Elective Asymmetries:
Pamuk Teaching World Literature

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“Now it’s as if everything I know about Islam is from The Message—you know, the film starring Anthony Quinn.” Ka smiled. “It was showing not long ago on the Turkish channel in Germany—but, for some strange reason, in German.”

—Pamuk, Snow

Curricula have recently seen the rise of ambitious models for studying world literature, among them Itamar Even-Zohar’s world systems-inflected approach, Franco Moretti’s distant-reading calculus (“Conjectures”), the civic and cosmopolitical models of Pascale Casanova’s World Republic of Letters and David Damrosch’s What Is World Literature?, Emily Apter’s notion of “nontranslation studies” (Translation Zone), and Pheng Cheah’s call for a non-Mercatorian, temporal conception of world literature. Amid this methodological conjuncture, less emphasis has been placed on how literature selected as world literary may have already theorized itself from within. How, we may ask, has the latest global novel registered and refracted its putative selectability in the course of its own composition process? How does a world literary novel intratextually calibrate its linguistic, political, and formal positionality vis-à-vis its transnational adjudicators—whether the members of a Nobel committee, a Frankfurt Book Fair jury, or the translation rights bureau of a Bertelsmann subsidiary trade publisher? As Walter Benjamin once remarked in a similar vein, we might consider asking: How has (translated) world literature acquired the ability, power, and desire to read us—as its consumers (Gesammelte Schriften 1: 646–47)? Faced even in their preproduction stages with editors’ strategic plans for marketing and circulation, with house translatability and style norms, and with translation-rights speculation schemes, twenty-first-century world literary texts are often inclined to critically textualize the very vetting procedures to which they were themselves subjected. While these may sound like problems for literary sociologists rather than for literary critics, the overtly metatextual novels of world literary authors such as Orhan Pamuk suggest that students of literature are on firm footing when close reading such phenomena. Whereas previous generations of students raised on postmodern thought may have delighted in pointing out that novelistic texts tend to deconstruct themselves self-reflexively from within, students of literature today are rather poised to ascertain how novels can intervene—on aesthetic, narrative, ethical, and intratextual levels—in precisely the global-circulatory logics that have brought them into being.
I first taught Pamuk’s work in a University of Arizona graduate seminar entitled Translingual Modernities: Literature and Film on the German-Turkish Axis. I introduced Pamuk’s self-described “political” novel Snow (2002) as a world literary text—but one that animates an uncanny asymmetrical affinity with Franz Kafka’s Castle (1924), a submerged hypotext that is never named in Snow despite its protagonist’s homophonic name, Ka. In presenting this structure of asymmetrical affinity as a critical problem, I assigned further readings: Even-Zohar on laws of literary interference, Roberto Schwarz on literary foreign debt, Meir Sternberg on polylingualism in the novel, and Sibel Erol (“Reading”) on the doppelgänger trope as a heuristic for Occidentalism. To prime students about ongoing debates on world literature, I also assigned Tim Parks’s polemical essay “The New Dull Global Novel” and Yaseen Noorani’s essay “Hard and Soft Multilingualism.” The participating students’ home departments included Middle Eastern and North African studies, anthropology, and German studies; thus a third of the group would read both Pamuk and Kafka in English, a third in Turkish, and a third in German. No student commanded all three languages, so class discussions were consequently both translational, that is, concerned with the translated nature of the texts themselves, and translative, engaged in the processual practices of conveying meaning from one language to another (Pym 75). Though it may appear methodologically excessive, I insisted there was a strong historical justification for reading Pamuk in German and Kafka in Turkish. Pamuk’s novel is partially set in Germany, a political landscape that has housed large-scale Turkish labor migration (1961–85) and religious-political refuge (1970–2000; 2013–present). Beginning in the late 1990s, German media and festival circuits have also hosted an intensified literary critical engagement with Turkey and Turkish literature in translation, as well as a belated rediscovery of the ongoing presence of Turkish-language literary production in German territory since before 1970. And Kafka’s work was known to republican Turkey’s intelligentsia, many members of which read him in German or English translation before Turkish translations were undertaken. Kafka’s East-West parables and modernization farces then became a key figural repertoire in the large-scale, state-driven westernization campaigns that held sway from the 1940s to the1960s, during which Turkey’s ministry of education commissioned translations of European modernist literature for appropriation and emulation in Turkish high schools. In a caprice of Occidentalism, Kafka’s novel The Castle, which serves as a symbolic palimpsest in Snow, is titled in Turkish with the French loanword Şato in the translations by Kamuran Şipal and Şükrü Çorlu.

In preparing the seminar, I decided that these matters of circulation and translation would be primary categories of analysis, not just enriching extratextual contexts for understanding world literary history. Our close readings thus presumed a multidirectional and multilingual approach, in which Çorlu’s
and Şipal’s Turkish translations of Kafka would enjoy no less primacy in our interpretive work than would Maureen Freely’s English translation of Pamuk or Christoph Neumann’s German translation. However logical this principle of multilingual analysis seems when made explicit in this fashion, it conflicts routinely with literary-historical custom: Kafka reception since the early 1940s has been largely anglophone; and Turkish-German literature since the mid-1980s has been largely germanophone. These two contingencies of literary-sociological history—propelled in the first instance by National Socialism and exile, and in the second by the decline of labor internationalism in the Kohl-Reagan-Thatcher years—has cast a long shadow on the potential for collaborative, multilingual inquiry in these traditions.

Though our discussions of these two (or six) texts—indeed eight or nine, if we include each of the retranslations of Kafka in Turkish and English—were engaged on one level as translations of one another, the texts’ variously multilingual entry points offered a prismatic touchstone for grasping the political and epistemological complexity in the stories themselves—how they cannot come to a satisfactory completion without one another. As a working translator, I wished to set a tone for the seminar that would not suppress questions of translation craft in favor of comparative critical philology. I also stressed, however, that the seminar was not a translation studies course as such, but a literature seminar where working affirmatively, not regretfully, with translations could constitute a new scholarly habit in philological training. In proposing this re-orientation I discovered how rare it was for my students—as emerging philologists, literary scholars, anthropologists, comparatists, and indeed translators—to research multilingually in a sustained, institutionally mentored fashion. We did not merely work in several languages in the instrumental or occupational sense; rather, we engaged in the explicit, differential work of collaborative interpretation amid multiple languages, some of which would always be unknown to one or another collaborator present. In the following sections I suggest some reasons why the twenty-first-century modern language curriculum presents unprecedented opportunity, urgency, and relevance for such a commitment to researching multilingually and in (multiple) translation.

**Teaching Pamuk in Multilingual Perspective**

Perhaps more than other contemporary world literature personae, the narrators of Orhan Pamuk’s novels—some of whom are named Orhan Pamuk—return again and again to questions of multilingual epistemology amid the pressures of market circulation and state censorship. Predominant in *Snow*, for instance, is a sustained concern for the pressurized political economy of publishable narratives amid European cultural consolidation and border patrolling. *Snow* itself was in part the result of sweeping European Union–oriented political reforms
in Turkey at the turn of the century, which reformulated censorship statutes in such a fashion that allowed Pamuk to finally publish a novel about contemporary Turkish politics, highlighting—if not always by name—the Armenian Genocide, the ongoing state war against Kurds, domestic phone tapping and surveillance, the Turkish secret police bureaucracy, and the outsourcing of Islamist and Kurdish-nationalist militancy to West Germany since the 1970s. Pamuk sought legal counsel to examine the manuscript of *Snow* line by line to ensure the novel would pass muster with the Republic of Turkey’s new, liberalized, EU-sanctioned censor (Pamuk, “Achte”). The resulting text is thus an utterly concrete artifact of post-Schengen European integration and forty years of EU-Turkey accession talks. Often overlooked in literary theory, such preproduction negotiations and their transnational, translingual discursive axes play a profound role in the twenty-first-century reemergence of what Schwarz calls “literary foreign debt” (50).

*Snow* presents students with a case study in the implications of literary—and otherwise symbolic—foreign debt precisely because it does not reduce the dynamics of the world literary system to simplistic notions of unidirectional imitation, lack, comparability, influence, or original-copy relations. In casting off the easy symbology of intercultural dialogue and comparativity so prevalent in Pamuk’s previous novels like *The White Castle*, *Snow* becomes a highly stylized fiction about the preproduction discursive collusion between source language and target language literary politics and more broadly about accelerated paradigms of literary interference and translatability in the twenty-first century. With its anti-ironic, didactic narrative voice and Brechtian stylistics, *Snow* indeed suggests how its author may have grown to become, over his first two decades of publishing, a kind of *picaro* of literary world-systems thinking. As if reckoning with the elaborate EU-oriented negotiations that preceded its publication, Pamuk seems to find ways to use the novel as an instrument to resist the orderly divide between published (translated) text and censored authorial activity—and to percuss against orthodox conceptions of authoriality and intentionality predominant in North Atlantic literary theory since New Criticism.

How can such a political economy of precaritized, censored, and nonetheless elite literary appearance be staged within a novel such as this? Like Kafka’s K. in *The Castle*, Pamuk’s protagonist dozes off in the novel at every available opportunity, leaving an opening for someone named Orhan Pamuk to hijack the story. Unlike in Kafka, whose narrators rarely stray—even in their sleepiest moments—from what Joseph Vogl calls Kafka’s “fourth-person” point of view, the authorial Pamuk uses such liminal moments in his protagonist’s consciousness to launch stealthy metaleptic authorial intrusions in his own name, for example, “[l]et us take advantage of this lull to whisper a few biographical details” (4). Such flamboyant contaminations of the narrative field prompt us to wonder
what function is fulfilled by the unauthorized, grandstanding presence of the cosmopolitan world literary star in his own texts? Is Pamuk joyriding through our world literary experience just for the fun of it?

Such moments of what we might consider a form of countertransference point students toward Pamuk’s more meaningful epistemological project, one that has literary-theoretical and literary-didactic designs, not merely self-promotional ones. Pamuk’s interpellations disrupt the readerly presupposition—promoted by most dust jackets, reviews, and prize press releases—that the novel exists primarily in order to disclose something representative about contemporary Turkey (“Nobel Prize”). Pamuk, of course, invites confusion and paradox on this point, seeming to imitate in the novel the generic habits of explanatory nonfiction, protocol literature, or New Journalism. Whereas Kafka assiduously cleansed his texts of all social deixis and local place-names, Pamuk dives headlong into an investigative forensics of an (apparently) local political landscape in Kars. Yet for every clause in Snow that describes local meanings in the northeastern Turkish border town where the novel takes place, another clause ruminates on how those local meanings have already been mediated and exchanged—often internationally—before they are circulated back in a legitimized, alienated form.

Snow’s narrative thus dramatizes its own international, metatextual sojourn along global distribution pathways. For example, we learn how “[a] number of correspondents for French and German newspapers . . . did pick up on the item, and only after they had gone to [the city of] Batman and published stories in the European press did the Turkish press begin to take an interest: at this point, quite a few Turkish reporters paid visits to the city” (14). This account mimics the publication conditions and consequences of the novel itself, inducing a kind of mise en abyme of publishability, a conical structure at the center of which is nothing but “the silence of snow” (3)—the hypotextual “key term,” in Raymond Williams’s sense, of formal and semiotic erasure at the heart of the novel. In the opening pages of Kafka’s Castle, snow is the negative principle ensuring the castle of Westwest its distinctive position “free and light” above (7).

Demythologizing World Literature

Snow is clearly a work of literary-political didacticism—but to what end? And what bait for the neo-Orientalist reader does the narrative lay out? It is certainly plausible to read or teach Snow as an auto-ethnography about the spectrum of secular-devout identities in Eastern Turkish cities; as an anti-allegory about class, regional animosities, and structural disenfranchisement in the shadow of westernization; as a bildungsroman about the reluctant atheist’s unwitting experience of the divine; as a chronicle of the struggles of an exile poet, both privileged and entrapped by his own transnational mobility; or as a farce
about the excesses of local nation-building pageantry in an age of globalization. Though one could lead a fruitful and comprehensive discussion on any of these themes, I propose that the novel teaches at the level of what Roland Barthes calls a “second-order signification” (*Mythologies* 235), a level that is less primarily interested in the experiential and thematic domains staged in the novel—secularity versus piety, provincial city versus megalopolis, East versus West, (Ottoman multicultural) imperality versus (Turkish étatist) nationhood, journalism versus poetry, or even surveillance versus solitude. *Snow* deliberates above all about how these domains can be coercively arranged in relation to one another to produce a second-order sign for decontextualized translation and consumption abroad—what Barthes calls a “myth,” a unity of signs drained of their primary-level meaning and conscripted for a subtle, but aggressive, ideological project. The material for myth can be religious, social, linguistic, experiential, or other, but the key criterion for mythmaking is that signs be harnessed for a communicative purpose that puts their local, vernacular, contextual, or experiential meanings “at a distance” (235). *Snow* uncovers how world literature is particularly susceptible to processes of mythologization—and often when an almost prurient realism appears to be afoot.

*Snow* thus offers students a compelling challenge: to analyze how themes of urgent contemporary topicality (theocracy, militancy, surveillance, insurgency, popular sovereignty, critiques of totalitarianism, military rule, coups, and so on) can easily become pressed into service of other subtle, modest, but deeply coercive purposes. In *Snow*, the elegant, second-order structure of mythic signification—what I regard as a kind of decoy—appears in the almost comical form of the snowflake, evoked on nearly every page of the novel. Pamuk’s cartoon-like cosmological diagram of the snowflake—built upon three axes, twelve terminal poles, and nineteen thematic points along them—mythically arrests everything that has mattered in the novel thus far, from “The Chocolate Box” to “REASON” to “The Night of the Revolution” and “MEMORY” (261). Found in the poet Ka’s notebook after his death, the reified, analytical snowflake seems at first to be a signature of both the creative and abstractive grandeur of the poet. Like Novalis’s blue rose, Ka’s snowflake is, however, also a diminutive, orderly, yet charismatic Orientalist form, caricaturing the violent blizzard outside that conceals and cripples Kars and constitutes it as a potential literary-political site throughout the novel. The didactician Pamuk tempts readers—always pulled between Orientalism and anti-Orientalism—with an elegant, symmetrical symbol that offers heuristic foreclosure and a feeling of revelation at having uncovered the occult logic of the local. The Westerner’s simultaneous affective embrace and epistemic totalization of the East—as embodied by everyone from Ka, to the grandiose intratextual Orhan Pamuk, to the novel’s readers-in-translation—is, of course, a chief critical concern of Saidian thought, and Pamuk is certainly aware of how it constrains his “political” novel.
Asked to talk about East versus West in his work, Pamuk responds: “Here we come to the East-West question. Journalists are exceedingly fond of the term, but when I see the connotations it carries in some parts of the Western press, I’m inclined to think that it would be best not to speak of the East-West question at all . . . There is . . . a strong suggestion that the culture, the way of life, and the politics of places like the one where I was raised provoke tiresome questions, and expectation that writers like me exist to offer solutions to the same tiresome questions” (“In Kars and Frankfurt”).

In the spirit of this refutation, Snow aims to demythologize—in Barthes’s sense—the syntax of the East-West relation and the epistemic negativity it generates. Upon arriving in the Kars, Ka thinks: “It was as if he were in a place that the whole world had forgotten, as if it were snowing at the end of the world” (10). This outside observer in Kars is indeed a potential world literary writer, “accustomed to scanning for his name in literary journals” (27), one who had “first won the appreciation of the entire country with two collections entitled Ashes and Tangerines and The Evening Papers. Our young poet, who is also the winner of the Behçet Necatigil Prize, has come to Kars to cover the municipal elections for the Republican” (28). A bourgeois of Istanbul extraction, he is told that if he wishes to “see what Turkey was really like after his twelve-year absence [in political exile in Germany], he should think of going to Kars” (8).

Ka is thus always on the verge of committing all of the neo-Orientalist misdemeanors comparatists are warned against: poaching for authenticity, angling for nationalized representations, satisfying moral cravings to give voice to the silenced, and all the while surreptitiously seeking recognition for himself as an expert. John Zilcosky suspects that the word “vermessen” (to measure falsely) lies at the heart of Ka’s literary forebear K.’s grand task as self-appointed landsurveyor in The Castle (49)—an ambition that Walter Sokel referred to as a “great fraud perpetuated against the reader” (59)—and this false measurement is potently reiterated in Ka’s circuitous path of methodological, ethical, and affective folly at every turn.

In the Arizona seminar, we thus explored how Snow requires a reversal of critical attention, focusing on how and why Pamuk’s text writes us as readers into regimes of comparativity in a radically uneven world, made even more uneven by new prerequisites of translatability in international trade publishing. Snow’s primary aim is to map out the epistemic conditions of twenty-first-century world literature and how texts themselves may offer teachers and students methodological instructions about these conditions. Even Ka’s clandestine meeting with the militant Islamist ringleader Blue revolves around a retheorization of world literature selection criteria. Blue tells Ka:

Once upon a time millions of people knew [the story of Firdevsi’s Shehname] by heart—from Tabriz to Istanbul, from Bosnia to Trabzon—and when they
recalled it they found the meaning in their lives. The story spoke to them in just the same way that Oedipus’ murder of his father and Macbeth’s obsession with power and death speak to people throughout the Western world. But now, because we’ve fallen under the spell of the West, we’ve forgotten our own stories. They’ve removed all the old stories from our children’s textbooks.

Blue characterizes the possibility of an alternative, hypotextual, or suppressed world literature as a kind of arms race against the leveling, “de-aestheticizing jaws of globalization” (Apter, *Against 9*). Blue’s resigned intervention is in implicit dialogue with positions such as those expressed by Parks:

Writing in the 1960’s, intensely engaged with his own culture and its complex politics, Hugo Claus apparently did not care that his novels would require a special effort on the reader’s and above all the translator’s part if they were to be understood outside his native Belgium. In sharp contrast, contemporary authors like the Norwegian Per Petterson, the Dutch Gerbrand Bakker, or the Italian Alessandro Baricco offer us works that require no such knowledge or effort, nor offer the rewards that such effort will bring. More importantly the language is kept simple. Kazuo Ishiguro has spoken of the importance of avoiding word play and allusion to make things easy for the translator. Scandinavian writers I know tell me they avoid character names that would be difficult for an English reader. If culture-specific clutter and linguistic virtuosity have become impediments, other strategies are seen positively: the deployment of highly visible tropes immediately recognizable as “literary” and “imaginative,” analogous to the wearisome lingua franca of special effects in contemporary cinema, and the foregrounding of a political sensibility that places the author among those “working for world peace.”

Parks oversimplifies matters, of course. He pictures today’s successful, globally mobile novel as little but a slick and passive delivery device, unburdened of its predecessors’ (untranslatable) aesthetic and political ambitions and exempted from any commitment to leverage critique back toward the international reader-reviewer’s gaze. Pamuk, for his part, seems poised to tell us about precisely these predicaments—not just in interviews and paratexts, but in the novels themselves. *Snow* thus offers students of literature the opportunity to complicate the cynicism Parks presents, while acknowledging the economic and symbolic conditions that underlie Parks’s concern about the structural attenuation of meaning in contemporary world literary circulation and translation.
**Snow as Globalization’s Pathetic Fallacy**

Students will find a further critical resource in Pamuk’s title, *Snow*, a substance and optical effect that, as a counterpoint symbolic form, allows Kafka’s Castle of Westwest its position of distinction. While the omnipresent veil of a “silence of snow” in Pamuk intimates the constitutive absence of the city of Kars on any world literary map, snow also offers a kind of pathetic fallacy for the globalized gaze upon the local: “The weather office has announced that cold air coming straight from Siberia and the accompanying heavy snowfall will continue for three more days. And so for three days, the city of Kars will have to do as it used to do during the winters of old—stew in its own juices. This will offer us an opportunity to put our house in order” (30). Extraordinary conditions of blinding white compel the city to close in on itself, to give a momentarily deglobalized account of its homegrown attributes and political narratives, though many of these local particularities originate from a clandestine “elsewhere,” whether Frankfurt, Istanbul, or Ankara. Getting stuck in Kars—a predicament faced by the novel’s characters and its readers—could have been avoided altogether, we are told. On his way eastward, the ambitious author Ka, seeing the oncoming snow, “might have realized that he was traveling straight into a blizzard; he might have seen at the start that he was setting out on a journey that would change his life forever and chosen to turn back” (3–4). The comment may be another authorial index about the contingency of the novel itself—namely, the unlikelihood that it would ever have been written or published under ordinary circumstances of national sovereignty, that is, without the constant structuring pressures of EU-Turkey accession negotiations and the West Study Group’s postmodern coup in 1997.

What, then, does this blinding whiteness in *Snow* intend to teach us about world literature in the adverse climates beyond cosmopolitan megalopolises like Istanbul? The formal effect of snow throughout the blizzard is negative: “Ka came to feel as if they had entered a shadow world. The rooms were so dark he could barely make out the shape of the furniture, so when he was compelled to look at the snow outside, it blinded him—it was as if a curtain of tulle had fallen before his eyes” (13). Snow is not merely a hindrance to visual perception; it is symbolically coded as the arbiter of publishability and mediation: “As the [electricity was cut and the] printing press whirred to a halt and the shop fell into an enchanted darkness, Ka was struck by the beautiful whiteness of the snow falling outside” (24). This whiteness of the snow outside the printing press indexes the attenuation of meaning present in the pattern of circulation that constitutes and reconstitutes the city of Kars in national-domestic and international-translated narrative.

*Snow* is a philosophical fiction about culture in the wake of what Noorani calls “soft multilingualism,” where every local category of meaning is presumed to
have an equivalent counterpart discourse in European languages and nation building histories. Pamuk hints at this early-twentieth-century transformation from hard to soft multilingualism in his historical accounts of Kars’s colonial past:

[T]he city was occupied by Armenian and Russian armies at different times and even, briefly, by the British. For a short time, when the Russian and Ottoman forces had left the city following the First World War, Kars was an independent state. . . . But when it came to renaming the five great Russian avenues, they couldn’t think of enough great men from the city’s history who weren’t soldiers, so they ended up memorializing five great pashas. (20)

Snow offers students of literature a primer in the mechanics of world literary circulation under globalizing conditions. Neither cynical nor self-aggrandizing, each chapter offers students an entry point into a critique of world literature beyond mere comparativity, exportation, influence, and culturalism. The novel allows students to imagine the contingencies of narrative circulation, shaped by ever-evolving endeavors to monetize and securitize literary translation as a means of production, and the neo-Orientalist implications for trade publishing of that ongoing evolution.

NOTE

1 This essay quotes from Maureen Freely’s translation of Snow published by Alfred A. Knopf in 2004.