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Turkish-German Literature Goes Istanbul, or, Lessons for Multicultural Germanists in Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red*

David Martyn

Turkish immigrants living in Germany had started to write and publish literature in the 1970s, and by the mid-1990s, Germanists in the United States had pounced on this new kind of “German” literature as a way of reinvigorating their field—or at least of catching up with their colleagues in English and French, who had been having a heyday with postcolonial studies since the mid-1980s. Germany, which lost its relatively few colonies in the First World War, didn’t have much in the way of postcolonialism to offer; but the four million Turks who had come to Germany looking for work came from a country at the margins of Europe, making the writing they produced suitable material with which to “de-center” the study of German literature. Alongside *francophonie*, we now had “Germanophonie”: literature written in German by non-German, transcultural authors. Coming as late as it did, the research on this literature did little to enhance the status of German within the modern languages. The path-breaking work on authors such as Assia Djebar and Salman Rushdie was being read by scholars of many languages, while Emine Sevgi Özdamar, the best-known “Germanophone” author, was not known outside of German studies. Even within German, the work did not always have a major impact. On the “theory” side, it seemed derivative of what had already been worked out in the other languages. On the “literature” side, it often failed to show why the texts were noteworthy. A typical article on a Germanophone novel in *German Quarterly*, one of the field’s premier venues in America, made intelligent arguments about the nov-

el's redeployment of Orientalist clichés, but without once *quoting* the text of the novel itself.¹ What made the literature interesting, it seems, was something that could be adequately rendered by paraphrase. But paraphrase flattens the individuality of every voice. Whereas studies of canonical *and* of postcolonial authors in English and French seem always to make contact with the surface of the texts themselves—witness Homi Bhabha's comments on the *Satanic Verses*, peppered with quotations from the novel²—studies on Germanophone authors pay less attention to poetics.³ Is there nothing about the writings of Germanophone authors so unmistakably unique that it *can't* be adequately translated into the impersonal language of paraphrase and theory? Do their texts have no individuality worthy of critical attention?

Perhaps—this had been my thought—the emphasis on these authors' "marginal" status *vis-à-vis* German mainstream culture was dulling our sense of what was actually going on in their texts. Instead of reading Turkish-German authors against the backdrop of German Eurocentrism, I had thought it might be interesting to put them into other contexts; for example, by exploring their relationship to current developments in Turkish literature. Such an enterprise would not necessarily exclude them from the German context, but would merely add another "angle" of observation in the hope of obtaining a richer and more detailed picture of their work. Curiously, I could find no one who had tried this before. Current research was increasingly aware of the drawbacks entailed in "compartmentalizing" literature by migrant authors, but proposed ultimately to solve the problem by reading their work as "German" literature with no hyphen, and hence dissolving the category of immigrant literature altogether.⁴ Exploring the relationship between Turkish-German and Turkish authors might provide another way, I had thought, if not of avoiding "compartmentalization," then at least of complicating and refining the compartments; and it would do so without erasing the authors' multicultural differences. Looking at contemporary Turkish literature would help in recognizing the *individual* value of what Turkish-German authors had written.

Of course, it turned out differently than I expected. From beginning to end, the seminar in Istanbul was a lesson in the hubris of expectations, especially the expectations of a "Westerner" hoping to discover some "solution" to a problem s/he has at home by "going East." This was, I was soon forced to admit, what had brought me to Turkey. In essence, I had been hoping for an experience that would complicate and dismantle the stark East-West dichotomy that subtended so much

of the current research on multiculturalism, even when this research was intent on criticizing dualist thinking on the part of Western scholars. It was as though ever since Said's *Orientalism*, all we could do was point fingers at ourselves for seeing everything in the binary terms of East versus West. Maybe the colleagues in Istanbul would have another take on the world, I had thought—only to find that my expectations were fully off the mark. With the exception of Sevkett Pamuk's detailed and informative lecture on the economic history of the Ottoman empire, the East-West dichotomy came back to haunt us over and over again during the weeks in Istanbul, not just in the presentations and papers, but in the conversations at lunch, at dinner, over *raki* and chickpeas. It seemed as though everyone was intent on proving—indeed, on proving *to us*—just how “Western” Turkey really was. As Khaldoun Samman put it early in the seminar, the unchallenged assumption in almost all of the discussion was that “modernization” could not be imagined except as a kind of “Westernization.” Even the author I had chosen to focus on, the much-celebrated contemporary novelist Orhan Pamuk, seemed to harp on the East-West problem both in his works and in published interviews. “I am living in a culture where the clash of East and West, or the harmony of East and West, is the lifestyle. That is Turkey,” he stated succinctly in 2003.⁵ And all of his translated novels, *The White Castle*, *The Black Book*, *The New Life*, *My Name is Red*, and *Snow*, deal in one way or another with the difference between East and West and with the difficult path between these two poles that Ottoman and Turkish history has had to navigate since at least the 16th century.

Nevertheless, while they did not fulfill my hopes of finding a “third” position beyond the East-West dichotomy, Pamuk's novels did finally engage my research plans in a way that was as illuminating as it was unexpected. This engagement concerned the notion of *individuality* I had used to point out what was missing in existing research on Germanophone authors. Ian Almond, one of the professors at Bogazici University who has written on Pamuk, argues convincingly that Pamuk's work undermines the notion of individuality from a distinctly hybrid East-West perspective. Reappropriating medieval Islamic traditions in which the self is exposed as an illusion—namely the illusion of the self's independence from God—Pamuk unfolds his own “post-modern” speculations on the illusoriness of all notions of identity.⁶ Taking my cue from this line of approach, I came to see Pamuk's work as a comment on the place of individuality in the East-West dynamic.

Indeed, I would argue that Pamuk invites us to see the modern notion of individuality, which is permeated with unacknowledged contradictions, as a *cause* of the dichotomist modes of thought that reduce everything to an instance of the East-West dualism. It is as though the notion of individuality was itself a symptom of what lies at the root of Orientalism.⁷ This is an idea that emerges with particular urgency in Pamuk's fifth novel to be published in English, *My Name is Red* (1998).

A murder mystery set in the milieu of 16th-century Istanbul "miniaturists" (manuscript illuminators), *My Name is Red* is one long commentary on the new cult of the individual that arose on the threshold to modernity in the West, and its rapid and eventful influence on the East. To mark the thousandth anniversary of Islam, the Sultan has commissioned an illuminated manuscript that will show to the world Islam's military strength and pride, as well as the power and wealth of his own dynasty. Enishte Effendi, the man charged with directing this project, has decided that the illustrations in the book should be carried out in the style of the Venetian masters, whose portraits he had admired on a trip to Italy. The murderer is one of the four miniaturists that Enishte commissioned; and the solution to the mystery is discovered in one of the illustrations. A peculiar trait in the way the murderer has rendered the nostrils of a horse betrays his identity.

The notion of individuality plays into this plot on at least three levels. For one, it is the central issue regarding the paintings themselves. As opposed to Islamic traditions of manuscript illustration, in which persons and objects are rendered in a generic manner designed merely to connote their "perfection," Venetian portraiture depicts individuals in all their uniqueness. This is the scandal that amazes the Istanbul artists: "One day, I came across a painting hanging on a palazzo wall and was dumbfounded. More than anything, the image was of an individual... . The Venetian masters had discovered painting techniques with which they could distinguish any one man from another—without relying on his outfit or medals, just by the distinctive shape of his face. This was the essence of portraiture."⁸ Furthermore, whereas the size of the objects in traditional miniatures reflects their importance in Allah's mind, the perspectivism of the "Franks," as the Europeans are called, renders objects as they appear to the eye, thus placing the human observer, rather than God, at the center of the (depicted) world. The

individual subject becomes the measure of all things (391). Secondly, the new notion of individualism fundamentally alters the concept of artistic production, of what it means to make art. In Islamic miniatures, the goal is perfection, not expression of the artist's individuality; any trait that distinguishes one artist's work from that of another is seen as a flaw. The Westernized aesthetics that Enishte imports to Istanbul transform these flaws into something valuable, namely, the fact of a personal, inimitable "style" (376). It is this discovery of style that leads to the solution of the murder mystery, making individuality, thirdly, a central issue on the level of plot. Only by learning to recognize the peculiar way in which the murderer renders horses' nostrils can the pursuers identify him. Indeed, the very genre of the detective story, the invention of which is often attributed to Edgar Allen Poe (an author of a very individualist age in that most individualist of countries), centers inherently on the peculiar "signature" of the perpetrator, on what makes him or her different from everyone else.

The upshot of this grand parable of the attempt to import the notion of individualism into 16th-century Istanbul is, ultimately, that it simply doesn't work. The Turks are incapable of attaining the status of "individuals." The more they try to be individual, the more they end up imitating the Franks from whom they inherited the concept. "For the rest of your lives you'll do nothing but emulate the Franks for the sake of an individual style," the murderer tells his colleagues at the end of the novel. "But precisely because you emulate the Franks, you'll never attain individual style" (401). Inasmuch as Pamuk himself is relentlessly accused of emulating Western models, we can see in this statement the expression of a problem that plagues not just the characters in the novel, but the author himself, indeed, the entirety of the "culture" of which he is a part. (*My Name is Red* was seen as a blatant imitation of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*.) In short, individuality appears here as a prerogative of the West. This is a problem that I had in fact already encountered in my research on immigrant authors in Germany: From the late 18th century, when Jews who had grown up speaking Yiddish and Hebrew began to write and publish poetry in German, up to the present state of Germanophone literature by Turkish and other immigrants, second-language authors were invariably denied the status of individuality. If their work seemed different from that of their native colleagues, they were accused of "getting it wrong." If it seemed the same, they were accused of being "inauthentic." They were either blunderers or epigones who had betrayed their true iden-

tity. Pamuk, of course, was not a migrant or second-language author, but he was running up against the same double bind. What was more, he had made this very problem a major theme of his work. Should I conclude that Western Europeans were the only people capable of being individuals?

Or was it that Western Europeans, on closer inspection, were every bit as incapable of having an authentic individuality as the Turkish miniaturists in Pamuk's novel? The social theorist Niklas Luhmann has diagnosed the rise of a new semantics of individuality in 17th- and 18th-century Europe as an ideological compensation for the increased dependence of individuals on social structures in modern society:

Men can only live in society, and this is no less true in modern society than it was before—perhaps with more alternatives and choices for the individual, but also with an immense increase of the ways in which one is dependent. It would seem that the semantics of individuality serves to compensate for these increased dependencies. The individual escapes into 'subjectivity' and 'uniqueness,' characteristics that cannot be called into question by empirical-causal dependencies. Confronted with ever more numerous and ever more complex chains of dependency, the individual is, in a more radical sense, *more* individual than before.⁹

What changes in the transition to modern society is not the *fact* of individuality itself—as Luhmann points out, individuality is an unquestioned given in all societies, including pre-modern and traditional ones¹⁰—but its *function*, which now requires each individual to prove and to emphasize his or her own uniqueness. Whereas before, one could *be* an individual without ever having to call attention to one's "difference," now one has to *show* one's difference from everyone else, precisely in order to mask the degree to which one is in fact the product of increasingly intrusive social mechanisms. One has to appear different exactly because one isn't. As evidenced by the rise of fashion and by the new requirement that art be "novel," "original," and "unique," the new cult of the individual leads paradoxically to a situation in which individuals become more and more the same. Luhmann writes of the "amazing imposition of originality, uniqueness, authenticity of personal values with which the modern individual sees himself confronted and which it can scarcely live up to except by copying established patterns of individuality."¹¹ It is not just the Turks who have a problem with individuality, but anyone living in a modern society.

Pamuk's novel can be read as an eloquent commentary on precisely this kind of double bind that modernity imposes on individuals. After he has absconded with the Sultan's illustrated manuscript and painted his own portrait into the center of the book's last, double-leaf, perspectivist illustration—"I was both the center of everything, like a sultan or a king, and, at the same time, myself"¹²—the murderer is overcome by the terrifying feeling that he has become "even more of a slave" (399) for foolishly following the new artistic fashion imported from the West. Renouncing the Frankish innovations, he warns his colleagues: "The old masters of Herat tried to depict the world the way God saw it, and to conceal their individuality they never signed their names. You, however, are condemned to signing your names to conceal your lack of individuality" (400). Falling into the "trap" (399) of *emphasizing* one's individuality (for example, the modern convention of signing one's name to one's illustrations) means becoming a mere imitation of "established patterns of individuality," as Luhmann puts it, thereby ceasing to *be* an individual. "If...we paint the way we feel like painting, embracing our faults and individuality under the influence of the Franks so we might possess a style, we might resemble ourselves, but we won't be ourselves" (389). In one of the most beautiful "Oriental" tales woven into the novel's lush tapestry of legends and parables, a merciless shah jealously guards his beautiful daughter from all other eyes, confining her to a room accessible only through forty locked doors. When his daughter's portrait miraculously shows up in one of the illustrations contained in an illuminated manuscript he had commissioned from his team of artists, he discovers the identity of the offending miniaturist by closely examining a seemingly marginal aspect of the illustration, namely, the maiden's ears. Precisely because ears are deemed unimportant by the miniaturists, each always draws them in the same way, without thinking: "For the ears, they didn't think, didn't aspire to anything, didn't even stop to consider what they were doing. They simply guided their brushes from memory" (252). "The thing we now call 'style'" (315), in other words, existed before it was named, indeed could only exist before becoming the focus of attention. Individuality was only possible before it became an issue.

This reading of Pamuk's novel forced me to reconsider the terms of my project. For if the Western discourse of individuality was in fact a means of disguising the degree to which we are all increasingly the same, then the search for the individuality of Turkish-German authors was perhaps misplaced. Indeed, what Pamuk's novels finally showed

me was that my project itself was a symptom of what it was designed to overcome, namely, the dualist mode of thought that sees everything before the backdrop of an East-or-West dichotomy. The Western claim to individuality is incapable of sustaining itself on its own; among the strategies and sleights-of-hand it relies on to uphold the compensatory desire for uniqueness is the construction of an East-West dualism. The West can appear "individual" only in comparison to an East that can always be seen as derivative, as a poor imitation of the West. The double bind of individuality that Luhmann and Pamuk describe is projected onto the East-West split, creating the illusion that individuality is a simple and attainable fact, at least in the West. What this means, I realized, is that my search for the individuality of Turkish-German authors was, among other things, an attempt to distract from the discomforting fact that the individuality I took for granted in Western authors was not something that simply "existed," but rather a discursive construct inseparable from Orientalism.

Beyond this negative heuristic outcome, however, Pamuk also opens a new perspective that promises to be useful in discussing Turkish-German authors. As the novel approaches its *dénouement*, "style" is revealed to be not the signature of individuality, but an element of tradition. The peculiar way of painting the nostrils of horses discovered in the murderer's illustrations "is not simply the meaningless and absurd mistake of a painter, but a sign whose roots reach into the distant past to other pictures, other techniques, other styles and perhaps even other horses."¹³ The emphasis on originality masks the importance of intertextuality for the development of style. Now, one of the concerns of Turkish-German authors, such as Emine Sevgi Özdamar and Zafer Şenocak, is the unprecedented and abrupt break from tradition that was incurred when Atatürk imposed the Latin alphabet onto the Turkish language and purged the lexicon of Arabic words. In Özdamar's *Mutterzunge*, for example, the autobiographical narrator is intent on recovering her "grandfather tongue" by learning Arabic. The text includes lists of those Arabic words that are still part of the Turkish language.¹⁴ Özdamar is uncovering the traces of the Turkish cultural past that survived the Kemalist linguistic reform. In Şenocak's *Gefährliche Verwandtschaft*, the Turkish-German protagonist discovers diaries of his grandfather that he is unable to read because they are

written in antiquated Turkish, in Arabic as well as Cyrillic script.¹⁵ He is thus doubly cut off from his cultural and familial history, both by his upbringing in Germany (he can scarcely read even modern Turkish) and by Atatürk's artificially imposed break in the history of the Turkish language. He finally resolves to commission a translation of the diaries by a German Orientalist (116–18). Like the works of Özdamar and Şenocak, Pamuk's novels are concerned with bridging the Kemalist rupture. They are mostly set in the Ottoman past¹⁶ and are engaged in recovering elements of Turkey's cultural history that are inaccessible to all but the few who are capable of reading older Turkish texts.

The work of all three authors, then, can be seen in the context of their confrontation with the Kemalist attempt to discard tradition and to catapult Turkey into its vision of "Western" modernity. In the process, Pamuk (and perhaps his Turkish-German colleagues) manages to uncover some of the unacknowledged contradictions and ideological deceptions at the core of that modernity. This is an important achievement, and one that would be vitiated, it seems, by attempting to identify the "individuality" of each author's contribution to it. ●

Notes

1. Nina Berman, "German and Middle Eastern Literary Traditions in a Novel by Salim Alafenisch: Thoughts on a Germanophone Bedouin Author from the Negev," *German Quarterly* 71 (1998): 271–283.
2. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1–19.
3. Two notable exceptions are Azade Seyhan's *Writing Outside the Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); and articles by Ülker Gökberk.
4. Gerd Bayer, "Theory as Hierarchy: Positioning German *Migrantenliteratur*," *Monatshefte für deutschsprachige Literatur und Kultur* 96 (2004): 1–19. See the remarks on Berman's notion of "Germanophone literature," p. 12.
5. Quoted in Brian Lavery, "In the Thick of Change Where Continents Meet," *The New York Times* (27 August 2003): E3.
6. Ian Almond, "Islam, Melancholy, and Sad, Concrete Minarets: The Futility of Narratives in Orhan Pamuk's *The Black Book*," *New Literary History* 34 (2003): 75–90.
7. The interest of this thesis derives in part from the fact that it goes very much against what Said argued in *Orientalism*, where the "individual" appears precisely as the antidote to Orientalism. It is when "the individual mind" finds "a precollective, preofficial individuality" in the Orient that the abstract generalities of Orientalist thinking are counteracted. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, with a new Afterword (New York: Vintage, 1994), p. 155. See also Said's response in his 1994 Afterword to criticism of his book's "'residual' humanism," *Ibid.*, pp. 339–40.
8. Orhan Pamuk, *My Name is Red*, trans. E. M. Göknar (New York: Vintage, 2002), pp. 26–27.

9. Niklas Luhmann, *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik: Studien zur Wissenssoziologie der modernen Gesellschaft*, Vol. 3, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998), pp. 159–60, my translation.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
11. Niklas Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, Vol. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998), p. 1019, my translation.
12. Pamuk, *Red*, p. 398.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 297.
14. Emine Sevgi Özdamar, *Mutterzunge* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1998), pp. 14, 39, 46.
15. Zafer Şenocak, *Gefährliche Verwandtschaft* (Munich: Babel, 1998), pp. 13–14.
16. See the informative essay by Nüket Esen.