

**Evolving Bodies and Abject Imperialities:
Evolution, Body, and Selfhood
in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *A'mâk-ı Hayâl***

by

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Koç University

Graduate School of Social Sciences and Humanities

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*for all the wanderers with lost faces
and for our late classmates, whom I often remember*

ABSTRACT

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Ebru Esma Yağız

Master of Arts in Comparative Literature

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This thesis examines *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) by Lewis Carroll and *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* (1910) by Şehbenderzade Filibeli Ahmed Hilmi Bey in their engagements with evolutionary theory and constructions of narratives of self-transformation. Both these novels invite interpretations through the bildungsroman genre as they concern individuals' developments. However, their engagements with modern evolutionary thought complicate their representations of transformation and development. The first chapter contextualises *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* within the multiplicity of evolutionary ideas in Victorian England. In this text, transformations within the narrative and the body of the protagonist reflect the tensions between competing evolutionary models. In this light, this narrative works like a self-reflexive bildungsroman, questioning the concept of self-development. Moving on to *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, the second chapter examines its integration of Sufi mysticism with the modern evolutionary thought. The way this novel interprets evolution also shapes the text's formal structure by blending old narrative conventions with the novel form. In this light, this text serves as an Ottoman bildungsroman which blends multiple scientific perspectives and old and new literary conventions discussed in the late Ottoman context. The final chapter situates these texts within an inter-imperial comparative framework to examine the interplay between the themes of bodily instability and the encounter with the other. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, this section foregrounds how transforming bodies become sites of both estrangement and permeability in these narratives. This concludes by arguing that in these texts, evolutionary theme serves to represent blurring boundaries of the self in imperial encounters.

ÖZETÇE

Evrimleşen Bedenler ve Zelil İmparatorluklar:

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland ve *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* Romanlarında

Evrim, Beden ve Benlik

Ebru Esma Yağız

Karşılaştırmalı Edebiyat, Yüksek Lisans

Temmuz 2025

Bu tez çalışması, Lewis Carroll'un *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) romanı ile Şehbenderzade Filibeli Ahmet Hilmi Bey'in *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* (1910) romanının evrim teorisiyle etkileşimlerini ve benlik dönüşümü anlatılarını kurma biçimlerini inceler. Her iki roman da bireylerin gelişimlerini konu edinmeleri açısından bildungsroman türü ışığında değerlendirilmeye açıktır. Fakat bu anlatıların modern evrim düşüncesiyle kurduğu ilişkiler sundukları gelişim ve dönüşüm temsillerini karmaşıklştırır. İlk bölüm, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* romanını Viktorya dönemi evrim tartışmaları bağlamında konumlandırır. Bu anlatıdaki metinsel ve bedensel dönüşümler dönemin farklı evrimsel düşünceleri arasındaki tansiyonu yansıtır. Bu açıdan söz konusu anlatı, gelişim düşüncesini sorgulayarak kendi türü üzerine yorumlar yapan bir bildungsroman gibi ilerler. Odağını *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*'e çeviren ikinci bölüm ise bu anlatının tasavvuf felsefesini modern bilimsel söyleme entegre etme biçimini inceler. Bu açıdan, bu metin, geç Osmanlı bağlamında tartışılan çeşitli bilimsel perspektiflerle eski ve yeni edebi gelenekleri kaynaştıran bir Osmanlı bildungsromanı sunar. Tezin son bölümü, bedensel istikrarsızlık ve ötekiyle karşılaşma temaları arasındaki ilişkiye odaklanarak bu metinleri imparatorluklar arası bir karşılaştırmada bir araya getirir. Julia Kristeva'nın "abject" (zelil) kavramsallaştırmasından hareketle bu kısım bu metinlerde bedenlerin hem yabancılaşma hem akışkanlaşma alanı olduğuna dikkat çeker. Bu bölüm söz konusu metinlerdeki evrimsel temaların emperyal karşılaşmalarda benlik sınırlarının muğlaklaştığını temsil edecek şekillerde kullanıldığını iddia ederek sonlanır.

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This thesis explores the journeys of two characters who are utterly lost, hopeless, confused and who, despite all these, desperately strive for answers and resolutions. Just as the characters and narratives it explores, this thesis has many loose stitches, unclear or weakly explored bursts of desires, and rarely a self-confident, clear, and strong personality with an assured sense of direction. The writer of this thesis, just as the subjects of her inquiry, was utterly lost, hopeless and confused and, unlike those subjects, she was on the verge of total surrender.

I tried to develop *Evolving Bodies and Abject Imperialities* through the— well, yes, the worst years of my life. Putting this *abject* fact out there in this page, like an excuse begging for easy treatment, weights heavy on my shoulders because here we have a rhyme: When I graduated from collage two years ago around this time, I put a very similar note on the acknowledgements of my senior thesis: “To my surprise, the writing process of this thesis coincided with one of the hardest periods of my life...” Back then, by the time I finished my senior thesis, I immaturely thought that this milestone would mark the end of my troubles, that delivering the piece would give me a sense of direction and an identity. I thought that I can start my academic career, a long-held dream of mine, with my perfectly established and acknowledged, confident and assured self. To my surprise, it did not turn out to be the case. My MA years flew by like an endless fall, leaving me even more confused and less confident.

Struggling with mental health while still trying to build a life of your dreams is hard, as simple as that. It is no lie that neoliberal academy or overly capitalist world structure offers neither kindness nor meaningful help for people under my circumstances. But it is also no surprise that it is very common to encounter people such as myself in humanities departments of those neoliberal universities across the world, as we have a lot to say about the brutal ways this world is constructed. Desperate in our circumstances yet still hoping for an idyllic happy ending in academia, we strive for a resolution, just like Raci and Alice. I also know that these feelings are not uncommon among all the other sensitive souls of my age outside academia. *Teşbihte hata olmaz*, I think, our condition, quite mischievously resembles the 19th century where the inquiry of my project rests. The Romantic hero complex is about to be gone, and it has been a while since we started to question ourselves and our capabilities. However, we have not yet arrived at a modernist desperation, a total surrender from action. This is the 19th century: Many things are beyond our power, and yet we still believe there are things, one or two, that we might be able to do. This is why this thesis with many loose stitches is dedicated to those wanderers with lost faces: I think, if not in what lies ahead in these pages, those wanderers will

find nice company in Raci and Alice. That was my experience with them and although I am still far from resolution, it was nice spending the worst years of my life in their company. So, thanks *pek muhterem Raci Bey'ciğim* and *my dear Alice*! And of course, I owe many a thanks to all those who support me throughout my project and my harsh MA years:

I want to thank dear Ahmet Ergün, Yusuf Talha Bez, Beyza Kaya, and Ömer Rafi Çiçek for offering the kindest and the most inspiring academic support, manifested in the form of discussions, editorial input, and intellectual companionship. Your warmth was the most important driving force behind the completion of this project, folks!

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I thank dear Meliz Ergin and Benoît Ellerbach for guiding me kindly through my TAship, and everything they taught me about teaching. I want to thank Sooyong Kim and Yorgos Dedes for their guidance in my admission to the Cunda Ottoman Turkish Summer School, and *devletlû veladetlû* Selim Sırrı Kuru for his joyful classes. Special thanks to the officials of Ayvalık Öğretmenevi for their help during my stay in Cunda. I also thank dear Irmak Taştan Kaplan for her administrative support during the time I spent at Koç University. Surely, I must not forget to thank dear Kıymet Erzincan Kına for the time she took to give me an interview about her translation career and on her Turkish translations of the two *Alice* books.

Finally, I want to thank my brave and wounded instructors from the departments of Psychology and Western Languages and Literatures at Boğaziçi University for planting inspiration and hope in my heart. I missed the days I spent with you terribly and the candle you lit is almost done, but if I have found the courage to keep swimming, here and there, *your* memories were the guiding stars of my horizon.

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¹ All illustrations included in this thesis were generated using ChatGPT's image generation capabilities. These are not historical documents, but AI-generated visual representations created for illustrative and decorative purposes.

Introduction

I can very vividly remember the day I first heard about *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*. It was a couple weeks after we had covered fantastic literature for our *Language and Narrative* course in high school. Discovering this genre for the first time then, I was deeply moved by how it creates a sense of freedom by establishing utterly unfamiliar and fresh natural laws and social conventions. I was on the phone with an acquaintance, pouring over her with this spring of utter excitement, when she recommended me an old novel, she had recently discovered, titled *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*. She urged me to read it immediately, for it was “a fantasy of our own”, a sky that belongs to “us.”

Years later, when I was a psychology student at collage, one day, in a lecture on evolution and neuroscience, our instructor spread his arms wide open as if he wants to embrace us all with the ultimate truth he was to reveal and said: “This is not the world of God after all.” My heart raced, yet I felt cold, and I felt pretty much pushed aside. I can also very vividly remember the week I seriously started reading *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*. Because, by a timely coincidence, this event occurred sometime after that neuroscience class. Raci, the protagonist, was in the depths of one of his many dreams, when he witnessed how the bodies of the animals, that now are his “prison [cells],” take up “a thousand shapes” by “evolving,” in the span of “thousands of centuries that passed like a day” in his eyes. I read and read, my heart raced once again, and I found a fresh but this time a familiar sky.

Even before embarking on a serious research project as an aspiring researcher of literature, *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* became a locus where my expectations about literary genres, as a young reader, and my discomfort within scientific determinism, as a student of science, intersect. While my later training in literary studies has taught me to approach a claim like “a fantasy of our own” with caution (due to a range of factors from its reflection of a desire to make this narrative acceptable within a European framework or to the autocratic effort to define

a specific culture that belongs to “us”), my personal history with this novel informed this project significantly. The source of that “fresh yet familiar” emotion I felt was the evolutionary narrative that is blended into Sufi philosophy in the body of this novel.

Years later, when I revisited Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* books, some of my all-time favourites, as a double major student in English Literature, the unexpected commonalities they shared with *A’mâk-ı Hayâl* surprised me. Although these two narratives emerged from two distinct literary markets and contexts, they both concern existentially troubled protagonists who traverse strange realms in dreams while undergoing several bodily transformations. Furthermore, both texts make use of the image of an originary water body from which multiple forms and species arise. These thematic parallels became the foundation of the present project. Developing an inquiry built upon these parallels, this project examines *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *A’mâk-ı Hayâl* in their engagement with evolutionary theory. In this light, it addresses two main questions: How do *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *A’mâk-ı Hayâl* negotiate with the developing evolutionary theory in their respective contexts? And how does their engagement with evolutionary theory contribute to their questioning of selfhood?

There is a significant body of research that traces the interactions between literary pieces from the 19th century and the development of the modern evolutionary thought. The main interpretive strategy adopted by this foundational scholarship concerns detecting Darwinian influences in literary pieces. In that regard, the works of Gillian Beer, George Levine, and Joseph Carroll present significant examinations of the nineteenth-century literature through the lens of Darwinian thought. Gillian Beer’s foundational book *Darwin’s Plots* (1983) establishes this field by drawing attention to the interactions between the scientific language and literary language. In this book, Beer emphasises the two-way tide between the scientific and literary writing, and she approaches Charles Darwin not only as a scientist but also as a writer “telling

a new story.”² Through this focus, Beer showcases how Darwin’s own writing engaged with “inherited mythologies, discourses, and narrative orders” as he tried to “precipitate his theory as language.”³ Addressing the other side of this two-way tide, *Darwin’s Plots* also presents the foundations of addressing Darwinian “implications for narrative and for the composition of fiction.”⁴ In that light, this book analyses how George Eliot draws from Darwinian conception of “variation” or how Thomas Hardy reflects the conceptions of “[natural] and sexual selection” as they present “the social and psychological implications of Darwin’s theories.”⁵ George Levine’s *Darwin and the Novelists* (1988) furthers this latter aspect and elaborates Darwinian influence over literary writing. In that regard, *Darwin and the Novelists* analyses several works of realist fiction through a Darwinian lens, presenting how Darwin’s evolutionary theory engaged with “questions of particular urgency among the Victorians.”⁶ In this book, Levine discusses how literature reflected the implications of Darwinian theory through the themes such as the loss of divine design, interconnected social life, and non-linear narrative style. According to Levine, such aspects contain direct parallels to the way Darwin’s evolutionary thought assumes unforeseeable speciation processes and interspecies interconnectedness.⁷ These interpretive strategies extend into 2000s in the works of Joseph Carroll which systemise the field of Literary Darwinism. Rather than repeating the inquiries of Levine and Beer, Carroll’s approach does not only aim at detecting Darwinian tropes in literature. His work offers a meta-level engagement between evolutionary thought and the act of producing literature. In that regard, Carroll invites researchers to approach literature itself as a product of evolutionary unfolding. Through his “adaptationist methodology,” Carroll argues that literature can be

²Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, 5.

⁵ Ibid, 136 & 196.

⁶ George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction* (Chicago University Press, 1992), 2.

⁷ Ibid, 14-20.

understood as an adaptive evolutionary mechanism that evolved due to its enhancement of survival. In other words, Carroll's adaptationist approach requires us to read literature as a practice that serves as a coping advantage against the uncertainties of natural life.⁸ Accordingly applying this adaptationist method to literary analysis, Carroll proposes literary interpretations that emphasise social conventions which served as an adaptive capability in the struggle for survival.

This foundational literary scholarship stages the inevitable commonality scientific and literary spheres share in their dependence on language and culture, while also exploring the possibility of seeing scientific relevance in the construction of literature. However, despite constituting the basis for understanding literature through evolutionism, this line of research represents only a portion of the interaction between literature and evolutionary theory within the context of the 19th century. This mainly stems from the fact that this invaluable scholarship mainly assumes a Darwinian framework in its interpretations. This perspective approaches Charles Darwin as a figure of rupture, who irreversibly changed the way humanity engaged with natural world and its place within it. Moreover, their literary focus mainly invests in the realist fiction produced in Victorian England and does not provide an account of other cultural contexts and genres in their engagement with the development of evolutionary theory.

Recently, another line of scholarship started to challenge this central role attributed to Darwin and his evolutionary model by drawing upon Peter Bowler's book, *Non-Darwinian Revolution* (1988), which was published around the same time as the works of Beer and Levine. Researchers like Bernard Lightman, Cannon Schmitt, Bennett Zon, and Gowan Dawson reach consensus over the fact that, contrary to the typical assumption, Darwin did not cause a significant break in mid-nineteenth century.⁹ In fact, Darwin's theory was only one radical

⁸ Joseph Carroll, *Literary Darwinism : Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature* (Routledge, 2004), xi.

⁹ This line of research is the result of the efforts of a large number of scholars. Among the most notable pieces that shaped this field are the following: *Evolution and Victorian Culture*, ed. Bernard Lightman and Bennett Zon,

perspective among several other evolutionary models. This latter scholarly effort foregrounds this multiplicity of evolutionary models circulating in the nineteenth-century, which at times competed with and mostly overshadowed Darwin's formulations. According to Peter Bowler, most of these non-Darwinian models were continuations of the theologically inflected notion of the "great chain of being," which categorises species within a hierarchy of development.¹⁰ In contrast to Charles Darwin, who proposes a model where species evolve by chance independent of their degrees of maturation, these "developmental models of evolution" assume that species *improve* through evolutionary processes.¹¹ This assumption aligns with "the traditional separation between human beings and the rest of the nature," as it frames human species as the highest and the most developed form in the evolutionary chain.¹² According to this later line of scholarship, Lamarckian evolutionary ideas, that emphasise the role of intention in evolutionary transformation, and the recapitulation theory, that presents an analogy between species' evolution and embryonic development, can be named among some of these "developmental" evolutionary ideas circulating in Victorian England.

Acknowledging that Darwin's theory was not widely accepted but instead coexisted, competed, and even merged with other evolutionary models prevents us from interpreting literary engagements with evolutionary theory as mere representations of a Darwinian influence. This insight allows us to reveal negotiations and interactions among multiple evolutionary ideas within literary pieces. Such a focus not simply foregrounds the complex engagements with evolutionary thought itself, but it can also serve to complicate our understanding of the implications of evolutionary theory. For instance, within this framework, evolution does not only represent a breakdown in the superior role attributed to the human self

(Cambridge University Press, 2014) and "Forum: Victorian Evolutions," *Victorian Review* 41, no. 2 (2015): 9-48.

¹⁰ Peter J. Bowler, *The Non-Darwinian Revolution: Reinterpreting a Historical Myth* (John Hopkins University Press, 1988), 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹² *Ibid.*

in natural world, but it also becomes a locus where this superior position is negotiated and reformulated. Similarly, this thinking allows interpretations that go beyond refutations of prefixed design in natural world. Furthermore, moving beyond the British or European interactions with Darwinian model, this perspective enhances the acknowledgment of the non-European responses and alternatives to the modern evolutionary thought. This approach offers significant ground for understanding how both *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* engage with evolutionary thought and the existential anxieties of their age. Because while on the one hand heavily interacting with the themes of development and speciation, on the other hand, neither of these novels simply reflect a Darwinian influence. They rather confer with multiple evolutionary perspectives in their representations of development and transformation.

Both Lewis Carroll and Şehbenderzade Filibeli Ahmet Hilmi Bey, the authors of these texts, held academic positions when evolutionary theory was a highly debated topic among intellectual chambers. They themselves were also very much interested in the scientific discussions circulating around them. However, rather than being avid representatives of a clear-cut deterministic stance, their intellectual worlds were also shaped by the religious trainings they received. Furthermore, they shared an interest in the spiritualist movements of their age which aim to merge the spheres of science and spirituality. As much as they engage with the radical ideas of Charles Darwin, their interests in and interactions with the evolutionary theory were also shaped by their nuanced interests. In that regard, they both interacted with theologically compatible versions and interpretations of evolutionary theory. In other words, both *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* took shape at the heart of the scientific debates that question Darwinian evolutionary thought and its implications while not refuting the concept of evolution in its totality. In that regard, drawing from the insight of the established scholarship on the non-Darwinian evolutions, the present project aims to closely

examine these narratives to showcase their ways of negotiating with multiple evolutionary conceptions within their fictional worlds.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland was published in 1865, that is six years after the release of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and five years after the fabled Oxford evolution debate. The latter event, which took part in a series of meetings planned by British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1860, constitutes one of the hallmarks of the tension Charles Darwin's ideas posed against teleological accounts on human ancestry.¹³ Although the exact content of the discussions in these meetings is not sufficiently documented, the exchange between Thomas Henry Huxley and Samuel Wilberforce became the "legendary" highlight of this gathering.¹⁴ The two scholars combatted in a heated debate over the notion of descent from primates and the challenge it posed to "biblical accounts of creation."¹⁵ At the time, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (or as we know him Lewis Carroll), have been serving as a lecturer of mathematics at Oxford's Christ Church for at least four years. Although it is unknown whether Dodgson himself was an audience member at this debate, he was a keen follower of this intellectual environment. According to Charlie Lovett's documentation of Dodgson's archive, the author of *Alice* had a rich range of books on natural science in his private library and at least eight of these books were about evolutionary thought.¹⁶ These books covered a range of evolutionary interpretations including the ones that negotiate the modern theory with Biblical accounts, alongside works on spiritual theories about evolution, books explaining the perspectives of more deterministic supporters of modern evolution, and complete refutations to Charles Darwin. Moreover, later in his life, Dodgson became a member of the Society for Psychical Research, a spiritualist organisation which is associated with occultist tendencies of

¹³ James C. Ungureanu. "A Yankee at Oxford : John William Draper at the British Association for the Advancement of Science at Oxford, 30 June 1860," *Notes and Records*, no.70 (2015), 135-136.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Charlie Lovett. *Lewis Carroll Among His Books: A Descriptive Catalogue of the Private Library of Charles L. Dodgson*. (McFarland and Company, 2005).

the time. Such groups were characterised by their aim at bridging the domains of spirituality and science by trying to find scientific proof for spiritual phenomena. Although Dodgson never explicitly addressed evolutionary questions in his work, neither academic nor fiction, he was arguably interested in the variety of scientific knowledge available at his time. Furthermore, when his interest in psychic groups alongside the diversity in his library is considered, we can assume that his intellectual world on science was an amalgamation of manifold streams. When we approach *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in light of these insight, we can see that it can be approached as a fertile stage where encounters between various approaches to science and evolution play out.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, narrates the story of a little Victorian girl, who following a rabbit, falls through a hole, finds herself trapped in a room and then plunges into a pool of tears from which several animals arose. These initial instances that posit a reader's entry into Wonderland alongside Alice's, evoke womb and reverse birth analogies while also gesturing at evolutionary themes. In that regard, Alice's entry into Wonderland lends itself naturally to be associated with recapitulation theories which propose the idea that interspecies transformations that took part across millions of years are reenacted in the womb. In this light, we can detect a travel back in personal history which also stands for the evolutionary history in the early sections of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. However, the existent evolutionary interpretations of *Alice* mainly parallel the trends in the established scholarship on the interactions between modern evolutionary thought and literature: These studies mostly adopt a Darwinian lens and draw analogies between the chaotic nature of Wonderland and the notion of natural selection, which foresees an unpredictable (and thus chaotic) unfolding in evolutionary processes. While these interpretations reveal the significant parallels this narrative has with Darwinian conceptions, they often overlook the other crucial aspect that shape its plot: Although the chaotic nature of Wonderland constitutes one main dimension of this novel, the

way Alice devoutly resists this chaos through her consistent attempts at restoring order establishes the other foundational element of this narrative. In fact, the way Alice frequently imposes direction and meaning to her journey and strives to gain control over her progression and transformations within the narrative shapes the way the whole text unfolds. In that sense, this narrative does not only align with the chaotic implications of Darwinian thought, but it also reflects teleological stances resisting to and alternating it. This dynamic calls for an interpretation that approach *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as a ground playing out the tensions between multiple evolutionary perspectives.

When we turn to the Ottoman context, we can see that the scholarship on the Ottoman engagements with evolutionary theory in literary pieces is very much a field in development. However, the established literature on late Ottoman scientific debates and their implications on literary field provide a meaningful framework for the inquiries of the present project. Within the existing scholarship on history of positivism in Ottoman Empire, particularly Şükrü Hanioglu's oeuvre offers invaluable insight about the role science played in late Ottoman intellectual world. In these works that foreground "positivist" intellectuals, Hanioglu also lays out their discursive attempts at formulating a scientifically accurate literary language.¹⁷ Hanioglu's research focuses on intellectuals like Abdullah Cevdet, Beşir Fuat and Baha Tevfik in their approach to science through a tension between "old" and "new." This binary that is rooted in the modernisation process of Ottoman Empire, refers to a contrast between what late Ottoman intellectuals deem as obstacles to progress and what they think is necessary for the survival of the Ottoman state against the European rise to power. Within the interpretation of these "positivist" intellectuals Hanioglu studies, these discussions between the old and the new gain further meanings through a tension between science and religion. In that light, "old" refers

¹⁷ Şükrü Hanioglu. "Blueprints of a Future Society: Late Ottoman Materialists on Science, Religion and Art." In *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy*, ed. by Elizabeth Özdalga (Routledge, 2005).

to the tendency of valuing religion as the source of truth over science. Accordingly, their conception of the “new” carries a reliance on science and reason. Furthering their worldview into the field of literature, these Ottoman positivists frame literary production that deal with dreams and visions in “older” literary forms as “psychological” pitfalls that hinder progress.¹⁸ In parallel, they argue that the modern literary forms and styles deal with reality through a “naturalist” lens, claiming that such a literary field can serve as tools for initiating the necessary transformations that will make Ottoman existence and progress possible.¹⁹

Although this line of research constitutes the foundation of Ottoman history of positivism, it mainly adopts the binary opposition introduced by the Ottoman positivist perspectives it studies. This adoption hinders our interpretation by highlighting an ossified binary between positivist intellectual chambers and reactionary Islamicist circles in late Ottoman context. Accordingly, the literary scholarship shows a tendency to analyse literature of the period through a dichotomy between mysticism and realism. This assumption often creates judgements based on the degree to which a text function like “a real novel” that is defined through particular Eurocentric conceptualisations such positivist circles adopt. However, lately with the research of scholars like Şeyma Afacan and Alper Bilgili, this binary approach starts to shift in the field of history. By introducing figures like İsmail Fenni Ertuğrul and Şehbenderzade Filibeli Ahmet Hilmi to these discussions, this later line of research, make grey shades available in the binary established between materialist and religious poles that dominated late Ottoman Studies for a long time. In that regard, the way Ahmet Hilmi constructs negotiations with modern evolutionary thought and Islamic mysticism in *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* constitutes a fertile ground for furthering these later insights into the field of literature.

¹⁸ Ibid, 73.

¹⁹ Ibid, 91.

Ahmet Hilmi started to serialise *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* in a newspaper titled *Necat* (*Salvation*) during the summer of 1909.²⁰ When this newspaper ceased its publication before the novel was completed, he continued to serialise further chapters as additional forms to *Hikmet* (*Wisdom*), a newspaper he founded himself.²¹ By 1910, existing ten chapters of the piece was compiled into a single volume and published with the subtitle *Birinci Kitap: Raci'nin Hatıraları* (*First Book: Raci's Memories*).²² Just as is the case in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* was the product of a time of heated scientific debate. It was published two years after the constitutional revolution of 1908, which resulted in the overthrow of the autocratic Islamist regime of Abdülhamid II. Following the downfall of the Islamicist regime of the Sultan, this period, known as the Second Constitutional Era, was marked by an atmosphere of freedom for previously repressed ideas and ideologies. Furthermore, there was significant relationships among the positivist chambers in late Ottoman contexts and the revolutionaries who initiated the dethroning of Abdülhamid II. Therefore, these political developments directly served the liberation of positivist intellectuals and allowed the debates between religion and science to be more openly and passionately held.²³ Ahmet Hilmi, himself had significant associations with these revolutionary groups and by the time the Second Constitution was declared, he was on an exile due his engagements with them. Therefore, the overthrow of the Sultan's regime, also allowed Ahmet Hilmi's return to Istanbul and secured him a lectorship of philosophy at Darülfünun at the time.²⁴

²⁰ Mustafa Aksu. "Sunuş" In *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, Ketebe, 2018, 5-6; Fatih Altuğ. "*A'mâk-ı Hayâl*'e Dalmak," In *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, Turkuvaaz Kitap, 2019, 9.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Şükrü Hanioglu. "Garbçılar: Their attitudes toward religion and their impact on the official ideology of the Turkish Republic." *Studia Islamica* 86 (1997); Pelin Aslan Ayar. *Türkçe Edebiyatta Varla Yok Arası Bir Tür: Fantastik Roman* (1876 – 1960). (İletişim, 2018).

²⁴ Amit Bein. "A 'Young Turk' Islamic Intellectual: Filibeli Ahmet Hilmi and the Diverse Intellectual Legacies of the Late Ottoman Empire." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, no. 39 (2007).

Being at the heart of the modern intellectual centre of the Ottoman Empire, Ahmet Hilmi was deeply engaged with the intellectual debates of his time. He wrote extensively on various philosophical frameworks which he thinks young people should interact with, and he gave conferences on related topics. Ahmet Hilmi's interest and commentaries reached across diverse fields, ranging from the ideas of Herbert Spencer to Charles Darwin. Despite being deeply engaged with these discussions, his oeuvre was particularly characterised by a critique towards materialism. However, rather than being a figure strictly positioned in either a determinist or a devout camp, Ahmet Hilmi's intellectual attempts showed a tendency of building an alternative perspective bridging the fields of religion and science. In that regard, his "formulation of "the soul" served as an ideal intermediary element within this framework.²⁵ Informed by this formulation, Ahmet Hilmi wrote one of the first textbooks of psychology written in Ottoman Turkish, where he interpreted the concept of the soul as a transitional element between science and religious and spiritual views.²⁶ In short, *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, published between 1909 and 1912 through serialisation, was a natural witness to the intellectual negotiations embedded upon the atmosphere of the Second Constitutional Era. Not unlike *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, this text reflected the clash between alternating scientific views, and it also served Ahmet Hilmi's attempts at creating a melting pot for old and new modes of making sense of the natural world.

A'mâk-ı Hayâl narrates the story of a young Ottoman intellectual who feels caught up between positivist and religious worldviews of his time. The novel presents complex engagements not only with spiritualism and Ahmet Hilmi's key concept of the soul, but it occasionally alludes to contemporaneous scientific fields like astronomy and evolutionary theory. Throughout the text, we follow the journey the protagonist Raci takes as he develops a spiritual position that will resolve the tension he suffers. This journey unfolds through a series

²⁵ Şeyma Afacan. *Of the Soul and Emotions: Conceptualizing 'the Ottoman Individual' through Psychology*. (University of Oxford, PhD Thesis, 2016), 141.

²⁶ Ibid.

of dreams guided by a strange dervish-like figure called Aynalı Baba (Mirror Baba). Although Islamic mysticism constitutes the strongest current that feeds into the intellectual horizon of *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, the text significantly refers to a wide range of philosophical and spiritual cultures which particularly includes Hinduism, Buddhism, Platonism, Confucianism, and Zoroastrianism. Through Raci's dreams, the narrative presents a search for truth drawing on all these philosophies through the themes like bodily limits, the path to happiness, and the nature of existence. Within this framework, Raci's third dream constitutes the anchor of the present project as it intersects with the evolutionary theory. In this dream, a spiritual ritual allows Raci to bear witness to the evolutionary transformations across thousands of years by experiencing them in his own body. This episode provides an evolutionary interpretation that blends Sufi configurations about the creation of natural world with the language of modern evolutionary thought.

This blended evolutionary interpretation lends itself naturally to an engagement with Gillian Beer's emphasis on the interactions between scientific and literary language, as well as with the later scholarship that explore non-Darwinian evolutionary models. This narrative reflects an intersection between modern evolutionary discourse and the earlier conceptions on the descent of species in the Islamic world. As Raci experiences evolution in his own body through a spiritual ritual marked by Indic traditions and Sufism, the narrative simultaneously adopts the language of modern evolutionary thought. It emphasises a conception of evolutionary time that stretches over millions of years and reflects a conception of "struggle" for survival in the natural world. Furthermore, it acknowledges a non-linear speciation process, highlighting the themes of extinction and elimination of certain characteristics. However, *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* places this modern language of science within a religious and spiritual conception of descent. In that light, Raci narrates a cyclical speciation process where each species is a manifestation of the divine, a stage in gradual maturation towards the best of

manifestations in human form. This engagement with evolutionary theory serves as a complex case where modern scientific language interacts deeply with the local literary culture available. Tracing this intertwined conception contributes to the dissolution of the binary thinking in Ottoman history of science. The way *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* presents an interaction between modern scientific language and old literary conventions requires us to understand Ottoman interactions with modern scientific thought not only as a matter of a European influence but also as a matter of cultural assimilation. In *The Ottoman Canon*, where he studies the development of the conception of Ottoman Turkish literature in the late Ottoman context, C. Ceyhun Arslan claims that “moving beyond what [he] calls the ‘influence paradigm’” is a requirement in Ottoman Studies.²⁷ While Arslan mainly questions the gesture of tracing Arabic or Persian influence in Ottoman literature, his insight can also inform our understanding of Ottoman engagement with modern scientific thought. In that light, highlighting the way *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* engages with evolution by “moving beyond the influence paradigm” reveals that evolutionary theory was not simply received from the European world, but it was also actively reworked and reimagined in the Ottoman context.

A'mâk-ı Hayâl and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* provide narratives fruitful to be analysed in light of the modern evolutionary thought. These pieces, which witnessed the development and the spread of this theory, reflect the distinct cultural responses their respective intellectual environments produced in their engagements with evolutionary thought. In both pieces we encounter characters who go through significant bodily transformations which affect their senses of self-perception. These bodily transformations provide significant grounds where we can observe analogies to the modern evolutionary thought's implications of transformative nature in the development of the species. The way the theme of corporeal transmutation in both

²⁷C. Ceyhun Arslan, “Introduction: Beyond the Influence Paradigm” In *The Ottoman Canon and the Construction of Arabic and Turkish Literatures*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2024), 2.

narratives directly influences the protagonists' questions of selfhood builds strong connections between the theme of self-development and evolutionary processes that produce human species. In that regard, both texts narrate journeys of self-development as their protagonists' attempt to rebuild a sense of self.

The dependency of selfhood upon these unstable bodies constitutes the locus of both texts' engagement with evolutionary thought. The directionality and form of the bodily transformations in these texts reflect the implications of evolutionary discussions in their respective contexts of the late Ottoman and Victorian Empires. In that regard, the contrast between the chaos of Wonderland and Alice's strive for order reflects the tension between teleological and non-teleological evolutionary ideas in Victorian discussions. While the teleological evolutionary views preserve the superior role attributed to the human species in natural world, the non-teleological perspectives (such as Darwin's) frame human as equals of any other species, or as an animal which managed to be dominant by chance. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* similarly stages the oscillations within Alice's sense of self through the tides of predictability and control. Within this framework, the narrative formulates Alice's selfhood through a dependency on her ability to teleologically foresee and direct her bodily transformations and her progression in Wonderland. In other words, as the narrative complicates Alice's selfhood through questioning her ability to predict and control, it also reflects confusions regarding the place of human self in the evolutionary course of history.

Similarly, *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* instrumentalises Raci's bodily transformations and narrative development to establish an evolutionary interpretation that complicates humans' place within the natural world. This narrative manages this through a blend of religious and scientific discourses. By feeding the Islamic narrative conventions expressing the descent of species with the language of modern science, this novel aims to frame evolution as a law of the divine. Within this perspective informed by the Sufi conception of the unity of being, each species

becomes a partial corporeal manifestation of God's essence. These species mature through gradual developments which build up to create the ultimate form of human, which stands as the most perfect manifestation of God. This conception interprets each species as a unique manifestation in and on themselves through an Islamic subtext. However, by adopting the evolutionary language, it also frames these species as historical/past versions of the ultimate human self. Within this context, although humans represent the ultimate end goal of evolutionary maturation, they bear kinship with all other species while also sharing the divine essence they carry. This framework stages a developmental narrative that both sublimates and expands Raci's sense of self, who experiences these transformations within his own body. Therefore, this narration aims to establish a conception of human self that goes beyond a deterministic reduction. In contrast to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* where the way the narrative adopts evolutionary themes serve to reflect questions regarding human selfhood, the evolutionary conception that *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* produces aims to restore a sense of identity within the intellectual debates in the late Ottoman Empire.

It is safe to claim that both these novels build direct analogies between their engagements with the evolutionary thought and the narratives of self-development. In both pieces, the question of selfhood parallels the question of evolution and makes each text the verbal counterpart of the protagonists' corporeal experiences. In other words, as the evolutionary theme reflects the evolution in the content, the formal structures of these pieces parallel these transformations in the narrative development. Therefore, both pieces serve as the verbal counterparts of the protagonist's bodies. This dependency between the physical transformations, sense of self, and narrative structure puts these texts within the framework of *bildungsroman*.

In *Modernist Life Histories*, Daniel Newman draws attention to the interaction between biological conceptions on development and the *bildungsroman* genre, which concerns the

development of a literary character. Newman highlights that, due to their dependence on the concept of development, bildungsromans mostly parallel protagonists' the bodily transformations.²⁸ In this regard, we can claim that *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* offers engagements and commentary on the bildungsroman, through their engagement with a biological theory concerning species development. However, the fact that these text present complex engagements with evolutionary thought through the narrative development of the characters prevents us from naming them as sample bildungsromans. Rather, their interrogation with evolutionary thought serves to create deviant bildungsroman formulations. The first part of the present project, titled "Evolving Bodies," aims to examine these novels individually in their interaction with evolutionary thought and the bildungsroman genre. In that regard, it presents *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as a self-reflexive bildungsroman. In other words, it suggests that by presenting the tension between different evolutionary thoughts' implications on the role of human self in the natural world, this novel presents a narrative questioning the nature of self-development. Similarly, this first half frames *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* as an Ottoman formulation of bildungsroman. In that regard, it interprets the blend of Islamicist and Positivist perspectives this narrative offer as an attempt to reformulate literary form by drawing from both old and new literary conventions.

In these narratives, evolutionary-inflected bodily transformations enable the constructions of complicated developmental journeys. Within this framework the travel plot serves to further complicate the construction of the self in both texts. Evolutionary transformations alienate the protagonists from their own bodies in both pieces. These instances of self-estrangement cause these characters to express a struggle in distinguishing themselves from the others they encounter in their travels. This thematic emphasis that connects

²⁸ Daniel Aureliano Newman, *Modernist Life Histories: Biological Theory and the Experimental Bildungsroman* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), viii.

evolutionary transformation to self-alienation in the face of the other charges these evolutionary transformations with a relational quality. In that regard, these texts where the question of selfhood affiliates with the travel through the realm of the other, allows both pieces to be interpreted within their broader imperial contexts.

The existing scholarship on the intersections between evolutionary thought and imperial structures masterfully highlights the parallels between the rise of modern scientific thinking and the ideological justification of imperial expansion.²⁹ Mostly shaped by the emphasis on eugenics or anthropology, this scholarship draws attention to the ways evolutionary theory was used to create associations between colonized peoples and "primitive" developmental stages in the evolutionary chain.³⁰ They also showcase the paralleling conceptions that attribute a more advanced and civilised biological position to profiles of imperial oppressors.³¹ This line of research highlights the parallels between these associations and the imperial projects that claim a mission of spreading civilisation through colonial rules. However, the relational treatment of evolution in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* provides a more complicated dynamic. In these narratives, the binaries between the imperial traveller and the imperial subject gets ambiguous by wounding the protagonists' taxonomical muscles through self-alienation.

In these novels, evolutionary transformations serve to establish kinship among species and distant others by linking them through a common evolutionary past. This kinship allows both texts to discuss identity ambiguities through encounters. In *Human Evolution and Fantastic Victorian Fiction*, Anne Neill claims that the existing scholarship remains insufficient

²⁹ Martin E. Thomas. "Anthropology and The British Empire." In *The Routledge of History of Western Empires*, ed. By Robert Alderich and Kristen McKenzie (Routledge, 2014), 255.

³⁰ Kathy Alexis Psomiades. "Anthropology and Classical Evolutionism." In *The Routledge Companion to Victorian Literature*, ed. by Dennis Danisoff and Talia Schaffer (Routledge, 2020), 389; Philippa Levine. "Anthropology, Colonialism, and Eugenics." In *The Oxford Handbook of The History of Eugenics*, ed. By Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine (Oxford University Press, 2010), 43-45.

³¹ Ibid.

to reveal evolutionary representations that feed on these nuances. In that regard, Neill's book draws attention to the narratives that complicate the binary oppositions between the "primitive" and the "civilised."³² Putting special emphasis on the narratives where characters travel backward through the evolutionary history in this book, Neill frames these narrations as challenges to the established evolutionary and imperial hierarchies.³³ Both *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* align with Neill's framework. These novels offer a productive ground for an inter-imperial comparison by which we can examine how these two literary texts from two imperial powers of the nineteenth-century complicate the narratives of imperial encounter through their distinct engagements with evolutionary thought.

The inter-imperial comparative framework, established by Laura Doyle in 2010s, examines how imperial models and their language regimes interact with each other and respond to similar political or cultural dynamics. This framework investigates the structures of domination through a variety of contexts by prioritising the inclusion of studies on the "non-Anglo-European" imperial powers.³⁴ Within this frame, especially studies that apply the inter-imperial model within the dynamics of nineteenth century also serve to theorise multiple versions of modernism by showcasing how different empires reacted to contemporaneous intellectual and cultural trends. In this light, the present project which configures the engagements with evolutionary theory in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* offers an inter-imperial contribution to the studies on the science-literature interactions in British and Ottoman empires. Furthermore, the way these narratives use evolutionary theory to trigger bodily fluidity and evoke intimacy with others presents a contribution to the inter-imperial scholarship. In that regard, the present project draws attention to phenomenological

³² Anne Neill. *Human Evolution and Fantastic Victorian Fiction* (Routledge, 2011), 6.

³³ Ibid, 7.

³⁴ Laura Doyle, "Inter-imperiality: Dialectics in a Postcolonial World History," *Interventions* 16, no. 2 (2014): 162.

and affective entanglements within arguably imperial narratives to detect the nuanced forms of imperial experience they present.

Within this framework, the second part of the present study, titled “Abject Imperialities,” presents an inter-imperial comparison between *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *A’mâk-ı Hayâl*. This section explores how evolution triggers bodily fluidity and how this liquification complicates notions of selfhood upon the encounter with the other in each text. In this light, this section adopts Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection to foreground the ways by which unstable bodies dissolve distinctions between the self and the other. Accordingly, “Abject Imperialities” interprets the alternative responses these texts produce to abjection to contextualise this abject experience whereby the boundaries of self and the other is blurred within the contexts of Ottoman and British empires. Within this framework, this project claims that Alice’s bodily instability highlights a symptomatic desire to differentiate from the inhabitants of Wonderland by evoking unease through embodying a tension between control and chaos. Conversely, it studies *A’mâk-ı Hayâl* as it represents Raci’s bodily instability through a calm surrender in the face of the fading boundaries to develop a resolution through spiritual sublimation.

PART I:
EVOLVING BODIES



Chapter I

Patchwork Evolutions in Wonderland:

The Blend of Recapitulation, Lamarckism and Darwinism in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Almost two centuries after its publication in 1865, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* continues being an all-time favourite children's novel which masterfully expresses the chaos and confusion of being a child. Alice's story provides us a travel back into childhood to reveal the inexplicable social conventions and mannerisms of an utterly unfamiliar and strange world. Within this framework, this novel also presents a tension between striving towards a goal while constantly confronting the unforeseeable unfolding of events. While Alice's constant desire to progress in the story and the unexpected obstacles she encounters along the way offer a deep engagement with the experience of childhood, these elements also reflect several tensions and discussions in Victorian Britain. As much as her adventure serves as a reflection of a child's confusion in response to Victorian mannerisms, this text also provides accounts of Victorian anxieties about the place of human self in the natural world. In that regard, with its narrative that situates the figure of a child within a natural (yet uniquely civilised) world, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* offers a panorama of evolutionary debates circulating in Victorian society.

Within the field of Victorian studies, the interactions between evolutionary theory and the literary narratives constitutes a well-established branch of research. This invaluable scholarship mainly adopts an interpretive strategy that looks for Darwinian influence within literary pieces. In that regard, this thinking frames Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* as the singular source of the evolutionary thought that revolutionised the age. Gillian Beer's book titled *Darwin's Plots* (1983) constitutes the most significant foundational source of this line of research. In this study, Beer approaches Charles Darwin in terms of his authorship and she

attempts to analyse his writing in relation to existing literary conventions in British culture. Furthermore, Beer also provides Darwinian readings of Victorian authors like George Eliot and Thomas Hardy in this book. Following this latter interpretive strategy, George Levine's *Darwin and the Novelists* (1988) constitutes another foundational source presenting literary analyses in light of Darwinian conceptions. In this book, Levine observes the way Darwinian themes of variation, natural selection and sexual selection influenced the work of Victorian novelists. Turning this field into a defined branch of scholarship under the title of Literary Darwinism, Joseph Carroll stands as the researcher who extend the foundational literature on analysing literary culture through evolutionary theory. Furthering the contributions of Levine and Beer, Carroll's studies also invite interpretations that reveal the ways literary culture served as an evolutionary adaptive strategy that enhanced survival.

These foundational studies on literature and evolutionary theory mainly adopt a Darwinian perspective due to the assumption of "Darwinian Revolution." This notion suggests that Charles Darwin irreversibly shaken and radically changed the Victorian intellectual sphere by publishing *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. Although this perspective rightfully highlights the level of radicality Darwin's theory proposed within the Victorian culture, this overemphasis on Darwinian evolution overshadows Britain's actual experience with the development of the modern evolutionary thought within the nineteenth-century. In that regard, another line of research highlights the existence of a more complex landscape of evolutionary ideas within this context. Although most of the existing evolutionary analyses of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* present meaningful Darwinian interpretations, the novel's anxious relationship with teleology offers fertile ground for observing the blend and clash of different ideas regarding evolution in Victorian Britain. This chapter examines *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* within this broader evolutionary context, moving beyond a strictly Darwinian interpretation. By showcasing Alice's transformations as a blend of directed adaptation and

random change, this chapter showcases how this novel reflects the tensions within 19th-century evolutionary thought, revealing a world where progression and the unpredictable unfolding exist in constant tension.

An overdependence on the premise of "Darwinian revolution" often serves to highlight the radical contrast Darwin's ideas proposed against the Victorian religious values. This conception draws attention to the non-teleological, non-progressive trajectory of speciation Darwin offers through the concept of "natural selection" which significantly deviates from a theological conception of species as predetermined categories. While Darwin's ideas, indeed, posed a threat to such established values, the assumption that Darwin radically influenced the Victorian Age presumes the immediate acceptance of his ideas by the Victorian intelligentsia and society. Addressing this presumption in *The Non-Darwinian Revolution* (1988), Peter Bowler notes that *Origin* was not "a major cultural revolution" even in the eyes of "the [Victorian] scientists".³⁵ According to Bowler, when Darwin published *Origin* in mid-nineteenth century, his ideas entered an already diverse and rich landscape of evolutionary thought. In this landscape, Lamarck's ideas emphasising species' willing contribution to their adaptation to the surroundings and the recapitulation theories that approach embryonic development as a reenactment of species' development had already been established since the start of the century. Although these alternative evolutionary theories had aspects that were compatible with Darwin's ideas, it was the non-teleological framework offered through the concept of natural selection that significantly differentiated Darwin's contribution from these pre-existing views. Bowler argues that "the story of 19th-century evolutionism" was, in fact, mainly framed by "the developmental' model[s]" of evolution, which stressed "the orderly, goal-directed, and progressive character of evolution".³⁶ Therefore, although the established

³⁵ Peter J. Bowler, *The Non-Darwinian Revolution: Reinterpreting a Historical Myth* (John Hopkins University Press, 1988), 4.

³⁶ Ibid, 5.

scholarship on the literature-evolution interactions attribute an Darwinian influence in the abandonment of teleological narratives in some Victorian literary pieces, this line of research foregrounds the inescapable presence of teleological narratives of evolutionary thought within the same context.

Despite the sharp contrast Darwinian evolution posed to the more “developmental” conceptions of evolution which emphasised progress and improvement in speciation, Victorian reception and representation of Darwin’s theory was not strictly distinguished from these ideas. In fact, within the intellectual discussions, Darwin’s thought was significantly intertwined with the alternative evolutionary views in circulation. In some cases, this was due to a willing attempt at reconciling Darwin’s ideas with teleology, while in some others the teleological interpretation of Darwin’s ideas stemmed from the established dominance of teleological language. In an article discussing Darwin’s reception among Victorian intellectuals, Cannon Schmitt showed that there were various attempts of reconciling Darwin’s non-teleological trajectory with a sense of directionality and progress.³⁷ Similarly, in an article on the populizers of Darwinian evolution, Lightman underscored that Darwin’s supporters who contributed to popularising his arguments, could not help but blended Darwinian evolution with the progressive evolutionary understandings of Lamarck and Spencer.³⁸ All these later studies showed that rather than causing a revolution, Darwin’s evolutionary conceptions merely entered and blended into an intellectual environment already engaged with “goal-directed” evolutionary frameworks that often assumed a sense of “progress[ion]”.³⁹ According to Dowson, the disproportionate focus on the notion of Darwinian revolution in literary analysis ignored this plurality of views within the Victorian era and it caused the development of “misconstrue[d] evolutionary meanings in

³⁷ Cannon Schmitt, “Evolution and Victorian Fiction.” In *Evolution and Victorian Culture*, ed. Bernard Lightman and Bennett Zon (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

³⁸ Bernard Lightman, “Darwin and The Popularization of Evolution,” *Notes and Records of the Royal Society* 64, (2009): 5-24.

³⁹ Bowler, *The Non-Darwinian Revolution*, 6.

Victorian fiction”⁴⁰. This chapter aims to address this blended evolutionary landscape in Victorian literature by analysing *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* through the lens of recapitulation, Lamarckism and Darwinism. Such an endeavour shows that this novel reflects the tension among these competing views through the contrast between the chaotic nature of Wonderland and Alice’s attempts at constructing a teleological progression within this strange land.

There is a well-established scholarship on evolutionary themes in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Alongside Anne Neill’s application of evolutionary psychology and Piaget’s developmental theory⁴¹ and Miriam Hanna’s analysis of Wonderland’s evolutionary landscape within the context of Animal Studies⁴², several studies approach this novel in light of the 19th century evolutionary thought. Among such key contributions are a book chapter by Jessica Straley alongside a master thesis by Michelle Smit. Paralleling the broader trends in literary studies which trace the evolutionary thought in literature, these existing evolutionary analyses of *Alice* predominantly use a Darwinian framework. While these works offer valuable insights about the themes of survival and natural selection within this novel, a closer re-evaluation reveals that this scholarship on the interaction between Carroll’s *Alice* books and evolutionary theory can be further improved by considering the range of evolutionary ideas that were available in Victorian England.

The existing evolutionary readings of *Alice* draw attention to the uncertain dynamics of agency and teleological progress, alongside the lack of directionality in Alice’s transmutations throughout her adventure in Wonderland. While Straley’s research purposefully addresses the way *Alice* problematises the loss and preservation of (human) agency within the natural world

⁴⁰ Gowan Dowson, “Up in the Air: Evolution and Victorian Culture,” *Victorian Review* 41, no. 2 (2015): 9-13.

⁴¹ Anne Neill. “Developmental Nonsense in Alice Tales.” In *Human Evolution and Fantastic Victorian Fiction* (Routledge, 2021), 41-60.

⁴² Miriam Hanna. “‘Muddled Mice, Clever Caterpillars, and Frog-Footmen’: A Darwinian Lens in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*,” *Prandium: The Journal of Historical Studies* 7, no.1 (2018): np.

of Wonderland, Smit's study addresses the same theme by creating a "misconstrued evolutionary meaning" due to a misinterpretation of Darwin's theory.

Straley's book chapter, "Generic variability: Lewis Carroll, Scientific Nonsense, and Literary Parody," addresses the instability of Alice's identity through the lens of Darwinian evolutionary thought and Victorian pedagogy. Drawing attention to the sheer volume of books in Carroll's library criticising Darwinian theory, Straley presents this author as a "skeptic of evolution".⁴³ Exploring the interplay between nonsense and parody in *Alice*, Straley's reading problematises the way Lewis Carroll explores identity instability through evolutionary themes while also generating a sense of agency and self. According to Straley, while Alice's sudden physical transformations and her ambiguous species identity create a detachment from the sense of self, the way Lewis Carroll adopts nonsense in the text serves as an enactment of this instability on the textual level. However, while the novel blends human with other species through this instability, Straley argues that through parody Alice engages with and directly controls the discourse regarding herself and others. In that regard, the narrative creates a ground where human agency is restored. In this regard, although Straley portrays Carroll as a sceptic, she showcases that *Alice* presents a stance against Darwinian evolutionary thought without ever rejecting or downplaying it.

Smit's thesis, on the other hand, despite presenting a broad contextualization of Victorian science, children's literature, and Carroll's intellectual milieu, ultimately offers a relatively casual engagement with evolutionary theory. In contrast to Straley, Smit interprets the large collection of books on Darwinian thought and its critiques in Carroll's library as a form of enthusiasm. In that regard she concludes that Carroll "was very much interested in

⁴³ Jessica Straley, "Generic Variability: Lewis Carroll, Scientific Nonsense, and Literary Parody." In *Evolution and Imagination in Victorian Children's Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 88.

Charles Darwin and his ideas”⁴⁴. Accordingly, the evolutionary analysis of *Alice* appearing in the final section of Smit’s thesis highlights Carroll’s “recast” of “Darwin’s ideas”⁴⁵. Within this Darwinian framework, Smit analyses Alice’s identity confusion, her struggle to express her identity, and the narrative’s general engagement with time through the concepts of taxonomy, struggle for survival, natural selection and deep time. Furthermore, in order to comment on *Alice*’s use of the child figure to ponder on “transformation[s]” within “human life cycle,” Smit foregrounds the similarities between the sense of developmental “growth and evolution”.⁴⁶ Smit emphasises that Alice “control[s] and reverse[s] her own growth” after experiencing the natural struggle for survival in Wonderland. In that light, she extracts a theme of “adapt[ation] to [the] surroundings” which is fit for associations with evolutionary theory.⁴⁷ This attention to adaptiveness construes a significant aspect of Smit’s Darwinian reading. However, such an analysis, despite serving as an evolutionary theme, falls into the rather common trap of mixing Darwin’s concept of natural selection with adaptability, suggesting that species evolve by adjusting to their environments.

This misreading overlooks the most fundamental principle of Darwinian evolution which differentiates it from the “developmental” evolutionary models. While progressive conceptions of evolution accounts for adaptation, Darwin consistently highlights favourability instead of adaptability in his explanation of natural selection in *The Origin*:

Let it be borne in mind how infinitely complex and close-fitting are the mutual relations of all organic beings to each other and to their physical conditions of life. Can it, then, be thought improbable, seeing that variations useful to man have undoubtedly occurred, that other variations useful in some way to each being in the great and complex battle of life, should sometimes occur in the course of thousands of generations? If such do occur, can we doubt (remembering that many more individuals are born than can possibly survive) that individuals having any advantage, however slight, over others, would have the best chance of surviving and of procreating their kind ? On the other

⁴⁴ Michelle H. Smit, “*What are You?: The Influence of Charles Darwin’s Evolutionary Theory in Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*” (MA thesis, Leiden University, 2019, 49.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 50.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 54-55.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 55.

hand, we may feel sure that any variation in the least degree injurious would be rigidly destroyed. This preservation of favourable variations and the rejection of injurious variations, I call Natural Selection.⁴⁸

Within this framework, Darwin does not approach survival as a matter of deliberate adaptation. Instead, Darwin underlines “useful variations” or “favourable variations” which pose an “advantage” in specific physical conditions. In other words, he emphasises survival and claims that it purely depends on chance, the presence of a trait that makes a species unforeseeably more advantageous under given circumstances. On several occasions where Darwin mentions “adaptation” in the *Origin*, accordingly, he refers to the state of being more fit to exist in their environment *by chance*, rather than the condition of being more capable of modifying oneself to develop desirable characteristics *by choice*. This emphasis poses a significant contrast to Lamarck’s ideas which emphasise a species’ natural inclination for modifying itself to its surroundings.

Lamarck presents his interpretation of the very same dynamic between a species and the variations in their environment in his *Zoological Philosophy* (1809):

Now, the true principle to be noted in all this is as follows:

1. Every fairly considerable and permanent alteration in the environment of any race of animals works a real alteration in the needs of that race.
2. Every change in the needs of animals necessitates new activities on their part for the satisfaction of those needs, and hence new habits.
3. Every new need, necessitating new activities for its satisfaction, requires the animal, either to make more frequent use of some of its parts which it previously used less, and thus greatly to develop and enlarge them; or else to make use of entirely new parts, to which the needs have imperceptibly given birth by efforts of inner feeling; this I shall shortly prove by means of known facts.⁴⁹

While Darwin highlights how changes in a given environment unpredictably render certain characteristics relatively less advantageous, Lamarck emphasises how such alterations in the

⁴⁸ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species: A Facsimile of the First Edition* (Harvard University Press, 1964), 80-81.

⁴⁹ J. B. Lamarck, *Zoological Philosophy: An Exposition with Regard to the Natural History of Animals*, trans. Hugh Elliot (The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 112.

environment trigger corresponding changes in the needs, habits, and eventually physiologies of the species in question. Hence, Lamarck envisions a natural world where species transform as they adapt to the new conditions surrounding them. In this instance, organisms either improve their existing body due to the “more frequent use” of certain anatomical structures, or they grow entirely novel features by the “efforts of inner feeling.” In other words, while the Darwinian model draws attention to the survival, elimination, and the selection of traits that turned out to be more advantageous, Lamarckian evolution highlights the role of a built-in inclination toward developmental plasticity. If we reconsider the question of adaptability therefore, we can note that Darwinian model does not account for adaptiveness, while developmental evolutionary models such as Lamarck’s can be understood through a conception of adaptability, and they even leave room for the role of volition.

In this light, returning to our discussion on the evolutionary interpretations of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, it is necessary to acknowledge that Alice’s desire to adapt her body cannot ascribe to a Darwinian scheme. In fact, Alice’s willingness to have control over her transformations makes a stark contrast to Darwinian frameworks. This discrepancy surrounding the concept of adaptation in evolutionary discourse reveals the interplay between different evolutionary models. The gesture of attributing a theme of adaptiveness into Darwinian evolution, in fact sheds light onto a rather broader pattern in both historical and contemporary receptions of Darwinian thought. Charles Darwin’s non-teleological framework that highlights randomness almost inescapably blends into teleological presumptions that are strongly established in language and culture. As the work of Schmitt and Lightman demonstrates, even Darwin’s supporters in Victorian England are now understood to have interpreted and represented his arguments by blending them with other evolutionary conceptions. The non-teleological aspects of Darwinian evolution taking place due to random chance, often got lost within teleological, progressive understandings of evolution that could put emphasis on

foreseeable transmutations. In that regard, by studying the inconsistencies and tensions regarding willing yet random transformations or goal-oriented yet non-teleological actions in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the present project seeks to situate this text within the complex network of evolutionary ideas circulating in the Victorian period.

In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the unforeseeable results of Alice's actions and the unconventional causal relationality embedded in the culture of Wonderland's inhabitants always balance Alice's desire to willingly control her bodily transformations in ways that enable her to proceed in the story. In other words, goal-oriented transformations often producing unpredictable results provide an anxious relationship with teleology. While on one hand Alice contributes to direct her quest in Wonderland, her agency constantly gets challenged by the uncertainties of Wonderland. This particular representation of the relationship between bodily transformation and direction creates a goal-oriented yet non-teleological, and a rather tense narrative reflecting the clash of various mid-nineteenth-century evolutionary ideas in circulation. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* establishes its evolutionary framework through a recapitulation analogy which serves the ground for the tension between Lamarckian willing adaptations and their unforeseeable random Darwinian consequences. Thus, this piece presents an amalgamized evolutionary landscape of recapitulation theory, progress driven goal-oriented Lamarckian trajectory, and Darwinian framework dependent on chance.

The similarity between “transformation[s]” within “human life cycle” and species’ “evolution” that Smit emphasises to interpret Alice’s “control [over] her growth” as a (misconstructed) Darwinian adaptiveness, can be better analysed in light of the theories of recapitulation circulating in Victorian Britain since the early 19th century. According to Peter Bowler, this notion that draws a “parallel between the history of life on the earth [...] and the

growth of human embryo” was an established line of thought during the 19th century.⁵⁰ Marked by the idea that “ontogeny (individual growth) recapitulates phylogeny (the history of the type)”, the recapitulation theories assumed that an embryo reenacts the developmental stages of “the adult forms through which the species has passed in the course of evolutionary history”.⁵¹ In order for the development of the human species, the human embryo was assumed to advance through phases of “fish, reptiles, and mammals and finally human form.”⁵² In other words, fully experiencing all developmental stages of each phase served as the basis for the transitioning into the next stage in the evolutionary chain. In relation to the popularity of these ideas, literary pieces where children “appear [...] as integral parts of [...] the natural world” started to extend the analogy between ontogeny and phylogeny into “the child’s [...] development after birth” by 1860s.⁵³ In other words, the figure of the child almost became the observable representation of evolutionary processes. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* establishes its evolutionary narrative through the womb imagery which reflects this popular parallel between species evolution and the development of the figure of the child and/or embryo. Especially the novel’s early chapters serve to provide this complex evolutionary ground of Wonderland.

In *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, the narrative introduces Wonderland and Alice’s transformations through a reverse birth analogy and the blurred distinction between human and animal. Seeing a nervous rabbit with “a waistcoat-pocket, [and] a watch,” Alice feels drawn to follow this creature and goes down “the rabbit-hole” after him.⁵⁴ Here, the narrator emphasises that Alice’s curiosity does not concern the rabbit’s ability to speak. In fact, she finds “nothing

⁵⁰ Bowler, *The Non-Darwinian Revolution*, 10.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Jessica Straley, “Of Beasts and Boys: Kingsley, Spencer, and the Theory of Recapitulation” *Victorian Studies* 49 (2007): 583-609.

⁵⁴ Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice* ed. Martin Gardner (W. W. Norton and Company, 2000), 12.

remarkable” in its speech⁵⁵. What triggers her curiosity stems from the rabbit’s striking resemblance to a person anxiously checking a pocket watch, worried about being late. This treatment towards the relationship between human and animal significantly differs from a fairytale or a fable where personification and anthropomorphization of animals serve to symbolise human affairs. In this instance, the rabbit’s human-like behaviours despite still being a rabbit ignites Alice’s “burning curiosity” by threatening the distinction between the boundaries of human and animal.⁵⁶ This detail constitutes one of the most important aspects of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and it positions the novel within the discussions concerning the human-animal distinction, a significant topic in natural philosophy in Victorian England.

Following this rabbit, Alice falls down “very slowly” in a “tunnel” or a “well”, where she feels that she loses her sense of time by “dozing off”⁵⁷. Finally, she arrives at a “hall” with “doors all round”, all of which are “locked.”⁵⁸ The contrast between the expected duration of her fall and its inexplicable length in her experience reflects the difference between the natural history taking millions of years in comparison to the relatively short intellectual history of humans. Thus, falling through the rabbit-hole Alice travels back in developmental time to arrive at a liminal space, a hall surrounded by locked doors. This travel through a dark well-like tunnel also mimics the birth in reverse and turns the hall into an allegory of the womb, an in-between space of transition where Alice is stuck for a passage of waiting and transformation. Through this sequence, narrative starts to blend evolutionary time with the image of the womb. More specifically, adopting recapitulative themes, these early instances provide an account of the evolutionary past that takes place in the womb.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 14.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 15.

Spending some time in this hall, trying the doors and seeking her way out, Alice starts to feel frustrated due to witnessing the necessity to transform her body to be able to proceed. In a moment when Alice starts to shrink unexpectedly and unconsciously, she falls down a “pool” at the floor of the hall, consisting of her “tears”.⁵⁹ According to William Empson, who has written on the pastoral themes in *Alice* through a psychoanalytic lens, this pool of tears generates recapitulation ideas within the narrative by representing both “the sea from which life arose” and the “amniotic fluid” in which an embryo develops.⁶⁰ This pool imagery contributes to the womb imagery by further connecting it to recapitulation because the moment Alice finds herself in the pool, she witnesses that some other creatures start to appear in this pool. Alice first encounters “a mouse” and then with the appearance of “several other creatures” the pool gets “quite crowded with the birds and animals that fallen into it”.⁶¹ Instead of presenting the child’s transformation across fish, reptilian, and mammalian phases of recapitulative evolution, the narrative positions all these species in the first recapitulative phase within water, which in this case also stands for the womb where recapitulation takes place. Thence, this pool becomes a shared origin enabling the encounter between the human child and the adult forms of some other species from the course of evolutionary history.

After leaving the pool Alice starts “talking familiarly” with members of this “queer-looking party” and feels “as if she had known them all her life.”⁶² In an attempt to “get dry,” these creatures impulsively decide to have a “Caucus-race” where they run “in a sort of circle” starting and letting off “when they liked.”⁶³ This chaotic sequence which lacks familiar causality is often interpreted as “an apt metaphor for natural selection.”⁶⁴ At the end of this race,

⁵⁹ Ibid, 27-28.

⁶⁰ William Empson, “Alice in Wonderland: The Child as Swain.” In *English Pastoral* (W. W. Norton and Company, 1938), 251-295.

⁶¹ *The Annotated Alice*, 32.

⁶² Ibid, 34.

⁶³ Ibid, 36.

⁶⁴ Straley, “Of Beasts and Boys”, 586.

the Dodo bird, a popular extinct species which became the symbol of extinction in Victorian England, declares all participants winners but chooses Alice as the natural, given authority that is responsible of distributing “prizes.”⁶⁵ Quite interestingly, within this shared origin, all species appear as equal and distinct subjects in the originary womb rather than as parts of a chain of transformations. While on the one hand positioning Alice within this party and race democratically, as one of the equal members, on the other hand, this sequence makes her the given authority among them. This interpretation of recapitulation, which simultaneously positions the human child in a common origin and fashions her as the leading authority, serves to build the tension between the goal-directed and random evolutionary frameworks. While the recapitulation ideas are “hardly antithetical” to a Darwinian framework, especially in terms of the notion of the common origin, they also represent human as the ultimate end point of a preordained hierarchical chain in contrast to Darwin’s framework.⁶⁶ In other words, recapitulation theory includes aspect that makes it compatible both with the assumptions of random speciation dependent on chance and the developmental frameworks emphasising “advancement toward a preordained goal” where “variation is not random.”⁶⁷ This perplexing position, which both assumes hierarchy and democracy, constitutes the basis of Alice’s struggle with her agency and its lack. The recapitulative framework introduced early in the narrative allows this novel to explore the contrasting evolutionary frameworks of Lamarck and Darwin. The hierarchical yet democratic environment can be interpreted both as a sign of a preordained order and as a result of processes that unfold unpredictably over time. This tension reveals itself in Alice’s relationship with her transformations which she both willingly directs and randomly becomes exposed to.

⁶⁵ *The Annotated Alice*, 37.

⁶⁶ Straley, “Of Beasts and Boys”, 588.

⁶⁷ Bowler, *The Non-Darwinian Revolution*, 11.

This recapitulative image of the womb, in this light, becomes the site where the goal-oriented, yet random transformations take place for the first time. This section, therefore, introduces the reader to the clash between teleology and randomness of evolutionary thought. After falling down the rabbit-hole leading to a hall enclosed by locked doors, Alice starts to seek her way out and confronts the disadvantageous position her bodily state causes. This brings the necessity of transforming the body in order to proceed to the forefront. As she tries to find a way of removing obstacles in her progression, Alice finds a key to a “fifteen inches high” door which is “not much larger than a rat-hole” leading to “the loveliest garden [she] ever saw.”⁶⁸ Even though Alice desires to “get out of the dark hall to wander about [in the garden,]” she cannot “even get her head through the doorway”.⁶⁹ Feeling frustrated, she wishes “[to] shut up like a telescope” or to shrink in order to fit in the doorframe.⁷⁰ In other words, Alice feels the need to adapt herself to the environment in ways enabling her progress within Wonderland, and within the story. Even though Alice feels the necessity to transform due to a specific objective, the teleological goal of reaching the garden, her actions and specific transformations occur rather randomly through trial-and-error. When she goes back to the table where she found the key “hoping she might find another key on it or at any rate a book of rules for shutting people up like telescopes,” she finds a bottle labelled “DRINK ME”.⁷¹ When she drinks from the bottle, she feels “nervous” because she cannot make sure what will happen or “if she’ll shrink” more than she needs.⁷² Soon after drinking from the bottle, she starts to shrink like a telescope. However, this time despite being “the right size for going through the little door into that lovely garden,” the fact that Alice had forgotten the key to the door on the table once again delays her progression in the story.⁷³ This time, eating a piece of cake labelled “EAT ME”, again

⁶⁸ *The Annotated Alice*, 15.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

not being able to foresee in if she will change form of in “which way” if she will, she starts “opening out like the largest telescope that ever was” which leaves her being so big that she can only “look through into garden with one eye”.⁷⁴ This plot structure, that resists progression despite the protagonist’s repeated attempts, can be interpreted in light of the tension between Lamarckian and Darwinian evolutionary frameworks. Even though most of Alice’s transformations take place in the directions she desires, their results almost always leave her incapable. While on one hand, Alice willingly wants to adapt by directing her growth in desired ways like the Lamarckian giraffes, her transformations unfold in unexpected ways and leaving her deprived of Darwinian favourable variations enabling survival. Frustrating both Alice’s and the readers’ desire to proceed in the story, this sequence establishes an anxious relationship with teleology, establishing a constant struggle between agency and submission. It builds a sense of an unattainable teleology, which constantly slips away from hands.

These early sequences of the hall and the pool play a very significant role in presenting the layered complexity of Victorian evolutionary discourse, revealing the tensions and amalgamations within it. Alice’s journey full of goal-oriented yet unpredictable transformations that both preserve the teleological direction while restraining access to it, mirrors the philosophical tensions that competing evolutionary ideas created. Throughout Alice’s linear journey in Wonderland, these cyclical transformations continue to appear and preserve the tensions within the story. In this framework, Alice becomes a protagonist who wishes to proceed teleologically in a story that resists teleology. This strange relationship *Alice* has with teleology and agency also provides this story with a unique literary form that can be analysed through the narrative implications of these competing scientific models. In this light, this form can be interpreted considering bildungsroman genre, particularly in relation to evolutionary branching.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 21-23.

In *Modernist Life Histories*, Daniel Newman showcases the “substantial and systematic literary dialogue” between the bildungsroman and “the biological models of development and evolution.”⁷⁵ Newman highlights that, due to its dependence on the development of “the body in time,” bildungsroman genre naturally lends itself to negotiations with biology.⁷⁶ In other words, in this genre where the narrative inevitably unfolds by following the protagonist’s developmental processes, the textual body serves as the verbal counterpart of the protagonist’s physical body. In that regard, even though it does not directly present a conventional coming-of-age story, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* engages deeply with bildungsroman genre by similarly providing a narrative dependent on the protagonist’s bodily transformations. As the recapitulation analogy establishing the tensions between Lamarckian and Darwinian implications about development and teleology showcases, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* presents a story about the nature of development if not a story of development.

The recapitulatory analogy further connects *Alice* to the 19th century bildungsroman. Because, according to Newman, the theory of recapitulation plays a significant role in shaping the 19th century “ideals of Bildung” or “the classical Bildung plot.”⁷⁷ Reflecting the recapitulatory and accumulative transformation of the embryo, these classical Bildung plots present textual bodies that unfold through “successive stages” which are “directed towards [a] goal.”⁷⁸ This framework “makes [the] plot both progressive and teleological” where “the past and present are significant” only due to the “the [final] meaning” they paved way for.⁷⁹ In this light, citing Peter Brooks, Newman highlights that in the classical Bildungsroman “past needs to be incorporated as past” and it should be “mastered through repetition” so that it can present

⁷⁵ Daniel Aureliano Newman, *Modernist Life Histories: Biological Theory and the Experimental Bildungsroman* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), viii.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 30.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 9-12.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 32.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 34.

an “escape from repetition.”⁸⁰ In other words, this framework shapes the past as a step to be grown out of or as a ladder to be climbed to arrive at a destination. In that regard, *Alice*’s use of recapitulation, as a ground of the Darwinian and Lamarckian teleological tensions, endows this novel with a critical quality that alternates the classical bildungsroman genre.

Similarly, in *Modernist Life Histories*, Newman draws attention to what he calls “the modernist Bildungsromane” which offers “alternative developmental structures” by resisting teleological treatment of the past.⁸¹ According to Newman, the modernist versions of the genre present “biological reversions” into ancestral or developmental past, justified by later biological research and presents the possibility of alternative forms of development.⁸² Contrasting these modernist literary strategies to the other Victorian novels with similar strange transformations or reversals, Newman notes that the modernist reversions present neither cases of “Gothic horror or pathology” nor scenarios of “arrested development.”⁸³ In other words, he suggests that while the non-teleological or cyclical unfold of events serves as developmental malfunctions in Victorian novels, Newman claims that the modernist novels he studies offer substitutes for developmental trajectories instead of pointing at pathological failures. In that regard, *Alice*’s anxious relationship with teleology may be interpreted as a presentation of such malfunctions Newman attributes to Victorian novels. For instance, Daniel Bivona approaches *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* as “an anti-Bildungsroman” that presents a case of “arrested development.”⁸⁴ However, when we analyse how *Alice*’s transformations reflect the tension between Lamarckian and Darwinian evolutionary theories, it becomes clear that this novel

⁸⁰ Ibid 37.

⁸¹ Ibid, 28.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid, 13.

⁸⁴ Daniel Bivona. *Desire and Contradiction: Imperial Visions and Domestic Debates in Victorian Literature* (Manchester University, 1990), 71.

negotiates and interrogates with several frameworks of evolutionary development, rather than presenting a belated process.

Even though *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* does not offer substitutes for the established developmental structures the way the novels of Newman's focus do, it reflects the doubts and questions regarding development by adopting "reversions" akin to the ones Newman highlights. The strange relationship *Alice* has with teleology and agency provides her story with such reversions. However, these reversions merge with directionality and contribute to the construction of a unique literary form which makes space both for progression and a condition of being stuck in repetition. The thematic tension between willing adaptations and their unforeseeable consequences, thus, also shapes the formal rhythm of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. These particular processes, that first appear in Alice's relationship with her bodily transformation, infiltrate into the form of this narrative. Therefore, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* can be approached as a *strange* bildungsroman which does not only narrate development, but it also presents inquiries about various conception of development. In other words, this text functions like a self-reflexive piece that comments on its own genre.

Throughout the time Alice spends in Wonderland, we follow a narrative that creates the impression of a linear progression while always restraining it via episodic jumps, circular movements, and disrupted resolutions that frustrate the desire for teleology. After establishing the tension between Lamarckian will and Darwinian randomness as its evolutionary and developmental basis in the early sequences of the hall and the pool of tears, in the rest of the story, Alice strives to provide herself with a direction while the narrative starts to unfold like Darwinian branching. Following her "swim in the pool," Alice starts to realise that "everything [has] changed" and sees that "the great hall, with the glass table and the little door, had

vanished.”⁸⁵ To interpret, situating Alice within an evolutionary past where animal-human distinction is blurred and transformations create a tension between random uncertainty and willing agency, the plot strips Alice’s access to the little garden. At this point, she comes across the White Rabbit that initiated her journey and goes to his house following his commands. In this building, once again, she finds herself in a similar situation to the one she experienced at the beginning regarding her body’s change: She follows a rabbit, enters in a room, finds a bottle and decides to drink from it “just to see what this bottle does.”⁸⁶ As a result, growing way too much, once again she traps herself inside a room. Then, desperately desiring to get smaller, she starts to consume “the cakes [laying] in the floor” hoping that they would surely “make some change in [her] size” even though she cannot foresee the direction.⁸⁷ Finally, “shrinking” yet again, Alice leaves the rabbit’s house and enters to “a thick wood” where she decides to come up with a plan to foresee her actions and destination in this strange place.⁸⁸ This plan that Alice considers to be “the best” one possible under her circumstances, first of all requires her “to grow to [her] right size again” and secondly, she “to find [her] way into that lovely garden.”⁸⁹

This gesture constitutes a scheme where Alice tries to master the unforeseeable logic of Wonderland. Also, it makes the plot strongly tied to the Lamarckian will and the classical Bildungsroman plot. By attempting at “mastering” the logic and the causality of events influencing her bodily transformation through repetition, Alice tries to “incorporate” her past experience “as a past” out of which one is grown. Within this foundation, the garden constitutes the telos in Alice’s journey. However, as she tries to establish a sense of control and direction, the plot positions her in episodic jumps that lack causality and constitute further chaos. The narrative jumps from the wood to the house of the Duchess, then to the wood once again, and

⁸⁵ *The Annotated Alice*, 43.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 44.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 52.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 53.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 53-54.

then to the Mad Tea-Party rather randomly. Furthermore, Alice's interactions with the inhabitants of Wonderland too starts to challenge her desire for resolution.

The episodic structure of the novel framed by the unpredictable jumps in narrative mimics Darwinian evolutionary branching. This constitutes yet another aspect where we can observe a contrast between Alice's rather Lamarckian reliance on her intention and the Darwinian chaos of Wonderland. According to Darwin's formulation of evolution, whether a trait will be preserved or disappear depends on its degree of favourability against the unforeseeable conditions of environmental change. Therefore, only the members who have the necessary advantageous characteristics that serve as favourable in the face of these unforeseeable changes manage to pass on their lineage to the next generation by chance. Therefore, the way a species will evolve depends upon unforeseeable fractures and crossroads in evolutionary trajectory. In that regard, coincidences constitute the main explanation that shape the appearance of stages in the evolutionary unfold within Darwin's framework. The episodic jumps in Alice's travel reflects this branching unfolding.

Just as the species evolve unforeseeably, the narrative arc of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* opens in unforeseeable ways that depend on the monumental shifts in her journey. The progression from the wood to the house of the Duchess, the return to the wood, and the arrival at the Mad Tea Party, follows one another by coincidences instead of being preordained steps into an inherent purpose. Rather than being steps paving way to a specified ending, by a goal-oriented causality the protagonist foresees, these episodes constitute sequences united by unpredictable causalities or by chance. In other words, even though Alice wishes to proceed teleologically, the plot she exists in resists teleology. Even if Alice willingly initiates her transformations, the fact that randomness always creates resilience against her will brings this novel closer to a Darwinian framework. The unforeseeable unfolding of actions almost makes fun of Alice's assumptions about having control over her body and story. Furthermore, these

delays her access to the garden. Therefore, while on the one hand the narrative creates the impression of a progression within the travel through Wonderland, the content of each of these episodes provide unresolvable repetitions that create cyclicalities. In these episodes, Alice's interactions with the inhabitants of the Wonderland frustrates her devotion to a telos by bringing up stories or games that lack an ending or causal logic. Witnessing the tension between her desire for resolution and the Wonderland's restriction of it, Alice starts to mimic the readers' frustration stemming from following a narrative that restricts resolution. These instances turn *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* into a narrative that becomes exposed to its own narration or a text that commenting on itself.

Alice's visit to the Duchess' house and to the Mad Tea Party and her encounter with the Cheshire Cat suffocates her with discussions, stories and games that lack causality and lead nowhere. For instance, when Alice knocks on the door, attempting at getting into the house, one of Duchess' footmen gives her a long explanation about not being able to let her in since they are "on the same side of the door."⁹⁰ This footman claims that his admittance of her would only be possible if they "had the door between [them]."⁹¹ Similarly, Alice witnesses that, the participants of the Mad Tea Party tell stories with no ending while endlessly rotating around the table to switch to "a clean cup."⁹² Furthermore, when Alice attempts at "finding out the answers" to the "riddles" posed by the attendees of The Mad Tea Party, the participants of the party disclose that theirs were "riddles that have no answers."⁹³ This discussion traps Alice within an endless conversation about whether it is possible to "mean what [one] say[s]" or whether "say[ing] what you mean" and "mean[ing] what you say" is the same thing.⁹⁴ While the unending conversations and stories frustrates Alice's desire for resolution, the discussion

⁹⁰ *The Annotated Alice*, 70-71.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*, 91.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

concerning the riddles particularly makes the tension between her striving for teleology and lack thereof visible. The concept of a riddle, in and on itself, suggests teleology by making what comes previous, the puzzling question, a stepping stone towards what lays ahead, the answer. Just as teleology assumes the destination to be antecedent to the cause, a riddle constitutes a mere ladder to be climbed to reach an answer. Therefore, these occasions where endless debates over unanswerable riddles emerge confronts Alice with her own need for teleology by frustrating this desire. Furthermore, these instances constitute parallels to the reader's experience on Alice's behalf and turn Alice's story into one which confronts its own self. This pattern, which comes to forefront through the discussion over riddles, can be observed both in Alice's earlier and later discussions with the inhabitants of Wonderland. In that regard, while on one hand Alice proceeds in Wonderland and in her story through Darwinian branching, the tension between Darwinian randomness and Lamarckian teleology cyclically appears over and over again.

The tension built by the bodily and teleological instability reflecting evolutionary discussions in Victorian Britain, thus, leaks into the narrative form by paralleling it through the contrast between "saying what you mean" and "meaning what you say." Confronting her desire for teleology through resistance of Wonderland's inhabitants to resolved narratives or answered puzzles, Alice starts to lose her sense of direction, her goal of arriving at the lovely garden. First, she expresses that she "[doesn't] much care where [she is heading towards]" anymore "as long as [she] get[s] somewhere."⁹⁵ In return, the cat emphasises that "where [one is] ought to go" depends "a good deal on where [one] want[s] to go."⁹⁶ These occasions pose surrenders to the Darwinian randomness that defies teleology. However, the growing emphasis on the intentional gesture of deciding "where one wants to go" or "meaning what one wants to say,"

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⁹⁶ *The Annotated Alice*, 78.

endows the protagonist with an inherent capability of heading into a direction despite the inescapable presence of chaos.

In “Generic Variability,” Jessica Straley interprets this dynamic in light of the concept of parody in *Wonderland*. Straley claims that in this piece, parody serves as a “linguistic solution that puts human agency back in the picture” without downplaying the existence of natural selection or Darwinian chaos in the nature.⁹⁷ While Alice manages to get into the garden by random chance only to find herself in further delay through a cricket game that lacks causality and more characters sharing unending stories, the emphasis on “taking care of the sense” and letting “sounds [to] take care of themselves” gets intensified. Despite the plot that resists the teleology, the emphasis put on the concept of “sense” and the gestures of “meaning what you say” and “deciding on a direction” creates a counterforce in the narrative. Allowing Alice to reclaim a sense of agency, coherence and direction, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* provides a self-made bildungsroman resolution. The tension between Alice’s Lamarckian desire to adapt and the Darwinian randomness that disrupts her journey reveals a deeper inquiry about what development means in narrative terms. Alice’s final act of ignoring the inhabitants of *Wonderland* by calling the court members “a pack of cards” constitutes both an ignorant and willing rejection of *Wonderland*’s arbitrary logic via assertion of agency.⁹⁸ This moment paradoxically merges wilful resistance and chaotic collapse, echoing the novel’s broader oscillation between purpose and randomness, or Lamarckian direction and Darwinian chaos.

Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland constitutes a strange narrative that does not have much alike. In this piece, we can find a questioning on the notions of development as the protagonist’s bodily and narrative transformations take shape in an analogy with the tensions between Lamarckian and Darwinian evolutionary frameworks. By mixing an unstable sense of

⁹⁷ “Generic variability”, 113.

⁹⁸ *The Annotated Alice*, 145.

agency with its restoration, or goal-oriented action with disrupted teleology, this novel provides an episodic structure where each episode repeats this clash through and through. By providing an oscillation between the desire for direction and randomness, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* reflect the tension between the implications of Darwinian evolutionary theory and other “developmental” conceptions of evolution in Victorian Britain. These tensions provide a significant representation of the broader anxieties embedded in the nineteenth-century in terms of both biological and narrative development and progression. In that regard both echoing and shaking the conventional narrative arc of a standard bildungsroman, this novel stands as a self-reflexive version of this genre.

Chapter II

The Greyests of Ottomans:

A Spiritual Interpretation of Evolution and Bildungsroman in *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*

In the last two decades, more than twenty different editions of *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* have been published by a range of publishers in Turkey. These included multiple transcriptions from the original Ottoman Turkish script into Latin letters, various intralingual translations into modern Turkish, reprints of the original Ottoman script, and even a comic book adaptation. Through these diverse formats and frames, *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* started to circulate popularly, targeting a significantly wide reader profile. While some editions presented it as a “spring of faith and wisdom,” some others advertised it as the “first philosophical and surreal novel written in Turkish.” Certain interpretations highlighted the text’s Islamic worldview, while others adopted a secular lens towards it. On the one hand, it was celebrated like a cornerstone of religious and spiritual resistance in an increasingly modernising world, on the other, it was put in garment of fantasy and surrealism, ornamented with exotic Sufism and spirituality. In other words, a century after its publication in 1910s, *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, found itself in an oscillation between religion and modern world, not unlike the existential confusion surrounding its protagonist within the late Ottoman period.

This narrative, which presents the spiritual journey of a young man caught between the religious and modern science, emerges from an effort to reconcile these tensions within the late Ottoman context. Although Islamic mysticism constitutes the most dominant thematic stream that feeds into *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, this text deeply engages with various other mystical traditions alongside the scientific discussions of the time. It constructs a nuanced synthesis across all these discourses. In that light, by highlighting the way it integrates modern evolutionary thought into Sufism the present chapter aims to explore the nuanced synthesis *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* constructs. Tracing the way this conception of evolution feeds into the formal structure of this text, this

chapter also foregrounds the way *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* establishes a philosophical framework that bridges science and religion, while simultaneously creating a literary form that mediates between the old and new literary conventions in Turkish literature.

An attempt at fully grasping *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*'s nuanced worldview necessitates that we understand its author, Şehbenderzade Filibeli Ahmet Hilmi Bey. Amit Bein defines Ahmet Hilmi as a “modernist yet deeply devout” person whose stance represents “an important intellectual trend that has often been overlooked in studies of the late Ottoman period.”⁹⁹ Having studied in the same modern institutions as Young Turks, a group of late Ottoman intellectuals advocating for modernity, progress, and science, Ahmet Hilmi was an avid follower of “modern sciences and European thought” early on his life and he shared this group’s political ideas.¹⁰⁰ Accordingly, after getting graduated from Mekteb-i Sultani, he held several bureaucratic positions while also taking part in activities opposing the autocratic rule of Abdülhamit II.¹⁰¹ These political engagements eventually led him to flee to Egypt by 1890s and even though he returned Istanbul shortly thereafter, he got exiled to Fezzan in 1901 due to similar charges.¹⁰²

In his later works, Ahmet Hilmi remembers the time he spent in the Saharan region almost as a time of transition. According to him, while he was a man who “despised everything about the Orient” as a graduate of Mekteb-i Sultani, who is trained in modern science and thought, overtime he grew an interest in spirituality and the concept of soul.¹⁰³ During his years away from Istanbul, this interest led him to engagements with various spiritual groups. For instance, around 1890 when he was in Beirut, he spent a significant amount of time among

⁹⁹ Amit Bein. “A ‘Young Turk’ Islamic Intellectual: Filibeli Ahmet Hilmi and the Diverse Intellectual Legacies of the Late Ottoman Empire.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, no. 39 (2007), 607.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Eren Yavuz. “İspiritizma ve *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*.” In *Eski Fikirler, Yeni Şekiller: Garip İlimler ve Ruh Çağırma* by Şehbenderzade Ahmet Hilmi, edited by Eren Yavuz (Büyüyen Ay, 2023), 12.

some Spiritualist groups and joined their table seances.¹⁰⁴ Later, during his years of exile, he grew an interest in Sufism, meeting the Senusism movement and becoming a member of the Arrusiyya order.¹⁰⁵ In short, these transitional years fed Ahmet Hilmi's horizon with various spiritualist views ranging from Islamic Sufism to esoteric occultism.

Following these years, Ottoman state experienced a radical milieu with the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and the foundation of the second constitutional regime. This development enabled Ahmet Hilmi's return to Istanbul where he extensively wrote and published and became the professor of philosophy at Darülfünun, the first modern university of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁰⁶ Although he became increasingly associated with mysticism, having joined a Sufi order, his interest in modern science never ceased to exist. Especially focusing on the concept of "soul" with a lens that blends modern scientific and spiritual discourse, Ahmet Hilmi authored one of the earliest books of psychology written in Ottoman Turkish. Therefore, while sharing the modernist ideals, especially in terms of the importance he put in "modern sciences and knowledge," he distanced himself from the "positivist, materialist, and antireligious" approach that became quite dominant during the Second Constitutional Era.¹⁰⁷ In that regard, fashioning himself neither a fully fetched positivist nor an Islamicist, Ahmet Hilmi tried to build a synthesis across these worldviews. This nuanced position constituted the main theme of most of his works and the publication of *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* coincided with this exact period in Ahmet Hilmi's life.

A'mâk-ı Hayâl presents the memoirs of Raci, a young Ottoman intellectual who is very much a product of the world Ahmet Hilmi grew up in. Early in the narrative, Raci describes

¹⁰⁴ Ahmet Hilmi presents an account of these experiences in a series of articles he published in *Şehbal* under the title of "Eski Fikirler, Yeni Şekiller."

¹⁰⁵ Abdullah Uçman. "Şehbenderzade Filibeli Ahmet Hilmi." In *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi*, accessed May 20, 2025, <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/sehbenderzade-ahmed-hilmi>

¹⁰⁶ Amit Bein, 608-609.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 610-611.

himself as someone who has received an extensive training both in religious and modern scientific fields. Yet, he finds himself unable to adopt a clear stance between these worldviews. One day, in the midst of these restless troubles, Raci wanders into a secluded graveyard in his neighbourhood, where he encounters a peculiar mystical figure. This man, whom Raci refers to as “Aynalı Baba” (Mirror Baba), who wears a motley garment adorned with broken mirror pieces and resides in the cemetery. As Raci begins to visit this dervish-like figure regularly, he embarks on a profound spiritual journey. Each day, Mirror Baba offers him coffee, plays the reed flute for him, and recites Sufi poetry. This ritual serves the initiation of states of trance which reveals several visions. In each of these dream-like episodes, Raci finds himself in different lands and in different bodies. Even though Islamic mysticism constitutes the main source that unites all these distinct narratives within Raci’s dreams, these sub-narrations engage with Indic cultures, Zoroastrian mythology, and Confucian and Platonian philosophies. Furthermore, occasionally some of these journeys implicitly draw from the scientific thought of the nineteenth-century within its spiritual framework. By weaving all these elements together, *A’mâk-ı Hayâl* presents an intriguing story that reflects Ahmet Hilmi’s complex worldview. In this framework, Raci becomes a model and a representative for all the late Ottoman intellectuals who suffer from a sense of disorientation within their intellectual chambers.

The first single volume edition of *A’mâk-ı Hayâl*, which includes the first ten chapters that were serialised in several newspapers, opens with a preface note:

[Only] the consciences familiar with concerns of truth and people who enjoy matters relating to the ultimate end can read this book delightedly. For about a century, this milieu and this nation, raised many a Raci and will raise many more.

If this story which we present to the readers of *Hikmet* – wonder if it is a story – would be found worthy of compliments, we would deem ourselves content since the interest in this story contains a compliment for serious matters. [Such a gesture of course] can be expected from the readers of *Hikmet*. [These] dear readers, who enable the continuation

of the spread of *Hikmet* (wisdom), has proved to friends and enemies that there are thousands of hearts who are sensitive to the concerns of truth in this esteemed nation.¹⁰⁸

This preface note discloses Ahmet Hilmi's envisionment of a certain readership and an agenda for *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*. First, he addresses this readership as the "readers of *Hikmet*," the community who subscribes to the newspaper he publishes. Furthermore, he positions this readership in a chain of intellectual people that were present throughout the last "century" in Ottoman Empire and specifies them as an impliedly special group within the "nation". According to Hilmi, what defines this group constitutes their thorough interest in "concerns of truth" (*endişe-i hakikat*), "serious matters" (*ciddiyat*), and "matters relating to the ultimate end" (*mebâhis-i nihayiye*). The protagonist Raci, within this context, appears as a representative and a model for this readership who is part of a century long philosophical search. Although this initial note does not disclose what these serious concerns of truth include, other than presumably an interest on death, the first chapter of the novel presents a sufficient background in that regard.

In the first chapter, Raci presents a thorough introduction about himself, noting that he received a "perfect education" and became a young man who had "nothing left that he had not develop an idea about."¹⁰⁹ To elaborate on this vague expression, he underlines that "in contrast to [his] friends" he did not "distance himself from the knowledge of religious sciences (*ulum-ı diniyye*)".¹¹⁰ Starting from this very first chapter, the narrative depicts an intellectual world where religion is significantly separated from educational environment Raci took part in. This configuration presents Raci as a character inclined to religious teaching despite the established "distance" his peers keep from religion. Even though such narrative creates the impression that Raci is defined mainly through his religiosity at first, his continuing narration of himself quickly leaves such a clear-cut interpretation in vain. Raci discloses that despite being well learned in

¹⁰⁸ Şehbenderzade Filibeli Ahmet Hilmi. *A'mâk-ı Hayâl – Birinci Kitap: Raci'nin Hatıraları* (Ahmet Saki Bey Matbaası, 1326/1910-11), 1.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 4.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

matters relating “both to the visible and the invisible sides” (*batin and zahir*) of things, he finds himself troubled by “the dragon of doubt”.¹¹¹ He constantly feels a discrepancy between his “heart” and his “mind” and cannot feel content neither about “proven” facts nor about what he deems as “fictive” ideas.¹¹²

This distinction Raci presents between “proven” facts and “fictive” ideas parallels the distinction he refers to through the contrast between “*zahir*” (*visible, apparent*) and “*batin*” (*invisible, hidden*). This categorisation can be traced back in a long history of Islamic hermeneutics and Sufi philosophy. It refers to the difference between Islamic disciplines like Kalam and Fqih in contrast to the Sufi epistemologies. Within this framework, while disciplines of the *zahir* or apparent, like Kalam and Fiqh, focus on the primary or literal interpretations of the scripture, the disciplines concerning the hidden, such as Sufi epistemology, rely on mystical intuition and offer an esoteric engagement with the Qur’an. However, while both these terms conventionally refer to different epistemological and interpretive approaches within the Islamic culture, Raci’s use of this terminology signals a different kind of binary. Paralleling the two strands of his intellectual formation, the modern and religious sciences, this narrative associates *batin* with religion and *zahir* with proven fact. In that regard, while religion comes to represent a concern with intangible and gains a fictive quality, scientific mode of knowledge denotes verifiability due to its dependence on observable, empirical proof. Even though Raci cannot prefer one of these strands and renounce the other, his intellectual chambers seem to show a strict preference towards a worldview prioritising proven fact.

Accordingly, the scholarship focusing on the literary history of the Second Constitutional Era, when Ahmet Hilmi was an active writer, frames the conflict between Islam

¹¹¹ Ibid, 4-5.

¹¹² Ibid, 5.

and positivism as the defining axis of this intellectual atmosphere.¹¹³ To showcase the significance of this tension these intellectuals build between science and religion, most research on the late Ottoman intellectual history refers to the visit Charles MacFarlane, a Scottish traveller and author, paid to Mekteb-i Tıbbiye-i Şahane (The Royal Medical Academy). According to this anecdote, upon seeing a considerable number of books on “materialism” in the academic library, MacFarlane expresses his “astonish[ment]” and notes that he did not expect to encounter such a scene in a country as deeply shaped by religion as the Ottoman Empire.¹¹⁴ In response, one student cannot hold back the necessity he feels and discloses that “Galata Serai” is not a place where “one goes in search of religion.”¹¹⁵ Such catchy anecdotes clearly exemplify the contrast such intellectual chambers assumed between religion and science. According to Şükrü Hanioğlu, “the conflict between science and religion” became one of the most popular topics of discussion among Ottomans “shortly after the emergence of the Ottoman press.”¹¹⁶ Existing knowledge of Ottoman history of positivism shows that, especially the intellectual chambers around new “Westernised” academic institutions, like the Royal Medical Academy, blames the socio-economic problems of the declining empire on the lack of scientific improvement. Furthermore, they assuredly attribute this state of lack to the unnecessary importance attributed to religion within Ottoman society. These intellectuals, like Abdullah Cevdet, Beşir Fuat, and Baha Tevfik, deem science to be the cornerstone “of a new and rational civilisation” while approaching religion as “the most dangerous type of philosophy, and a major obstacle to social progress.”¹¹⁷ Therefore, in the eyes of these intellectuals, an advancement in science accompanied by a renunciation of religion constitutes the most

¹¹³¹¹³ Pelin Aslan Ayar. *Türkçe Edebiyatta Varla Yok Arası Bir Tür: Fantastik Roman* (1876 – 1960). (İletişim, 2018)

¹¹⁴ Şükrü Hanioğlu. “Blueprints of a Future Society: Late Ottoman Materialists on Science, Religion and Art.” In *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy*, ed. by Elizabeth Özdalga (Routledge, 2005), 33; Şeyma Afacan. *Of the Soul and Emotions: Conceptualizing 'the Ottoman Individual' through Psychology*. (University of Oxford, PhD Thesis, 2016), 102.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ “Blueprints of a Future Society,” 32.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 27.

fundamental solution to save the declining empire. The group of peers from whom Raci distinguishes himself in the initial chapters of *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, in that regard, reflects the political and philosophical stance of these positivist chambers.

Until recently, the role played by figures such as Raci and Ahmet Hilmi in this intellectual atmosphere was largely overshadowed within the field of Ottoman Studies, as the established scholarship predominantly focused on the “positivist” intellectuals and their discursive interventions. In that regard, the late Ottoman relationship with modern science has been interpreted within framework of religion-science conflict. However, recent research presented a paradigm shift that forestage alternative negotiations between modern science and religion. Furthermore, distancing from a perspective that approach Ottoman engagements with science as a matter of European influence, these recent studies also bring Ottoman interactions and negotiations with such discourse to the forefront. In this light, key researchers like Şeyma Afacan and Alper Bilgili started to draw attention to figures like İsmail Fenni Ertuğrul and Filibeli Ahmet Hilmi to showcase the distinct forms of synthesis these figures offered between science and religion.

In his work on İsmail Fenni, for instance, Alper Bilgili showcased that Fenni approached scientific discoveries and “empirical” findings of his age as “guiding” sources to better understand the “scripture.”¹¹⁸ Furthermore, Bilgili highlighted that İsmail Fenni invited his readers to approach laws of evolution as “natural laws” of God, as long as are not framed to “reject divine design.”¹¹⁹ The attention put on these nuances demonstrated that it was possible to offer a religiously compatible perspective of science in the late Ottoman context, even regarding ideas such as evolutionary theory which is typically seen as contradictory to religion. Fenni’s application of contemporaneous scientific developments to the hermeneutics of

¹¹⁸ Alper Bilgili. *Darwin ve Osmanlılar*. (Vadi, 2018), 32.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 38-39.

scripture, in that regard, revealed that the exported scientific discourse was integrated into the Ottoman intellectual legacy as much as it served as a borrowed source of influence.

On her dissertation on the development of the discipline of modern psychology in Ottoman Empire, Şeyma Afacan, displayed Ahmed Hilmi's role within this framework. Examining his book of psychology, Afacan introduced the synthesis Ahmet Hilmi created between science and religion through the connection he built between "psychology and spiritualism."¹²⁰ The way Ahmed Hilmi verbalises the discrepancy between Raci's mind and heart in *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, was a manifestation of this synthesis. The conflict between heart and mind, in this novel, represents the struggle between different epistemological strategies that compete in Ottoman intellectual world: Neither the epistemological centre of observation-based reasoning, Raci's mind, nor the mystical locus of knowledge in Sufism, Raci's heart, can convince the other. In this scenario the mystical and rational loci of knowledge do not appear as forces cancelling one another. In fact, Raci constantly suffers from "his mind confirming whatever he rejects with his heart [while] he accepts whatever his mind denies through his heart."¹²¹ Instead of establishing mind and heart as contrasting faculties, therefore, the novel frames Raci's sense of doubt not as a necessity to renounce one epistemological source over the other. Therefore, we can claim that, starting from the very first chapter, the narration prepares the ground for the synthesis to be offered between these two epistemological pathways.

The insight Afacan and Bilgili present, as well as Raci's resistance to pick one epistemological source over the other, highlights the necessity of introducing one more paradigm change. Research on the literary history of the Second Constitutional Era often define the conflict between Islam and science as the defining element of this period. In that regard, this line of thought positions figures like Ahmet Hilmi or Fenni in an "Islamicist" or "mystic"

¹²⁰ *Of the Soul and Emotions*, 52.

¹²¹ *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, 5.

camp opposing the positivist circles of figures like Abdullah Cevdet and Beşir Fuat.¹²² Studies that position *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* within this framework emphasise the “Islamic understanding” that dominates the novel and interpret its rich content through a gesture of linking all the other “philosophical and mythological” influences with Islam.¹²³ Despite containing elements of truth, these frameworks show the tendency of overlooking the synthesis that figures like Ahmet Hilmi and Fenni attempted. Furthermore, approaching all these alternative views as “Islamicist” gestures, this line of research overshadows the significant degree of diversity across the views compatible with Islam. However, we can see upon close examination that while İsmail Fenni’s positions grounds his arguments within a mainly scriptural approach towards Islam, Ahmet Hilmi adopts a spiritual stance.

According to Afacan Ahmet Hilmi’s position presents a critique not only of “materialism, the anti-religious tendency of his time” but also of “the religious establishment” of his age.¹²⁴ Afacan draws attention to such nuances in her work to caution against the tendency of framing all the late Ottoman intellectuals who deviate from the positivists circles as one single reactionary “Islamist” group.¹²⁵ Such a framing, indeed, creates the risk of undermining the heterogeneity of views among these more Islamically inclined figures, especially in terms of the variety of their approaches to “the tenets of Islamic theology and philosophy.”¹²⁶ Therefore, even though the established research on the Second Constitutional Era frames the conflict between the positivist and Islamicist camps as the defining axis of this intellectual atmosphere, the content of these discussions requires more nuanced paradigms that would prevent reductionist thinking. Understanding these nuances requires us to widen our horizon, considering not only the 19th century discussions between science and religion but also the

¹²² Aslan Ayar, 123-154.

¹²³ Ibid, 151.

¹²⁴ *Of the Soul and Emotions*, 53.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 51.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

historical and the literary background that prepared this age. The story of evolutionary theory in Ottoman intellectual world and *A'mâk-ı Hayal*'s configuration of this theory offers us a very fertile discussion in that regard.

In *Darwin's Plots* where she analyses Charles Darwin's works through English literary conventions, Gillian Beer highlights that scientific language develops "against the grain of the language available."¹²⁷ In other words, she emphasises that scientific knowledge, especially when it presents a radically novel perspective, not only creates a "resist[ence]" in the cultural world it enters but also establishes itself through the "appropriat[ion] and recast [of] inherited mythologies, discourses and narrative orders."¹²⁸ Scholarship on Ottoman intellectual history of science and Turkish literature can significantly benefit from considering this "two-way traffic" Beer brings to forefront.¹²⁹ The present chapter aims at introducing Ahmet Hilmi's interpretation of evolutionary theory as a sample for this two-way interaction within the Ottoman context. To present such discussion, we should first address the entry of evolutionary ideas into Ottoman intellectual milieu.

Ottoman engagements with the modern evolutionary theory mainly parallels the development of positivism within this intellectual context. In his *Osmanlı Aydınları ve Sosyal Darwinizm*, Atila Doğan presents a detailed panorama of Ottoman interactions with evolutionary thought. This intellectual world initiated interactions with modern evolutionary theory around 1870s, via the works of European materialists like De Baye, Haeckel, Büchner, and Bernard.¹³⁰ While Lamarck had initially been the primary figure referenced in Ottoman sources on evolution, starting from 1880s and especially in 1890s, Darwin's name also began

¹²⁷ Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 2-3.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 5.

¹³⁰ Bilgili, 21; Doğan, Atila, *Osmanlı Aydınları ve Sosyal Darwinizm*. (İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları,, 2006), 152; İnan Kalaycıoğulları & Batuhan Akgündüz. "Osmanlılar ve Lamarck." *Kaygı : Bursa Uludağ University Faculty of Arts and Sciences Journal of Philosophy*, no.21 (2022), 448-465.

to appear in these debates.¹³¹ According to Alper Bilgili, Lamarck's significant presence in Ottoman discussions can be interpreted as a direct effect of the emphasis European materialists put on the possibility of constant improvement.¹³² Conversely, distinguishing between Ottoman engagements with French and German materialist thought, Atila Doğan argues that French materialism served as the initial source through which Ottomans encountered modern evolutionary ideas.¹³³ Doğan emphasises that despite the spread of Darwinian thought across Europe around 1870s, French intellectual circles of the time remained "cautious" in their reception of Darwin due to concerns that the concept of natural selection could threaten "the priorities of national unity and stability" in post-revolutionary France.¹³⁴ Therefore, according to Doğan, the initial Ottoman interactions with evolution might be reflective of this French bias. In contrast, the German materialists like Büchner, whose *Force and Matter* became the most influential source among fully fetched positivists in the late Ottoman world, referred to Darwin's ideas in their work.¹³⁵ Therefore, the more positivist circles come to the forefront, the more visible Darwin seems to have grown among late Ottomans. Within this framework while Ahmet Midhat's early writings on evolutionary themes marks the first stage of encounter, later evolutionary discussions by positivist figures like Beşir Fuad and Abdullah Cevdet signifies another stage of such interactions.¹³⁶

Despite the staged appearance of references to Lamarck and Darwin, even the earliest Ottoman accounts of evolution drew upon the ideas of both scholars.¹³⁷ For instance, Ahmet Midhat referred to themes of adaptation to environment and struggle for survival

¹³¹ Doğan, 169.

¹³² Bilgili, 21.

¹³³ Doğan, 154-155.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 169.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ In their article titled "Osmanlılar ve Lamarck," Kalaycıoğulları and Akgündüz also argue for a staged engagement with evolution in late Ottoman period.

¹³⁷ Doğan, 155.

simultaneously in his work.¹³⁸ According to Doğan, these earlier representations of evolutionary ideas mainly focused on social implications of this theory.¹³⁹ It seems that these social implications became the primary concern of Ottoman intellectuals. The biological dimensions of evolutionary theory were not openly discussed until the proclamation of the Second Constitutional regime partly due to the Islamist agenda of Abdulhamid II, although intellectuals from The Royal Medical Academy had already developed a strong interest in biological evolution.¹⁴⁰ Even when the biological implications of this theory started to be heavily discussed after the revival of the constitution, these debates paralleled the social commentary drawn from them.¹⁴¹ In that regard Doğan notes that, Ottoman scholars often continued to blend adaptationist ideas and the notion of natural selection without distinguishing clearly between the two frameworks.¹⁴² This can also be considered relevant to the reception and representation of Spencerian ideas on Social Darwinism in the Ottoman context. While this dynamic might be reflective of a global trend of the interactions across multiple evolutionary ideas, Doğan attributes this tendency to the fact that the specific mechanism by which “evolution unfolded” held little “significance” for Ottoman intellectuals.¹⁴³ He notes that primary concern of these circles was to highlight the broader notion of improvement as a part of a progressivist sociological agenda.¹⁴⁴ Similarly, we can see how Ahmet Hilmi’s interpretation of evolutionary theory in *A’mâk-ı Hayâl* is reflective of his social views.

The fact that evolutionary theory was chiefly received in Ottoman context through its association with ideas of civilisational progress can be understood through interactions between scientific knowledge and “grain of language available” in the Ottoman intellectual milieu. In

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Doğan, 152-156; 237-238.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 192.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 336.

¹⁴² Ibid, 186.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 336.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 336.

the late Ottoman period, the theory of evolution was commonly referred to as *tekamül*. Being derived from the word “kemal,” which refers to a state of being “complete and mature” or a state of “perfection,” this term carries connotations of progress and maturation.¹⁴⁵ The teleological direction of this framework aligns well with the emphasis late Ottomans put on the theme of improvement, which aligns well with Lamarckism and Social Darwinism.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, we should note that the concept of “tekamül,” which grew to signify modern evolutionary theory during the 19th century in Ottoman Empire, was in use in Ottoman Turkish since the 18th century.¹⁴⁷ Signifying the discussions between Sufi philosophy, Islamic science and Islamic philosophy regarding the creation of material world, this term referred to the process by which Godly essence manifests in the material world through subsequent stages. The fact that the late Ottomans did not simply adopt a foreign term or coin a completely new term to refer to modern evolutionary theory provides significant insights into how scientific discourse interacts with the existing culture. Because the concept of *tekamül* and its implications on the gradual creation of the natural world was not only part of distant philosophical discussions in the linguistic horizon of Ottoman Turkish, but it was significantly present in the narrative conventions in classical Ottoman poetics through a specific genre known as *devriyye*.

¹⁴⁵ *Kamus-ı Türki*, “Kemal,” <https://www.osmanlicasozlukler.com/kamusiturki/tafsil-297583-ba7.html>; *Kamus-ı Türki*, “Tekemmül,” <https://www.osmanlicasozlukler.com/kamusiturki/tafsil-254399-b36.html>.

¹⁴⁶ While this chapter focuses on the circulation of Darwinian, Lamarckian, and Spencerian ideas in relation to the concept of “tekamül,” it is important to note that Ottoman engagements with evolutionary theory were not confined to these perspectives. Mehmet Fuat Köprülü’s article “Türk Edebiyatı Tarihi’nde Usûl” (1913), which outlines a proposed methodology for Turkish literary historiography, reflects this broader intellectual landscape. In this piece, Köprülü discusses the common tendency to draw parallels between the laws of natural sciences and the unfolding of history. He argues that through a blend of the ideas of Darwin, Spencer, and Marx, history started to be understood as a process of *tekamül*. However, Köprülü also notes that this method is being replaced by a paradigm relying on the evolutionary ideas of Bergson and De Veries, which proposed discontinuity and creative ruptures, rather than linear progression. Such an account demonstrates that late Ottoman intellectuals were aware of and engaged with a wide range of evolutionary models. While the present project centres Darwin and Lamarck in light of the concept of “tekamül,” acknowledging this broader spectrum of evolutionary ideas available in Ottoman intellectual world is essential for future research aiming to fully grasp this period. Fuat Köprülü, “Türk Edebiyatı Tarihi’nde Usûl,” In *Edebiyat Araştırmaları* (Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 1986), 6-11.

¹⁴⁷ Nusret Gedik. *Türk Edebiyatında Manzum Devriyye* (Marmara University, PhD thesis, 2016), 42.

In his dissertation on this genre where he traces the philosophical roots of this narrative form and technique, Nusret Gedik defines *devriyye* as literary works on “*devir nazariyesi*” (the theory of cyclical revolution), which refers to the philosophical configuration regarding

[the way] the existence that is manifested from God, descends first to the realm of mind, then to the realm of [material] shapes. [Continuing the descension, the existence] emanates firstly in minerals and earth, then in plants. Then [it continues to transition] from plants to animals, and from animals to humans and from this level to the stage of the perfect human (*insan-ı kamil*) [which signify a return] to God where human [and all existence] originated.¹⁴⁸

According to Gedik, this configuration of “revolving” transitions was developed through a mix of the “procession theories” developed by Islamic philosophers, the Sufi convention on the “unity of being,” and “tekamül” configurations in history of Islamic science. In its essence, this “cyclical revolution theory” offers an understanding that explains the existence of the material world through staged “emanations from the Necessary Being,” God.¹⁴⁹ According to this view, God first creates a universal intellect, “*akl-ı kull*”, which holds the potential of all emanations to be proceeded.¹⁵⁰ After several continuing stages, conceptual bodies start to be materialised as the “divine light” descends to “the earth” and “passes on to minerals [and] plants,” then manifests in “animals” and finally arrives at “human” form and from there it moves on to “the perfect human.”¹⁵¹ This final arrival point stands as a return to the source of emanation, the Ultimate Being or the God, as a state of being one with Him. Within a Sufi conception, this “cyclical revolution” assumes the divine essence to be present in each of these material manifestations but also acknowledges its procedural emanations. Therefore, while on one hand unifying the material bodies with one another and with God, this theory also leaves room for the distinctions between them. In short, the entry of modern evolutionary theory into the late Ottoman world cannot be understood as a sterile process. Because once “evolution” becomes

¹⁴⁸ Gedik, 103.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 24.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 81.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 81-82.

“tekamül,” it inescapably engages with the legacy of narrative conventions like devriyye and becomes susceptible to the connotations the term “tekamül” has.

The interaction between evolutionary theory and these cultural conventions in the Ottoman Empire becomes evident in the earliest texts that address evolution within the Ottoman intellectual landscape. As earlier noted, several articles Ahmet Midhat published in the journal *Dağarcık* are considered to be the first texts in Ottoman Turkish discussing evolutionary thought.¹⁵² In these essays, Ahmet Mithad touches upon a variety of evolutionary themes like competition, random/natural selection, maturation, common ancestry, and a staged unfold of evolution.¹⁵³ These early writings on evolutionary thought occasionally draw from the “grain of” spiritual “language available.” For instance, in a passage from an essay titled “Veladet,” while discussing a theme of common ancestry, Ahmet Mithad wrote:

In each particle that makes up this first layer of the globe, my body was present. By collecting my body parts in every particle, I went through [various] states. I became earth, I adopted the shape of plants. I turned into flowers and blossomed. I turned into insects and got spread.[...] Lastly in a fourth layer, after witnessing ten thousand transformations [...] [my] fate was to be born right at this time.¹⁵⁴

In these instances, by presenting a narrative “I” who vocalises a “body [that is] present” across evolutionary transitions, Ahmet Mithad evoked the impression of an enduring existence or essence that both witnesses and embodies the course of evolution. This narrative strategy, whether impliedly or not, drew from the legacy of devriyye form. In that regard, while on the one hand introducing a European scientific conception to an Ottoman audience, on the other Ahmet Midhat adorned it with familiar garments.

A'mâk-ı Hayâl presents a very similar account of evolution in which the language of modern evolutionary theory blends into the Sufi conceptions of cyclical revolution. However,

¹⁵² Doğan, 153-155; Deniz Gültekin, *Osmanlı Düşünce Dünyasında Evrim Teorisi Tartışmaları* (Urzeni Yayınevi, 2022), 93-94.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ahmet Midhat, “Veladet” In *Dağarcık*, n.d. quoted in Deniz Gültekin, *Osmanlı Düşünce Dünyasında Evrim Teorisi Tartışmaları* (Urzeni Yayınevi, 2022), 100.

while Ahmet Midhat's style of drawing from the devriyye form constitutes an accurate example of how scientific language develops through an engagement with "the grain of language available," Ahmet Hilmi's narration results from his distinct attempt at synthesising modern science and Sufi philosophy. In other words, the way Ahmet Hilmi presents an interpretation of evolution through his synthesised worldview creates the impression that he *consciously* makes use of such interactions between scientific language and the literary conventions. Accordingly, in this novel which presents Raci's quest for resolution amidst the tension between "his heart" and "his mind," and respectively the *batın* and the *zahir*, an account of evolution that feeds on both religious and scientific language serves to unite these binaries. In that regard, by creating an account where Raci both witnesses and embodies the descent from oneness and interspecies transitions, the narrative unites the methodological horizon of both positivist and Sufi epistemologies.

The evolutionary account *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* presents appears in the third dream of Raci which constitutes the fourth chapter of the novel, titled "Devr-i Daim" ("Unending Revolution"). After introducing Raci as a young intellectual who is caught up in a contrast between religion and modern science, the novel exhibits his search for resolution through the dreams/visions he has in his rituals with Mirror Baba. In "Devr-i Daim" Raci wakes up within his dream "as a twelve-year-old boy" in an unknown "big city."¹⁵⁵ His father tells him that "since [he] reached the age of wisdom now" it is time to go on a quest with "the great master."¹⁵⁶ After an "arduous" journey, this guide and the boy arrive at "a hut" where "there only is a bowl filled with water."¹⁵⁷ The master performs "a prayer" and wishes "the essential body of existence" (*vücud-ı asli*) to "show its stages of body and levels of soul" and then commands the

¹⁵⁵ *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, 38.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

boy to “stare at the water.”¹⁵⁸ Once the boy starts staring, he slowly transitions into a vision. First, “everywhere becomes dark” and then the boy, or Raci, hears “a voice from an unknown source.”¹⁵⁹ This voice utters a verse devriyye that expresses how “in the moment of unification [with God],” an essence is “hidden in all.”¹⁶⁰ The poem continues by stating how this essence sometimes manifests itself as “sun” and sometimes as “moon”, and likewise how it can be “rain” or “cloud”, “night” or “wind”, “rock” or “plant”, “ant” or “lion”, and finally both “soul” and “bodily form.”¹⁶¹ The poem concludes by noting that, this “revolving” essence “is going to [transform into] Adam,” in whose body “God manifests [Himself].”¹⁶²

After presenting the classical Sufi idea about bodily transitions in a versified devriyye, the narrative returns to the novel form to reconfigure this notion within a mix with modern evolutionary theory. In other words, following a classical devriyye, the narrative moves on to its reflection in the form of the novel. This time, Raci starts to experience this whole chain of transformations within his own body. First, he narrates being present in a state of “staying in one single point and moment, while imaginatively revolving through points manifested by imagined existence across millions of centuries.”¹⁶³ This moment corresponds to the stage of *akl-ı kull* in cyclical revolution theory, which refers to the state where God descends by first creating a universal intellect. This intellect contains all existence, and its upcoming unfolding as “imagined” possibilities, like a plan for a paper to be written. Even though nothing yet appears in visible forms and bodies, Raci can know and feel that he “revolve[s]” across “imagined existences” that will “manifest” the divine essence through “millions of centuries” in different bodily shapes. Then narrative zooms in to this moment to reveal subsequent stages it contains. Raci feels a sense of “intensification” in “[him]self” just “as if [he] surrounds an

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 40.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 41.

infinite field which encompasses [him]self.”¹⁶⁴ In other words, he feels that he becomes all being while all being becomes his body. Then, he sees that in “a glimpse of an eye,” there appears “a universe” which “covers a million” fields and also “fit[s] into [his] palm.”¹⁶⁵ This state of “intensification” refers to the transition from conceptual existence to physical existence by which the Godly essence descends into the material world.

The narrative, which follows the literary conventions of a devriyye in prose form until this section, starts to introduce details that are associated more with modern scientific thought. After Raci “enters” a “globe consisting fully of water” in a corner of the universe he just witnessed, and he starts to “cover millions of strange animals.”¹⁶⁶ These animals, he notes, “neither have limbs or special shapes.”¹⁶⁷ Raci defines his bodily experience in the forms of these “millions of animals,” as a matter of being “imprisoned.”¹⁶⁸ While on one hand he embodies “these animalistic existences” and becomes them, on the other he feels the need to “escape” these forms “lacking any sensation or mind.”¹⁶⁹ In instances like this, the concept of “imprisonment” establishes Raci’s essential self to be beyond material boundaries of the animals he embodies. In that regard, Ahmet Hilmi envisions human to be a higher entity that feels stuck in animalistic bodies. While on one hand drawing attention to a scientifically specific detail about the bodies which “lack limbs or special shapes”, on the other hand, the narration maintains the religiosity that conceptualises human as a superior end point in revolution. This configuration also expresses an understanding of evolution that moves toward the better. Raci continues to witness and states that in these bodies, which significantly resemble single-cell organisms, “strange transformations get born” which manifest themselves through “thousands

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 42.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

of shapely appearances.”¹⁷⁰ Quite significantly, the narrating voice of Raci defines these transformations as a matter of “tekemmül”, a matter of “evolution” towards maturation. In these instances, the way narrative is adorned with scientific information about speciation, like the existence of “animals without limbs or special shapes” or the transformations that are manifested in “thousands of [different] shapely appearances”, establishes a balanced mix of scientific and mystic religious understandings.

Ahmet Hilmi preserves this scientific spice throughout the narrative in “Devr-i Daim”. In this regard, Raci witnesses that at some point he sees himself “in the bodies of animals not only in sea but also in earth.”¹⁷¹ One moment he feels the bond between animals “that are not dangerous” to each other, the next moment he feels that his “changing shapes permeate into minerals.”¹⁷² Furthermore, he starts to witness how animals start to multiply not only “through unclear causes” but through the “moments of love” between “male and female” essences, while his bodies are “not distinctly male or female.”¹⁷³ Finally, he further comments on the idea of speciation by noting that his “bodily forms” multiplied so much that “they no longer resemble each other visually.”¹⁷⁴ Although Ahmet Hilmi keeps the narrative tightly in the framework of a devriyye, in these occasions, he constantly establishes negotiations with modern conventions of evolutionary theory. He even opens up space for the randomness embedded on Darwin’s understanding of evolution. In that regard, Ahmet Hilmi establishes a chain of transformations not only move forwards but also get mixed and mingled across more primitive and complex stages. For instance, the “permeation” to “the minerals” does not precede the speciation as one might expect through an isolated Sufi understanding of transformation. Instead, in a way that is supported by scientific evolutionary knowledge, Ahmet Hilmi envisions stages that are

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 43.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

entangled and simultaneous. In these entangled stages he further draws from the insight offered by modern science. For instance he mentions that some of “these bodily forms feed on others” or how some of his bodies become “clever”, while others end up being “weak.”¹⁷⁵ Furthermore, by noting that “universe turn[ed] into a battle ground of competition and benefit” which becomes some sort of “a law”, Ahmet Hilmi implicitly integrates the idea of struggle for survival within his narrative.¹⁷⁶ In this way, this text draws from the conceptions of modern evolutionary thought by implicitly referencing a conception of “struggle” for survival in the natural world” or a non-linear speciation process, highlighting the themes of extinction and elimination of certain characteristics.

After giving a very scientifically established account of evolution that draws from the insight of modern evolutionary science, Ahmet Hilmi finally arrives at the development of the human form. As hinted through details about the animalistic bodies being prison cells, in this part, the narration transitions back to a religiously charged description: “As if the secret mystery, that has been temporarily entrusted to every single grain of the universe starts to come together in a single bodily form” Raci feels that he is being “contained and invaded” by a “breeze of meaning.”¹⁷⁷ He witnesses that in this stage “all bodies put their heads down on earth, right beneath the feet of human” and that “every grain” in the universe “salutes” him.¹⁷⁸ After this arrival at human form Raci wakes up into the frame story and returns to graveyard where Mirror Baba waits for him. Catching the dervish’s questioning eyes, Raci responds with a very short sentence: “They all prostrated.”¹⁷⁹ This last sentence of Raci is the Turkish rendering of a direct quotation from Qur’an about the creation of Adam. By ending his configuration of evolution that combines Sufi understanding of revolution and Ottoman

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 44.

understanding of evolution with a Quranic quotation, Ahmet Hilmi adds another interpretive dimension to his narrative. This gesture offers a Sufi-inflected hermeneutic perspective to the creation story in Qur'an. Similar to the insight Bilgili provides about İsmail Fenni, Ahmet Hilmi offers to apply evolutionary theory as an interpretive element to Islamic hermeneutics. Through a mix of Sufism, tekamül, and Qur'an, Ahmet Hilmi establishes evolutionary theory as a mystical experience that will reveal the divine truth. Furthermore, he brings it to a more conscious level as a source to be applied to the interpretations of the Qur'an.

Transposing the devriyye style into the novel form and complicating it with a scientifically specified language, "Devr-i Daim" presents a nuanced interpretation of evolution which both assume the unity of being and a staged process of speciation. Within this framework, while species evolve to have distinct forms, sometimes through competition and sometimes through maturation, they also share a divine essence which makes them different manifestations of God. The linguistic gestures that combine spiritual unfolding of evolution with scientific language constitutes one aspect of establishing this specific interpretation of evolution which combines epistemologies of science and religion. In addition to these linguistic choices, the narrative voice of Raci, which both embodies and witnesses evolutionary processes, creates a grey space where scientific epistemological methods merge with spiritual ones. In other words, Raci's bodily experience in this narration creates a framework of discovery (keşf), experience (tecrübe), and body (vücud) that combine spiritual and materialist connotations of these concepts.

In *Darwin's Plots* Gillian Beer underlines that evolutionary theory alongside geological discoveries, disrupted human experience about time and conventional narrative strategies by revealing that "man is unfitted by the shortness of his time span either to recognise the great

extensions of change in the natural world or to effect change himself.”¹⁸⁰ Quite strikingly, even though both evolutionary theory and geological advancements depends on scientific observation and reasoning, Gillian Beer’s comment reveals that these discoveries also showed how “narrow[ly] limit[ed]” human “senses” and experiences are when it comes to the “[ability] to observe the natural phenomena [...] surround[ing]” them.¹⁸¹ The source of “the dragon of doubt” disturbing Raci in *A’mâk-ı Hayâl* partially stems from this paradoxical relationship between the confidence empirical science put on experimental observation and its fragility compared to the scale of time. On the one hand, scientific discovery and observation appear as the ultimate epistemological methodology revealing the truth, while on the other hand they serve to negate their own power by revealing how dependent they are in the particularities of the present time and moment. Ahmet Hilmi establishes *keşf* experience in “Devr-i Daim” to address this tension. Through the way he establishes a sense of temporality and experiential embodiment, Ahmet Hilmi presents an episode of *keşf* to transcend the limits of sensual observation in a way that still relies on their factual power.

Keşf, which can simply be translated as “discovery” into English, carries connotations that can be associated both with science and spirituality. *Kamus-ı Turki*, one of the earliest Ottoman Turkish dictionaries, exemplifies the varying uses this word. In cases like the “discovery of America” where *keşf* is understood as a matter of “finding something unknown and revealing it” and likewise in cases like “officials going out for discovery,” this refers to the act of “thorough examination and investigation.”¹⁸² In such uses, this term gains a meaning embedded on the discovery of facts through scientific and observational practices. On the other hand, however, this term bares the heavy connotations of Sufi philosophy and metaphysical experientiality, signifying a state of “discovering the deep mysteries” or “many truths having

¹⁸⁰ *Darwin’s Plots*, 16.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, 17.

¹⁸² *Kamus-ı Türki*, “*Keşf*,” <https://www.osmanlicasozlukler.com/kamusiturki/tafsil-297365-mh9.html>

been revealed to a person.”¹⁸³ In these occasions, keşf is defined as a matter of “being privy to a secret [knowledge]” or “a hidden state or secret being revealed as inspiration to someone.”¹⁸⁴ In these later uses, keşf becomes a matter of esoteric epistemological experience. Similarly, the concept of “tecrübe” which is an equivalent of “experience” in contemporary Turkish, has both mystical and empirical connotations. “Tecrübe” refers to empirical “experimentation” within a scientific context in late Ottoman Turkish.¹⁸⁵ However, within the context of Sufism, “tecrübe” connotes the “mystical experience” that “enables keşf.”¹⁸⁶ While the first group of meanings of both concepts assume a willing observing agency within an empirical frame, the second group conceptualises a receiving self within a spiritual context. “Devr-i Daim,” in the establishment of its interpretation of evolution, unites the states of intentional observation and receiving witness-hood through the temporal and bodily experience of Raci.

In “Devr-i Daim,” Raci’s narrative voice gives his account of a keşf episode where the sense of temporality can be stretched to reveal millions of centuries it contains. In his dream, Raci narrates a state of “staying in one single point and moment, while imaginatively revolving through points manifested by imagined existence across millions of centuries.”¹⁸⁷ The emphasis on “staying in one single moment” while witnessing the history of “existence,” establishes a conception of time inflicted with Sufism. In that regard, time concerns no bounds, neither a beginning nor an end. Likewise, time constitutes a container point which holds all succession of events that create a sense of temporality within itself. Therefore, the entry of scientifically specified temporality of evolution, which continues “across millions of centuries,” into this narration posits a paradox. On the one hand, the temporality Raci experiences is timeless, on the other hand though, it unfolds in successive events. Through this simultaneity of being

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ *Kamus-ı Fransevi*. “Tecrübe,” <https://www.osmanlicasozlukler.com/fransevi/tafsil-48311-mul.html>

¹⁸⁶ Reşat Öngören. “Tasavvuf” In *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi*, accessed May 20, 2025,

<https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/tasavvuf>

¹⁸⁷ *A’mâk-ı Hayâl*, 41.

unbound of time and regardless using time as a measure, “Devr-i Daim” opens up a space in esoteric keşf for observation based keşf configurations. The receiving witness that watches the being also becomes the intentional agent that measures and examines.

Further playing with this tension between moments and centuries, “Devr-i Daim” slowly zooms in this moment to reveal the successive stages it holds. This zoom in creates a combination of willing scientific observation and esoteric testimony. The time that is as narrow as the present moment gets configured as a stretchable concept that includes a successive history in itself. In this succession of events, Raci first sees “the universe”, then finds his attention “drawn to a globe consisting fully of water.”¹⁸⁸ Next moment he finds himself “in the water” where he “cover[s] millions of strange animals” and then he sees himself “in the bodies of [those] animals.”¹⁸⁹ He witnesses how in the bodies of these animals he transitions from “water” to the “earth” where he starts to “lose some limbs”, “change shape”, and start to get multiplied through “moments of love” between the “female and male bodies.”¹⁹⁰ In each of his transitions between these separate moments within one single moment of existence, Raci notes over and over again that “in a moment millions of centuries passed.”¹⁹¹ Raci emphasises that his transitions “continued for millions of years” and that “in this temporality” where he experiences here and now, “hours, years and centuries [were a matter of] one single moment.”¹⁹² By emphasising such specific expressions like “millions of years”, embedded in the 19th century developments in evolutionary biology and geology, this narrative allows Raci to witness and observe the natural history that is beyond his sensual limits. However, by using the Sufi conception of “moment” as a key to this experience, the narrative also manages to maintain the

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 42.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 43.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

Sufi framework. Therefore, this experience becomes a ground where mystical and scientific epistemological pathways depend on each other and support one another.

Alongside the configuration of temporality, this narration also uses the concept of body (vücûd) in his effort to establish the keşf experience as a means of unifying these different epistemological pathways. Just as was the case in the concepts of *keşf* and *tecrübe*, vücud bears one meaning embedded on material reality and another referring to a religiously charged transcendental conception. Kamus-ı Türkî defines vücud both as “shape, [physical] body, [and/or] bodily form” and as the concept of “being” or “existence” itself.¹⁹³ In “Devr-i Daim”, this double meaning of vücud also lends itself naturally to Ahmet Hilmi’s effort of unifying different epistemologies. In that regard, Raci’s bodily experience draws both from the whole conception of existence and the material bodies of evolving species.

Right before the narrative zooms in this “single moment” it established, Raci feels “as if [he] surrounds an infinite field which encompasses [him]self.”¹⁹⁴ In other words, he embodies a transcendental unit in its totality while also supervising its parts. Even though in each transition across species and materials he concentrates on one single event in one single stage, Raci constantly underlines that his attention merely spotlights a part of the totality he embodies. In other words, even though Raci narrates the experience in one single body which allows him to focus on one single part, he continues to experience all different parts of existence simultaneously. For instance, narrating the extinction processes within a continuum of events, Raci notes that “in each minute millions of [his] bodily forms were left extinct” while others continued to transform.¹⁹⁵ Similarly, talking about speciation processes, he notes that “[his] bodily forms changed,” in ways that “no longer resemble the others visually.”¹⁹⁶ In these

¹⁹³ Kamus-ı Türkî, “Vücûd,” <https://www.osmanlicasozlukler.com/kamusiturki/tafsil-303602-sa9.html>

¹⁹⁴ *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, 41.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 43.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

occasions, the keşf experience again dances between willing observation of a scientist examining a particular event, and the mystical experience of a Sufi that witnesses the truth being revealed to him, contributing to the blend of scientific and religious epistemologies.

This configuration of evolution is a product of Ahmet Hilmi's nuanced position within the late Ottoman intellectual world. This perspective synthesizes religion and science but also presents a particular interpretation of evolution by drawing on the “grain of language” and culture “available.” This framework of evolution assumes both *vahdet* (unity or oneness) and *tekamül* (maturation). In other words, this conception includes both the assumption that species evolve gradually towards a state of perfection and that each species serve as yet another material appearance of the singular divine essence. Therefore, while this configuration assigns each species a rank of maturity based on their relative stages in the evolutionary process of development, it also complicates this hierarchy by equating them as unique manifestations of the same divine source. Through and through, “Devr-i Daim” presents an interpretation of evolution that synthesises modern science and religious conventions by drawing on the linguistic and cultural resources available in the Ottoman literary context.

This evolutionary interpretation, which appears in the fourth chapter (and the third dream) in the novel, takes place among a series of dreams/visions Raci had throughout *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*. In other words, it is situated within a broader textual frame, which compiles stories that supposedly offer a resolution for the late Ottoman intellectuals like Raci, who grapple with “concerns of truth.”¹⁹⁷ Therefore, it contributes to the intellectual agenda Ahmet Hilmi sets forth for this novel alongside the other stories it sides with. This intellectual position *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* carves out, is above all a spiritual one, not only bringing science and religion together but also constructing a particular spiritual and mystical discourse. This worldview is shaped various

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 1.

branches of thought like the spiritualist movements of the nineteenth-century, the development of modern science, and various mystical and philosophical traditions. All these different streams come together within the textual body of *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* like an amalgamation to offer a nuanced stance. These stories touch upon themes of the limited nature of bodies in fully grasping the truth and the spiritual implications of several other philosophies and mythologies. The dreams Raci has within the first single volume copy of *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* culminate towards a final assembly scene. In this occasion which appears in the tenth chapter of the first single volume version of this book, several characters, representing various philosophical schools that feed into *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, gather in a council convened by the Prophet Muhammad to debate the nature of a content life. In other words, all the previous revelational dreams Raci had in *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* builds towards this climactic moment and each vision serve as a step toward this point where Raci's intellectual crisis will be resolved.

This formal organisation in *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* gives an account of Raci's intellectual and spiritual development through a series of stories that gain episodic qualities. In other words, while these stories the text contains appear as distinct narratives from each other, they contribute to the general frame by serving as different streams establishing a worldview. This narrative form posits a significant parallel to the interpretation of evolutionary theory reflected in "Devri Daim" chapter. While this interpretation of evolution constitutes the thematic content of the fourth chapter within the textual body of *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, it also informs the general formal structure of the whole text. In this context, just as Ahmet Hilmi's evolutionary thought imagines different species as unique and valuable manifestations of the same divine essence, each of the stories Raci enters in his dreams work as distinct and meaningful units, compact and complete on their own. Similarly, just as Ahmet Hilmi's vision of evolution imagines a teleological progression toward perfection, these narratives, too, move toward a culminating moment in the assembly scene where all the perspectives come together within a discussion. Furthermore, just

as this conception of evolution unites species within the ultimate essence, Raci's embodiment of all these stories serves as the unifying thread that stitches these stories together. In this light, it is safe to claim that *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* functions like a novel that contains an anthology within itself. We can interpret this structure as a novelistic form nourished by the various structural possibilities of the *masnavi* genre. Such a discussion enables us to interpret *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* as an Ottoman configuration of bildungsroman bridging old and new literary conventions.

Previous discussions on the genre of *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* seem to arrive in a consensus over the fact that this text significantly diverges from a standard conception of the novel. Some of the existing research explains this structural deviation as a matter of having technical “flaws” or as issues stemming from the predominance of Sufi teaching within the text. Some studies argue that certain sections constitute technical “flaws” within this piece as they cause disruption within the narration of the protagonist's development.¹⁹⁸ Some other research supports these perspectives on form, through examinations of the content. In her MA thesis on *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, Damla Sağdıç attempts to define this text as a modernist novel. According to Sağdıç, the theme of “the search for truth within the inner world” constitutes a commonality *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* shares with modernist novels.¹⁹⁹ However, she also notes that the fact that this piece shows a “hasty” tendency to “move on to the message it wants to convey,” which prevents it from “deeply committing to the complexities of this inner struggle.”²⁰⁰ Noting that a deep treatment of such complexities constitute one of the key aspects of the modernist texts, Sağdıç prevents from naming *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* as a fully-fetched sample for the modernist novel.²⁰¹ In another research evaluating *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* through the fantastic genre, Pelin Aslan Ayar arrives at a similar conclusion. She argues that the pervasive “didactic” tone inflected with Sufism diminishes the

¹⁹⁸ Sema Noyan. “‘A'mâk-ı Hayâl' Romanında Tasavvuf, Budizm, Hinduizm ve Zerdüştlük Açısından Vahdet-i Vücut Karşılaştırması,” *Türkiyat Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 66 (2019), 179.

¹⁹⁹ Damla Sağdıç. *Tasavvufun Derinliklerinden Modernist Romana Açılan Kapı: A'mak-ı Hayâl*. (Nevşehir Üniversitesi, MA Thesis, 2013), 66.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 146.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

fantastical dimensions of this novel.²⁰² Although all these studies provide valuable insights for interpreting *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, we can see that they share a methodological strategy: All these pieces adopt a definition of the novel genre that is rooted in European literary cultures. Therefore, as they attempting to situate this text within various novelistic configurations, they adopt a methodology that compares it to the European standards. However, the aspects these perspectives highlight as deviations from the standard configurations of the novel in the case of *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, in fact, stem from its convergence with old literary conventions. In this light, *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*'s resistance to Eurocentric genre conceptions necessitates that we evaluate this piece of within the literary context it emerged.

In his preface his transliteration of *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, Fatih Altuğ suggests that this narrative can be considered an “Ottoman bildungsroman.”²⁰³ According to Altuğ, especially the fact that this text presents the “maturation process” of its protagonist leads us to such a conclusion. When we consider the evolutionary narrative that shapes *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, we can see that Altuğ's remark points at an intriguing perspective on how this novel can be understood within Ottoman literary conventions. Once again to draw from *Modernist Life Histories* by Daniel Newman, we can highlight the “substantial and systematic literary dialogue” he detected between the bildungsroman genre and “the biological models of development and evolution.”²⁰⁴ According to Newman, this genre's dependence on the protagonist's development naturally aligns it with scientific conceptions of development. In this context, *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* also lends itself to such a reading, as its structure is shaped by its own understanding of evolution. Furthermore, the way this evolutionary structure is incorporated into the novel can likewise be understood as a narrative element that negotiates between older literary conventions and

²⁰² Aslan Ayar, 147-148.

²⁰³ Altuğ, 13.

²⁰⁴ Newman, viii.

emerging modern ones. In that regard, *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* can be understood as an Ottoman bildungsroman.

Within the domain of Classical Turkish literature, the masnavi genre constitutes the largest and the most dominant literary form for conveying narratives. While this genre can be used to narrate the lengthy story of a central character, it can also be utilised to create a collection of stories compiled within a framing narrative or theme. According to Victoria Holbrook, who specialises on the masnavi, although we can encounter narratives in “other prose forms in [the configurations of classical] Ottoman literature,” the way masnavis “confront and sincerely express the overwhelming inner states of human beings” constitutes the key feature that “distinguishes” it from the other forms “throughout history.”²⁰⁵ Furthermore, Holbrook argues that due to this specific feature, the masnavi shares a commonality with “pre-modern romances, which are the precursors of the Bildungsroman genre” within European literary conventions.²⁰⁶ In that regard, considering *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*'s engagement with evolutionary alongside its kinship with the masnavi, this text can be considered a product of the establishment of modern bildungsroman genre in Ottoman Turkish, akin to its development in the European context.

Drawing from both of the two structural possibilities of the masnavi within the novel format, this bildungsroman narrates the developmental journey of a character and also assembles sources that support this development, much like a collection of stories within the novel's body. In this sense, *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* offers a narrative about the development of an Ottoman intellectual through Raci's story, while also bringing together key episodes that enrich this intellectual position. An analysis of the content of these short narratives within the novel reveals the nuanced nature of the worldview Ahmet Hilmi constructs and represents. These

²⁰⁵ Victoria Holbrook, “Alegorinin Ölümü, Hüsn ü Aşk'ın Özgünlüğü,” In *Osmanlı Divan Şiiri Üzerine Metinler*, ed. by Mehmet Kalpaklı (Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 1995), 408.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

stories extend beyond the scope of synthesising religious and scientific discourses. These stories touch upon the themes of bodily limitations in accessing truth and they reference various non-Islamic spiritual philosophies and mythological traditions. In that regard, *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* offers a worldview that cannot be reduced into an Islamicist agenda.

A'mâk-ı Hayâl mainly centres the narratives on the limits of bodily senses through the fourth and seventh of Raci's dreams. In the fourth dream titled "Maidan of Examination, Counsel of the Wise", Raci wakes up in a strange world of "afreets" and "demons" who have "shallots for eyes" and thus lack the sense of sight.²⁰⁷ Starting to wander around the city of these strange creatures Raci witnesses that they are very much "developed in art", that they "especially consider literature, theology, and wisdom important", and that they "have many famous scholars [...] and many scholars in their universities."²⁰⁸ This episode serves an allegorical representation of the intellectual chambers of Darülfünun, the modern high education institution in Ottoman Istanbul, where Ahmet Hilmi himself was the instructor of philosophy. Upon his visits to these creatures' universities, Raci witnesses intellectual discussions on science and theology among these intellectual chambers. These discussion mostly address the questions regarding "the creation of the universes" and whether in the very beginning there was "light blue demons" or "purple demons sitting beside the White Afreet."²⁰⁹ This debate gets more and more heated, and the scholars start to introduce their philosophical, sometimes religions, and scientific explanations one by one refuting each other. Raci deems all these intellectual refutations and conflicts to be a form of ridiculous "delirium."²¹⁰ This episode, which allegorises the late Ottoman intellectual world, defamiliarizes the Ottoman context to attribute it a level of absurdity. When Raci wakes up Mirror Baba comments on this dream

²⁰⁷ *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, 47.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 48.

²¹⁰ Ibid, 50.

claiming that “the true nature of things in the perception of human knowledge resembles the discoveries” of these creatures.²¹¹ Furthermore, he states that “when it comes to seeing truths, the human eye equals the relative value of shallots.”²¹² In this light, Ahmet Hilmi conceptualises the truth as something unattainable neither through mere religion nor through mere science.

The second occasion where *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* mainly highlights the theme of limited senses appears in the seventh chapter titled “The Ocean of Sublime and The Swirl of Grandeur”. In this chapter, in his dream Raci wakes up in a body with “one single eye in the middle of [the] head, [...] one single arm extending from the chest and one single leg like a pillar.”²¹³ He finds himself joining a group of travellers heading to a quest with the hopes of having “two eyes, two arms, and two legs” once they reached the destination.²¹⁴ Unlike the previous example that address the same theme, where Raci simply observes the others’ limitation, this chapter frames bodily limitations as a handicap that prevents Raci himself from having accessing the truth. The travellers arrive at “The Garden of Wisdom” (*Cennet-i İrfan*) through their quest. This place neighbours “a sea” that is separated from the garden through a “strong and transparent barrier.”²¹⁵ The narration describes that the surface of this sea is not levelled with the one of garden. Instead “the surface of the sea reaches endless heights” without ever mixing with the air in the garden.²¹⁶ “The Garden of Wisdom” (*Cennet-i İrfan*) in this story serves as an allusion to the “Counsel of the Wise” in the fourth chapter, where Raci listens to intellectuals who make their cases. Just as those intellectuals present their refutations and arguments without ever managing to discover what is beyond their perceptual faculties, the travellers cannot access this oceanic body neighbouring this garden which stands for wisdom.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid, 69.

²¹⁴ Ibid, 70.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

After spending many days at this garden, the party goes to see “The Waterfall of Manifestation” (*Tecelli Şelalesi*) where this “sublime ocean” flows onto the land and “enters in a nutshell.”²¹⁷ In this story, the concept of “tecelli” (manifestation) appears as the mediator between the material factuality and the unattainable truth Ahmet Hilmi conceptualises throughout the novel. In the context of Sufism, “tecelli” refers to “God’s action of creation” in relation to the theory of emanation developed in Islamic philosophy.²¹⁸ In other words, this term expresses the materialisation of the conceptual creation. While the garden of wisdom represents the maximum limit these limited bodies could reach, the “sublime ocean” appears as a symbol of the unattainable truth. The guide leading the travellers in their journey tells that this nutshell where ocean enters the garden is “The Swirl of Grandeur” where the “sublime sea” flows “since time immemorial.”²¹⁹ In a second, the noise of the water flowing into the nutshell becomes audible, so loud to knock all travellers’ unconscious. When they woke up, they realise that they now have “double eyes, hands, and legs.”²²⁰ After establishing the limiting nature of the material bodies in the fourth chapter, this chapter emphasises the concept of manifestation as the basis of reaching beyond the limits. Through these two stories on the theme of bodily limits in contrast to the unattainable truth, Ahmet Hilmi builds a vision that acknowledges the importance of observation and reason in the journey towards the truth but also suggests that it should be enlarged through the integration of concepts like manifestation which assigns spiritual dimensions to the material world.

Ahmet Hilmi’s blend of spiritual and material is mostly presented through terms and concepts grounded in Sufi philosophy in *A’mâk-ı Hayâl*. However, the spiritual horizon of this text does not only include but also reaches into accounts of Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and

²¹⁷ Ibid, 71.

²¹⁸ Semih Ceylan. “Tecelli” In *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi*, <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/tecelli>

²¹⁹ *A’mâk-ı Hayâl*, 71

²²⁰ Ibid.

Hinduism. While the first printed copy consisting of ten chapters only represents these three philosophies, the later serialised sections that make up a second book of *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* enlarges its horizon into Confucian, Aristotelian and Platonian philosophies. Ahmet Hilmi's integration of these spiritual systems into his world view that blends scientific materialism and spirituality, in fact, reflects the grander trends in 19th century. This age, where science started to challenge religious beliefs, also witnesses the growing popularity of "psychic experiences" like attempts at "communicating with spirits."²²¹ Through the emphasis they put on the concept of "soul" and "spirit", these practices become a mediatory field where "science" meets the metaphysical. These practices which came to be called "Spiritualism" create "new forms of faith" that offers a "mediation between deterministic science [...] and superstition."²²² In that regard, Ahmet Hilmi's encounter and contact particularly with the Indic, the mystical practices can be traced back to his interest in "spiritualism" which Ottomans refers to as "ispritizma". damla

During his years of exile in Egypt, Ahmet Hilmi develops an interest in the concept of "soul." This interest leads him to circles practicing Spiritualist psychic activities in table seances and to Sufi dervishes who narrate their various "travels to India."²²³ Through these experiences, Ahmet Hilmi gets familiar with spiritual events like mind-reading and then publishes his ideas in a series of articles under the title "Old Ideas in New Forms". As obviously expressed in the title of this series, Ahmet Hilmi arrives to the conclusion that the spiritualist practices which try to scientifically explain metaphysical concepts like soul are mere new forms of "ancient" belief systems.²²⁴ Furthermore, he notes that "in order to answer the question ['What is soul?']" one has to "start with India."²²⁵ In the indirect account he passes down from a sheikh acquaintance

²²¹ Burak Bayülgen. "Science as an Assimilation of the 19th Century Spiritualism into Society," In *Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi* (2021), 273.

²²² Ibid, 275.

²²³ Şehbenderzade Filibeli Ahmet Hilmi. *Eski Fikirler, Yeni Şekiller: Garip İlimler ve Ruh Çağırma* ed.by Eren Yavuz (Büyüyen Ay, 2023), 35-66.

²²⁴ Ibid, 23.

²²⁵ Ibid, 27.

of his, he narrates how a man of Hindu training who lives an acetic life developed the ability of gaining access to “secret” information.²²⁶ Such anecdotes Ahmed Hilmi cites introduces the spiritual training as a means that allow humans to reach beyond the limits of their bodily sensations. This article series not only reveals that Ahmet Hilmi’s world view blends science with various mysticisms through his search for soul but also provides historical account of the interaction between Sufi dervishes and Hindu practices which too feeds into the novel.

From this standpoint, *A’mâk-ı Hayâl* presents various spiritual narratives that will help to go beyond the possibilities provided by material conditions, as elements that are fed into Sufism. Raci’s eighth dream in *A’mâk-ı Hayâl* almost presents a fictionalised version of what he learned in his encounters with spiritualists orders. In this story Raci embodies a Chinese young man who goes on a search for “the true nature of the soul” in India.²²⁷ The Brahmins guiding this young man puts him in a self-discipline practice which requires him to “lock himself in a cell” and to eat very little.²²⁸ This narration perfectly mimics the Hindu training Ahmet Hilmi gives an account of by citing the narration of his Sufi acquaintance’s travel in India. Following this self-discipline technique, the young man releases himself from the chuckles of the bodily limits and starts to wander as “a soul” which can “fly and walk through the doors.”²²⁹ However, even this cannot provide this Chinese boy that Raci embodies with an answer to his questions about the nature of the soul. As a result, his guiding Brahmin sends him to yet another quest, which requires the boy to “sacrifice his eternal life.”²³⁰ This quest reveals him that understanding the nature of soul requires one to “prove that body/existence (vücut) and nothingness (adem) is one and the same.”²³¹ In this narration, where Ahmet Hilmi recalls

²²⁶ Ibid, 68.

²²⁷ *A’mâk-ı Hayâl*, 73.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid, 75.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid, 77.

his Sufi acquaintance's account of his encounter with Indic spiritual practices, Hinduism becomes a source nourishing the Sufi spiritualism.

Similarly, in Raci's second dream, which presents a story drawing upon Zoroastrian elements, Ahmet Hilmi creates a unique form of Zoroastrian conceptualisation that blended Islam and Sufism. Even though Ahmet Hilmi's known archive does not provide any accounts of Zoroastrianism, when the information circulating about this religion in the Ottoman Empire is researched, we come across Ahmet Midhat's textbook on "History of Religion". In this textbook taught at Darülfünun, Ahmet Midhat presents a comprehensive framework of Zoroastrianism. This text explains how this religion which conceptualises existence as a constant combat between "light" and "darkness" which are represented by "the two great gods" that are called "Horomazes who is also known as 'Ahura Mazda'" and "Ahriman."²³² The textbook also notes that despite the fact that "Horomazes is the creator" and thus superior authority over "Ahriman," their struggle continues forever. In addition to these two great entities, the textbook also expresses the existence of secondary gods like "Mithras" and "Yazata" (İzid) in this religion.²³³

In *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, Ahmet Hilmi uses this conceptualisation of the combat between light and dark as the main theme of the second dream of Raci's. In this dream Raci wakes up as a character that can speak "a language in between Sanskrit and Persian" and joins a battle under the leadership of Horomazes.²³⁴ However, within the story we encounter a third god named "İzid."²³⁵ While Ahmet Midhat's textbook refers to "İzid" as the name of a secondary god, in this story İzid appears the superior god whose "light [side] is Horomazes and dark [side] is Ahriman."²³⁶ *Kamus-ı Türki* too defines "İzid" as "one of the two [gods] in Zoroastrianism who

²³² Ahmet Mithad. *Tedris-i Tarih-i Edyan*, (Hürriyet Matbaası, 1329/1912), 280-283.

²³³ Ibid, 281-282.

²³⁴ *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, 25.

²³⁵ Ibid, 26.

²³⁶ Ibid.

[represents] good and light,” but it adds that “Iranians started to use [this term to refer to God after [the conversion into] Islam.”²³⁷ Therefore, in *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* Ahmet Hilmi rewrites Zoroastrianism within a context that mixes monotheistic and polytheistic frameworks of religion. Alongside these more layered representations of Hinduism and Zoroastrianism blended with Sufi philosophy, in various dreams of Raci's, Buddha appears as a guiding character in Raci's dreams. While the “First Book” of *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* includes only Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism in its horizon, with the “Second Book” this horizon enlarges to include Confucianism and Aristotelean and Platonian philosophies.

The fragmented episodic structure that mimics Ahmet Hilmi's Sufi evolutionary trajectory in *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* allows each these stories to function on their own yet also as streams that feed into the total synthesising philosophy Ahmet Hilmi tries to build. Using these narratives as episodes within a longer narrative also positions them in the stages of an evolutionary unfold that moves towards the ultimate direction, the ultimate truth that appears in the last dream in the first single volume of *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, which includes the first ten chapters written. In this dream, Raci becomes an observer to an assembly of “people wearing crowns and veils,” and led by a “chairman” (*reis*) seated in a “higher chair” compared to the others.²³⁸ A person named “Humanity” (*Beşeriyet*), seeks guidance from this assembly asks them a question: “What happiness?”²³⁹ This final episode mimics the whole narrative of the novel where Raci searches the truth, by bearing witness to various stories that represent different religions and philosophies. Similarly, in this last episode, each member of the assembly provides their answer to Humanity's question. Among these respondents Raci sees figures from Abrahamic theology like Adam, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus alongside figures like Zarathustra,

²³⁷ *Kamus-ı Türki*, “Ezid,” accessed 18 December 2024, <https://www.osmanlicasozlukler.com/kamusiturki/tafsil-164679-he7.html>

²³⁸ *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, 78.

²³⁹ *Ibid*, 79.

Confucius, Plato, Aristoteles and Buddha. Each member provides their own answer one by one, but Humanity expresses his frustration in the face of this many answers. As a result “the chairman stands up” to provide his answer and we learn that he is Mohammed, the prophet of Islam.²⁴⁰ He expresses that “acceptance” of “life as it is” constitutes the key to happiness while also showing “compliance to its hardships” and putting “labour to its betterment.”²⁴¹ Humanity deems this answer the most truthful and Raci wakes up in the graveyard, seeing that Mirror Baba is no longer there. This connotes the end of Raci’s search and spiritual development process. After baring witness to several philosophies and gathering insight from each, he arrives at Islam as the most mature form of these philosophies in the evolving unfold of the novel. Despite presenting the Islamic answer and Prophet Mohammed as the ultimate end point, the fact that Ahmet Hilmi envisions an assembly to collect these various philosophies together reveals the synthesising nature of his philosophy. When we contextualise the novel in the Second Constitutional Era when the ultimate power of the sultan was significantly challenged and the new established assembly witnessed the presence of multiple political parties, we can understand that Ahmet Hilmi’s image of the assembly presents a democratic atmosphere where Mohammed is not the “sultan” leading the assembly but “the chairman”.

In conclusion, *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* stands out as a complex literary piece within the late Ottoman intellectual sphere. This piece goes beyond and above of a gesture at offering a didactic or Islamicist agenda. It presents a rich worldview nourished with many streams like the scientific perspectives of the time, Sufi philosophy, spiritualist trends of the 19th century, and various non-Islamic cultures. Instead of reproducing the dichotomy between science and religion that constitutes one of the main axes of the Second Constitutional Era and the modernisation process of Ottoman state in general, this text offers a midway. In that regard, the

²⁴⁰ Ibid. 80.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

evolutionary interpretation this novel presents constitutes one of the key aspects of the rich worldview it reflects. This interpretation draws from the established notions of *tekamül* and the literary conventions of *devriyye*. Within this framework this novel presents modern science not as a dominant current of influence accepted in its totality, but instead as a concept reconfigured within the existing intellectual, linguistic and literary conventions. Informing the formal structure of the novel and its contact with the masnavi *genre*, this evolutionary interpretation contributes to the establishment of a spiritual Ottoman bildungsroman.



PART II:
ABJECT IMPERIALITIES



Chapter III

Abject Imperialities and Evolving Bodies:

Evolution, Body, and Selfhood in Late Ottoman and Victorian *Strange* Narratives

The tea-scented parlours of Christ Church in the 1860s and the corridors of Darülfünun refreshed with the winds of freedom 1908 onwards, the worlds of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (or as we know him, Lewis Carroll) and Şehbenderzade Filibeli Ahmet Hilmi Bey, were worlds apart, without question. They were as distant and incomparable as a curious Victorian girl chasing a rabbit down its little hole and a melancholic young Ottoman man stepping into a graveyard. Although these contexts were shaped differently, they shared a preoccupation with the rivalry between modern science and older modes of making sense of the natural world and the nature of human. Despite all the differences, these contexts shared an atmosphere that could raise two authors who taught in modern universities and are drawn to the spiritualist currents of their times, both of whom come up with *strange* stories. It is, accordingly, no surprise that their novels, one expressing the Victorian anxieties about human condition through a child's strive for development amid chaos, and another presenting the spiritual development of a young Ottoman intellectual in search for truth, come to share similar narrative strategies. This chapter presents a comparison between those novels, between *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, in their exploration of selfhood through their respective engagements with evolutionary theory and imperial context.

One distinct element that makes a dialogue between *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* possible constitutes the way the theme of bodily transformations interacts with the travel narrative. As thoroughly discussed in the earlier chapters, in these novels, bodily transformations go beyond being merely fantastical. These physical experiences, in fact, serve to liquify protagonists' bodies and reflect each narratives' particular engagement with

evolutionary ideas within their distinct contexts. This theme when combined with the travel plots offers an opportunity to associate the selfhood these novels present considering the theme of imperial experiences. In both of these pieces, the phenomenological experience of bodily liquidity accompanied by the travel plot serves to establish a sense of self-estrangement that draws these protagonists closer to others. In this light we can analyse these novels in the ways they invoke abjection. Since the protagonists' bodily transformations blur the boundaries of their selves, we can analyse both novels in terms of the ways they articulate their respective imperial experiences in ways that complicate imperial discourse.

While both these novels bare faint resemblances to imperial travel writing, the protagonists' main concern in both texts remains very much invested in understanding themselves in abjection. In other words, these protagonists try to understand their position, rather than (or as much as) making sense of the places they traverse or the inhabitants they encounter. This nuanced frame complicates an interpretation grounded in imperial binary positions because in these instances the authors use the theme of physical transformation by drawing from the affiliative aspects of the evolutionary thought. In other words, in these narrations the evolutionary transformations serve to link the protagonists to the others as much as triggering a desire to distinctly define their selves. In that light, these affiliative representations of evolution create a dynamic where both ambiguous experiences of intimacy and civilisational hierarchies appear simultaneously. Therefore, moving beyond the discussions of language regimes and colonising hegemony within imperial contexts, this project aims to contribute to the existing literature through an inquiry of bodily ontology, affect and narrative form. However, doing this, this project does not aim to present these novels as gestures of resistance or complicity within imperial discourse either. Instead, this discussion adopts a descriptive approach focused on the themes of intimacy and separation, familiarity and estrangement. In this light, drawing on Julia Kristeva's distinction between abjection as

symptom and sublimation, this study traces how each novel expresses bodily instability to create abjection and generate diverse responses to it. Given this methodology, nevertheless, this discussion does not present an Ottoman-British binary towards the representation of such abjection but rather foregrounds these novels as various responses to the intersection of the imperial, the evolutionary, and the abject.

Approaching the engagement between literature and evolutionary theory in the British and Ottoman long nineteenth century, through the lens of imperial context, naturally aligns with the framework of *inter-imperiality*. This critical perspective articulated by Laura Doyle in the 2010s, seeks to foreground the interactions, rivalries and shared dynamics among multiple imperial structures. More specifically, it aims to enlarge the Anglo-European focus of postcolonial thinking by drawing attention to non-Anglo-European powers functioning as “empires [themselves],” whose “inhabitants [...] suffer the problems of colonisation [within their own contexts].”²⁴² In that regard, the inter-imperial model “enlarg[es] the postcolonial imaginary” and contributes to the broader efforts to provincialize Europe within cultural studies.²⁴³ This framework allows the “consideration of differences [among empires contemporaneous or from different times] while [also] naming [their] commonalities.”²⁴⁴ Thus, it not only spotlights the interplay between empires, but also posits opportunities to discuss how different imperial contexts respond to similar experiences. Building upon the inter-imperial model, this chapter explores how two texts from the British and the Ottoman imperial contexts respond to similar scientific discussions located in the long nineteenth century. By doing so, it seeks to amplify the inter-imperial contribution to “theorising multiple modernisms,” by highlighting how these texts from “[distinct] empires operating simultaneously” navigate

²⁴² Laura Doyle, “Inter-imperiality: Dialectics in a Postcolonial World History,” *Interventions* 16, no. 2 (2014): 159-165.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

analogous development and spread of the modern evolutionary thought.²⁴⁵ However, rather than delineating the narrative strategies of *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as characteristics of distinct Ottoman and British imperial responses to evolutionary theory, this project seeks to approach these texts as different manifestations of how the imperial experience and evolutionary thinking intersect in literature in ways that complicate binary oppositions.

Consequently, exploring varying engagements with evolutionary theory in imperial contexts, particularly in relation to questions of selfhood and otherness, fits within the scope of the inter-imperial project. In that regard, there exists a significant body of literature examining the relationship between the imperial structure and evolutionary thinking, especially within the Anglo-European context. This line of research foregrounds the influence of biological evolutionism on anthropological discussions and lays bare the “symbiotic relationship between the growth of science and modern empires.”²⁴⁶ Informed both by biological “Darwinian evolutionism” and “earlier kinds of evolutionary thinking about how cultures and societies change over time” such anthropological accounts from the nineteenth century Europe present a “sequen[tial]” conceptualisation that situates different cultures within a hierarchy of “evolutionary time.”²⁴⁷ This gesture treating different cultures as distinct stages of evolutionary unfold establish a discourse shaped by “oppositional terms” of “primitivism”/“savagery” and “civilisation,” as a means to establish “justification for and of imperial expansion.”²⁴⁸ While both *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* constitute fertile ground for tracing the way their engagements with evolutionary thought take part in the establishment of such hierarchical discourse, this project aims not to further emphasise such taxonomical distinctions

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Martin E. Thomas. “Anthropology and The British Empire.” In *The Routledge of History of Western Empires*, ed. By Robert Alderich and Kristen McKenzie (Routledge, 2014), 255.

²⁴⁷ Kathy Alexis Psomiades. “Anthropology and Classical Evolutionism.” In *The Routledge Companion to Victorian Literature*, ed. by Dennis Danisoff and Talia Schaffer (Routledge, 2020), 389.

²⁴⁸ Philippa Levine. “Anthropology, Colonialism, and Eugenics.” In *The Oxford Handbook of The History of Eugenics*, ed. By Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine (Oxford University Press, 2010), 43-45.

attributed to evolutionary thinking. Instead, it aims to contribute to existing literature through an exploration of the affiliative implications of evolutionary thought. Informed by Doyle's inter-imperial framework on the one hand, therefore, on the other hand, this project seeks to distance itself from literary reaffirmations of hierarchy. Instead this project attempts to focus on narrative forms and representations of bodily instability and affective estrangement that complicates the imperial discourse.

Earlier research, addressing the narratives where scientifically inflected imperial desire to categorise is alternated, often foregrounds strange or speculative narratives where body becomes a site of instability beyond definition and control. In *Human Evolution and Fantastic Victorian Fiction*, Anna Neill explores how certain "strange stories" from Victorian England deviate from the taxonomical influence of evolutionary theory by presenting engagements with biological evolution in ways that "challenge the prevailing evolutionary hierarchies."²⁴⁹ According to Neill, these "strange stories" feature elements that are "distort[ing] or compress[ing] the deep time" of evolutionary development into the immediate experience of the characters.²⁵⁰ By doing so, these narratives "grant [the] characters the power to change form or move rapidly" through evolutionary stages.²⁵¹ These frameworks, Neill suggests, interrupt "a depiction [...] that sees certain human beings as irredeemably degenerate and others as capable of self-improvement" and posit a stark contrast to nineteenth century evolutionary anthropology.²⁵² In other words, these strange narrative events complicate the clear-cut distinctions by creating fluid transformations across the more "civilised" or "primitive" stages of speciation. Although Neill primarily frames these strange stories as challenges to the dominant contemporaneous anthropological discourses of the Victorian era, her observations can also be extended into the consideration of the ways such narratives destabilise the notions

²⁴⁹ Anne Neill. *Human Evolution and Fantastic Victorian Fiction* (Routledge, 2011), 7.

²⁵⁰ Ibid, 13.

²⁵¹ Ibid, 6.

²⁵² Ibid.

of selfhood. In other words, collapsing the evolutionary history into the immediate bodily experientiality, these narratives can be addressed in their evocation of a shared evolutionary origin which affiliates “the civilised” and “the primitive” through a conception of common descent or a shared evolutionary nature.²⁵³ Despite not offering a discussion on the literary influence of evolutionary theory, Karen E. Macfarlane presents a parallel argument about “unstable bodies” in imperial narratives.²⁵⁴ In “Here Be Monsters: Imperialism, Knowledge and the Limits of Empire,” Macfarlane engages with Patrick Brantlinger’s conception of the Imperial Gothic to claim that “representation of unstable bodies function as signifiers that mediate between imperial fantasies of control and definition and fin-de-siècle anxieties.”²⁵⁵ In other words, when bodies became sites foregrounding “failures of classification”, Macfarlane notes “[the] scientific and political interest in establishing clear lines of demarcation” gets impaired.²⁵⁶

In contrast to Neill’s and Macfarlane’s discussions, this project does not specifically claim that *A’mâk-ı Hayâl* and *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* explicitly aim to challenge evolutionary hierarchies through their engagements with the scientific discourse. However, both novels employ narrative strategies akin to the ones Neill and Macfarlane highlight, creating plots where such hierarchies are complicated.²⁵⁷ In these texts, the protagonists undergo bodily

²⁵³ Here distinguishing between the notion of “common descent” and “shared evolutionary origin” matters. In *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race*, Robert Young draws attention to the competing perspectives about human race in Victorian age: Monogenesis and polygenesis. The idea of monogenesis assumes the notion of common descent, emphasising that all humans, regardless of differences in phenotype are developed from the same species. The ideas of polygenesis on the other hand notes that while the evolutionary nature is common, different groups of the same species might have developed separately by undergoing similar changes in different times and places. While the distinction between these terms were central to contemporaneous debates of science, especially in Victorian context, the present study does not directly address these discussions.

²⁵⁴ Karen E. Macfarlane. “Here Be Monsters: Imperialism, Knowledge, and the Limits of Empire.” *Text Matters* 6, (6):2016, 76

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ *Human Evolution and Fantastic Victorian Fiction* already names Carroll’s two *Alice* books among the “strange stories” it examines. However, since Neill’s interpretation of *Alice* books draws primarily on evolutionary psychology and Piaget’s developmental stages, this chapter presents the interaction between the imperial discourse and evolutionary theory in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* as an alternative case.

transformations shaped by evolution as they move both through evolutionary history and through lands and cultural norms distinct from their own. Although their journeys through unfamiliar cultures calls to be associated with the imperial project, the mediatory role of their bodily instability in these journeys serves to destabilise their conceptions of self and other. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, therefore, lend themselves both to readings that situate them within the imperial hierarchies and to interpretations emphasising the unstable aspects of such discourse. Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, in that regard, offers a productive framework for examining how evolution creates this double quality in both narratives.²⁵⁸

Julia Kristeva defines abject in a variety of ways in *Powers of Horror*: Abject can be understood as “a threat [...] that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside,” *something* “quite close” and yet “cannot be assimilated”, *something* that “disturbs identity, system, order,” or *that which* “does not respect borders.”²⁵⁹ These definitions which leave the reader even more confused than the naked presence of the word “abject,” in fact, exhibit its signification of what is beyond signification. Abject constitutes something, *a thing*, that cannot be easily defined. It “does not respect borders” because its “in-between” or “ambiguous” nature posits a challenge to the meaning making system itself.²⁶⁰ By showcasing where definitions within a system end up being insufficient, the abject constitutes a “display of [the] fragility” of the whole structure, it showcases the fictionality of meaning.²⁶¹

Kristeva discusses thoroughly that the body constitutes the most prominent locus where abjection is experienced. Paralleling the conceptual tension in abjection, the physical

²⁵⁸ Macfarlane's discussion in “Here Be Monsters,” where “dismembered and fragmented [bodies]” are discussed through the lens of heterotopia, too calls attention to the relevance of Kristeva's concept of abjection, for interpreting these imperial narratives showcasing “unstable bodies,” p. 82.

²⁵⁹ “Approaching Abjection.” In *Powers of Horror*, trans. By Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia University Press, 1982), 1–4.

²⁶⁰ Ibid, 4.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

experience of it creates feeling of intimacy and simultaneously rejection. On the one hand existing “quite close” as if it is in and of the subject’s body, that which is abject “cannot be assimilated.”²⁶² It stands in the borders between what is considered inside the self or part of the body, and what is considered outside. It confuses the presumptions by which a body is defined and separated from all other existence. Therefore, one of the instances where “the abject confronts us,” where we start to confuse in and out, constitutes the “fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*.”²⁶³ This particular form of experiencing abjection does not simply refer to the relationality with something observable from the outside but rather it concerns the relationship with the body itself. On the occasions where human body “strays on the territories of animal,” the whole body of the subject becomes a site of abjection. While being the most intimate register of the self, it also becomes something unfamiliar or rejected. According to Kristeva, a “culture” gets established by the act of “mark[ing] [for it] a precise area” which is “remove[d] from the threatening world of animals or animalism.”²⁶⁴ In order for animalistic instincts like “sex and murder” to be domesticated and controlled, these inclinations end up being exiled to the territory of savage or primitive animal, securing a distinct, civilised state for men. Therefore, whenever a subject confronts where the animalistic takes control in one’s body, the distinction between the human and animal, between the civilised and primitive, gets shattered. It alienates the body from itself. In that respect, the conception of evolution itself constitutes a matter of abjection because it reveals where these distinctions become obscure, it showcases that the civilised man too is a savage and primitive animal, or that both savage and primitive share the same origin.²⁶⁵

Borrowing the configurations of Neill and Macfarlane, we can claim that “the strange stories” establishing the locus of this project perform within the territory of abjection. Both

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid, 13.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ See note 204.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* address the fading boundaries of the self and the other. However, both narratives and characters present distinct ways of representing and engaging this abjection, where the imperial and the evolutionary intersect. While Alice's experience with the inhabitants of Wonderland and her own transformations produce constant unease and a desire to reestablish distinct identities, Raci's journey calls for a calm acceptance of his transformations and of the leaps in his journeys as manifestations of the unity of the ultimate being. In contrast to Alice's, Raci's story domesticates the abjection by naming it sublime and sacred. In that regard, while Alice's journey and resolution can be positioned more along the lines of "symptom," a rejection of the abject, Raci's experience stands closer to what Kristeva calls a response of "sublimation" towards abjection.²⁶⁶

In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the consecutive moments in which Alice falls through the tunnel, arrives in a room with locked doors, begins to change form, and dashes into the pool of tears play a foundational role in the narrative. As discussed in the first chapter, this section builds the tension between the teleology oriented evolutionary ideas and the more chaotic conceptions of evolution by establishing a recapitulation analogy. In that regard, the fall through the rabbit hall creates reverse birth symbolism and makes the hall with locked doors a womb-like space. This instance marks the protagonist's travel back into evolutionary deep time, where her identity becomes destabilised and entangled with others as equals in the shared evolutionary beginning. Growing and shrinking in the enclosed room, Alice falls into a pool of tears which "get[s] quite crowded with the birds and animals that had fallen into it."²⁶⁷ She merges out of the womb, the origin, with several other creatures. This strange "party" of creatures decides to have "a Caucus-race" to "get [themselves] dry."²⁶⁸ In his annotations to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Martin Gardner explains that the term "caucus" refers to the

²⁶⁶ Ibid, 11.

²⁶⁷ *The Annotated Alice*, 28-32.

²⁶⁸ Ibid, 36.

“meeting of the leaders of a faction to decide on a candidate or policy.”²⁶⁹ In other words, leaving the pool turns Alice into a member of an assembly, where she is an equal of each other member. The merging of the themes of the womb, the evolutionary/recapitulative past and the assembly contribute to the theme of ambiguous identity boundaries through touching upon multiple way by which abjection is theorised. As well as the states “where man strays on the territories of animal,” the abject, as Kristeva notes, also resides “within personal archaeology [embedded upon] the maternal entity.”²⁷⁰ The maternal, marked by the lack of clear distinctions, in this novel, presents the evolutionary (in this case, recapitulative) past as a moment devoid of individuation. Accordingly, while she finds this strange crowd quite “queer,” Alice also thinks of them as “familiar[s], [...] as if she knows them all her life.”²⁷¹ This key section that irreversibly “changed everything” for Alice, therefore, serves to develop abjection by constructing the theme of rapprochement with the other through evolutionary origin.²⁷² In other words, the recapitulation analogy in this sequence draws Alice closer to the inhabitants of the unknown land she is traversing and prepares the theme of self-alienation in the novel.

Alice’s liquified body constitutes the other main element of self-destabilisation alongside the entanglement with the other in this recapitulation narrative. Alice’s transforming body creates self-estrangement. The concurrent themes of alienating from the body while getting entangled with the other, turns Alice’s body into a locus of abjection. The narrative establishes this abjection through the theme of disorientation. To summarise the first chapter, the recapitulation theory includes aspects that can be reconciled both with the chaotic interpretations of evolution that emphasise randomness and chance, and the teleological ones that assume a prefixed arrival point. These distinct conceptions of evolution carry equally distinct conceptions of the development of human form. Respectively, while on the one hand,

²⁶⁹ Martin Gardner, *The Annotated Alice*, 36.

²⁷⁰ Kristeva, 13.

²⁷¹ *The Annotated Alice*, 34.

²⁷² *The Annotated Alice*, 41.

the womb can be a primordial space where all creatures are indistinct from each other, it can also be understood as a place where the embryo is destined to develop into the final and prefixed form of human in a teleological chain of being.

In this early sequence where Alice tries to direct her progression in Wonderland towards the ways she desires, the fact that the consequences of her actions resist her intentions presents this tension. Alice cannot foresee or direct the direction of her progression in the story. This tension regarding narrative directionality inseparably depends upon Alice's corporeal directionality in her journey. Because in the enclosed room, Alice's ability to proceed depends on *the way* her body transforms. She starts to consume the random liquids and cakes appearing around her to be able to move in space while not holding a grasp of in "which way" she will change form.²⁷³ In other words, even though Alice tries to control her body, the transformations themselves exceed her powers and turn this body into an ungraspable object of inquiry. For instance, trying to check her body by "holding her hand on top of her" Alice tries "to feel which way [her body] was growing."²⁷⁴ Furthermore, she loses sense of her bodily perception and feels the need to use other objects like "the roof" of the hall to be able to measure her size.²⁷⁵ Just as she cannot control in "which way" the story will proceed, she also cannot foresee in "which way" her body will transform. This condition distances her from her own body and makes it an unstable, abject element which is intimate and detached, both close and simultaneously beyond of her control. Later, this feeling of estrangement comes to forefront when Alice starts to address her "feet" as distinct subjects from herself.²⁷⁶ Not being an object against which Alice defines herself or a subject separate from her, this body turns into a site of abjection. This tension equates the textual body with the corporeal body of the protagonist. Not being able to direct her body and progression, Alice starts to feel abjection.

²⁷³ Ibid, 21.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

This ultimately affects Alice's sense of self. The more she loses control over her bodily transformation, the more alienated she gets from herself and almost becomes a part of Wonderland. This establishes the recurring theme of identity confusion. Alice constantly asks the question "Who in the world am I?"²⁷⁷ Over and over again, she emphasises that she no longer "knows" the answer to this question for she has "changed several times" since the last time she knew "who [she] was."²⁷⁸ Michelle Smit's thesis on the theme of evolution in the two *Alice* books approaches these "identity problems" through the concept of "classification [of species]."²⁷⁹ Smit's project draws attention to the constant attempts at defining Alice throughout the novels as trials at determining Alice's species in Wonderland. However, a focus on the theme of destabilisation of the self and body shows that these instances also foreground Alice and her body as elements unclassifiable throughout the narrative. In short, these early sections of recapitulative analogy create abjection by alienating Alice from her body and bringing it closer to Wonderland and its inhabitants.

The concurrent intimacy and distance of her bodily directionality tie Alice into Wonderland, making her both an extension of the place and a foreigner traversing in it. Not being a mere observer but also an object of this new cultural and geographical context, shapes Alice's travel and experience of imperialism significantly. The abjection of her own body complicates her situation within her travel. Just as she can neither fully own her body or fully get rid of it, she both tries to master Wonderland as a the distant unknown and feels absorbed by its familiarity and dominant influence over herself. In other words, the tension that shapes Alice's sense of corporeal and narrative directionality also manifests in the tension between the familiarity and foreignness of Wonderland, making the place an abject space and complicating this story beyond imperial binaries.

²⁷⁷ Ibid, 26.

²⁷⁸ Ibid, 57.

²⁷⁹ Michelle Smit. "*What are You?: The Influence of Charles Darwin's Evolutionary Theory in Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*" (MA thesis, Leiden University, 2019, 52.

The interpretations that examine *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* through the imperial context mainly present two conflicting arguments. Some of the foundational research on this topic frame Alice's journey in Wonderland as a case of "English culture" invading "a foreign land."²⁸⁰ Some others claim that Alice's position in Wonderland resembles that of the "colonial other"²⁸¹ more than taking after the colonising agent.²⁸² The evolutionary transformations which cause Alice's confusion in separating her body from Wonderland and her identity from others, in fact, allows both dynamics to occur simultaneously. Accordingly, in her thesis examining the different stages of imperialism in the British context through children's literature, Brittany Griffin frames the two *Alice* books as representatives of a transitional period. According to Griffin, the *Alice* books, which are published in a time when the British Empire was negotiating its "boundaries" in relation to the colonies, showcase a significant stage of imperialism.²⁸³ Within this period the "cultures," with which "the budding empire" engages, started to get "increasingly 'real' and present within the British imagination."²⁸⁴ Therefore, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, came to reflect "an Empire whose identity is continually in flux" accompanying the "attempt to recreate the colonies in Britain's own image."²⁸⁵ In that regard, the Wonderland itself too becomes an abject space that cannot be distanced or fully owned.

²⁸⁰ Daniel Binova. "Alice the Child Imperialist and the Games of Wonderland" In *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 41 (2): 1986, 144.

²⁸¹ Amanda Brayan. "Alice's Struggle with Imperialism: Undermining the British Empire through Alice's Adventures in Wonderland." In *The Final Chapters: Conducting Paper of The Journal of Children's Literature Studies*. (Wizard's Tower Press, 2013), 22.

²⁸² Daniel Bivona's "Alice the Child Imperialist" (1986) constitutes the foundational imperial interpretation of the Alice books alongside James Kincaid's "Alice's Invasion of Wonderland" (1973). Both readings foreground the power struggle between the inhabitants of Wonderland and Alice, which manifests through the clashing discussions regarding the logic, rules, and mannerisms. In that regard, both these texts assume Alice as the European subject imposing her logic to Wonderland. In "Alice's Struggle with Imperialism," Amanda Brayan directly addresses Bivona's interpretation, criticising the way his interpretation "automatically" place Alice "on the side of the British with no thought." In that regard, analysing Alice's relationship with authority figures in Wonderland, Brayan claims that Alice is the colonised party in this dynamic.

²⁸³ Brittany Griffin. *Tales of Empire: Orientalism in Nineteenth-Century Children's Literature* MA Thesis, University of South Florida, 2012), 6.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Ibid, 31.

First and foremost, Wonderland seems to be a foreign land where Alice approaches with a curious desire to discover and master. She literally becomes the stranger creeping along another's house when she enters the White Rabbit's home, trying to examine this attractive and strange destination. Similarly, when she enters the forest, she encounters a rather "oriental" figure of "the Caterpillar" with "the hookah."²⁸⁶ On both occasions, while on the one hand, what she discovers seems distant, intriguing and exotic, on the other hand, this place also starts to leak into Alice's identity. For instance, the White Rabbit "[takes Alice] for his housemaid."²⁸⁷ Furthermore, undergoing physical transformations within his house, Alice grows so much that the "chance of her ever getting out" of this place becomes impossible.²⁸⁸ Similarly, when Alice tries to convince the Caterpillar that "being so many sizes in a day is very confusing," the Caterpillar, for whom bodily transformation is most natural, opposes Alice's arguments and teaches her the way of foreseeing the direction of her transformations.²⁸⁹ In these instances, the unknown directly seeps into Alice's body and sense of self, leaving her subjected to the natural laws governing Wonderland and turning her into a part of this geography. In other words, the exotic absorbs Alice and paints her in its own colour, contributing to Alice's distance to herself.

These occasions that makes the distant intimate merge with the instances that make the familiar unfamiliar. In many moments in the narrative, Wonderland uncannily resembles the Victorian England. For instance, The Mad Tea Party where the March Hare and the Hatter repeatedly explain Alice which behaviour are considered "very rude" and which ones are "civil," seems to be a parody of the Victorian afternoon teatime practice. Likewise, the social etiquette, that is governing this gathering, parodies the Victorian mannerisms.²⁹⁰ While being familiar with the conventions of the Victorian teatime etiquette, Alice cannot adapt to the way

²⁸⁶ *The Annotated Alice*, 57.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 46.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid*.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 57-58.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 83-90.

Wonderlanders shape their own version of such a practice. The inhabitants she encounters always frustrate her expectations about the rules that govern these settings and leave Alice “dreadfully puzzled.”²⁹¹ Similarly, “three gardeners [who] busily paint” the white roses in queen’s garden red parody the War of Roses, a significant episode from the British history.²⁹² Even though it does not posit a parody of Victorian England, this instance likewise associates the Wonderland with the British context, contributing to make Wonderland an alienating representation of what is familiar to Alice. Making the place Alice traverse in an element that is “quite close” yet “cannot be assimilated” therefore, these instances contribute to the recurring theme of abjection by making the Wonderland an abject locale, equating it with Alice’s body. Therefore, rather than being a narrative rejecting or contributing to the imperial discourse, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* complicates imperialism by presenting the identity confusion within the imperial setting through Alice’s embodiment and travels.

The evolutionary inflected transformations of Alice, in short, alienates her from her body and identity while also drawing Wonderland and its inhabitants close to this body. The undefinable states of Alice’s own corporeality and of the space she traverses in establish abjection, but the text does not engage with it through feelings of horror or disgust. Throughout the novel, we encounter emotions ranging from curiosity to distress in response to abjection. Early in the novel, Alice approaches both to the environment and characters surrounding herself and her own transformation with curiosity. When she sees the White Rabbit for the first time, its human-like manners charges Alice with “burning curiosity.”²⁹³ As she falls down the rabbit hole, she approaches everything surrounding her with “wonder.”²⁹⁴ Similarly, when she ends

²⁹¹ Ibid, 86.

²⁹² According to George Goodwin’s *Fatal Colours* which studies these civil wars fought between the House of York and House of Lancaster in late 15th century for the English throne, the term “War of Roses” was an early-nineteenth century construction, developed to refer to these wars in a novel by Walter Scott. This term built upon the entrenched symbolism referring to heraldic badges of the rivals and it can be traced back to Shakespeare’s *Henry VI*, where one of the characters cautions the other about “painting the white rose red.”

²⁹³ *The Annotated Alice*, 12.

²⁹⁴ Ibid, 13.

up being stuck in the great hall, “wondering how she was to get out again,” she examines the room curiously. However, once her transformations start and she finds her in the intimate setting of the pool with many creatures, once she starts to ask “who in the world” she is, the burning curiosity leaves its place to a sense of feeling that everything is “all wrong.”²⁹⁵ By the time the moment she arrives at the White Rabbit’s house and ends up being stuck there, this feeling turns into one of anger and anxiety. She starts to “peer about anxiously” in Wonderland neither knowing who she is or how to proceed in this place.²⁹⁶ Upon her unresolving dialogue with the Caterpillar, she hardly “swallow[s]” her “anger down.”²⁹⁷ In other words, the more abjection, the confusion between self and other, sets in, the angrier and the more anxious Alice gets. These feelings dominate the rest of the narrative in Alice’s interactions in the tea party, at the Duchess’ house, and finally in the Queen’s Garden. In that regard, both her own body and the whole Wonderland turns into walls where Alice constantly bumps into. While all these elements force her to accept the random unfolding of her progression in the narrative and her lack of distinction in comparison to others, Alice feels the need to systemise, categorise and define even more passionately than before. The curious desire to discover gives way to feelings of confusion, anger, and finally distress. This emotional arc of Alice throughout the novel leads her to develop a particular response to abjection, a response that Julia Kristeva defines as “symptom.” Alice’s experience constitutes one of “discomfort, unease, dizziness stemming from ambiguity” and it calls for “a revolt against” what triggers it.²⁹⁸ It seeks to “demarcate” things and assign “signs” or definitions.²⁹⁹ According to Kristeva, abjection which signifies what is beyond signification, can create a response of “symptom,” which refers to the condition where “abject permeates” the subject. It can create a response of rejecting or pushing away. The fact that Alice experiences

²⁹⁵ Ibid, 26.

²⁹⁶ Ibid, 54.

²⁹⁷ Ibid, 60.

²⁹⁸ Kristeva, 10.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

abjection through unease and disgust leads her to generate such a response. At the final court room scene, she faces the abject for the last time and decides to take action by a response that can be understood in light of Kristeva's conception of "symptom." In that regard, Alice decides to "put" whatever was wrong "right."³⁰⁰

In this part of the narrative, all the characters Alice met throughout the journey gather along to witness a trial. This moment where the Queen "invent[s]" laws randomly and where the court finds the defendant "guilty" based on random "evidence," serves as the last episode where Alice faces the nonsensical nature of Wonderland.³⁰¹ However, in contrast to all the earlier episodes where Alice finds herself trapped between acknowledging the rules of Wonderland and comparing them to hers, in this scene she starts to refute. She forces the Wonderlanders to acknowledge that the laws the Queen utters are momentary "inventions."³⁰² When the Queen demands to present "sentence first [and the] verdict afterwards," she loudly names this "stuff and nonsense."³⁰³ This scene ends by her naming the inhabitants of Wonderland "nothing but a pack of cards."³⁰⁴ This gesture marks her attempt to introduce distinctions between what is true and what is fake. In that regard, the utterly familiar courtroom or the teatime cease to be some interesting versions of what she is familiar with and end up being reduced to mere fake copies. Shortly, the court room scene serves as a stark contrast to the initial maternal space of the womb. In other words, Wonderland where everything started to entangle and perplex now turns into a space where everything is distinguished and defined. This particular point in the narrative signifies the domain of rule making and definition. And Alice constitutes the subject who enforces her rule to it. In this point, Alice rejects the abjection

³⁰⁰ *The Annotated Alice*, 139.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 140-143.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 144.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

leaking into the courtroom and takes the control in her hand. Naming all the inhabitants of the place simply a pack of cards, she rejects the abject and restores the order.

We can also detect a similar narrative arc, which progresses from a maternal field of water to the realm of law, in *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*. This novel also incorporates themes of abjection through its engagement with evolutionary thought which informs the general structure of the piece. However, unlike *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, where abjection leads to feelings of distress or unease, *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* presents a different affective engagement. In this text, Raci, the protagonist, responds to the dissolution of boundaries not with distress but with a sense of calm and acceptance. In Alice's journey, the matter of experiencing and encountering the abject serves to shatter her sense of self. However, in Raci's case, such occasions of blurring sense of self and the theme of merging with the others contribute to his need for finding himself. Within this framework *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* engages stands more along the lines of a response of sublimation in the face of the abject.

A'mâk-ı Hayâl presents the story of Raci, a late Ottoman intellectual, who feels stuck between the polarised intellectual world of late Ottoman context. Within these circumstances Raci expresses a confusion regarding not being able to decide what to believe or who he is. This novel consists of series of stories Raci enters through subsequent dreams he has throughout his intellectual and spiritual development. In each dream, he embarks on a different journey, finding himself in a different geography and a different body. These journeys reach out to diverse cultural contexts. They range from occasions where Raci converses with Brahmins in the body of a Chinese man to incidents where he meets Buddha or Zoroastrian deities. It sometimes leads to cosmic journeys where he travels through space at the back of a phoenix or to an experience of embodying the evolutionary transformations. Within this framework, each story serves as a stream that tends Raci's intellectual wound, to build a spiritual resolution and a sense of self for him. These different stories he experiences culminate into a final scene of assembly where the

representatives of each philosophical culture he meets along the way come together. As stated in the second chapter, this formal structure which presents an anthology of stories within the broader narrative of Raci's spiritual journey as a novel, draws from the way one of these stories configures the evolutionary theory through engagements with Sufi philosophy. This evolutionary conception that both manifests in the form and content of the novel serves to construct a narration where the body of the protagonist becomes ambiguous and merge with the others.

The fourth chapter of *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, which presents the novel's engagement with evolutionary thought, draws on a symbolic maternal environment much like the locked door and the pool in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. In this instance, Raci starts to experience the evolutionary unfold by initially looking at a "bowl of water."³⁰⁵ This act transforms him into an experience where everything, including both "light" and "darkness" disappears and where his body becomes "nothing but darkness."³⁰⁶ Within this "infinity" where Raci himself becomes "nothingness," he feels that he is "witness[ing]" and "mov[ing] with" a feeling that he can neither fully "name [his]" nor not.³⁰⁷ Drawing from the conventions of *devriyye* genre, this section frames evolutionary processes as a law of the divine creation. Within this framework, this stage where everything exist conceptually without materialisation constitutes the ultimate beginning when the God started to create the material world by imagining. While not offering a clear analogy of the womb, this stage constitutes a point of origin likewise. In this place where there is only darkness, nothing can be distinguished from each other, darkness unites all. Upon "checking [his] body," Raci feels everything disappears while his own body becomes the embodiment of this "darkness," where even darkness is non-existent.³⁰⁸ Experiencing this world bodily on the one hand, Raci witnesses this process through his cognition on the other. This

³⁰⁵ *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, 39.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Ibid, 40.

³⁰⁸ Ibid, 39.

causes him to not fully get immersed in this experience while still being a part of it. Therefore, even though he can experience this process through “checking [his] body” and narrating what he senses, he also cannot fully own or distance himself from this feeling.

Later when the materialisation of this conceptual realm starts, Raci feels a form of “intensification” in his body and later sees a “globe full of water” where he is “pulled into.”³⁰⁹ Upon diving into water, Raci feels that his body “contain[s] millions of strange animals,” as they start to have “strange transformations” and “evolutions.”³¹⁰ This slowly blends the creation process with an evolutionary unfold. Starting from a stage where the world is a watery globe, the geological past and the subsequent evolutions in it gets compressed into Raci’s phenomenal experientiality. This stage where Raci embodies a body of water and everything it contains, again adds on to a maternal symbolism. This watery origin almost serves as a geological womb where evolutionary history originates. Just as is the case in Alice’s experience in the maternal, this section creates abjection along multiple dimensions through which abjection is theorised. In this section, the animalistic and the maternal pasts merge in the divine origin. In these two subsequent moments where Raci becomes nothingness and then becomes the watery origin blurs this body with the bodies of the others.

In contrast to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, where the evolutionary-inflected bodily transformations destabilise the protagonist’s body within the originary womb as she still stays separate from the other creatures with whom she shares the origin, in *A’mâk-ı Hayâl*, Raci’s body completely melts into primordial oneness and later embodies the evolutionary transformations. This narration goes beyond a representation where Raci’s body only resembles the other bodies but it becomes one which he shares this body with the others. The way the narrative integrates Sufi conception of the unity of being and the literary conventions of devriyye with modern evolutionary thought makes this configuration possible. In this light,

³⁰⁹ Ibid, 43.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

while species evolve through a series of transformations which create more and more mature forms, they also represent divine essence in their own nature. Throughout this process, Raci also feels that these strange animalistic bodies feel like “prison cells” to him, until he arrives at the human form as Adam.³¹¹ Therefore, while each species represents divine essence in their own way, they also represent stages that cannot express the divine essence with the full potential. This narrative makes Raci’s human body both potentially distinct and inescapably tied to the other species. In that regard, the narration represents a phenomenological abjection, where body “strays on the territories of the animal” that stays “quite close” but regardless “cannot be assimilated.” This mode of bodily embodiment constitutes the basis of Raci’s physical transformations throughout the whole novel as he visits different cultural contexts.

The way this narrative depicts evolutionary transformations across different partial manifestations of the divine essence, until these lead to the assumed perfect form of human, finds a formal parallel in the structure of the novel. Episodic stories Raci enters through his dreams unfolds with a similar dynamic since he shares and owns the bodies of characters from various cultural contexts. Especially in the earlier stories which communicate the nature of these transformation to the readers, Raci’s attempts at checking and making sense of his body first initiates his interaction with the new narrative and geography he enters starts. In one of these earlier stories, he wakes up in the city of “Balkh,” where in most “strange” way, he communicates in “a language that resembles Sanskrit and Persian.”³¹² In this experience of embodying another body he attempts to explain what he feels claiming that it was as if he was “two people at once.”³¹³ While being “himself” on the one hand, he feels that he also is “a Persian who lived thousands of years ago.”³¹⁴ This balanced fluidity of his body puts him in the shoes of various characters throughout most of these stories while securing his own cognition

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid, 20.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

as the vocalising vice that communicates the bodily experience. This dynamic almost serves as to point at the presence of an unchanging essence across different appearances. Within this framework, as Raci one day becomes the son of the Indian sultan, another day he turns into a Chinese man embarking on a quest for learning the nature of the soul. Within this formulation, his experience of constant shapeshifting does not trigger anxiety or resistance, but rather it cultivates a sense of calm acceptance. Through consecutive episodes by which Raci enters and exits various bodies and cultures, the narrative establishes a sense of habituation. In that regard the text shapes Raci's transformations and bodily liquidity as a familiar and ordinary experience. Therefore, as he traverses across bodies, Raci does not respond to his body liquidity with rejection. The abjection, the blurring of the boundaries between the self and the other, in this narrative serves not to destroy Raci's identity but it bestows him with one.

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva defines sublimation as an alternative response to abjection. According to Kristeva, the occasions where “abject is edged with sublime,” the experience of being “carr[ied] away” from the self serves to “expand” the subject, allowing him/her to “find [one]self.”³¹⁵ Similarly, throughout Raci's dream travels, the way his body melts into other characters serves to feed him with different experiences. These journeys contribute to the construction of a resolution for the existential and intellectual crisis he is suffering. In other words, this response to abject, prevents Raci from destruction because it offers the possibility of “naming” the abject and “keep[ing] it under control.”³¹⁶ In contrast to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, where the desire to name and distinguish manifest itself through a desire to refute abjection, in *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* the narrative domesticates the abject by allowing the inclusion of it, which is in fact beyond signification, into the meaning-making system.

³¹⁵ Kristeva, 11-12

³¹⁶ Ibid.

In that regard, each of these stories stands as a representative of Ahmet Hilmi's blended Sufi philosophy while also enlarging the borders of his conception of spirituality. Each of the stories in the novel both exist within their own frame while also melting into the Sufi philosophy. This spiritual and philosophical enlargement of borders manifest itself as an enlargement of linguistic and geographical boundaries in these narratives. Throughout the remaining dreams, Raci wakes up as speakers of various languages like Sanskrit and Persian, and in various places like Balkh, Nanjing, Adam's Peak (which is currently located in Sri Lanka), and various unspecified cities in India. By embodying these various people located in various places in separate narratives, Raci collects and unites them in a whole in the spiritual journey he takes under the guidance of Mirror Baba. Shortly, in *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, evolutionary-inflected bodily transformations create abjection but tends it with sublimation.

Arif Çamoğlu interprets Ottoman intellectuals' interest in India as a form of colonialism that is "borrowed" from European models in his work that approach the nineteenth-century Ottoman context from an inter-imperial perspective.³¹⁷ Within this framework, he draws particular attention to the work of the Ottoman poet Abdülhak Hamid who occasionally critiqued the British imperial rule in India through his poetry. Çamoğlu interprets these critiques not as a form of post-colonial scholarship, but rather as attempts at "verbalis[ing] [a] desire of Ottoman expansion" in India.³¹⁸ In this light the way *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* engages with geographies and cultures such as that of India by associating them with Sufism might be approached through an interpretation that draws from Çamoğlu's claims. Within such an interpretation, Raci's travels across these places can be understood as imperial travels that serve colonial appropriation attempts. However, the protagonist's capacity for fully entering the body of the other through an experience that makes his own body a stage for their play constitutes the main

³¹⁷ Arif Çamoğlu, "Inter-imperial Dimensions of Turkish Literary Modernity," *Modern Fiction Studies*, no. 64 (2018), 436.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 443.

element that distinguishes *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* from the examples Çamoğlu highlights. This creates a narrative where various cultural contexts Raci enters adds to his Sufi interpretation, as much as it influences the others within the anthological framework they appear. In this regard, this structure, which presents the unfolding of the spiritual development of Raci through an anthology of stories, serves as an interesting ground for the interpretation of this from of imperialism.

In *The Ottoman Canon*, C. Ceyhun Arslan provides an analysis of Ziya Pasha's poetry anthology *Harabat* to comment on the way this text "compiles texts from diverse geographical and temporal origins rather than defining them as members of distinct national traditions."³¹⁹ This study reveals that through using the Sufi conception of "ocean imagery," Ziya Pasha envisions Ottoman literary a canon as the meeting point of "seas of confluence."³²⁰ Highlighting the criteria of exclusion and inclusion in such an attempt at canon formation, Arslan conceptualises Ziya Pasha's oceanic body as "a reservoir," that is a "human-made" entity "shaped by [various] biases."³²¹ This approach reveals the nuanced understanding that existed in late Ottoman chambers when it comes to defining the imperial body. This formation draws attention to nuances which requires researchers to go beyond oppressor-oppressed paradigms in post-colonial studies. Even though we cannot observe a case of compiling specific text and authors with the intentions of forming a canon in *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, the unique spirituality this novel establishes, through the presentation of various spiritualist cultures can benefit from Arslan's perspective significantly. *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* does not posit an agenda of offering a compilation of the entire Ottoman literary culture within a single textual body. However, it offers a "reservoir" of worldviews that nourishes the position Ahmet Hilmi has placed himself in. In this regard, the scientific discourse alongside the elements of religions like Hinduism,

³¹⁹ C. Ceyhun Arslan, "A Multilingual Ottoman Ocean: Taverns, Exclusions and Ziya Pasha's *Harabat*," in *The Ottoman Canon and the Construction of Arabic and Turkish Literatures*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2024), 31.

³²⁰ Ibid, 32-26.

³²¹ Ibid, 38.

Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism in *Amak-ı Hayal*, can be interpreted as “seas of confluence” that build the “oceanic” textual body. In other words, through creating a textual body made up of fragmented episodes Raci embodies, Ahmet Hilmi creates a reservoir of narratives that reflect his complex subject position. Thus, *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* establishes itself like an anthology of stories which represent an amalgamated spiritualism.

The reservoir of narratives within this novel arrives at a destination through the assembly scene that appears at the last chapter of the first book. Just as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* functions through a structure that establishes a trajectory starting from the maternal and moves towards the realm of law, the assembly scene in *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* posits the realm of law that presents a resolution. However, unlike Alice who brings resolution through the symptomatic reaction of rejection, this novel concludes in a democratic setting where representatives of all the cultures Raci encounters come together.

This scene constitutes the section where the text develops a response of sublimation in the face of abject. Rather than positing a refusal toward the intimacy and similarity of the other, it aims at integrating these alternative sides together within a common meaning-making system. This assembly scene constitutes such an attempt at integration by preparing a dynamic where each representative, ranging from Abrahamic figures to Indic characters, express their own distinct answers to the question of what “happiness” is. Among all the answers proposed, the answer of Prophet Muhammed ends up being marked the “only one” which “understands the troubles of humanity and finds a treatment” for them.³²² The gesture of presenting this answer as the most perfect among others does not serve to negate all others. On the contrary, as the novel mimics the evolutionary unfolding it envisions throughout the whole structure, this particular answer appears to be the last and most developed manifestation of the essence in

³²² *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, 80.

search. Putting all the answers under the umbrella of the Islam then, this framework domesticates the abject and keeps it under control to establish a particular meaning making system.

At the end, we can see that both *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* engage with evolutionary theory through their depictions of bodily transformation. These bodily experiences serve to bring evolutionary history to the immediate experience of the protagonists in order to affiliate different stages of the evolution. As the protagonists travel through these stages, their journeys enact forms of abjection. Within this framework, the affiliative use of the evolutionary theory serves to the representation blurring bodily boundaries which draws the protagonists into entanglements with others. As both narratives work through trajectories moving from the maternal realm towards the realm of law, they create a journey from the experience of intimacy to the establishment of definitions. Therefore, these narratives provide stories by which the implications of this blurring selfhood are reworked to offer distinct responses to abjection. In that regard, in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the encounter with the other get represented through a sense of unease and it produces a desire to reestablish distinct identities by pushing the other away. In *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, on the other hand, the dissolution of bodily limits serves not as a threat, but as a form of spiritual expansion. Raci's journey calls for a calm acceptance of his transformations and of the leaps in his journey since the narrative frames them as unique manifestations of the ultimate truth. Therefore, in contrast to Alice's, Raci's story domesticates the abjection by naming it sublime and sacred. In that regard, while Alice's journey and resolution can be positioned more along the lines of "symptom," a rejection of the abject, Raci's experience stands closer to what Kristeva calls a response of "sublimation" towards abjection. These diverging responses to the ambiguity of self and other do not necessarily be titled as distinct imperial gestures belonging to the British or Ottoman Empires. Rather, they can be approached as alternative configurations of

relationality shaped through evolutionary discourse in imperial contexts. In both cases, the theme of boundary dissolution complicates imperial hierarchies while ultimately preparing the ground for a return to order, through a symbolic passage from the maternal to the law. In that regard, the concept of abjection establishes the dual role these texts play. It allows each narrative to explore self-other entanglement within imperial conditions, while also it is enabling the eventual reassertion of boundaries and selfhood. Therefore, these texts construct subtle but meaningful strategies of identity reformation through the way they make use of the theme of embodiment through evolutionary terms.

This inter-imperial comparative framework allows for a more nuanced understanding of how evolutionary theory can be used to create narratives where an ambiguity dominating the self, the body, and the other can be represented to address nuanced imperial dynamics. However, we should note that rather than being understood as gestures that reproduce imperial hierarchies, these narratives can be used to showcase the occasions in which evolutionary discourse could be used to imagine and represent alternative modes of relationality. By tracing how abjection, bodily instability, and intimate encounters with the other unfold in both texts, the present study attempts at putting emphasis on the phenomenological and affective dimensions of embodied experience. This approach not only challenges binary models of domination and resistance that can be adopted in the way we understand imperial contexts, but it also contributes to inter-imperial literary studies by foregrounding the occasions where selfhood and hierarchy are negotiated. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that inter-imperial frameworks can benefit from drawing attention to the bodily experience of literary characters and the themes of affective disorientation in literature in order to move beyond binary assumptions.

Conclusion

This thesis project titled *Evolving Bodies and Abject Imperialities* examines *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* in their engagement with evolutionary theory to contemplate on the representations of selfhood in developmental and imperial terms. Through their engagements with the nineteenth-century conceptions of evolutionary theory, these novels construct narratives of self-development through the central themes of identity search and bodily transformations. In that regard, they present “strange” versions of the bildungsroman, where species development intersects with the development of the sense of selfhood in personal and imperial terms. In that regard, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* creates a self-reflexive story of development, while *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* builds up a culturally alternative understanding of development. In these narratives, the bodily fluidity the protagonists experience serves to create the theme of self-alienation. Through this theme of self-estrangement, both texts express an affiliative evolutionary theme that link the protagonists with the others they encountered within the evolutionary and geographical travels. In that regard, their engagement with evolutionary thought serves these texts to present abject experiences, where the boundaries of the self dissolve. This interplay between the themes of evolution, search for a sense of self, and the encounter with otherness makes possible to contextualise both texts within their imperial climates. Within these circumstances, both narratives develop diverse responses to this imperially charged experience of abjection.

Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* builds a tension between the protagonist's desire to proceed in a journey to arrive at an ending while the plot and other characters show resistance to such demand. This text turns the protagonist's journey in space and her bodily transformations into a locus which plays out the questions of whether a pre-determined directionality exists in evolution and whether intention plays a role within it. This central dynamic reflects engagements with recapitulative, Darwinian, and Lamarckian

evolutionary ideas. In other words, this text contemplates the rich evolutionary discussions of Victorian era and their implications on human selfhood within the natural world. The clash between different theories that conceptualise different developmental trajectories for speciation allows *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to present a self-reflexive bildungsroman.

Şehbenderzade Filibeli Ahmet Hilmi Bey's *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, on the other hand, presents the Ottoman interactions with evolutionary theory. Within the Ottoman context, an engagement with evolutionary thought does not merely carry questions on the place of human selfhood in the natural world. Since modern evolutionary ideas entered the Ottoman intellectual life through a contact with contemporaneous scientific developments in European, this text's engagement with evolutionary thought also carries the charge of representing Ottoman selfhood within these cultural encounters. In that light, *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*'s engagement with modern evolutionary thought reflects the socio-political climate of the Second Constitutional Era. As opposed to the positivist perspectives of the time, this text creates a spiritualist blend between science and religion by conceptualising an evolutionary idea inflected with Sufi philosophy and existing Islamic literary conventions about interspecies transformation. Within this framework, this novel represents the evolutionary process as part of a process of spiritual maturation. By adopting this evolutionary perspective in the formation of its literary form, this text borrows several formal possibilities of masnavi genre alongside drawing from the entry of novel into the Ottoman context. Through the way its understanding of evolution influences its structure, *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* posits as a spiritual Ottoman bildungsroman.

In the final chapter bringing these texts together, this project presents a comparison between *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Amak-ı Hayal* in their exploration of selfhood and otherness in their imperial contexts. The evolutionary-inflected bodily transformations of the protagonists, in both these texts, blur the boundaries of the self and creates a sense of self-estrangement that draws the protagonists closer to others. In that light, the way the bodies

became unstable in these narratives carries significant parallels to the concept of abjection. The way these narratives highlight abject experiences allows both novels to articulate their respective imperial contexts. Alice's bodily instability evokes unease by staging a tension between control and chaos to cultivate an experience that heightens Alice's desire to differentiate from the inhabitants of Wonderland. In that regard, it responds to abjection through a symptom of rejection. Raci's bodily instability, conversely, expresses a calm surrender in the face of disappearing boundaries which can be understood as a resolution established through spiritual sublimation.

Eventually, the present project highlights the theme of evolutionary theory to provide insight in two overlapping fields of scholarship: science-literature interactions and inter-imperial studies. Firstly, it draws attention to the presence of non-Darwinian evolutionary perspectives in both novels to showcase that evolutionary thinking entered the intellectual horizon not through easy gestures of adoption. Instead, this project highlights that initial engagements with evolutionary thought was a case of negotiation. This focus adds to an already expanding body of literature challenging the predominance of the notion of a "Darwinian Revolution" in the nineteenth-century studies. Particularly in the case of *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*, this emphasis serves to complicate the interpretation of Ottoman modernisation by moving beyond a "influence paradigm." In regard, the present project highlights how this novel exhibits an active dialogue with evolutionary thought instead of one-way influence. Furthermore, this project engages with the scholarship on the relationship between biological theories of development and bildungsroman genre. In that regard, it questions the gesture of associating nineteenth-century bildungsroman with linear and predictable plotlines, by showcasing the dynamism these novels build between linear progression enhanced by repetitive plotlines.

Finally, this thesis project offers several contributions to the growing field of inter-imperial studies. Firstly, *Evolving Bodies and Abject Imperialities* adds on to the inter-imperial

studies by addressing the science-literature interaction in imperial contexts. It stages the role of evolutionary discourse in nineteenth-century Ottoman and British contexts to reveal parallels between these contexts in their negotiations with scientific modernism. Furthermore, this project aims to facilitate the adoption of a reparative, affective, and phenomenologically driven approach in inter-imperial comparisons. The present project reveals that the affiliative implications of evolutionary theory in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* require us to be cautious before directly going in search of language regimes and domination structures in our analyses of imperially resonant texts. In that regard, the present project attempts at highlighting the nuanced ways of reconfiguring imperial bodies without downplaying power imbalances.

Finally, this project offers several directions for future comparative interpretations of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *A'mâk-ı Hayâl*. *Evolving Bodies and Abject Imperialities* mainly centres the concept of selfhood within the separate developmental trajectories of these novels and within their imperial climates. However, in both novels the fact that the themes of journey and development coincide opens up potential dialogues with Joseph Campbell's conception of "hero's journey," and imperial travel writing practices. Campbell's configuration outlines a cyclical literary structure that narrates a character's transformation through stages. According to Campbell, most of the heroic stories adopt a narrative arc where a character first departs home, then discovers the unknown, goes through transformations through these discoveries, and finally comes back home as a changed person. This form resonates well with the dream plots of both *A'mâk-ı Hayâl* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. In both pieces, we can observe that protagonists enter unknown dreamscapes, discover themselves and the space throughout the journey, and wake up to return to the familiar as a changed and developed person. Similarly, we can detect complex echoes of imperial travel writing in the travels of Raci and Alice. In both texts, the characters' strive for self-discovery parallels the act of getting to

know different lands and cultures. A future project might further analyse the dynamic between cyclical journey, identity search, and travel writing in these novels to further expose nuanced accounts of self in imperial contexts.



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