On Campus

Politics and Prose

After a criminal indictment and a Nobel Prize, the novelist Orhan Pamuk reflects on the challenges of remaining true to his art.

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It's a story line that was too improbable to write, so Orhan Pamuk did the next best thing: he lived it.

In 2005 Pamuk was already one of Turkey's most prominent writers, a novelist whose cherished writing routine was blissfully uninterrupted by the trappings of his modest literary fame. In February of that year, in the course of an interview with a Swiss newspaper, he said, "Thirty thousand Kurds and 1 million Armenians were killed in these lands, and nobody but me dares to talk about it." It was a fateful remark. Four months later, under a new law, Pamuk was retroactively charged in his native Istanbul with "insulting Turkishness." He risked up to three years in prison. The case provoked worldwide outrage, especially in the European Union, and under increasing pressure, a Turkish court dropped the charges in February 2006. By then, Pamuk had become an international figure, known more for his free-speech battle than for books like Snow (2002), praised by John Updike as having taken "the courage that art sometimes visits upon even its most detached practitioners," or *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (2003), a reflection on the soul of his birthplace. In May 2006 he appeared on the "Time 100: The People Who Shape Our World" list in Time magazine, under the category "Heroes and Pioneers." Then, in October — just when it seemed his political profile might forever outstrip his artistic one — he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Pamuk is currently a fellow with Columbia's Committee on Global Thought and a visiting professor at Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures (MEALAC) and at the School of the Arts. He spoke with writer and critic Lila Azam Zanganeh '02SIPA in New York.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: You have spoken of your first years of writing, which were extremely solitary, whereas today you are a Nobel laureate, an internationally renowned public figure.

Orhan Pamuk: Well, quite frankly, I had always dreamt of being a public figure, but it didn't all happen overnight, as it did for some of my Romantic forebears. The truth is that I went through so much rejection, failure, and difficulty for many years.

Zanganeh: Has the Nobel changed your life as a writer?

Pamuk: Contrary to my first expectation when I heard the news, the Nobel Prize has changed my life a bit. It has made me busier and more popular in some countries, but it did not change my devotion to literature or, of course, my character. I still love writing fiction, and now I write more than ever.

Zanganeh: In light of the Nobel, do you feel you now have certain responsibilities as a writer, in Turkey and around the world?

Pamuk: Let's say that in my lifetime I never aspired to the political responsibilities that have so abruptly dropped onto my shoulders. I feel that because of jealousies, resentments, taboos, and varying pressures, they suddenly hit me, like something falling off a balcony while you're casually strolling down the street. And because Turkey is repressed, and I now have a so-called international reputation, I have to deal with this abrupt shift in my destiny. It isn't all that great, to tell you the truth. My secret wish always has been to remain a free artist. My writing style and my method of composition demand a childlike approach to life. The responsibility of writing is limited within myself to the impish, magical games I play with the rules of the world. I must admit that parading as a public figure is no good for the work of a novelist. As for being a political figure, don't even mention it. What a disaster!

Zanganeh: So you never thought of yourself as a committed intellectual?

Pamuk: That would imply that, first, I have made or could draw up systematically generated political plans before actually implementing them, and second, that I have a given cause to defend. After all this legal wrangling with the Turkish state over my comments on the Armenian genocide, I am now convinced that my only responsibility is to recover my youthful irresponsibility and return to the life I had before, which was far more Nabokovian — turned toward aesthetics, that is. I'm also a very slow writer. According to my calculations, I write about 175 pages a year,

which comes to about half a page per day after nine or ten hours of work. It is hard to be a committed intellectual when one is this slow.

Zanganeh: But after surviving your legal battles with the Turkish government, do you not feel compelled to fight for freedom of expression?

Pamuk: Writing is enough. All the other stuff could only amount to an unfortunate destiny, where I am dragged onto terrain I do not like.

Zanganeh: Do you hope Turkey joins the European Union?

Pamuk: I believed in it with great fervor, and several politicians I respect have sought to enlist my help. I sincerely believed that Europe and Turkey would make a good match. But clearly the infatuation has worn off, and they are no longer attracted to one another. I prefer to think of my novels.

Zanganeh: When you were a child, you wanted to be a painter. Vladimir Nabokov did, too.

Pamuk: Yes. From the ages of 7 to 22 I dreamed of becoming a painter. I wandered the streets of Istanbul snapping photos of those hybrid, bronzed urban landscapes. My sense of duty impelled me to study architecture, but I quickly gave it up; I felt that I was cheating, since my interests so clearly lay elsewhere.

Zanganeh: What books were your first literary heartthrobs?

Pamuk: *The Possessed and Anna Karenina.* I realized I loved them 1000 times more than any of my architecture books and even more than my books on painting.

Zanganeh: So you decided to live with your mother and write.

Pamuk: Yes, until I was 30 I didn’t earn a single kopek, and I lived at my divorced mother’s house. I lived the strange life of a crazy boy who might one day become a writer. My friends had real jobs. I just wrote, and I could never get published. I was so ashamed, but I was also stubborn. Today my books are translated into 40 languages, but the strange truth is that the most difficult thing for me was to get published in my own language.

Zanganeh: Your first book was *Cevdet Bey and His Sons*, published in 1982. It is a family saga, composed in a rather Flaubertian style, and very different from your

later novels, like *My Name Is Red or Snow*, which are modernist works, closer to Franz Kafka or Italo Calvino.

Pamuk: Yes. *Cevdet Bey* tells the story of the rise of the Muslim bourgeoisie of Istanbul, its relationships with the army, with bureaucracy, politics, all things that had a decisive impact on the evolution of the country.

Zanganeh: In 1985, you accompanied Arthur Miller and Harold Pinter on a trip sponsored by the PEN American Center and Helsinki Watch. Their objective was to write a report on human rights in Turkey. What were your impressions of that trip?

Pamuk: There had been a military coup in 1980. Freedom of expression was curtailed. Human rights were nonexistent. Abuse was rampant in the prisons. And yet people were talking, the prisoners' families, as well as the writers.

Zanganeh: Did you experience a sense of solidarity? Guilt? Both? There is this dualism that seems to run obsessively through your novels.

Pamuk: First, I felt an explosion of shame, as I do whenever people from America or Europe come to investigate the state of democracy or the loss of freedom in various parts of the world. It's a shame connected to national sentiment, difficult to explain, yet quite pervasive. Second, I also felt, for the first time I believe, an international solidarity among writers who were representing not only their home countries but also the world — a solidarity born of a shared, almost religious respect for freedom of expression.

Zanganeh: Nonetheless, you are not fundamentally a "political" writer. You like to create your own variegated, dreamlike worlds. Numerous novels of yours even bear the names of colors: *My Name Is Red, The Black Book, The White Castle*.

Pamuk: Yes, I was more Nabokovian at the beginning. I wrote for beauty. And while entire generations of Turkish writers were modeling their work on John Steinbeck or Maxim Gorky — and destroying the essence of their talent by allowing it to serve something that supposedly transcended them all — I was reading Nabokov and dreaming on. Twenty-five years have passed, and I know now that if I had made the mistake of writing political novels, I would have been destroyed; the system would have annihilated me.

Zanganeh: And *Snow*, in 2002? Why, then, did you decide to write a novel about Islam, about nationalism and the collective suicide of a group of young women forced to remove their veils in a small town in northeastern Turkey?

Pamuk: I decided to write a political novel because I suddenly wished to speak of my country in a different way. Each of my novels is structurally different from the others. For a good reason, too. I meet someone on an Istanbul street and he exclaims, “Oh, Mr. Pamuk, how sad! I really loved such and such of your novels, but you never wrote anything like it again.” Well, *Snow* was radically different. And for me the entire pleasure of fiction lies right there, in the constantly shifting movements of composition, which precede the execution. Writing itself is nothing but craftsmanship after that.

Zanganeh: What writers do you admire most?

Pamuk: Leo Tolstoy, Nabokov, Thomas Mann. Those are the great ones, for me. And Marcel Proust, of course, with his long baroque sentences, at once limpid and formidably obscure, but so voluptuous and textured.

Zanganeh: Were you ever interested in writing a political novel before you published *Snow*?

Pamuk: Yes, I have an unfinished novel, which is 25 years old, a Dostoyevskian political novel, in which radical leftist thought is melded with mystic demonism. But when we had our military coup in 1980 it became impossible to publish that novel. It was at that point in time I realized, not without shock, that some of my old Marxist friends were being tempted by radical Islam and its anti-Western logorrhea.

Zanganeh: In December 2005, one month before the beginning of your trial in Istanbul, you wrote in the *New Yorker* that Turkish nationalism has peculiar roots, both intellectual and bourgeois.

Pamuk: Yes, as though to protect themselves against both the specter of globalist anomie and the anxious resentment of working classes, the educated classes adopted the most superficial nationalistic position: Turk and nothing else! This high society is of course an old premodernist society. By collective reflex it prefers to define itself through nationalistic sentiment rather than modernity, with obvious consequences for democracy.

Zanganeh: Would you say that Turkish democracy is intrinsically tempted by Islam?

Pamuk: Not necessarily. The cliché would be that Turkey has been poisoned by political Islam. But in reality there are so many hues and nuances that the hard-line fundamentalism becomes diluted. We have Sufi sects, for example, and scattered groups that, put together, conjure the mirage of what we might call “political Islam.” But there are also secular anti-Western groups and atheist antidemocratic groups. They all form an extremely complex political configuration. In the eyes of the novelist, they constitute, of course, a rich and wide palette of colors.

Zanganeh: This is why in *Snow* you depicted an impoverished, beaten-down Turkey, with the small city of Kars and its deep ambivalence, as it wavers between Islam and Kemalism.

Pamuk: Yes, I suddenly felt that I wanted to write about contemporary Turkey, Islamic politics, fundamentalism, secularism, the nationalistic response to military coups, the nationalism of our ethnic groups, the political forces at play and their ever-multiplying factions. I wanted to set the action in a small town, a very poor town that would become a microcosm of Turkey as I see it today. I wanted to build an intrigue hinging upon actions, which would reveal the mysteries and the shams of my country — its obscure patterns of thought, the zany labyrinth of its politics.

Zanganeh: You often talk about the demonic hesitations of your characters, and, as you did in *Snow*, you revel in describing the dizzying complexity of the Turkish landscape, whereas Westerners are so tempted to oversimplify, working their own political endgame.

Pamuk: If you could only imagine the number of people who actually know that I support the integration of Turkey into the EU and who have nonetheless rebuked me because the novel supposedly contradicts my political positions. At the beginning I was surprised. Then I was thrilled. My own political opinions are irrelevant, you see. A novel must hold its own, it must defend its own unique colors, just like Thomas Mann’s books, which are able to span an entire era through the lens of a luminously individual vision.

Zanganeh: Christopher Hitchens, in his review of *Snow* in the *Atlantic Monthly*, reproached you for depicting your fundamentalist Muslim characters more sympathetically than others.

Pamuk: My golden rule for writing a novel is to identify with all the characters. Identifying with the darkest characters is what makes a novel essentially powerful. The finest example is surely Dostoyevsky.

Zanganeh: And your novel-in-progress?

Pamuk: My new novel, *Museum of Innocence*, will be published in Turkey in December. I am still working on it all the time. It is the story of a rich Istanbul man's obsession with a poor, distant relative, and it chronicles the high society in the city from 1975 to this day. So it's also a novel about marriage, sex, and social upheavals. It's full of humor and loving detail. It speaks of the anxieties and follies of this strange society, which summoned Turkey to the footsteps of modernity and perhaps — who knows — to the very doors of Europe.



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