

ACROSS CHASMS OF CHANGE: THE KASIDE IN LATE
OTTOMAN AND REPUBLICAN TIMES

Walter G. Andrews and Mehmed Kalpaklı

it's that transparent wall dividing
the existing from those who are no more
those who live out their lives to the endless
within a cloudy silence (27:1-4)

The historical perception of radical change in Ottoman society and its cultural practices has traditionally focused on the Europeanizing reformative period of the mid-nineteenth century (the *Tanzimat*) and the break accompanying the establishment of the Turkish Republic early in the twentieth century. As we begin to discuss continuity and change in a poetic genre, we believe it is important to problematize this general perception, especially insofar as we will focus on specific cultural products of just these periods.

An expanding fringe of Ottoman historians is questioning the widespread notion that the Ottoman Empire was an essentially homeostatic entity that accreted power, territory, cultural skill to a point in the sixteenth century from which it descended in a long and steady decline of some three hundred years, ablating its commendable qualities en route.¹ That this notion has been so late questioned seems to be less a matter of scholarly competences and more a matter of the dominance of a widespread teleological historicism that sees Western modernity, scientific rationalism and the nation-state as the logical end of history. It is necessary to critique, however superficially, such Western proclivities on the subject of historical change primarily because it is so easy to find support for the image of a polarity between a homeostatic East and a dynamic West. In fact, the self-image of present-day Turkey quite often posits a similar, homeostatic alterity—the East of the (Ottoman) past—in contrast to which the actual or hoped-for national state represents itself. Thus when we talk about Ottoman and Turkish cultural products that emerge from within the twin processes of estranging the past and

¹ Perhaps the best single study problematizing the historicist narrative of Ottoman homeostasis and steady decline is Abou-El-Haj, 1991. He also mentions several other historians who have questioned the common perception.

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Edited by
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