006).

### **2.1. Nurullah Ataç and Impressionism**

Ataç became the champion of impressionistic criticism. He argued that a critic is essentially an artist, and their primary function is to express their personal impressions and feelings about a work of art (Ataç, 1922). For Ataç, the critic cannot be objective; they are inherently subjective, and this is a strength, not a weakness. As he noted, a critic’s passion and personality are what make their writing compelling (Ataç, 1938a). He celebrated the idea that criticism is the “view of works and writers through a temperament.” He was not afraid to use his power as a critic to champion new artists, like the “Garip” movement led by Orhan Veli, and to challenge established literary figures. He saw the critic’s role not as

a scientist dissecting a text, but as a creative writer building an essay on the pleasures and challenges of reading (Ataç, 1953).

### **2.2. The Quest for Objectivity**

Opponents of the impressionistic school, including figures like Sabahattin Eyüboğlu, wanted to move beyond personal taste. Eyüboğlu, drawing on the French critic Hippolyte Taine, argued that a critic’s first duty is to understand the work, not just to feel it. “Understanding,” he wrote, “is not feeling, loving, liking, or being excited,” but “the work of reason, performed with cold-bloodedness, not with emotion” (Eyüboğlu, 1982, p. 29). For these writers, criticism was an intellectual act, and the critic must be a knowledgeable guide (Burian, 1936).

On one side were critics like Alaattin Gövsä, who complained that a “critical spirit” was missing (Gövsä, 1935), and Mehmet Kaplan, who demanded a more scholarly and informed approach. Kaplan argued that the lack of good criticism stemmed from an environment of passivity and a lack of intellectual courage (Kaplan, 1946). He insisted on three essentials for the development of criticism: familiarity with the subject, a sense of duty to judge works fairly, and intellectual freedom (Kaplan, 1948). This ongoing debate between the impressionist and the scientific or academic critics dominated the Turkish critical landscape for decades.

Criticism was never politically neutral. The Republican ideology profoundly shaped what was written and valued. The **National Literature** movement, which had begun in the final years of the empire, continued to exert a powerful influence (Ercilasun, 1995). Its principles included the simplification of the language, the adoption of the syllabic meter, and the exploration of themes related to Anatolia and the Turkish people. Critics like Ali Canip and Ziya Gökalp argued that a genuinely national literature was essential for the survival of the nation-state (Gökalp, 2018).

Later, with the rise of the **Köy Enstitüleri** (Village Institutes) in the 1940s and the increased influence of socialist ideas, a new branch of criticism emerged: Marxist and socialist realist criticism (Moran, 2002). Critics like Fethi Naci and Asım Bezirci analyzed literature through a class-based lens,

evaluating works by their representation of social reality, their critique of capitalism, and their advocacy for the oppressed peasantry and working class (Bezirci, 1983; Naci, 1986). They were highly critical of impressionistic criticism, like that of Ataç, which they saw as individualist and a-political (Bezirci, 2003). This led to bitter disputes and a politically charged atmosphere in the literary world. The debate wasn't just a matter of taste; it was a battle over the role of literature and the critic in the future of the country.

The development of universities and the professionalization of literary studies gave rise to a more formalized, academic tradition of criticism. While figures like Fuad Köprülü had been instrumental in establishing a historical and sociological methodology for studying literature (Köprülü, 1926), the new school of academic critics, led by figures like **Mehmet Kaplan**, pushed further.

Kaplan, in particular, argued for a rigorous, text-centered analysis that was more concerned with understanding the literary work on its own terms than with making moral or political judgments. He was influenced by Western literary theories, including the "New Criticism," and his work, such as his analysis of Yahya Kemal's poetry, was a departure from the polemical and personal style of critics like Ataç (Kaplan, 1949). He emphasized the inherent formal and aesthetic qualities of the work. Another key figure was **Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar**, who, as

a novelist and intellectual, also functioned as a sophisticated critic and literary historian. He was deeply concerned with the cultural dilemma of Turkey, caught between Eastern and Western traditions, and his critical essays often explored these broader cultural and historical pressures (Tanpınar, 1969; Dellaloğlu, 2013).

### Conclusion

The Republican era witnessed the full institutionalization and diversification of literary criticism in Turkey. It moved from being a passionate, often personal, and sometimes formless activity into a mature and complex discipline (Tural, 2006). The debates of this period were not just about the techniques of criticism but also about the very soul of the nation and its literature.

The struggle between impressionistic and objective criticism, the rise of a politically engaged Marxist criticism, and the development of a more detached, "scientific" academic criticism all contributed to a rich and contentious intellectual environment (Moran, 2012). Critics like Nurullah Ataç, Mehmet Kaplan, and Fethi Naci, despite their profound disagreements, collectively defined the parameters of modern Turkish literary criticism. In doing so, they helped shape the literature itself by guiding readers and challenging writers, thereby becoming central participants in the enduring project of defining the Republic's cultural identity (Hece Dergisi, 2003).

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