

# Orhan Pamuk's *laudatio*: life, novel, characters

Manolis PATEDAKIS

Dear Mr. Pamuk, dear Orhan, dear Asli,  
honourable Rector of our University,  
honourable representatives of public and municipal authorities,  
dear colleagues, dear students, ladies and gentlemen,

A YEAR AGO we felt great joy and honour, when the writer Orhan Pamuk accepted the proposal of the Department of Philology and the School of Philosophy of the University of Crete, after the decision made by the General Meeting of our Department, in order to come in Crete and Rethymnon, and receive in a special event and venue the Honorary Doctorate title of the University of Crete. A year after that, here, today, in the hall “Pantelis Prevelakis” of the Auditorium of the town, a monument known as Neratze Mosque in the Ottoman times, once the cathedral of the Augustinian monastery of the Virgin in the Venetian times, we all have gathered to honor the one who honors ourselves with his presence, the nobelist writer Orhan Pamuk, in this official ceremony: the authorities of the place, members of our society and the academic community of a relevantly young university; a university, the University of Crete, which by coincidence also in the month of May, when taking its first steps, in 1984, had awarded in this same place, the title of the Doctorate *honoris causa* to Jorge Luis Borges.<sup>1</sup>

A very first thought for the speaker is “*the hardly feasible*” of the undertaking, “*for I have put myself in a contest hard to achieve through word*,”<sup>2</sup> using thus the words of the rhetor of the Late Antiquity, Menander of Laodicea, and attempting to speak on the work of the honoree, the

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<sup>1</sup> UNIVERSITY OF CRETE, School of Philosophy 1985. *Ο Μπόρχες στην Κρήτη = Borges in Crete*. Athens: editions «στιγμή».

<sup>2</sup> (Pseudo-)Menander, *On Epideictic Speeches*, 368.10–11.

nobelist writer Orhan Pamuk; a literary work so rich, a work recognized internationally, from a writer, novelist and intellectual, renowned and acclaimed world-wide: He was firstly awarded with prizes in his own country, later held important literary honours in Europe and elsewhere, was awarded with the Nobel Prize in Literature by the Swedish Academy in 2006; since then, continuously active in the field of writing literature, at the same time a citizen of the whole world that constantly asks to meet and honor him; many interviews, many special features on him, many other occasions of grace; at the same time, I have the impression, also through our short acquaintance, that he is perpetually young, also with the rich experience of his life, longing for the knowledge of the world, inner and outer, in order to continue writing.

As during the last days, I was seeing the books by Orhan Pamuk, translated in Greek and other languages, spread on my desk—in the same manner, as in the displays of the small exhibition that was prepared for the public by our University Library at Gallos—, I was thinking that it will be more honorary for tonight, this event and venue, after leaving for a while the many other accounts all over the world, as much as I can, to concede the speech to the books of the honoree, how they talk on himself, the man and the author Orhan Pamuk, his land and city in which himself and his characters live, and at the same time to search his literary values, the reasons of his writing, of his creation, also through the feeling of the reader of his novels. As he defines literature, in the text entitled “My Father’s Suitcase,” which he read for the Nobel Prize ceremony, it would be better if the writer himself speaks, who alone is sitting here and is writing inside a room, with a feeling of discontent, and he lives for us and we live for him inside his work.<sup>3</sup>

Orhan Pamuk was born in Istanbul on the 7th of June 1952, a second son of Gunduz Bey (1925–2002) and Şeküre Hanum, a brother of Şevket Pamuk; he was brought up, as he himself says, in his birth place, the world of his early years, moving from his base “the block of flats of the Pamuk family” in the district of Nisantas, after some family and personal shifting, having also experienced the overturns of fortune, regarding the financial and emotional life of the whole family. For his more tender age, his parentage, his childhood and school years, his teenage and youth, love and other concerns, his relation with painting, literature and writing, his big decisions, especially that of becoming a writer, later the

<sup>3</sup> PAMUK, Orhan 2007. “My Father’s Suitcase”, *Other Colors*, transl. Maureen Freely. New York, 403–17 passim.

birth of his daughter Rüya, there are extensive references in his work *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, as long as in his essays.<sup>4</sup> In his art, his literary production, aspects of the members of his family live again, often with their very same names, through characters of the novels and their experiences.

The real and simultaneously fantastic city of Pamuk, with the many names—Byzantium, Constantinople, Konstantiniye, İstanbul—is perhaps the character par excellence in his work; manifold, proteic, not only through the eyes of the West, the eyes of the visitors and travelers, writers and painters, it is also transformed through his own personal and family life. Pamuk receives the City, as Flaubert, Baudelaire or Théophile Gautier, and Gérard de Nerval have seen it, or how it is depicted through the foreign view of the painter Melling; at the same time, he attempts to transmute how the “others” see his country, into the most authentic view by which they would see their own one, that is into how finally he himself sees in his work his own country through the eyes of the Turkish writers, such as Yahya Kemal, Reşat Ekrem Koçu, Tanpınar, Abdülhak Şinasi Hisar, or the photographic lens of Ara Güler; he can clearly see the recent loss for part of the multi-ethnic composition of the City, comparing it even with its Conquest; but primarily, as it was stressed during the ceremony for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2006, he creates his city as “an indispensable literary territory, equal to Dostoevsky’s St Petersburg, Joyce’s Dublin or Proust’s Paris,” already with its own universal life. The miniaturists in the court of the Sultan, the street vendors of the city who sell the drink *boza*, its stray dogs and the seagulls on its roofs, the wooden houses (*konak*) and the old mansions, the boats that sail over Bosphorus, all of them acquire their own autonomous life; especially its melancholy (“*Hüzün*”) in its literary dimension, not in the meaning of melancholy from the point of view of the outer, western viewer, close to that of the *Tristes Tropiques* of Claude Lévi-Strauss, but the deeper feeling of the man who lives inside the decline of the monuments of every age of the City, inside its weather and streets, the black and white in its face view; in addition, the point of view of its inhabitants who would say plainly and in a sad manner, “after the dry fountain,” or “after the burned down,” or “the house which looks at the ruin,” in order to define its places.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> PAMUK, Orhan 2005. *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, transl. Maureen Freely. New York, 274 (photograph) and passim, and PAMUK 2007, *Other Colors*.

<sup>5</sup> PAMUK 2005. “Hüzün,” *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, 90–107 and passim.

Orhan Pamuk has been recognized worldwide as a genuine representative of the modern novel. He receives his start lines from topics from the city and the tradition—the country, in which he lives—, the ottoman past and the continuously undefined relation to the Western culture, the Turkish democracy and the political moments of the recent past, Islam and the secular culture in the most recent as well as the modern life of Turkey, the identity of his country on the horns of a dilemma between East and West, the endless roads and the stories of its countryside, together with the alleys of his beloved City, the private life of the bourgeoisie, the individual freedoms and personal anxieties of the people; all the above, he conspires in a way that ultimately it is not the story and characters which are important, but writing: the voices of narration are alternated, interweaved between them, almost photographic–cinematic shots, noises and images, collective identities, as well as the mystery of human life, insistent characters, fixated, melancholic and strange, tender and sometimes violent introspections, loves and dreams in various formations, they seem like hovering within the dimensions of space and time; all the above by themselves each time have acquired their own life.

Orhan Pamuk apart from the stories which he conceives to make them a novel, as a novelist is able not only to conceive but also to capture together the instantaneous—in the depth of the real and literary time—images of his city, his people, his tradition, and as all the other great writers in world literature, to render them as lived by all the people of the world, within the psychographic depth of his characters. He is a writer in whose work stories of people take life through us, and we then live through them, as if now and as if here; a writer who dresses with the same winning way of writing either the heroes of his novels or himself, his city or other less important towns, his father, the earthquake of 1999, the procedure of writing, all these that he wishes his readers will listen to in every novel of him. The world literature is often identified in his work explicitly, through occasions such as the district of Cavafy's childhood in Constantinople, *Therapia*, or his small article on Cavafy in the *New York Times*, the syphilis of Flaubert, the moments when he mentions Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Thomas Mann, Nabokov, Mario Vargas Llosa, Salman Rushdie. Despite his admission for the mixed feelings which the differentiation East–West causes, Pamuk himself wanders freely inside the “double world,” having digested together their literary means. He does not cling to the fear of

the great figures in Turkish literature, as Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, Yahya Kemal, “*how they will compete with Victor Hugo and Zola, Verlaine, Mallarmé and Proust,*” but he himself becomes a writer for the entire world and all the people, through the modern Turkish reality, his knowledge of the Ottoman tradition, the Persian literature and culture, as well as those of the East, which he brings together again in contact with Europe and the West.

Very often he offers to his reader simple moments, and deeply human, as in the touching little essay for his father, which he ends with the phrase, “Every man’s death begins with the death of his father,”<sup>6</sup> in a similar way to what here in Crete we hear people saying, “As long as your mother is alive, you are still a child.” Or as among all the characters in his novels who fall in love, Mevlut from the novel *A Strangeness in My Mind*, confesses in the last phrase that “I have loved Rayiha more than anything in this world,”<sup>7</sup> the woman whom he married, without being in love with her, as he believed when he eloped with her, that he had eloped with her sister Samiha.

Fortunate–blessed is a people, a language, when it finds its voice through literature. This has also happened with Orhan Pamuk; for then, a people goes beyond his own tradition. It is as if through the Turkish view, the landmark and separating filter in his work, he can see himself from inside but also from a distance—through his fantasy—his stories and characters, having already made his own literature Turkish, European, worldwide, human. His work has already been read and studied by millions of readers all over the world. He himself does not rest assured as a subject of study, but apart from the success or the impact, the manifold activity or the fame, he holds writing as the centre in his life, the creative machine of fantasy, in order to see life, the novel.

Now, I understand why, over the span of the last days, I was delaying again and again the completion of this text. If people would ask me even now, “Is your speech over?” I would answer you, “Not, yet.”

Thank you, Orhan; thank you very much.



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<sup>6</sup> PAMUK 2007. “My Father,” *Other Colors*, 15.

<sup>7</sup> PAMUK, Orhan 2015. “The Form of a City. I Can Only Meditate When I’m Walking,” *A Strangeness in My Mind*, transl. Ekin Oklap. New York and Toronto, 584.