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The Ottoman art of word-painting. Rhyme and reason in seventeenth-century Turkish literary letters

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ABSTRACT

Among highly-educated Ottomans letter-writing was not simply a means of practical communication but an art in itself and a significant aspect of Ottoman literary culture. Collections of exemplary letters from the seventeenth century survive in considerable numbers, but they have been neglected as literary and historical sources due largely to the complexity of their rhymed, rhetorical prose and to a modern belief that they were mostly empty bombast. This article, based on a composite collection of letters by the six most eminent writers of the 1620s, examines the nature of this kind of prose, known as *inşa* (construction, creative composition), and the purposes behind such letters. It assesses how contemporaries evaluated such writing and why it was admired; how rhetorical prose might contribute to the maintenance of friendships; and how petitions in the form of literary letters helped create essential patron-client relationships.

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Some time in the mid 1620s two men who were to become the most admired Ottoman Turkish prose stylists met for a few days in Üsküb (now Skopje, North Macedonia), an administrative centre in the empire's Balkan provinces. Both were by profession sharia court judges, spending much of their careers rotating between mid-ranking, often relatively isolated, provincial posts far from the centre of patronage in Istanbul, and dealing with routine, often mundane, legal matters. However, both were also committed literary writers, and from letters subsequently exchanged between the two, it is clear that the practice of prose composition had been a major topic of conversation at their meeting. The elder man, Veysi (c. 1561–1628), was already renowned as an outstanding literary stylist; the younger, Nergisi (early 1580s–1635), soon to complete a quintet of prose works, had clearly sat at his mentor's feet avid for his wisdom and guidance. 'Meeting with you was like being in paradise', he wrote in his first letter to Veysi, and went on to describe how he had gathered 'those precious jewels of a hundred branches of knowledge . . . those gems which are forever ornaments in the diadem of respect . . . and threaded them onto the necklace of my mind and stored them in the coffer of my

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memory'.[1] In his reply, Veysi cast his admirer as 'the embroiderer in the workshop of rhetoric', one who arranges 'the jewels of meaning and metaphor' into a beautiful necklace.[2] This compliment was met by a protestation from Nergisi that 'the steed of my thoughts is kept on a tight rein, for he is still learning how to walk gracefully'.[3] In his own hands, those 'lustrous gems full of meaning' invariably turned into 'insignificant, worthless, little black beads'.[4]

The works of Veysi and Nergisi – full-length compositions as well as letters – were much admired by contemporaries as examples of fine writing in the trilingual amalgam of Turkish, Persian and Arabic which formed the Ottoman high-imperial written language. From at least the era of Süleyman I (r. 1520–66) onwards, this deliberately complex genre of rhymed rhetorical prose – a style known as *inşa*, 'constructed, creatively composed'[5] – was considered by many in the Ottoman cultural, political and administrative elites as the pinnacle of refined expression in a suitably imperial register. While diplomatic correspondence was one major vehicle for rhetorical expression, and historical writing was another, the personal letter collections of well-educated men such as Veysi, Nergisi and their correspondents bring us closer to a writer's mindset and to the heart of the question of why *inşa* composition was so admired. Letters such as theirs might contain little specific personal information and only occasionally convey significant news or wider political or social comment. Most were not meant to be everyday, practical communication, but when opportunities for conversation were limited, or impossible due to distance, the power of words on paper had a special significance. Such letter-writing was, in Veysi's words, the art of 'word-painting'.

> O rose of the gardens of perfection! If out of kindness
> You would enquire about the condition of the nightingale of the heart, then ask!
> The degree of my affection is such that without you I waste away
> Speech is fleeting; all else is word-painting[6]

Within the general category of Ottoman letter collections, there is considerable variation, from the most well-known compilation of imperial correspondence, *Münşe'âtü's-selâtîn* (*Letters of the sultans*) assembled initially by Feridun Ahmed Bey (d. 1583, head of the Ottoman chancery), through collections of literary letters of individual authors, to manuals of style for aspirant writers, to the equivalent of commonplace books of miscellaneous jottings.[7] The nature and purpose of the second category, Ottoman literary letters, is the subject of this

[1] On this correspondence, found in Nergisi's collected letters, see Christine Woodhead, 'Gift of Letters', 971–88; also Süleyman Çaldak, 'Nergisi'; Bayram Ali Kaya, 'Veysi'. Transcriptions are taken from the modern edition of Nergisi's letters edited by J. R. Walsh, '*Esâlîbü'l-Mekâtîb*.' These initial phrases are from p. 282: *meclîs-i İrem-tev'emlerinde … cevâhir-i girân-behâ-yı ma'ârif-i sad-gûne ki … ebede'd-dehr pirâye-i tâc-i i'tibârdur yek-be-yek keşîde-i rişte-i mulâhaza ve gûşe-gîr-i sandûka-ı hâfıza kılınub*. All translations in this article are my own, but inevitably no translation can convey the linguistic artistry or the musical effects of the original rhymed phrasing.

[2] Walsh, '*Esâlîbü'l-Mekâtîb*', 283: *zer-dûz-ı kârhâne-i belâgat … ferâ'id-i 'ibârât-ı müste'ârât*.

[3] Walsh, '*Esâlîbü'l-Mekâtîb*', 285: *rahş-i sühan-em teng-licâm-est henûz/Z-ân rû ki nev-âmûz-i hirâm-est henûz*.

[4] Walsh, '*Esâlîbü'l-Mekâtîb*', 285: *sebec-i nâ-çîz-i meslûbü'l-i'tibâr*.

[5] The term *inşa* has two specific meanings: (i) official epistolography, (ii) the rhetorical prose style developed for use in a ruler's chancery and also in certain prose genres. This article concerns the second meaning. A modern Turkish term for *inşa* is *süslü nesir*, 'ornate, decorated prose'.

[6] Walsh, '*Esâlîbü'l-Mekâtîb*', 283, comprising a 4-line introduction in Persian verse: *Eger zi rûy-i kerem ey gül-i riyâz-ı kemâl/ Zi hâl-i bülbül-i dil pürsişî be-fermâ'î/Beyân-ı şevk hemîn bes ki haste-em bî-tu/Sühan yekî-st diger-hâ 'ibâret-ârâ'î*. A more literal translation of Veysi's term *'ibâret-ârâ'î*, translated here as 'word-painting', would be 'adorned with metaphors and figures of speech'.

[7] For introductory surveys, see András J. Riedlmayer, 'Ottoman Copybooks of Correspondence'; Halil İbrahim Haksever, 'Eski Türk Edebiyatında Münşeatlar'; Hasan Gültekin, *Türk Edebiyatında İnşa*. For imperial correspondence see Feridun Ahmed Bey, *Münşe'atü 's-Selatin*; Dimitris Kastritsis, 'Feridun Beg's *Münşe'atü's-Selatin*.'

article.[8] Copies of such letter collections compiled by (or, posthumously, on behalf of) highly-educated Ottoman writers are common in library collections of Ottoman texts in Turkey and elsewhere.[9] Although the number of later copies is evidence of continuing appreciation of the *inşa* style used in these letters, most letter collections remain in manuscript, unstudied and unedited. Other texts by Veysi and Nergisi were among the first Ottoman literary works printed in the first half of the nineteenth century, and several late-Ottoman letter collections were published in that era. However, as the movement for simplification of the Ottoman written language gathered pace from the 1860s onwards, the popularity of *inşa* writing faded and Nergisi's style in particular came to be seen as the ultimate in overblown, bombastic, flowery prose – as largely verbiage with little 'real' content.[10] Its value(s) and style died with the empire.

Further, in 1928 Atatürk's alphabet reform introduced a specially devised set of Latin characters to replace the Arabic script in which Turkish had been written for almost a millennium. This change opened a chasm between modern readers and their Ottoman literary heritage, one which deepened during subsequent decades as the Turkish language reform movement purged from the written language a significant proportion of the Arabic and Persian elements which had been essential features of *inşa* composition. The result was an easily accessible, regular and distinctive language known as *öztürkçe*, 'pure Turkish', but one described by a leading western Turcologist as 'a catastrophic success', due to its deliberate severance of the link with much Ottoman writing.[11] It is true that for the great majority of Turkish speakers 'the jewels of meaning and metaphor' of writers such as Veysi and Nergisi would always have been largely unintelligible. But by the mid twentieth century the old rhetorical style was not easy reading even for researchers in Ottoman literature. Given the wealth of little-studied texts available in other literary genres and registers, attempts to make sense of *inşa* prose and of letters in particular were often considered a waste of time and energy. Concern that there was 'fallacy in neglecting one of the most specific and characteristic of the cultural activities of Ottoman civilization'[12] – collections of literary letters – was not widespread.

The situation is now changing, but it is still the case that only a few Ottoman letter collections have been studied, edited or published in full in modern editions. Such studies range piecemeal over several centuries – e.g. on the collections of the poet Lamii Çelebi (d. 1532), the bureaucrat and historian Mustafa Ali (d. 1600), Nergisi (d. 1635), the much-studied poet and prose writer Nabi (d. 1712), and the grand vezir Koca Ragib Paşa (d. 1763)[13] – and the depth of comparative analysis and interpretation of these does not yet approach that of studies on western-language letter collections. The letters of an

[8]On late 16th and early 17th-century *non*-literary letters: Cemal Kafadar, ed., *Asiye Hatun'un Rüya Mektupları*, letters from a Bosnian female dervish to her sufi sheykh; Özgen Felek, *Kitabü'l-Menamat*, on the 'dream letters' of Murad III; Derin Terzioğlu, 'Power, Patronage and Confessionalism', on the letters of a Crimean sheykh to Murad III.

[9]Gültekin, *Türk Edebiyatında İnşa*, notes over 60 individual letter collections by different authors from the 16th to the 18th centuries (some of which exist in dozens of copies), together with many miscellaneous collections, and around 20 manuals of style.

[10]Emma J. Flatt, 'Practicing Friendship', 64, notes similar dismissive attitudes among British colonial administrators to the Persian *inşa* style used in India.

[11]On the creation of the modern Turkish language and the irreversible break with Ottoman Turkish, see Geoffrey Lewis, *Turkish Language Reform*.

[12]Walsh, '*Esâlîbü'l-Mekâtîb*', 217.

[13]In addition to Walsh, '*Esâlîbü'l-Mekâtîb*,' on Nergisi's letters, see also Hasan Ali Esir, ed., *Münşeat-ı Lamii*; İ. Hakkı Aksoyak, ed., *Gelibolulu Mustafa Ali*; Adnan Oktay, *Münşeat-ı Nabi*; Gültekin, *Türk Edebiyatında Inşa*, which includes letters by Koca Ragib Paşa.

individual Ottoman literary writer can only be studied through the collection of copy letters made by him, or by a secretary or admirer of his. In contrast to imperial correspondence, originals of which survive in both the Ottoman archives and in the foreign papers of many Middle Eastern and European states, there appear to be no significant caches of *original* sixteenth- or seventeenth-century personal letters. Informed comment on practical aspects of correspondence such as paper, ink, folding, address, carriage, etc., is therefore difficult to make.[14] Only occasionally do authors refer to the bearer of a letter, who may be a member of the writer's household, such as Nergisi's employee Hacı Çavuş, or another trusted courier. In the case of a letter of recommendation, the bearer would usually be the potential beneficiary himself.[15]

One indication of how such a compilation might have been made is given by Nergisi in the introduction to his first collection of letters (c. 1625/6).

> I applied all my effort to correcting and putting in order those loose sheets and torn pages which had previously been scattered by the strong winds of disappointment. One by one I retrieved them, some hidden and forgotten in cracks in walls, some under a mat, others retained in the unquiet recesses of my mind, and yet others recovered from my indolent memory.[16]

However, while it may be true that for ordinary writers survival of their drafts was a matter of chance, it was probably standard practice for writers of literary letters to keep copies of their work with a view to future 'publication' in a collection. Nergisi's picture of disorder and lack of preparation is most likely a self-deprecating motif.

A recent resurgence of interest by Turkish scholars in such 'collections of pieces of fine writing' (*münşe'at mecmuaları*, or simply *münşe'at*) provides an opportunity to assess the problems and potential of such material for cultural historians.[17] What can be learned from *münşe'at*, in terms of how and why such letter collections were made? What insight can they provide into aspects of seventeenth-century Ottoman elite society and culture? The following discussion arises from a preliminary survey of a composite manuscript of the *münşe'at* of the six most admired letter writers of the early seventeenth century – Azmizade, Okçuzade, Abdülkerim, Veysi, Nergisi and Ganizade – all of whom died between 1627 and 1635.[18] This collection may have been assembled for presentation to *şeyhülislam*[19] Yahya (d. 1644), himself a major poet and literary patron.[20] Veysi, Nergisi and their four contemporaries wrote not only to their individual personal friends but also to several of the

[14]The classic work in English on the practicalities of Ottoman official documents is Jan Reychman and Ananiasz Zajączkowski, *Handbook of Ottoman-Turkish Diplomatics*.

[15]Woodhead, 'Gift of letters', 983, 987; also TY 1526, Azmizade, *Münşeat*, f. 49a, lines 13–25, letter to the governor of Baghdad concerning a newly arrived judge acting as courier.

[16]Walsh, '*Esalibü'l-Mekatib*', 228: *sâbıkâ perişân-ı tünd-bâd-ı hizlân olan evrâk-u-sahâ'if-i güsiste-şirâzenün cem'-ü-dercine bezl-i himmet-i 'âcizâne olınub, kimin rahne-i cidâr-ı nisyândan ve kimin zîr-i hasîr-i ferâgdan, ve ba'zın mahfaza-ı hâtir-i nâ-âsûdeden ve ba'z-ı âharın pîş-tahta-ı zihn-i gaflet-sûdeden birer birer ahz-ü-ihrâc idüb*.

[17]Of various articles by Haksever, see especially 'Münşeat Mecmuaları ve Edebiyat Tarihimiz için Önemi'.

[18]Münşe'at mecmuası, Istanbul University Library, TY 1526: letters of Azmizade Mustafa Haleti (d. 1631), ff. 1b–65b; Okçuzade Mehmed Şahi (d. 1630), 68a–150a; Akhisari Abdülkerim (d. 1629), 158a–198b; Veysi, 204a–262b; Nergisi, 264a–305a; Ganizade Mehmed Nadiri (d. 1627), 313a–327a. Gaps in folio numbers are blank pages in the manuscript. Several copies of this compilation exist (in addition to other individual copies of each *münşe'at*), some with slightly different or additional content. For more on these writers, see below.

[19]*şeyhülislam*: head of the Ottoman judicial hierarchy and advisor to the sultan.

[20]On Yahya see Walter G. Andrews *et al*., *Ottoman Lyric Poetry*, 245–6; Kaya, 'Yahya Efendi, Zekeriyyazade'. Abdülkerim's letter collection was compiled by İsmeti, a protégé of Yahya, probably in the late 1630s (see Charles Rieu, *Catalogue of the Turkish Manuscripts*, 98a). İsmeti may also have been responsible for assembling the six-part compilation of TY 1526 (or, given that this manuscript is undated, an original of which TY 1526 is a later copy).

same state and judicial officials, and sometimes to each other. A picture begins to emerge not only of the style of such correspondence but also of its place in professional society.

İnşa as creative writing

If a terse and functional soldier's note – the equivalent of 'please send me my green cloak' – lies at one end of the spectrum of letter types, the most admired letters of stylists such as Veysi and Nergisi represent the opposite end.[21] Literary letters are generally short (most averaging around 50 manuscript lines), tightly controlled, distillations of style. Striving for 'the jewels of meaning and metaphor' meant that Ottoman *inşa* was consciously aesthetic. It made frequent use of simile, metaphor, allusion, alliteration, synonyms, homonyms, and considerable other play upon words. Lengthy sentences with parallel and/or dual phrasing were standard, a pattern memorably described by Andreas Tietze as one in which 'the words of the author's vocabulary appear to come in pairs, like the animals filing into Noah's ark'.[22] Seventy-five percent or more of the wide-ranging vocabulary was Arabic or Persian in origin and usage, deliberately chosen both for the cultural depth and lexical resourcefulness implied and for the contrasting combinations of long and short vowels in those languages, which together facilitated the rhyme and enhanced the rhythm of the text. Turkish, with a more quantitatively uniform vocalic system, was used mainly for basic elements such as pronouns, connectives and the eventual finite verb. The dominant grammatical construction was the genitive/adjectival Persian *izafet* ('annexation'), a simple, addictive element which eventually permeated most styles of written Ottoman, but which reversed completely the natural word order of nouns and adjectives, of genitive constructions, and of relative clauses from that in ordinary Turkish phrases.[23] Most *inşa* texts were also adorned liberally with lines of verse in Arabic, Persian or Turkish, and often with Islamic classical allusions and quotations from the Koran. Above all, *inşa* prose was characterised by rhyme. Although not in a recognized poetic metre, rhymed prose (*seci*) drove the momentum of phrasing and functioned as intermediate punctuation in otherwise unwieldy sentences. It also gave a musical effect to the text, particularly when read aloud. Nergisi wrote proudly of this amalgamated, decorated form as

> the Turkish language of pleasing expression, distinguished by its gathering from the surrounding green meadows of various languages [i.e. Arabic and Persian] the choicest flowers of meaning approved by men of eloquence and, through collecting thence the fruits of clarity, admired for its natural qualities of pure and sound measure agreeable to the palate.[24]

[21] For simple texts, see Rhoads Murphey, 'Forms of Differentiation', 140, noting Ottoman letters in a Hungarian archive. For an example of an intermediate style combining 'elaborate formal and casual personal language', see the translations of two letter petitions by the lower-level college teacher and poet Zaifi (d. after 1557) to the grand vezir Rüstem Paşa (d. 1561) in Hakan Karateke and Helga Anetshofer (eds), *Ottoman World*, 1–7.

[22] Andreas Tietze, 'Mustafa 'Ali of Gallipoli's Prose Style', 300. This study remains the best short introduction in English to the elements of *inşa* prose.

[23] The following are typical (and simple) Ottoman *inşa* phrases: *tertîb-ü-tedvîn ve tezhîb-ü-tezyîn* ('collect and arrange, decorate and adorn') and *kâ'ide-i ecdâd-ı emcâd-ı 'izâm ve kânûn-ı eslâf-ı eşrâf-ı kirâm* ('the practice of my great and illustrious forefathers and the custom of my noble and distinguished predecessors') from an Ottoman chancery document of 1601: all words are Arabic, with rhyme and rhythm driven by the long vowels *î* and *â*, and connected in the second example by the Persian *izafet*. For this document see Woodhead, 'A Praise-Worthy Custom of Princes', 534–8.

[24] Nergisi, *Nihâlistân*, 6: *lisân-ı hoş-beyân-ı Türkî etrâf-ı çemenistân-ı elsine-i muhtelifeden ıktıtâf-ı ezhâr-ı 'ibârât-ı ber-güzîde -i bülegâ-pesendile müstesnâ ve ictimâ-yı semerât-ı huz mâ safâ ile müstahsen-i tıbâ'-ı selîme-i râst-mi'yârân-ı mezâk-âsinâ*.

Attached to the collection of Nergisi's letters in J. R. Walsh's edition are three *takriz* (encomium, piece of writing written in order to praise another work). Each of these brief but glowing recommendations was composed as a literary gem in itself, by three leading writers of similarly rhetorical prose. Nergisi would have presented his *münşe'at* to each assessor in turn, soliciting the equivalent of a favourable blurb which he could then append to the letter collection.[25] While the motifs used in each *takriz* differ, their imagery makes very similar points: ingenuity, craftsmanship and, above all, clarity are the qualities most admired in Nergisi's letters. The first writer finds the collection 'heart-stealing, awe-inspiring and succinctly expressed – a divinely-inspired window into the storehouse of man's mind'.[26]

> It is a luxuriant collection wherein flow rivulets of expressive meaning. It is a vessel laden with hidden royal treasure, like the camels which transport a sovereign's gold … It is a proud sailing ship carrying a precious cargo of allusion and metaphor, flying its flag high on a sea full of surprises.[27]

To Azmizade, writer of the second *takriz*, 'the sequence of phrases is epistolary medicine for the headache of anguish and concern'.[28] He is impressed by the 'wonderful first fruits of the garden of eloquence … a *münşe'at* which resembles a newly formed garland of roses, bound gently together with a fine thread of meaning'.[29]

The third writer, Ganizade, is the most succinct but also the most specific, his compliments playing upon Nergisi's pen-name.[30] Describing 'gems which sparkle with meaning', he continues

> how charming is this calm flowerbed of narcissi,[31] where dawn's silvery growth is transformed by the touch of the sun's golden globe into a striking expanse of new flowers. See the appearance of each flower [or each conceit, or letter], like a ray of light from the freckled moon wreathed in a halo of silver petals. Its centre is a dark glass, its bowl full of the most fragrant musky perfume. … every choice phrase of this collection is a stronghold of precise meaning, like that sacred stone, the Rock of God.[32]

To appreciate the full significance of these assessments for contemporaries is difficult, given the very different expectations of post-Ottoman literary composition and what we would now consider to be direct and grounded judgments. Jewels in a necklace and flowers in a garden were two of the most popular among a number of standard motifs used by composers and evaluators of *inşa* prose for centuries and had been inherited by

[25]For the Ottoman texts of these *takriz*, see Walsh, '*Esâlîbü'l-Mekâtîb*', 303–6.
[26]Walsh, '*Esalibü'l-Mekatib*', 303: *bir dîvânü'l-inşâ-yı dil-güşâ-yı mu'ciz-'unvân-ı mücez-beyân lâhutî-revzen-i nâsutî-mahzen*.
[27]From the *takriz* by Şeyh Mehmed Şerifi (d. 1631), a senior judge and also *nakibüleşraf*, head of the community of descendants of the Prophet registered within the Ottoman empire. Walsh, '*Esalibü'l-Mekatib*', 304: *bu mecmû'a-ı âbdâr-ı cedvel-mevvâc ve sefîne-i keyânî-defîne-i 'ascedî-revâcda çehre-nümâ olan suver-i mekâtîb ve süver-i mu'ciz-esâlîb şol münşe'ât-ı bülend-a'lâm-ı bahr-i i'câz ve ol mevâhir-i fevâhir-i teyyâr-ı kinâye-vü-mecâzdur*.
[28]Walsh, '*Esalibü'l-Mekatib*', 305: *terkîb-i elfâzı derd-i ser-i endûh içün 'ilâç-ı mektûb ola*.
[29]Walsh, '*Esalibü'l-Mekatib*', 305: *nev-bâve-i bâg-ı belâgat … nahl-i gül-i nev-zuhûr ki şirâze-i cem'iyeti rişte-i bârîk-i ma'ânîdür*.
[30]'Nergisi' is a *mahlas* (pen-name) derived from the writer's family name Nergiszade, 'the sons/family of Nergis' (see Çaldak, 'Nergisi', 560). 'Nergis' also meant 'narcissus'.
[31]Or 'Nergisi's peaceful garden'. On a particular use of the *nergis* motif in Ottoman poetry, see Savaşkan Cem Bahadır, 'Ölüm Sonrası Aşk', 289–91.
[32]Walsh, '*Esalibü'l-Mekatib*', 306: *habbezâ nüzhet-gâh-ı Nergisî ki kadeh-i zerrîn-i mihr ile berg-i sîmîn-i seher te'sîr-i âbu-u-hevâsından perveriş-yâfte bir nergis-i ter ve berg-i sîmîn-i hâle ile peyker-i kelef-dâr-ı mâh-ı enver anda bir müşgîn kadehdür ki kâse-i zerrîni pür-müşk-i ezfer dür. Ve'l-hâsıl her fıkrası muhkemiyet-i 'ibâretde sahretü'llâh ile mevsûm olan hacer-i mukaddesî … dür*. The 'rock of God' refers to the black stone in the Ka'aba in Mecca.

the Ottomans from their Arab and Persian literary predecessors. Garden imagery was also a fundamental feature of poetry and frequently used in book titles.[33] But as with the seemingly repetitive motifs of Ottoman lyric poetry, the challenge was to treat a traditional image in new ways. For Okçuzade – a former *nişancı*[34] whose *münşe'at* is prefaced by a long introduction, part autobiographical and part justification of his belief in professional standards of composition – the potential breadth of good *inşa* composition meant that a true *münşi* (letter writer, literary stylist) was one who could treat a single theme ten times with equal subtlety without repeating the same images and allusions.[35] Innovation and dexterity in the use of language were the goals.

The study of *belagat* (rhetoric) was an integral part of the education both of Ottoman chancery officials and of Ottoman scholars and judges. Chancery *inşa* was considerably influenced by the Arabic tradition of formal epistolography culminating in the encyclopaedic compilation of the Mamluk secretary al-Kalkaşandi (d. 1418). Personal themes of friendship, loneliness and courtesy in Ottoman literary letters can also be traced back to elements of less formal Arabic letters (*rasa'il ihvaniyye*, lit. 'brotherly letters'), particularly those written from the ninth-century Abbasid era onwards.[36] For their understanding of Arabic rhetoric generally, scholarly Ottoman letter-writers would have studied as a standard college text on *belagat* one of the many Arabic commentaries on or epitomes of the *Miftahu'l-'Ulum* (*Key to the Sciences*) of al-Sakkaki (d. 1229), or the works of al-Jurjani (d. 1078 or 1081) on which al-Sakkaki drew.[37] It is worth noting that translations into Ottoman of two other important college texts on *belagat* – works by al-Kazvini (d. 1338) and Mahmud-ı Gavan (d. 1481, known to Ottoman *inşa* writers as *h^{v}ace-i cihan*, 'the teacher of the world')[38] – were both made in the early seventeenth century.[39] This suggests the continuing importance of studying *inşa* composition in this era and illustrates the increasing prominence by around 1600 of Ottoman Turkish as a scholarly medium, in serious competition with Arabic. The existence of such translations might also help explain why there appears to be an intensification of personal letter-writing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and an increased interest in exemplary collections as models.

There is an understandable tendency when studying complex Ottoman *inşa* prose in any genre to focus on compositional elements such as grammar, syntax and vocabulary, partly as a means of justifying any translations achieved or conclusions reached. However, looking at the end product as a whole, rather than at the nuts and bolts of composition, places less emphasis upon how such writing was constructed, and more on what the style and content, and ultimately the existence, of the text actually meant to

[33]See Aslı Niyazioğlu, *Dreams and Lives*, 23–4, 47–8. In Niyazioğlu's translation (p. 2), the full title of the biographical dictionary of Ottoman scholars compiled by Nev'izade Ata'i (d. 1635; see Hatice Aynur, 'Atai') is 'Gardens of Truth in the Completion of the Peonies', reflecting its origin as a continuation of a mid 16th-century biographical compilation entitled *Şeka'ik-i nu'maniye*, 'Crimson Peonies'.

[34]*nişancı*: keeper of the sultan's seal and head of the imperial chancery.

[35]Woodhead, 'Ottoman *İnşa* and the Art of Letter-Writing', 158.

[36]See Adrian Gully, *Culture of Letter-Writing*, 1–28 for a brief introduction, and chapters 6 and 7 on 'balagha, epistolary structure and style' and 'epistolary protocol' and the ethos/rules followed; also Klaus U. Hachmeier, 'Private Letters, Official Correspondence'; Rahmi Er, 'Risale'.

[37]Cf. Mustafa Bilge, *İlk Osmanlı Medreseleri*, 55–7; William Smyth, 'Canonical Formulation of 'Ilm al-Balaghah'. On al-Jurjani and Arabic *inşa* generally, see Lara Harb, *Arabic Poetics*.

[38]On Mahmud-ı Gavan, see Flatt, *Courts of the Deccan Sultanates*, 133–8.

[39]Christopher Ferrard, 'Development of an Ottoman rhetoric', Parts I, 163–73 and II, 19–23; Atabey Kılıç, 'Altıparmak Mehmed Efendi'.

writer and recipient(s) at the time it was composed. While it is easy to dismiss 'flowery prose' as meaningless bombast, the fact that letters in similar styles have been written in many other cultures suggests that they met much deeper cultural needs and purposes. In addition to studies on classical and western Christian epistolography, the work of Margaret Mullett and others on Byzantine letters, particularly on letters of exile and on notions of friendship in a world apparently full of enemies, raises useful questions for Ottoman studies.[40] Mullett considers letters to be 'the supremely Byzantine prose genre', able to deal with 'grand emotional issues' comparable to the use of poetry in other cultures. She describes the Byzantine letter of friendship as 'an emanation of the spirit, a mirror of the correspondent, the icon of the soul'.[41] Alternatively, Emma Flatt, studying letters of friendship and patronage networks in the fifteenth-century Bahmani sultanate in India, concludes that the Persian *inşa* rhetoric of court and personal documents – of the type composed by Mahmud-ı Gavan, 'the teacher of the world' – was 'an instrumentalist style, ideal for negotiating the complex dynamics of courtly society but directly opposed to the qualities associated with modern conceptions of friendship'.[42] As will be suggested below, Ottoman literary letters appear to range from one end of this spectrum to the other, from sincere, possibly emotional, friendship to instrumentalist patronage-seeking, with several other stages and purposes in between.

Uses of *inşa*

Why write *inşa* prose at all, and why write personal letters in this style? The first question concerns the purposes for which *inşa* was used in a general sense, and the effort required to write it well. Most Ottoman writers of rhymed, decorated prose in genres other than epistolography did not use this style all the time, but varied it according to the kind of literary, historical or other work they were writing, and according to the intended readership. Veysi himself chose a much simpler, though still elegant, register for the dream narrative which he presented to Ahmed I (r. 1603–17) – or possibly to the vezir Nasuh Paşa, d. 1614 – some time around 1610[43]; several of his shorter letters are also in a fairly straightforward style. Equally, within any given work the language register could also vary. In historical texts, the most complex prose appears naturally in the introduction but also in passages which are intended to convey grandeur or immensity of some kind – of the sultan, his commanders or his army; of a very difficult terrain or an imposing enemy fortress; of extreme weather, shortage of supplies and tremendous hardship to be overcome; of a highly significant and hard-fought battle, etc. The intention is to use the richness of words and images rather than accumulation of hard fact to increase the drama and to impress upon the reader or listener the depth and enormity of the imperial achievement. Much of the rest of the narrative, including side issues such as skirmishes, anecdotes and general observations, might be written in relatively straightforward prose, which makes the rhetorical passages even more striking.[44] Clearly, it was

[40]Margaret Mullett, *Letters, Literacy and Literature in Byzantium*, esp. nos. II and IV. For a useful comparative work on letter-writing and patronage in Renaissance Florence, see Paul D. McLean, *Art of the Network*.
[41]Margaret Mullett, 'The Classical Tradition in the Byzantine Letter', 77 [no. II above].
[42]Flatt, 'Practicing Friendship', 65.
[43]Ahmet Tunç Şen, 'A Mirror for Princes, a Fiction for Readers'; full edition in Mustafa Altun, *Hab-name-i Veysi*.
[44]Tietze, 'Mustafa Ali of Gallipoli's Prose Style'; Jan Schmidt, *Pure Water for Thirsty Muslims*, 220–49.

accepted that there was a right place and a right time for *inşa* prose, that it was not to be used simply for its own sake or to show off the writer's ability. Variations in language register did not indicate a lapse from the ideal but a skilful use of language to the desired effect. Controlled use of *inşa* in a text of mixed register allowed an author to add extra depth to his range of expression; it communicated intensity of feeling, rather than of fact.

The link between high style and high status or achievement is relatively clear. A second reason put forward by some Ottoman authors for writing *inşa* prose is less obvious, has nothing to do with imperial grandeur, and is initially surprising in a literary tradition usually considered to have been heavily dominated by verse.[45] It is that *inşa* composition offered a greater challenge and allowed a greater range of expression and more intensity of feeling than poetry. The poet and biographer Latifi (d. 1582) describes how, having put together a *divan* (anthology) of his own poetry, comprising 500 *gazel*s (lyric poems), 33 *kaside*s (praise poems) and several other short forms of verse, he 'then realized that this was not a worthwhile stock of capital, and that it did not amount to much in skill or achievement': one in every two people was a poet. He therefore 'turned to *inşa*', which was a skilled profession in which 'no ill-educated incompetent can spread his wings'.[46] Similarly, half a century later, in the 1620s, Okçuzade claimed that

> while numerous skilful poets capable of originality in rare and beautiful expression may always be found in every country, if not in every city, true prose stylists, those with natural talent, appear only once in each generation.[47]

He then specified how a real master of the *inşa* style can be distinguished from someone who is only second rate. The true *münşi* does not simply follow established models, but

> by making the forehead of memory sweat and by discovering the treasures of his inner mind . . . by wearing himself out to the limit of his mental resources he tests the bounds of clear expression.[48]

The effort required in writing *inşa* is also apparent in many motifs used in the letters themselves. Writing to Veysi, Nergisi describes how he despaired of being able to find the right words to produce a graceful style of expression.

> The broker of imagination was sent into the market of a mind already ransacked, and ran hither and thither in the storehouse of my thoughts. However, he did not succeed in finding the beautiful, lustrous gems full of meaning which would be worthy of being offered . . . I was reduced to the inadequate practice of threading onto the knotted string of writing these insignificant, worthless, little black beads.[49]

While such protestations could be viewed simply as conventional motifs, they should not be dismissed out of hand. The emphasis upon inadequacy, upon the never-ending search for 'the jewels of meaning and metaphor' in expressing one's innermost feelings, is

[45]On poetry as 'The literary expression par excellence in the Ottoman world', see Aynur, 'Ottoman Literature'.
[46]Ridvan Canım, 'Latifi Tezkiresi'nde Dil ve Üslup', 169.
[47]Okçuzade, *Menşeü'l-inşa*, TY 3105, 5b: *ihtirâ'-i bedâ'i'-ü-nevâdire kâdir şâ'ir-i mâhir her iklîmde belki her şehr-i 'azîmde mevcûd-u-vâfirdur; emmâ münşi'-i hakîkî ki kudret-i inşâ nihâdinde selîkî ola her 'asrda vâhiden ba'de vâhidün[dür].*
[48]Okçuzade, *Menşeü'l-inşa*, TY 3105, 5b-6a: *münşi'-i hakîkî-şi'âr . . . cebîn-i hâtırını ta'rîk ve defîn-i zamîrini tefrîk ile bir tarz-ı cedîd îcâd-u-ihzâr teferrüd-ü-istibdâd ider . . . temhîs-i 'ibârât-ı sarîhede bu vechle it'âb-ı karîhe itdüklerinde.*
[49]Walsh, '*Esâlîbü'l-Mekâtîb*', 285: *simsâr-ı mütehayyileyi bâzâr-ı zihn-i târâc-kerdeye irsâl idüb, tekâpû-yı çârsû-yı mütefekkire kılmış ise, tabakçe-i mektûb ile pişkeş-i mahfil-i ehâlî-nişîn-i hazret-i üstâd-ı ferîdü'l-âfâk kılınmağa kesb-i istihkâk eylemiş bir zîbende güher-i tâb-dâr-ı ma'nâ-dârazafer müyesser olmayub, bi-'l-âhere bu makûle sebec-i nâ-çîz-i meslûbü'l-i'tibârı keşîde-i rişte-i girih-der-girih-i tahrîr kılmak hücnesine irtikâb zarûrî lâzım gelmişdür.*

a prominent element in the literary letter. The fact that relatively few Ottoman writers were recognized masters of *inşa* certainly does indicate that successful writing required considerable skill and application.[50] Writing a letter in this style was intended to be a challenge which required one's greatest efforts; as such it was both satisfying to the writer and a compliment to the recipient. This understanding perhaps parallels Mullett's description of Byzantine letters mentioned above. And, given the general tenor of Islamic allusions in such writing and of reverence for the stylistic perfection of the Koran, completing a successful letter may also have been regarded as an act of piety.

From this follows a further aspect of *inşa* writing, in general but particularly in letters, that it should create a work of art which would be a worthy gift for someone capable of appreciating it. Presenting *gazel*s, *kaside*s or entire works in prose or verse to the sultan or to a powerful state official was a standard means of attracting functional patronage; a literary gift was a piece of flattery offered in the hope of receiving monetary reward or gainful employment. However, a letter could also be a gift between friends and equals. According to Azmizade, letters were 'an opportunity for eloquent communication' which produced something rare and desirable, and should not be filled with 'idle chatter' about the writer's specific troubles.[51] Nergisi describes a letter from Veysi as 'a intricately-composed missive which is a health-restoring exemplar',[52] and which 'produced the kind of joy and delightful state of excitement of a child-like heart when first seeing and experiencing something special'.[53] Letters to genuine friends and fellow *münşi*s were miniature works of art, sent as gifts to be treasured, read and re-read, both alone and in a *meclis* (literary salon). The best reward here was not pecuniary, but appreciation and a reply in kind.

The personal satisfaction to be gained in creating and receiving exemplary letters is therefore one answer to the question why (some) educated Ottomans used the *inşa* style in letters of friendship: the purpose of making contact was often less to communicate information and more to send a gift in artistic form. Professional and patronage-seeking letters were also a form of gift and flattery, though for rather different purposes.

Networks of correspondence

Studying a group of letter collections from the same era offers considerable potential for gaining insight into both social and professional relationships. Although the lack of published editions currently limits what can be said in this respect, certain general observations are possible. The six *münşe'at* in manuscript TY 1526 exemplify an interesting range of both letter types and recipients.[54] There are around 250 items in total, sent to some 90 different recipients over a period of about 40 years, roughly from 1590 to 1630, with the majority probably written between 1600 and the mid 1620s. The ability to

[50] A rough survey of entries in a contemporary biographical dictionary of scholars (Ata'i, *Zeyl-i Şeka'ik*) for the period 1617–34 reveals that only around 14 out of 189 men (c. 7.5%) in the learned profession were noted for skill in *inşa* prose, and of these only half are noted as gifted letter-writers; by contrast, a considerably larger number are noted as poets.

[51] Azmizade to Abdülkerim, TY 1526, 39b: *makâm-ı bisât-ı makâlde bu denlü güft üzre iktisâr ma'zûr olmak ricâ olınur*.

[52] Walsh, '*Esâlîbü'l-Mekâtîb*', 285: *nüsha-ı 'âfiyet-resân olan nâme-i nâmî-yi kirâmî-güher*.

[53] Walsh, '*Esâlîbü'l-Mekâtîb*', 285: *tıfl-i dilün evvel gördüği şekl-i meserret, ve ibtidâ müşâhede kılduğı hâlât-ı hoş-nümâ-yı behcetdür*.

[54] Among a small number of non-epistolary items are at least two *vakfiye* (document establishing a charitable foundation) and several *takriz* in praise of a work by someone else.

write 'heart-stealing' *inşa* prose may have been granted to only a few stylists, but many others could read, hear, appreciate and be impressed by such writing. Letters in a *münşe'at* were included primarily for their literary and artistic value, to enhance the author's reputation and, knowingly, to serve as exemplars for future practitioners, as evidenced by the number of later copies and the continuing interest in them.[55] However, a *münşe'at* is not a complete collection of the author's personal letters, often nowhere near being so. In one manuscript of letters by Azmizade there are 52 items, in another 88; in the Walsh edition of Nergisi's letters there are 38, but in other manuscripts more than 50.[56] The difference between these (and other copies of the same *münşe'at*) may be due simply to the addition of later compositions to an early compilation, or to the inclusion of others previously disregarded, or both. However, as seen in the two manuscripts of Azmizade's *münşe'at* mentioned above, the order of items could vary significantly between one recension and another, which suggests some element of choice by author or editor, and conscious re-organization. Until these differing copies have been fully compared, it is not possible to draw reliable conclusions about a writer's range of addressees, or how often and why he wrote to them, or whether he received replies or, in some cases, material advantage in return.

A lack of basic detail further complicates the picture. Letters in a *münşe'at* are usually neither dated nor signed with the author's name and location or post. Nor, for the most part, do they appear to be organized chronologically within an individual collection. Nergisi's seemingly haphazard gathering of items may have been partly genuine after all, and not unusual. Internal evidence can often establish at what stage in the writer's career a letter was composed, but not always. As many letters also lack the original salutation, addressees may be identifiable only through the compiler's heading added in contrasting red ink. In some cases even these headings have been omitted, with a blank line left between items; this is more likely if an author did not compile his own collection. Alternatively, some of these untitled items may have been originals not sent, and some may have been model letters, though this is unlikely if their contents are specific. Such 'deficiencies' do, perhaps, indicate that the purpose of a later letter collection – as opposed to the original purpose of any given letter – was as much to demonstrate the high literary achievement of Ottoman culture as it was to promote the reputation of the writer himself.

There are three principal types of recipient mentioned in these six *münşe'at*. The first, around 50%, are senior members of the *ulema* (highly educated scholar-judges), particularly those holding one of the three highest offices, as *şeyhülislam* or next in the judicial hierarchy as *kazasker* of Rumelia or of Anatolia.[57] Regular addressees are Yahya (firstly as *kazasker* at various times and then as *şeyhülislam* 1622–23, 1625–32, 1634–44), and Hocazade Esad (*şeyhülislam* 1615–22, 1623–25, and a member of the dominant *ulema* family of the time[58]), but the largest number of letters in TY 1526 to one individual is to

[55]On the flyleaf of TY 1526 are two notes of ownership of the manuscript, dated 1223 (1808) and 1257 (1841). Many marginal annotations explaining unusual vocabulary have been added throughout the manuscript, either by the copyist or by a later owner.

[56]Number of items in the *Münşe'at* of Azmizade, Or. 1169 and TY 1526 resp.; Walsh, *'Esâlîbü'l-Mekâtîb'*, 218.

[57]*kazasker*, a Turkish form of *kadi'l-asker* or *kadi-i asker*: lit. 'judge of the army', but in fact responsible for the application of sharia law to all Muslims throughout the relevant part of the empire.

[58]i.e. the Hocazadeler, the four sons of Hoca Sa'deddin (d. 1599), teacher/mentor of Murad III and Mehmed III and briefly *şeyhülislam*: see Baki Tezcan, 'Ottoman *Mevali*', 397–407.

Ganizade (the sixth author in the collection), both before and during his tenures of both offices of *kazasker*. As the *kazasker*s of Rumelia and Anatolia were responsible for appointments to and organization of judicial and college posts in the western/Balkan and eastern parts of the empire respectively, and as both were also members of the imperial council, letter-writing courtesies to holders of these offices were always useful in putting forward a writer's own claims to recognition and preferment. Also, as Ganizade was personally well connected in both *ulema* and court circles and spent most of his career in Istanbul, at the centre of events, his prominence as a recipient of letters and petitions is unsurprising.

The second type of recipient, around a quarter of the total, are vezirs, pashas and other high-ranking military-administrative officials. This bears out a finding that in the late sixteenth century vezirs in the civil administration were frequently the givers of certain types of patronage and members of the *ulema* were the receivers.[59] Azmizade wrote around ten essentially patronage-seeking letters to the controversial grand vezir Nasuh Paşa (in office from 1611 to his execution in 1614)[60] and seven (perhaps more friendly missives) to the less powerful but more congenial vezir Hafız Ahmed Paşa (killed 1632), himself a highly regarded poet and a genuine literary patron. According to TY 1526, both pashas also received at least one letter each from Abdülkerim and Veysi. Interestingly, none of the six writers appear to have written letters to the sultan, in contrast to the regular practice of presenting poems to the ruler.

The third group of recipients, the remaining 25%, are largely miscellaneous lesser figures among judicial, religious, administrative and military personnel, and tend to be particular to each writer, with only slight overlap. In terms of the social contacts of the six *ulema* letter-writers, this varied group may turn out to be the most interesting, in showing them communicating with men who were possibly friends rather than potentially useful associates. Finally, in addition to these three categories of recipient, in each collection there are usually a few letters headed simply 'to a dear friend'.

Ganizade's own *münşe'at* is the shortest of the six, containing only 20 items, most of which probably date from the early part of his career.[61] Around half of these are letters written on his own behalf to military-administrative officials – to vezirs, the *reisülküttab* (chief secretary to the imperial council), the commander of the Janissaries and to at least one palace officer – and three were composed by him, probably in the late 1590s, on behalf of state officials themselves. The latter include a letter from a grand vezir to the Central Asian Özbek ruler Abdullah Han, and another on behalf of the chief white eunuch, the Venetian convert Gazanfer Ağa (d. 1603), to the sister of Shah Abbas of Iran. These two 'official' letters open his collection. Okçuzade's *münşe'at* (of around 57 items, over some 75 folios) begins similarly, with five relatively lengthy *name-i hümayun* (imperial letters) to Shah Abbas written in his capacity as *nişancı*, one in the name of Mehmed III (r. 1595–1603) and four composed during the second reign of Mustafa I (r. 1617–18, 1622–3). Disappointingly, most of the rest of Okçuzade's letters bear no heading, their recipients are difficult to identify, and it may be that some here are exemplars of particular types of model letter, especially given Okçuzade's role as *nişancı*, in which he

[59]Suraiya Faroqhi, 'Social Mobility among the Ottoman '*Ulema*', 209.
[60]On the nature and tone of these letters, see Woodhead, 'Writing to a Grand Vezir'.
[61]Other copies of Ganizade's *münşe'at* may contain many more items, from a later period. As this is the last of the six collections in TY 1526, it is possible that the compiler/copyist ran out of time, material or interest to include more.

might be expected to set a high style for official epistolography. The collections of both Ganizade and Okçuzade tend to be court-centred, reflecting Ganizade's early status as a favoured protégé of the influential Gazanfer Ağa and Okçuzade's chancery career.[62]

The largest *münşe'at* in TY 1526 in terms of the number of items is that of Veysi. It contains around 120 separate entries, although some are very short (around ten lines or less) and a considerable number are without headings. In contrast to the elevated style of his correspondence with Nergisi, the briefest items are written in a fairly straightforward prose and are generally practical in content. An example of the latter is the penultimate, untitled note. This is a request to someone to find a place on a ship for the son of a secretary of the imperial council, who had been ransomed after several years' imprisonment following his capture at sea by Christian pirates while on his way to Cairo to join the pilgrimage caravan. In a slightly more complex style are three letters sent probably in the early 1600s to Ömer Efendi, preacher at the mosque of Aya Sofya in Istanbul, and a fourth – in an altogether higher register, adorned with verse – sent later to the same Ömer Efendi in his then more elevated capacity as *hoca* (teacher, mentor) to Osman II (r. 1618–22). Of the readily identifiable addressees of Veysi's longer letters, the great majority are fellow judges and senior *ulema*, with relatively few letters to vezirs and pashas. The range of Veysi's correspondence is probably the most varied, and also the most variable in form and content.

The next largest *münşe'at* is that of Azmizade, containing 88 items. The son of a *hoca* of Murad III (r. 1574–95) and a relatively privileged member of the *ulema*, Azmizade was also a highly regarded poet, under the pen-name Haleti. His *münşe'at* begins with 19 letters to various pashas, which initially also suggests a court-centred orientation. However, this impression soon wanes and the collection proceeds in a less orderly fashion.[63] Some 34 letters to professional superiors in Istanbul and to some of his peers in the judiciary constitute around 40% of the total contents. As in all six *münşe'at*, that of Azmizade includes many of the typical Ottoman letter-types, such as *tehniyetname* (letter of congratulation) on appointment to high(er) office or with good wishes for a religious festival; *taziyetname* (condolences) on a death in the family; *şefa'atname* (letter of recommendation), and other more general communications. Similar courtesies and items specifically termed *mahabbetname* (letter of friendship) are addressed to contacts in major cities in the empire, particularly Damascus and Cairo, and may reflect friendships (or at least connections) established whilst Azmizade served as chief judge there.

The *münşe'at* of Abdülkerim contains 46 items, nine of which are to *şeyhülislam* Yahya and six to Hocazade Esad. The majority of the remaining two thirds are to other members of the *ulema*, including Veysi, Ganizade and Azmizade. From 1611 onwards, Abdülkerim's judicial career was spent mostly in the principal imperial cities, as chief judge of Cairo and of the former Ottoman capitals Bursa and Edirne; he did not gain appointment as *kazasker* and probably had fewer dealings with Istanbul-centred vezirs. He is now the least well known of the six letter-writers of TY 1526, but his reputation as

[62]On Gazanfer Ağa's patronage of Ganizade (under the latter's pen-name Nadiri), see Emine Fetvacı, *Picturing History*, 249–58. Ganizade's highest career post was that of *kazasker* of Rumelia, 1624–5. On Okçuzade, see Woodhead, 'Ottoman *İnşa* and the Art of Letter-Writing'.

[63]The earlier collection of Azmizade's letters (Or. 1169), containing only 52 items, begins not with a block of letters to pashas but with three probably sent around 1603–04, to a scholar in Damascus, to the chief judge of Cairo, and to a military commander also in Cairo. In TY 1526 these three items are found much later in the collection, and separately.

an Arabic scholar and an Ottoman *münşi* was high among contemporaries.[64] An unusual feature of Abdülkerim's *münşe'at* is the inclusion of five *vefeyat* (obituaries, biographical notices), four of early seventeenth-century pashas and one of a member of the Crimean Giray dynasty.

Nergisi's *münşe'at* in TY 1526 has a slightly different character again. His judicial career comprised two principal parts, the first largely as a deputy and protégé of Kafzade Faizi (d. 1622), poet and chief judge of Selanik (Salonica) between 1618 and 1620, and a much longer second part as *kadi* (judge) in various Balkan administrative centres, such as Mostar and Elbasan.[65] Born in Saraybosna (Sarajevo) and without significant family connections to Istanbul or to leading members of the *ulema* aside from his relatively brief association with Faizi, Nergisi struggled professionally in almost inverse proportion to his literary success. Some of his earlier letters were written in his capacity as secretary to Faizi; many others bemoan the isolation of his subsequent provincial postings in Bosnia and Albania. Ironically, when he finally attracted the sultan's attention and was appointed to write a literary account of the first eastern campaign led by Murad IV (r. 1623–40) to Revan (Yerevan, Armenia) in 1635, he fell from his horse and died shortly after the army left Istanbul.

What kind of correspondence was there between such Ottoman word artists? Did they develop their treatment of particular themes in response to letters they received? Was there the equivalent of a *nazire* (a poem written in conscious and flattering imitation of another) in prose writing? Azmizade and Ganizade are said to have exchanged such responses to each other's poems; perhaps they did so with letters too.[66] When letter-writers met with their correspondents in person, privately or together with others in a *meclis*, did they discuss the most effective use of words and motifs? What proportion of a writer's letters were not considered fit for collection, and why? Also, with regard to professional and patronage-seeking 'literary gifts', why choose to write a letter rather than the more usual poem? Azmizade appears to have presented only verse to sultans, both verse and letters to certain military-administrative officials, and only letters to judicial colleagues.[67] The fact that such letters usually contained several verse elements – varying from single lines to four-line compositions, often in Persian and sometimes in Arabic – tempers but does not negate this apparent distinction. In some cases the choice between poem and letter might have been simply expected courtly practice, or personal preference. Otherwise, if it was appropriate to present a short *gazel* or *kaside* in person, perhaps only a *name* or *mektub*[68] would be sent from a distance. The *gazel*s and *kaside*s in Azmizade's *divan* date mainly from his early career as a college professor in Istanbul, with easier access in person to court patronage circles, whereas the letters in his *münşe'at* date largely from a highly competitive mid career at *mevleviyet* (senior judgeship) level in major provincial cities, when distance meant that continuing contact with professional

[64]Kılıç, 'Unutulmuş bir Münşi', noting (p. 104) that more than 30 copies of Abdülkerim's letter collection are known.
[65]On Faizi as a literary patron, see Niyazioğlu, *Dreams and Lives*, 23–9.
[66]Niyazioğlu, *Dreams and Lives*, 42, n. 44.
[67]For poems sent by Azmizade to Nasuh Paşa between 1611 and 1614, see Kaya, ed., *Divan of 'Azmi-zade Haleti*, v. I (no. 57), *kaside* nos 39 and 40, pp. 89–91; for two verse petitions sent by him to Osman II and Murad IV, see H. Dilek Batıslam, 'Divanlardaki Manzum 'Arz-ı Haller', 212–13.
[68]*Mektub*, the modern Turkish word for letter, is sometimes used in both the headings and the texts of Ottoman letter manuscripts, but is not the most significant term.

superiors in the judiciary was more important, and a better impression could probably be made with a sophisticated letter.

A broader range of vocabulary and freedom from the demands of metre clearly differentiate a literary letter from a poem. On the other hand, early impressions of the letters of Azmizade and Nergisi studied so far suggest that there are broad structural similarities. For instance, rather like a *gazel*, each letter usually contains one main theme to which perhaps three or four images contribute from different, sometimes unconnected angles. In two separate letters to Veysi, Nergisi dwells upon the themes of loneliness and inadequacy. His first letter after the meeting in Üsküb contains four principal motifs, centred around Nergisi's happy memories of their discussions and his present feelings of loneliness and loss in comparison. He dwells upon the jewels of Veysi's eloquence (which he, Nergisi, cannot match); he describes himself as a helpless child in comparison, unable to be comforted; he is the nightingale to Veysi's rose; their meeting remains a 'feast of memory'. The second letter contains a further set of images on the same themes: Nergisi describes himself as consumed by fire and water in the pain of separation; a letter from Veysi brings new life to his troubled mind; on receiving the letter he is as happy as a child; but he lacks the resources to write a worthy reply, as the jewels of eloquence are denied him.[69] The principal themes in an early letter sent by Azmizade from Damascus around 1603 to Dukakinzade Osman, then chief judge in Cairo, are illness and lack of strength. Casting Osman Efendi as a wise physician, Azmizade presents himself as a patient in need of the reviving drugs of kindness; his soul is a weak little bird imprisoned in a body suffering the pains of separation; he has no strength to visit his friend, nor to write to him; he desires the restorative medicine of a letter in reply.[70]

Conclusion

Ottoman literary letters served a range of purposes – particularly as a challenging form of art, as a gift between friends, and as a means of creating and maintaining professional and patronage links. In absorbing and developing long-established Arabic-Persian epistolographic traditions, they were also one means of demonstrating Ottoman cultural and imperial achievement to the Islamic world. With further study it might also become evident that the motifs, metaphors and allusions favoured by a particular *münşi* indicate not simply commitment and inventiveness, but also adherence to a specific religious, philosophical or political outlook which would be difficult to ascertain otherwise.

Unfortunately, leaders of Ottoman society in the early seventeenth century, whether statesmen or learned men, left few, if any, other private papers. The principal and most readily available source for personal and career information on members of the *ulema* remains the contemporary biographical dictionary compiled by Ata'i (d. 1635), himself a scholar-judge and a protégé of Azmizade. The schematic format of Ata'i's entry for any given individual briefly identifies his family and comments on his education. It then lists all his subsequent teaching and judicial posts, and usually concludes with a note about works written, a sample of the subject's poetry, and one or two character-revealing anecdotes. The letter collections of Azmizade, Abdülkerim and their contemporaries

[69]Walsh, '*Esâlîbü'l-Mekâtîb*', 281–3, 284–6; Woodhead, 'Gift of Letters', 980–1, 984–6.
[70]Azmizade to Dukakinzade Osman, Or. 1169, 2b–4a (this letter does not appear in TY 1526).

have the potential to extend considerably the range and depth of Ata'i's reference work. Even when presented as literary exemplars shorn of most practical detail, these letters are significant sources both for individual personality and for aspects of communication among the *ulema* and with state officials. Further investigation should reveal additional evidence of patron-client groupings within the scholarly-judicial community, and permit greater understanding of the mentalities of early modern Ottoman educated society.

The early seventeenth century was a period of unusual political uncertainty and social change in the Ottoman empire. Significant disruption during the five years from 1618 to 1623 resulted for various reasons in three sultanic depositions (including the regicide of Osman II in 1622) and many changes of senior officials; thereafter, factional conflict and simmering military revolt continued well into the 1650s.[71] The appearance of a number of political 'reform tracts' reflected this unease.[72] Members of the *ulema*, particularly the *şeyhülislam*, the two *kazasker*s and their closest would-be successors, had to negotiate these perils just as much as the vezirs and pashas whose lives were more visibly affected, and often lost. Career patterns in the learned profession had also become increasingly precarious for another reason. Tenure of judgeships during the sixteenth century had generally been relatively stable and reasonably long-term. However, by around 1600, an increase in the number of qualified judges had led to greater competition for appointment, with the result that most judicial posts, up to and including those of the two *kazasker*s, were usually awarded for one or two years only. In between postings there might be a lapse of some years during which unemployed *kadi*s converged on Istanbul and sought the most useful patrons among senior *ulema* and military-administrative officials who could support them when applying for new judgeships. Among the judiciary itself, patron-client networks became especially important, for both protection and advancement. Being able to address a potential benefactor correctly and successfully by letter was a useful skill, while Nergisi's success in securing favourable *takriz* recommendations from both Azmizade and Ganizade, solicited in 1626 between postings, was a significant achievement.[73] According to Ata'i, a *takriz* written by Azmizade was 'like the coins struck by the imperial mint, much in demand and a treasured possession'.[74]

Clarity of expression was highly valued by contemporary recipients and assessors of letters composed in the *inşa* style, though the expansive expressions of the latter often seem to the modern mind anything but clear. The belief that a rich literary style could give substance and meaning to life is neatly summarised in the words of another early seventeenth-century Ottoman *nişancı* and wordsmith, Hasan Hükmi (d. 1638).

> Through droplets of elegance from masters of eloquence, through magical images conjured into being by inventive literary artists, the affairs of mankind and the essential concerns of this our transient world are poetically arranged and gracefully adorned.[75]

[71]On the upheavals of this period, see Tezcan, *Second Ottoman Empire*.
[72]Douglas A. Howard, 'Ottoman Historiography', 63–73.
[73]Walsh, '*Esâlîbü'l-Mekâtîb*', 218–9.
[74]Ata'i, *Zeyl-i Şekâ'ik*, 740.
[75]Letter in Sarı Abdullah, *Düstûrü'l-İnşâ*, 160r–162v: *reşehât-ı aklâm-ı şeker-rîz-i debîrân-ı fasîhü'l-lisân ve fikirât-ı erkâm-ı sihr-engîn-i münşiyân-ı bedî'ü'l-bünyân ile umur-i 'ibâd-u-bilâd ve mühimmât-ı 'âlem-i kevn-ü-fesâd nazm-u-nesk ve zîb-ü-revnak [bulunub]*.

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