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THE RECEPTION OF ORHAN PAMUK IN NORWAY

In the morning of October 12, 2006, I got a telephone call from the Norwegian publishing house Gyldendal, which has published all Orhan Pamuk's novels (I had by then translated three of them) and was asked to watch the TV news at noon, and to stay available for the rest of the day. At noon, Horace Engdahl, the head of the Swedish Academy, eventually appeared on the news and announced that the Nobel prize of literature was awarded to Orhan Pamuk, who, as he said, "in the quest for the melancholic soul of his native city has discovered new symbols for the clash and interlacing of cultures." I was not completely surprised, not only because of the call from the publisher, but also because OP had been the favourite candidate of the Norwegian and Swedish press. I was filled with an utmost joy because I thought Orhan deserved the prize so much. I was then called by the biggest Norwegian TV station and gave an interview there, and then hurried home again in order to check out the reactions in Turkey.

To my great surprise and disappointment, however, most of the Turkish reactions I could find on the Internet were negative. Nobody expressed any joy or pride; quite on the contrary, some writers (I will not name them; their statements are still on YouTube) even expressed the thought that the prize rather should have been given to themselves (or to Yaşar Kemal), since they were much better writers than OP. Some of these reactions doubtlessly were caused by the statements OP had made about the Kurds and Armenians, and by the suspicion that the Swedish Academy wanted to honour him for not literary but political reasons, but behind quite a number of the hateful statements, sheer envy was also quite obvious.

Before the appearance of OP's novels in Norwegian from the beginning of the 1990ies onwards, except for some short stories, Yaşar Kemal was the only Turkish author who had been translated into Norwegian – not from Turkish, however, but from German or English. One of the reasons for this was that there was nobody who did (or could do) direct translations from Turkish at that time. In Denmark, this was still the case until quite recently; almost all OP's novels have been translated from other languages than Turkish. As stated on the title page of the Swedish translation of *The Black Book*, it was translated from my Norwegian translation; most later Swedish

translations of other of OP's novels, however, have been done from Turkish. The Norwegian image of the Turks and Turkey created by Yaşar Kemal's novels had little to do with the reality of the urban, Europeanized lifestyle of Istanbul, and the existence of a Turkish intelligentsia and a blooming Turkish cultural life was almost unknown in Scandinavia. One of the main merits of OP (which, however, never has been realized in his home country) has indeed been that the common notion of the Turks being either an exotic and backward peasant society or conservative warriors trying to become westernized but still living in the past, has yielded to an international acknowledgement of the existence of a vivid Turkish intellectual life.

The White Castle and The Black Book

The Black Book appeared in Norwegian in 1994, and it was the first translation of that book which appeared whatsoever. During my work with it, it was also being translated by Güneli Gün into English and by Münevver Andaç into French, and all the three of us had questions regarding the interpretation of quite a lot of expressions and sentences in the book, which we used to fax to Orhan. To a great extent, our questions must have been identical, because as a reply to our questions he produced quite extensive answers, which actually could have been published as "Guidelines for the translation of *The Black Book*".

However, then *The Black Book* appeared in Scandinavia, OP was already well known because of *The White Castle*, which had appeared in Norwegian (translated by my former student Trude Falch) in 1991 and in Swedish in 1992. The reception of *The White Castle* and *The Black Book* in Norway has been treated in an article by Şehnaz Tahir and Emel Türker.¹ As could be expected, the critics mostly dealt with the historical complexity of Turkey treated in these novels, and especially the eternal East–West problematics, and, with that as a starting-point, the identity issue, which is illustrated by the identity switch in *The White Castle* and by all the people who pretend to be somebody else, and the country that has lost its identity in *The Black Book*.

¹ "The Man from East/West". Reviews of Turkish Literature and Turkey's Image in Norway in the 1990s." In: Nedret Kuran Burçoğlu (ed.): *The Image of the Turk in Europe from the Declaration of the Republic in 1923 to the 1990s*. Proceedings of the workshop held on 5–6 March 1999. Istanbul: Isis.

The Black Book was met with very positive reviews when it appeared in Norwegian, except by the well-known critic Kjell Olav Jensen, who wrote a review under the headline “Code without a key”, where he claims that the book is unintelligible in spite of my 10 pages long afterword.² “Without footnotes, I fail to understand that this publication has any value except for people having a masters degree in Turkish philology – and I suppose they do not need a translation. In short, somebody has not done their job, and hence a main work in modern world literature has been rendered worthless. That is a crime – do something better!”

This criticism by Kjell Olav Jensen was directly refuted by Linn Ullmann (the daughter of the famous actress Liv Ullmann and the equally famous Swedish director Ingmar Bergman), who pointed out that footnotes would have had a destructive effect on the text. “The text itself is a journey within the world of secrets, dreams and arts; a world that eludes unequivocal explanations and interpretations,” she writes.³ And further: “My claim is that the reader needs no doctorate in literature. However, the book presupposes that the reader is ready to experience, to sense, and to get engaged. The different stories that are woven into the novel essentially deal with human experience, choices in life and realization [...] *The Black Book* [...] can be read as a love story, a thriller, an urban report, a religious, mystical text, and as an experiment. The meaning is not to understand everything logically or rationally. The essence of the novel is the secretiveness. The inexplicable.”

Some of the other Norwegian reviews of *The Black Book* concentrated a bit too much, I think, on the possible politic aspects of the book, and also I think the journalists were quite taken aback when OP claimed in an interview: “Identity – I hate that word.”⁴ I do not think the identity aspect of the book was understood beyond the obvious fact that it depicts a society torn between an eastern and a western identity, and that the split between eastern and western culture causes people to pretend to be somebody else than themselves. When I go through the book with students and ask them to write an essay on what they think is its intended message, they often answer that the author believes it is necessary for every individual and every society to find their own “pure personality”, which is – I believe – the opposite of what is meant by

² *Arbeiderbladet*, 9.3.1994. All the quotations from Norwegian newspapers in this article have been translated into English by myself.

³ *Dagbladet*, 19.3.1994.

⁴ *Vårt Land*, 10.3.1994.

the author. The necessity for a person and a culture to accept that they are products of different impulses, and the necessity of being exposed to different cultures, becomes even more obvious in *My Name is Red*, but I have not seen any Norwegian review that has noticed the thematic continuity between these two novels.

The New Life, My Name is Red, and Snow

The reviews of *The New Life*, which appeared in Norwegian in 1998⁵, were less equivocal. One of the reviewers wrote: "What makes me get a certain disliking for this novel, is the strange numbness that characterizes this morbid updating of Don Quixote. There is no doubt that the style is intended to underline the powerlessness that increases proportionally with the new life turning more and more sour because of tragicomical adversities."⁶ Another critic wrote, after having put "A tiring Odyssey by bus" as a headline: "As a reader, one can get tired of all the shifting scenes and the somewhat contrived shadow plays. Now and then one misses closer humaneness."⁷ Both from these and more positive reviews one understands that the critics were searching for a meaning with the book they were convinced was there but which they could not find. (That was also the case with me.)

When *My Name is Red* appeared in Norwegian (in my translation)⁸ in 2003, the reviews had headlines such as "Thousand and one nights", "The power of ink", "Complicated and beautiful from Pamuk", and "The Wizard from Istanbul", etc. One of the most thorough reviews is by Vigdis Ofte,⁹ who writes, inter alia: "The sophisticated aspect of the pursuit of the murderer is that it turns into the investigation of personal style. The murderer is finally exposed by a tiny technical detail in a picture, an involuntary signature, which leads us into another of the main themes of the novel: The trace of the aesthetic and the relationship between aesthetics and

⁵ Translated by my former student Alf Storrud and his wife Ayfer Erbaydar.

⁶ Pål Gerhard Olsen in *Bergens Tidende*, 19.1.1999

⁷ Karsten Alnæs in *Dagbladet*, 21.12.1998.

⁸ under the title *Mitt navn er karmosin*, i.e. "My name is Crimson" – I thought that was a better way to render the Turkish word *kırmızı*, both because the two words *kırmızı* and *karmosin* are etymologically the same, and because the book has its title from the chapter having the same headline, where the crimson ink (that is splashed around in the room when Enişte Efendi's skull is crushed with the ink-pot containing it) tells about how it was made from the special kind of lice called *kırmız*.

Furthermore, OP had told me that he originally had planned that *Call me Crimson* would be the title of the English translation.

⁹ *Morgenbladet*, 24.10.2003

ethics. The murderer regards his brutal act as a work of art whose perfection depends of his self-eradication as its producer, and this is completely compatible with the contemporary understanding of the role of the miniature painter.” And further: ”When the Islamic traditionalists fought for keeping their own traditional art separate from modern European innovations, they did that in order to preserve the qualities which we today regard as expressions of a modern, or rather, postmodern perception such as repetition, intertextuality, ... the ”death” of the author, the non-transparency of shape. That is, all the concepts that we use when we describe postmodernism were among the most central ones in old Islamic miniature art. ” This critic also points out that Pamuk’s language reaches its most poetic levels in his descriptions of the miniatures, and that great parts of the novel are written in lyrical prose. Another critic¹⁰ points out that there is a similarity between Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* and *My Name is Red*, and speculates over whether OP’s book may have been meant to be a reply to Eco, since red is a colour associated with roses. But then he goes on: ”Pamuk has been compared to Eco, and such a comparison may be justified. But to me, Pamuk is more playful, more accessible and a more lyrical author. Eco consciously writes the first fifty pages in an unnecessarily heavy and intellectual style, according to himself in order to get rid of undesired readers; Pamuk, however, does all he can to include the reader from the first until the last sentence of the book.”

However, not all critics agree that *My Name is Red* is especially ”accessible”. One critic¹¹ finds some sentences ”long and stilted”, and the whole book ”boring from time to time. Some phrases are repeated too often, some dialogues are too high-flown and some descriptions so detailed that they almost become boring.” Exactly as is the case in Turkey, OP’s novels do not appeal to all kinds of readers because they are quite demanding not only thematically, but also linguistically. It should be regarded as treason against the original if a translator tried to simplify the language of the novels beyond what is necessitated by the structure of the target language; hence the claim that it is easier to read OP in translation than in Turkish is a myth.¹² As for the

¹⁰ Sigmund Jensen in *Stavanger Aftenblad*, 25.11.2003.

¹¹ Jørgen Alnæs in *Dagsavisen*, 29.10.2003.

¹² Except for the fact, of course, that a translator has to interpret equivocal and vague expressions that cannot be transferred to the target language with the same vagueness. This is a salient issue especially in the case of *A Strangeness in My Mind*, where quite a lot of expressions in the original text have to go through a thorough interpretation

claim that some of them are "so detailed that they almost become boring": As OP once pointed out to me, if Kemal, the protagonist of *The Museum of Innocence* goes in and out of the house of his beloved Füsün, just waiting for her to give him a sign that she stills loves him, several times a week for eight years, the reader should also feel the same tedium as Kemal; accordingly these futile and boring visits take up quite a lot of the book. So, the answer to the question "Do you read OP?" in Scandinavia may happen to be: "I have his books, but I have not read them," which is an even more frequent answer in Turkey. At the Nobel dinner in Stockholm in December, 2006, OP had Princess Christina, the youngest sister of the Swedish king, as his partner at the table. The Swedish royal family is not particularly known for their literary interests; the only family member who reads books, is Christina, so she gets the literature laureates as her partners at the annual dinner. However, even she confessed to OP that she had not been able to read his novels because she found them heavy, but excused herself by adding that she had not been able to read Gabriel García Márquez either. One interesting point regarding regular readers (not professional critics) is that they tend to like some of Pamuk's books, but not all, but that the preferences vary from person to person. Some just adore *My Name is Red*, others do not like it at all, but think that *Snow* is his best novel. This, I think, shows the great versatility of the author.

When *Snow* appeared in both Norwegian and Swedish in 2005,¹³ the critics proclaimed that it was a political novel.¹⁴ This notion was enhanced by the fact that OP himself was then being tried by the court in Istanbul for his claims about the Kurds and Armenians. I was not convinced that the novel had any political message at all, and when I read an interview with OP in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* one year later,¹⁵ I saw that the author himself confirmed my opinion, stating that the political aspect of the novel is only on the surface, and that the real theme of the book is morality. However, the "message" of the book is not immediately comprehensible; in this book,

process before they are transferred to the target language. In this respect, Ekin Oklap's English translation of that book is quite excellent.

¹³ Translated into Norwegian by Alf Storrud og Ayfer Erbaydar. The Swedish version was translated from English.

¹⁴ This was confirmed even by the publisher, Janneken Øverland, cf. *Aftenposten* 15.12.2005.

¹⁵ Thomas Stenfeld: "Die Poesie ist eine Quelle des Glücks", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 25.11.2006.

the tendency of the author to play hide-and-seek with his readers is stronger, I think, than in the previous novels.

The *Istanbul* Book

When *My Name is Red* appeared in Norwegian in 2003, OP came to Oslo (for the third time, as far as I know) in connection with the launching of the book, and also gave a lecture at Oslo University where he read in English the chapter "Hüzün" from *Istanbul – Memories and the City*, which had not yet appeared in English. I got so fascinated by that book because I felt that OP had managed to name and describe the feelings I had had for that city myself since the first time I came there many years ago. I got even more fascinated when I started translating it. At that time, in order to nominate a candidate for the Nobel Prize in literature, one should be a member of the Swedish Academy or a foreign academy or writers' association, or a university professor of language or literature. The call for nominations is sent out in November the previous year. I think the English translation of *Istanbul* had not yet appeared by then – this was in 2005 – for together with my nomination, I also mentioned the *Istanbul* book as an outstanding work by the author, and offered to submit my translation of one of the chapters if the Academy was interested. They replied that they were interested indeed, so I sent them the "Hüzün" chapter and the following chapter in Norwegian translation, and I was overwhelmed when I got a cheque of 3000 Dollars for my translation. In the same year OP did get the Nobel Prize. I have the feeling that my translation may have helped a little, but of course, Pamuk was probably nominated by a lot of people, and he was already a "hot name" at the Swedish Academy anyway.

In the summer of 2006, the critic Kari Løvaas wrote a long, but rather strange review of *Snow* and the English translation of the *Istanbul* book, claiming out that OP's attitude to his native city most probably is not representative of most of the population of Istanbul, implying that the impression the author gives of Istanbul would have been different if he had come from a poor family.¹⁶ "Maybe not all dwellers of Istanbul do share the 'end of empire'-melancholy," she says. She calls him arrogant, and also claims that Pamuk does not address regular Turkish readers, but that his aspirations are to write world literature. This view was heavily criticized

¹⁶ *Morgenbladet*, 14.7.2006.

e.g. by Tom Egil Hverven, who points out that the author of an autobiography cannot transform himself to a poor person, that he has no obligation to address "regular Turks" more than readers in the rest of the world, and also that there is nothing wrong about writing world literature.¹⁷ Some reviews reveal indeed, I think, that the cosmos described in the Istanbul book is not easily understood by everybody in the well-regulated, egalitarian Nordic countries. A couple of years after the Nobel Prize, a Swedish lady told me that she would very much like to go to Istanbul *in spite of* OP. For, she said, the arrogance he displays [in the *Istanbul* book] in his descriptions of his fellow-pupils at school as stupid and brainless in contrast to himself was rather disgusting. I tried to point out to her that her egalitarian attitude perhaps is not dominant all over the world, but rather specific to half-socialist countries such as ours, but I also reminded her of the sacrifice it means to an author to expose himself and his family in the way PO has done in the Istanbul book. Although OP states himself that "what is important for a memoirist is not the factual accuracy of the account but its symmetry",¹⁸ implying that not everything in his autobiography has to be a fact, the honesty with which he describes his own feelings cannot be fully appreciated.

The Museum of Innocence

When *The Museum of Innocence* appeared in Norwegian (in my translation) in 2010, the first reviews were very positive, pointing out that the first book a Nobel laureate writes after having got the Prize in several cases has been a disappointment, but that this was absolutely not the case with this book. One of the most pertinent descriptions of the book is, in my opinion, the one by Torbjørn Trysnes: "*The Museum of Innocence* is a book that slowly grows into a beautiful and melancholy mausoleum of desperate love. A book that shows how the traditional gradually has to give way to the modernity of the west. Innocence disappeared and is now only found in museums."¹⁹

One critic, Jonny Halberg, rebuked the reviews that had appeared, claiming that the novel is a "Euro Burger", which is supposed to mean an easy-to-read, entertaining novel without resistance, addressing a taste that is acceptable to everybody.²⁰ However, from his review it became clear that he had not himself read

¹⁷ *Klassekampen*, 21.10.2006.

¹⁸ *Istanbul – Memories of a City*, p. 165 in the English translation.

¹⁹ *Fædrelandsvennen*, 23.12.2010.

²⁰ *Morgenbladet*, 7.1.2011.

the novel properly. As pointed out in one of the articles refuting his view, *The Museum of Innocence* is "...the opposite of an easy-to-read page-turner. It is a novel about little things, and it needs a patient reader. It plays with the roles of the author and the storyteller, and deals with what is going on when nothing is happening. The novel is retrospective and sentimental, but with its multiple storyteller perspective, it is also critical of society, and intricate. It is more than romantic soap and far much more than hamburgers without a character. For little things are important, and standstill may create movement."²¹

One of the reason why I am so intrigued by *The Museum of Innocence*, is that it represents the zenith in the development of OP's attitude to objects. Already in *The Black Book*, objects play a special role apart from creating an ambience; they are also interpreted and given a *sufi* meaning in the same way as human faces, but at the same time, they also seem to be obstacles against understanding oneself, cf. the "Story about the Prince", who thinks he has to get rid of all the objects and books that surround him in order to "realize himself". On the other hand, the ambiances described in novels such as *My Name is Red*, not to speak of the *Istanbul* book, are full of objects, some of which are described in the tiniest detail. I had noticed, however, that OP's home in Cihangir is quite Spartan. Once I went to visit him together with some friends at his apartment ("Celal's apartment") in Nişantaşı, where the furniture also was quite simple: Apart from all the book-shelves along all the walls, there was a white sofa and one or two easy-chairs in the living-room, but the television was standing on top of a pile of books. I remember I asked him a bit ironically when he was going to buy a coffee table, and he answered wryly: "Never!"

The relation of people to objects is an issue that is further exploited and gets a special turn in *The Museum of Innocence*. Some years ago, I thought I would write an article about OP's use of objects on his novels.²² In that connection I had to read several textbooks on material culture, and I also collected articles and books written on the role of objects in literature. One of the best studies in this field is Janell Watson's *Literature and Material Culture from Balzac to Proust* (Cambridge 1999). My surprise was great when I once visited OP and saw the same book in one of his

²¹Frode Johansen Riopelle in *Klassekampen*, 22.1.2011.

²² Which has finally appeared in Hickman, Bill & Leiser, Gary: *Turkish Language, Literature, and History. Travelers' tales, sultans, and scholars since the eighth century* (London: Routledge 2016), p. 60–78.

shelves! Or rather, I should have known that being the erudite novelist he is, and writing encyclopaedic novels, this could only be expected of him. I also remember all the textbooks of art history he showed me in connection with his publication of *My Name is Red*. Also the scholarly preparations to *The Museum of Innocence* must have been very comprehensive, and OP must have aspired to become some kind of a museologist himself in the same way as he became an art historian in connection with his work on *My Name is Red*. On the last day of his visit to Stockholm in connection with the Nobel Prize in 2006, he gave a talk at Uppsala University, followed by a lunch. After the lunch there was some time before he had to leave for the airport, and he was asked if there was anything special he would like to do, and he said he would like to visit the Gustavianum, which is the museum of the university, dating back to the 17th century. We went there, and the official guide started guiding us around. "Please," OP said, "I would prefer to walk around by myself," so he went up to the room where the Augsburg Art cabinet, one of the treasures of the museum, is kept. When I remarked that he really seemed to know his way around, he whispered: "I've been here before!"

Soon *The Strangeness in my Mind* will appear in Norwegian (again in my translation). Linguistically I find it more impressionistic (and accordingly more difficult to translate) than OP's previous novels. Thematically, it is quite different from the previous ones on the surface, the setting being poor neighbourhoods in Istanbul, and also the hero, Mevlut, seems so much more positive than the more or less depressed and depressing male protagonists of OP's previous novels. However, there are clues and hints that can be interpreted to the effect that these characters are all aspects of the author himself, that they are facets of his own mind; I wonder if the critics will discover that when the book appears in the Nordic countries.