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Abstract

Literature, again, is not a collection of more or less naive theories of life, which it is the business of the philosopher to dissect and then put together again in terms of his own technical system; it is the most direct, the most inevitable, the most vital interpretation of life itself. As Wordsworth well said, the poet should always write with his eye on the object and the same applies to literature as a whole. Of course the writer's personality is always a decisive factor; but the less he thinks about his personality or his merely individual views of life, the better, for life itself, in some aspect or other is always his subject. He may be a classicist or a romanticist, a realist or an idealist, but that is his own concern.

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Introduction

Nobody can decide such matters for him; it is temperament and artistic environment, including the age in which he lives, that determines him. The absolute essentials of true art are sincerity imagination, and felicitous expression, such as will re- create the vision in the mind of the reader or the beholder or the listener. It is possible to tell the truth in many languages; and it is the business of the artist, whatever his medium or method or artistic creed, to bring out the vital truth of the side of experience that he is dealing with. And it hardly need be added that artistic truth can never be reduced to merely intellectual terms. Here, at any rate, ‘appreciation’ cannot be reduced to terms of mere ‘description,’ no matter how teleological the latter may be.

While considering a novel of another culture these are some of the likely problems that one will come across. Apart from general context, literary traditions themselves are often highly culture-specific: the plays of Bernard Shaw and Tom Stoppard insistently recall Shakespeare, while the medieval Japanese *Tale of Genji* is filled with references to earlier Chinese and Japanese poetry, and modern Japanese novelists keep referring back to *Genji* in turn. Along with differing literary references, cultures develop distinctive assumptions about the ways literature should be created and understood.

If someone reads a foreign text in ignorance of its author’s assumptions and values, they will risk reducing it to a pallid version of some literary form we already know, as though Homer had really wanted to write novels but could not quite handle character development, or as though Japanese haiku are would-be sonnets that run out of steam after seventeen syllables. However, a great work of literature can often reach out beyond its own time and place, but conversely it can also provide a privileged mode of access into some of the deepest qualities of its culture of origin. Works of art refract their cultures rather than simply reflecting them, and even the most “realistic” painting or story is a stylized and selective representation. Even so, a great deal is conveyed through literature’s kaleidoscopes and convex mirrors, and our appreciation of a work can be enormously increased if we learn more about the things it refers to and the artist’s and audience’s assumptions.

In their long history, the Turks have gone through more changes than most nations, and yet—paradoxical as it may sound—they have preserved most of their basic cultural traits. Through the centuries, they lived as nomadic tribes, built small and large states in parts of Asia, created the Selçuk state in Asia Minor and later the sprawling Ottoman Empire, which endured from the thirteenth to the early twentieth

century, and finally established the modern Turkish Republic. At different stages of their history, Turkic communities embraced Shamanism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, and other creeds until most of them accepted the Islamic faith more than a thousand years ago. Their language, one of the world's most regular in grammar and also one of the most agglutinative, has used five separate scripts: Köktürk, Uyghur, Arabic, Cyrillic, and one based on the Latin alphabet.

The pattern of the main ages of Turkish literature follows the foregoing outline of the major periods of Turkish history. But scholars have pursued a variety of approaches to the periodization of Turkish literary development. The simplest approach sets up two stages: early (eighth to nineteenth century) and modern (nineteenth to twenty-first century). Another breakdown involves three periods: pre-Islamic (until the eleventh century), Islamic (eleventh to mid-nineteenth century), and modern (mid-nineteenth century to the present). A different three-pronged categorization is: pre-Ottoman (until the thirteenth century), Ottoman (thirteenth to twentieth century), and twentieth century to the present. A more elaborate—also more meaningful—approach sets up five stages: pre-Islamic (until the eleventh century), Pre-Ottoman Islamic (eleventh to thirteenth century), Ottoman (thirteenth to mid-nineteenth century), transitional (mid-nineteenth century to the 1920s), and modern (1920s to the present). All these periods have their subdivisions, on which, however, there is no unanimity among literary historians.

Pamuk's formula for success has been postmodernism plus some Turkish exoticism. He has been likened by several giants of modern literature. Such kinships tend to provide a fairly easy passage to fame abroad. The risk involved, however, is that similarities may not sustain the inherent value of the oeuvre for long—unless the writer from the other culture finds a voice uniquely his own, explores new forms, and creates a synthesis beyond a part formula based on what is in fashion.

Critics enamored of identifying models and influences have discovered affinities between Pamuk and Borges, Calvino, and Eco, whose works he has probably devoured. As a voracious reader, he has stated that especially from age sixteen to twenty-five, he read and aspired to resemble the authors he admired most. On another occasion, he observed:

If we must use Western criteria, for me the novel of the Western world is the creative work of Joyce, Proust, Woolf, Faulkner, and Nabokov—not Hemingway and Steinbeck, who have long been idolized in our country for their simplicity of style and language.(Interview)

It would not be incorrect, however, to assert that Pamuk is at present proceeding away from “influences” toward an authentic, original novelistic art—a new synthesis as evinced by his post-Nobel novel, *Masumiyet Muzesi* (2008; *The Museum of Innocence*, 2009). His first novel, *Cevdet Bey ve Ođulları* (Cevdet Bey and His Sons, 1982) is a Buddenbrooks type of work in three volumes that traces a family’s life over three generations as well as the process of Turkish modernization from the early twentieth century onward. *Sessiz Ev* (Quiet House, 1983) skillfully fuses modern and traditional novelistic techniques, utilizing five major characters who narrate the story through their stream of consciousness. The latter two works remain untranslated into English, although both have fascinating features. *Beyaz Kale* (1985), published in English translation in 1990 as *The White Castle*, is a tour de force about the intriguing interaction between a Venetian and an Ottoman look-alike who symbolize diverse aspects of the cultural tensions between East and West. *Kara Kitap* (1990; *The Black Book*, 1994 and 2006) was hailed as a masterwork, especially in Europe and the United States, and solidified Pamuk’s reputation. It masterfully depicts the mysteries of Istanbul and evokes the traditional values of Sufism. *Yeni Hayat* (1995; *The New Life*, 1997) is a travel novel woven in a poetic style that deals with imagination gone awry, youthful despair, and republican idealism thwarted.

The success of two novels in particular—*Benim Adım Kırmızı* (1998; *My Name Is Red*, 2001), a powerful novel about miniature painters in the Ottoman capital in 1591, and *Kar* (2002; *Snow*, 2004), Pamuk’s most patently political work—led to his Nobel Prize. His *İstanbul: Hatıralar ve Behir* (2003; *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, 2005), a beguilingly evocative description of his beloved and sorrowful city, enhanced his international prestige. His *Masumiyet Muzesi* is avowedly a novel of love, marriage, friendship, sexuality, family life, and happiness. Pamuk was crowned the novel’s success by opening a museum by the same name in Istanbul.

References

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