Conversation

Nights of Plague
A Conversation

Orhan Pamuk
Istanbul, Turkey

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Abstract

The following is an edited transcript of the opening plenary session of the Institute for World Literature in July 2020 – held online as a result of Covid-19. In this conversation with IWL’s director and associate director, Orhan Pamuk discusses his understanding of world literature and his place in it, and his ongoing work on his novel Nights of Plague, then nearing completion.

Keywords

Orhan Pamuk – Turkish literature – world literature – translation – literary markets
David Damrosch: I’m very happy, Orhan, to welcome you back to the Institute for World Literature. We have here on our virtual stage also our Associate Director, Delia Ungureanu, whom you know well, and our tech guru Michael O’Krent, who will be taking questions from the audience. And I want to say how pleased we are to have been able to circulate, through your generosity, a translation of a draft chapter of your new novel *Nights of Plague*, which isn’t even out yet in Turkish.

Before we get to the present, we might set the stage a little bit. When you were growing up in Istanbul in the ’50s and ’60s and then starting out as a writer in the ’70s, my impression is that in Turkey, as for much of the world, world literature meant primarily the major Western European powers, not even Southern or Eastern Europe, at least not their contemporary literature. You had classical Greece and Rome, and 19th-century Russia was obviously very, very important in much of the world, but that was pretty much the extent of world literature. You’ve written about the importance for you of your father’s collection of Gallimard volumes when you were growing up. So in your early years, was world literature largely French literature plus the Russians, or were you already reading well beyond them? You read so widely now; when did that start?

Orhan Pamuk: At that time when I was first beginning, the idea of world literature was *disguised* – I was influenced by world literature at that time, I had a concept of world literature, but I wasn’t calling that “world literature.” Maybe I was calling it translated literature, but in the end Russian writers – for most Turks or just for me, I don’t know – Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, also Turgenev, were definitely more important than the French. So what is world literature? First, we don’t know. I mean, we can think about this, conceptually. But let’s try to see it more sentimentally: as something different. I open myself to it, it changes me. And it’s not like this soup I am in. It’s something different. And I have a willingness to change myself, open myself to it, it has an effect on me. Then I use that effect here in Istanbul, and I am something new, I am something different. And world literature is important for me in that sense, not geographically. When you take it geographically, it’s ornamental – “Oh, let’s have some Indian literature, why don’t we have some Kazakh literature? Where is Turkish literature? Where is my Finnish literature? Where is my Hungarian?” – it’s very ornamental. And Turkey’s population is a hundredth of the world’s population, and Turkey’s economy is slightly higher than 1.2 percent of the world economy. Turkish literature, believe me, is not bigger than these two amounts. So when you say English, it’s a huge palace. When you say Turkish literature, it’s a small room; let’s be honest about that. There is a postcolonial ethics showing us the map: “Hey, you forget this, you forgot that!” I understand that, I respect that, but world literature is beyond that. It is a willingness to
change ourselves, with texts which are not you, which are different – a different language, different form, or different structure.

So at that time, it was the Russians, you needed to read the Russians. And of course, Balzac, Flaubert, but not even Dickens, who in my childhood was a children's writer, and I never enjoyed him. And I was open to world literature. I had a father who showed me Gallimard volumes, but Gallimard had also translations. My father read Musil in French, that kind of thing. Really the strong novelists were Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and in Turkey we read them as world literature. And they were not far away; people would say, “Look up there. They're close to us.” But on the other hand: “Wow, how big they are, how readable they are, and how strong they are.”

Delia Ungureanu: On the question of peripheral and semi-peripheral countries and their relations to central powers, they are memorably expressed by Pascale Casanova in relation to the Greenwich Meridian of literature – also the title of her last talk before she died a year and a half ago. She identifies this Greenwich Meridian of literature primarily with Paris in the 1920s, but also supplemented currently by London and New York. I recall, Orhan, that you spoke favorably of her book, and the theme of Turks wanting to be like the Westerners appears significantly in works of yours such as The Black Book and My Name Is Red. It seems to me, though, that in your more recent novels, like The Museum of Innocence and also A Strangeness in My Mind, this theme is perhaps less prominent, either because Istanbul is seen more as a cosmopolitan city or because your characters have different preoccupations. Would you say that there has been some shift of emphasis of this sort?

Pamuk: Yes, the place I'm living in, which I've been chronicling for the last fifty years, is getting to be slightly more cosmopolitan and richer. This is partly true. But we have to remember this. Pascale Casanova was radically critical of this hierarchy, right? She was saying, well, it's only Paris, London, and New York. On the other hand, that was a first, early book that paid attention to this geography in a very strict way and pinned down the situation. But now, I think we are beyond that; I have more things to say. But this situation is deeply important in non-Western literature. Because, of course, novels are invented in London or Paris, as Pascale Casanova said. And also, let's say Russia in a second generation. The other cultures, when they were exposing themselves to world literature, they were also fragile, because they were immediately thinking, “Well, I'm not original. Where is my originality, my authenticity? I'm not a Turk anymore. There's so much Dostoevsky or Flaubert here; where am I?” This kind of anxiety paved the way to a lot of Harold Bloom-style anxiety of influence – not from one person but from a culture, from another culture, and this was important also for me.
Yes, Istanbul is getting cosmopolitan, but the problem of authenticity, of being influenced by a foreign culture, it's not as important to me as it was twenty-five years ago.

Sentimentally, my mind is less preoccupied with authenticity, influence, being influenced by this or that. In your youth, you worry about anxiety. If you reach my age, you don’t worry about anxiety.

DD: I’d like to pick up on this question of the peripheral and semi-peripheral. Delia has just coedited an issue of the Journal of World Literature with Gisèle Sapiro on Casanova’s legacy. The issue opens with a preface to the second edition of La République mondiale des lettres that we translated from French. There Casanova says that in 2008, when her book began to circulate around the world in translation, she became part of the same mechanism she was theorizing, and it was a shock to her she hadn’t expected.

Pamuk: It’s the same with Penguin making money with Karl Marx’s books. So what? This is not a major problem. Maybe one thing I should say about Casanova’s book, I read it very carefully, I saw myself in the book.

DD: In her preface, she says that she discovered from her foreign reception that she was French after all. She’d always thought she was opposed to the French system, but abroad, they saw how French she was, which is quite interesting. One of the major emphases in our seminars and in our colloquia this summer is the question of translation. There’s the perennial question of what’s lost or gained, and the problem of the growing hegemony of global English, but also the possibilities it provides. When you first began publishing, were you thinking much about being translated? Or were you primarily thinking about the Turkish market?

Pamuk: In early 2000, the British newspaper The Guardian asked writers, “Who do you write for, your British or international readers?” Antonia Byatt said, “I only write for the British,” and Kazuo Ishiguro said, “I write for the international audience, for whoever reads.” That stayed with me. But they were at least happy, or not uncomfortable, with this question. But in my part of the world, believe me – except at Harvard – this is a negative question. I'll give you my problem, for example, from one of my novels. Say I’m writing about Istanbul and one of my characters is reading a newspaper, Cumhuriyet, and the events take place in 1980. In 1980, Cumhuriyet had a distinct leftist political stance. Now, if I put this newspaper in my character’s hands and she is reading it, then my readers in Turkey who were around at that time understand what this is detail is about. But even twenty years later in Turkey, they won’t. And even at the time, internationally they wouldn’t. But I don’t believe Antonia Byatt is more original and authentic than Kazuo Ishiguro. No, I don’t think so. This problem is an eternal problem of literature. But how can a guy in Arkansas or a guy in
Korea know that Cumhuriyet is a leftist newspaper? So the solution is this. I insert this leftism, in such a way that it doesn't look like inserting encyclopedia information for the benefit of international readers.

In The Red-Haired Woman, they’re digging a well. So if I live in a Turkish village, my concept of the well is the well in that village, right? But if I’m reading the novel in another part of the world, there are different wells and the meaning and the technical details are different. So I arranged my novel and wrote it in such a way that my Turkish reader understands it and isn’t upset that there is some artificiality in it, but also so the other reader, who knows a different well, understands it also. When writers only focus on the local, they don’t have an idea of international readers, but even in such situations, some writers read more classics, read more Russian or international writers or what we call world literature. And they have a different sense of what they see in their Istanbul or in their Petersburg or wherever. I think the world is important in that sense. No one is blind to world literature, you know. Even if you’re mending a shoe or inventing a kind of chewing gum, you think: What would others do with this shoe? How would other chewing gum look or taste like? You will always have a sense of other people. Literature especially is about those others. We are writing here, it seems to be only about me, but I also have a naive belief in this other community: that people, although different, will understand. My uniqueness will pass to them. And as I do that, I also look at my uniqueness through their stories, through their uniqueness, and try to combine them. With this, I get closer to Plato’s more general idea. My table here is my table. But if I read about other tables, it’s better; I write about my table in a better way.

DD: I’m now reading Tagore’s novel The Home and the World, which he wrote in 1915, two years after winning the Nobel Prize. And it’s really interesting because just as you were saying, there’s a good deal of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Also Robert Browning, whom he is actually quoting. But his novel is very much focused on current issues in Bengal at that time, it’s written for a Bengali audience. He’s writing in Bengali, not in English, but the world is coming into the way he’s framing his novel for very direct local purposes. And then partly because of that, it’s accessible to someone who’s grown up knowing a Tolstoy rather than an earlier Bengali novelist such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, whom I have never read.

DU: I was just looking at a wonderful comment from our seminar leader Venkat Mani. His question is: You’ve been instrumental in putting Turkish literature on the map, on the “there” of world literature. You’ve created a global fraternity of readership, as you mentioned in your essay “Dünya Edebiyatı” [“World literature”], modifying our idea of world literature. Now, the question: With all your novels, but especially the new one on the pandemic, you
are expressing concerns of a reader in Arkansas and a reader in Korea, who is equally concerned about life, death, fate, punishment, divine or secular. You’re creating a world that is in the fear of being destroyed. Would you please tell us more about this world as you’re writing about it in conjunction with the fatalism that you mentioned in your *New York Times* article?

**Pamuk:** I’m happy to see that no one is saying that there is some media here now. I also mentioned in that article that there are sudden uprisings, not just fatalism. But they didn’t read my article carefully. [Laughs.] Anyway, after a plague or during the plague, there are always uprisings. So really, I don’t think the world is changing or being destroyed that much. This is a virus; we are preserving ourselves. I have a museum, the Museum of Innocence. We’ve closed, unfortunately. After the lockdown ended in Turkey, only 10 people, 5 people, 3 people a day came. So I decided to close for another three months. But on the other hand, I don’t think the world is changing that much, that radically. I am not in a panic. I was panicked about my life – “Oh, let’s clean this, don’t touch that” – but not in panic about the future of the world; I was not that worried.

**DU:** Your *Nights of Plague* is set in the late nineteenth century, which adds historical as well as geographical distance for your worldwide readers. In the era of high modernism, novelists tended to write about the world of their immediate experience, and they didn’t usually write historical novels. Now, your novels always come in some way out of your own experience, but you’ve also several times transferred your experience to other times and places. *The White Castle* concerns a young Italian in Ottoman Istanbul in the 17th century, whereas in *My Name Is Red*, you’ve said that you wrote about the 1950s by transposing two digits and writing about the artistic conflicts of the 1590s.

**Pamuk:** Yes, it’s true that in my historical novels personal sentiments are thrown back to different centuries, but other novelists are also doing that. I’ve always wanted to write an article about the historical novel. And if I write that, first I will quote “all the negative things.” In my *Naive and Sentimental Novelist*, I refer to Henry James making fun of the historical novel in one of his letters: “How can we moderns understand these people who are not modern, who don’t have our minds? It will always be limited.” I’ve agreed to write an article about the historical novel starting with the subject of French historical painting of the 19th century, people like Jacques-Louis David. Now, that kind of very painfully executed, very detailed work, where there is so much labor on all these big paintings, which are based on texts – it may be the Bible, it may be this novel, it may be Sophocles, it may be this national epic. But in the mid-19th century, everyone was doing historical paintings. I want to show that these mid-19th century novelists, they write based on medieval texts which have 5 lines,
lines, one short point. And then there’s a picture which has so many details that aren’t in the poem, that aren’t in the text.

The artist should read the historical text carefully, and imagine, convert words into pictures: ekphrasis. I respect the form of the historical novel. And all these problems that Henry James was making fun of were actually, I would say, “solved” by Calvino. We are reading a historical novel, and we also know we are reading a historical novel, and it’s also fantastic. The historical novel that Calvino invented is not realistic, though he gives us some realistic details. But we have a viscount who is cut into two parts. We have someone living in a tree for many years. So we are not judging the details by their accuracy, but we are enjoying the artistic qualities of the writer. And we are not judging the writers for getting details wrong – oh, that king wouldn’t be smoking that cigarette, or whatever. We are not after that. But there is some history there which we care about. And what we care about is what this writer is doing with this history. I think Calvino, once he invented this solution, paved the way for Umberto Eco and other postmodernist historical writers. I am proud to be one of them.

DD: You mentioned A.S. Byatt a minute ago. She has a very nice essay about writing historical novels, defending them against the prejudice against them. And she says that the great thing for her about writing a novel set back in the Victorian era is that she can write long sentences. She doesn’t have to write short, modernist Hemingway prose anymore.

Pamuk: But I disagree that you have to use the forms of the period. In fact, it’s more interesting to write about the Victorian age in Ernest Hemingway’s language.

Question: The question about what is lost to the Western reader in the novel’s circulation worldwide leads me to another question of what is gained in the circulation even through lost meaning or misunderstandings. How do they make literature richer?

Pamuk: This is also true in the United States. Faulkner and Paul Auster were more famous first in France. I am now the most famous Turkish writer in Turkey, but being famous outside of Turkey helped me to get into this position. First of all, international recognition promotes you at home. And you always say when that’s happening, “Hey, look, Americans are reading me. Why don’t you respect me more?” I did that, and it worked.

DU: I want to press a bit on this question and ask, Orhan, beyond this effect of becoming more read and more renowned back home, would you say that you find your own texts becoming richer? Like, for instance, Goethe loved to read his Faust in Gérard de Nerval’s translation, saying, it’s a fresh take, and he felt it was even better than in German.
Pamuk: Yes. I understand. But Nerval was a unique person, and Goethe was very lucky. I respect and like Nerval so much. You know, he hanged himself. Nerval was a unique person, and contrary to Goethe, his version was also ironical. Goethe is a bit kitschy and fussy. Nerval, he is radical, he is different. Perhaps I can say, okay, of course, recognition is a bit of exaggeration or a joke. But even more, you can get a different sense of what you have done, sometimes without even realizing it. For example, in her review of *Snow*, Margaret Atwood wrote more or less words to this effect: “Little things happen, happen, happen. Suddenly, there is an explosion of terror.” I thought: Wow, yes, that’s what I’m doing in my book. Any critic can do this. But I think this was seen by an international critic because partly it was the texture of Turkish life, where people are easily using terror and brutal force. I was not aware of it.

Then you suddenly see you’re being compared to international standards. What you take to be natural, normal, you begin to realize: wow, it’s not normal. I think this is the most important information on things that you have achieved, perhaps you’re not aware of and your Turkish critics or friends wouldn’t tell you. But internationally, they would tell me. I really read international criticism, we read it all. Does it help the book? Will it help the book sell? Of course you read it for that first. Then you read for these other things, and these things really matter. And I have learned so much from these things.

DD: So now on *Nights of Plague*, it’s really fascinating that almost prophetically you’ve been writing about this plague in the late 19th century. You’re still working on the book, nearing the end of it, and yet suddenly there’s now a plague. Has this affected the writing of the book which was well on the way?

Pamuk: Yes, it affected the writing of the book, of course. First, I realized that being afraid and thinking of some characters who are afraid is not the same thing. I was afraid, and I gave my fear to my characters. Wow, that was different. I was really happy about that.

Second, perhaps, when I was writing the book, it was archaic, it was an old story. Suddenly, it’s new. And I felt prophetic, self-congratulatory, that kind of thing. I enjoyed it. But now, of course, all the publishers, unfortunately, are sending me emails. When is it finishing? Orhan, can you send it soon? This is happening when I’m 68, but I’m happy about that.

Question: Do readers see a different Pamuk in Turkey from outside Turkey, in the same way that there’s a French Deleuze and an American Deleuze, for example?

Pamuk: Yes, I don’t know about Deleuze, but definitely a different Pamuk. Look, even my most popular books are not the most popular books in Turkey. *Snow* is one of my least popular books in Turkey, while in America it’s my most popular book. And yet internationally it isn’t my most popular book, which is
My Name Is Red, while in Turkey my most popular book, you wouldn’t believe it, is The Red-Haired Woman, which sold half a million copies in three years, while those books didn’t sell this much in twenty or thirty years. So in every country, my books are read differently. In America, I am more political. In Turkey, I am political for my comments, not for my books. Snow, yes, is a political novel, but it’s not my main book in Turkey, where my main book is The Black Book or My Name Is Red. Also, A Strangeness in My Mind is very popular. Before I published A Strangeness in My Mind, I changed publishers. My new publisher said, “This is going to sell a lot.” And I asked why. “Because now,” she said, “for the first time, you are very Turkish.” [Laughter.] You see? In Turkey, they judge my Turkishness also by that. Not only because I go to court about Turkishness, but my publisher says, now you’re very Turkish, and it will sell. And that happened.

Question: Mr. Pamuk said that he doesn’t have any audience in mind when writing. In fact, he expressed how problematic he finds the concept in general. How is it then that he considers his international readers together with the “local” readers? Like he said in the example of the well in the village, that he makes sure that the meaning is transferred to both the national and the international audience.

Pamuk: There are many ideal readers. Sometimes you write your novels for your friends. Sometimes you write your novels for your girlfriend, to make a point. Sometimes you write two or three pages because those friends at that period would understand, and they will enjoy the joke the most. Mostly, I think we have a group of readers – girlfriend, friends, mother, Turkish readers. Also, readers are not all the same – the popular Turkish reader, the sophisticated Turkish reader, the popular American reader, sophisticated American reader. There are also these distinctions. And the national distinctions, especially today, are less important than these cultural-class differences. What happened in the last twenty years in literature? I will say that books now travel faster, in the marketing of new books, translations, the internet. I have, say, some 10,000 readers in Brazil. Every book they buy, I am sure it’s the same people, and when a new book is out, they buy it. These people or my Korean readers, as far as worldview goes, Weltanschauung, we are close. These are people like me.

When I say Turks, in Central Anatolia the farmer is not interested in me. But someone in Argentina or in Korea who reads my kind of books, who reads international newspapers, who is well-versed with what’s happening in world literature, it’s a small community. Now, we have a lot of communication with these small communities. When I have a new book, vroom, it’s translated there. They’re even sending me emails: Oh, when is it coming? So we should not pose
the question as whether I am writing for the whole Turkish audience or am I writing for the whole American audience. No. First of all, let’s narrow this down. I am writing for the book readers of this or that country and my own country. And they’re very similar in mind, mostly liberals, also in Turkey they are slightly leftist. They believe in the world. They have some humanistic values. So we reduce the numbers. When they go to the library or to the international bookstore to buy Pamuk, already you identify these people. They’re narrowed down, they’re filtered. When I say I write for Turks, it’s not all Turks. Not everyone in Turkey is reading novels or post-modern novels or historical novels. So they’re a limited number here, a limited number there. And their minds, the views of these people, are also similar. So let’s not make them more distinct from each other by their Turkishness, by their Korean-ness. They are close to each other. And that’s why I can address them.

DD: This reminds me of a conversation between Ishiguro and Oe Kenzaburo in 1991, when Ishiguro first went back to Japan after many years, and Oe asked him about his audience. Ishiguro was already saying in 1991 that he was writing for a global English audience, while Oe replied that he was only writing for some friends in his generation from his village. It’s possible that Oe was asking the question to somewhat corner Ishiguro, like, do you really care about us in Japan anymore – so it may have been something of that. But since then, they both won the Nobel Prize. So either strategy may turn out to work globally.

When you talk about writing for your readers who read all your books, if we think of The Red-Haired Woman, which centers on the digging of the well, a well is also important in the opening of My Name is Red, when the first narrator describes his body being thrown down the well. Do you think that your readers will say, Ah, I remember another Pamuk well, and this is a different kind of well. Or are you not–

Pamuk: There is also a well in The Black Book, where the air shaft is compared to a well, which is a very evil-ish kind of well, you know, air shafts between buildings. All kinds of dirty things are thrown there from the kitchens and bathrooms. And the janitor picks them up and says, please don’t throw these ugly things down the air shaft, which I think I could compare – yes. But, no, David. Yes, of course, a writer is always referring to himself. Today, in fact, I wrote something and I thought: Well, didn’t I write something like this in Snow? Okay. But it’s different.

Question: When there are many ways of setting up the circumstances of crisis in a novel, what makes a pandemic more relevant than others? What does the idea of a pandemic add to the novel thematically, aesthetically, politically, and formally? And following that idea, what is the use of literature during a
pandemic? In today’s circumstances, how do you think literature can be useful in our understanding or coping with the pandemic and post-pandemic circumstances?

Pamuk: I began to think about a novel that takes place in a plague. When I say plague, I use the word not as a pandemic. It’s a plague of bacteria. When I had the idea for the novel, it was essentially about getting organized and imposing quarantine, which is also about governmental states. The government organizing in such a way that it’s repressing people, but also getting away from sickness, this was contradictory. And I wanted to dramatize this, and I was already thinking about this thirty years ago. Though it’s a very post-colonial subject – “Oh, you call this fatalism. Or these Orientals or Turks or Muslims are different, so different that they don’t know how to implement quarantine measures.” There are so many observations, and it is a dammingly political postcolonial subject. And it’s very hard to talk about this. I did a panel [in January, 2019] at Columbia University with Nükhet Varlık, a scholar of Islam and plague. And I thought about it: this subject, Islam, plague, and the quarantine in modernity is so interesting and sexy. In fact, I use “sexy” in the wrong way, but you understand. It’s so fruitful a subject.

Also, the psychology of the guy in my novel who comes to a small Muslim village in the late 19th, early 20th century – he is a Muslim doctor. But people are not ready to understand his measures. He likes these people, although he is not a religious person. He wants to save them, but they don’t understand him. He wants to impose quarantine, which is not something desirable: “Don’t go there. Don’t eat this. Close this here, or just get out of your house, or I’m going to burn your house down.” Of course, no one will like you. This is something he is doing for these people, but these people don’t want him. This is the position of Kemal Atatürk, or the position of someone who has the information and power of modernity, but the people don’t want it. So I wanted to write about this subject, in fact to see all the points of view and identify with the modernist good guy who wants to impose quarantine or modernity or these modern things while the people cannot see what’s a microbe: “What is this? Well, we are dying, but we are not sure we are dying because of what you’re saying.” I like to write about this guy.

In fact, that is the starting point of my plague novel, the unique position of this guy. It took me four years to learn about the period. And then this pandemic happened. My first reaction was: My God, just like when I was finishing Snow. Two months before I finished Snow, 9/11 happened. So what do I do? In my book, Osama bin Laden was mentioned twice. In fact, I wrote about Osama bin Laden because there was an article in The New Yorker before 9/11 about him, and it’s a great article ... There are three big plague novels in world history: Daniel
Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year*, Albert Camus’ *The Plague*, and Manzoni’s *The Betrothed*; these are three plague novels all written by writers who did not experience that plague. I’m writing the fourth one. Then suddenly, it comes.

**Question:** From a PhD student in Xi’an, China, who is writing a dissertation about your work. The question is, how do you understand the word “landscape,” and what aspects does it include? What do you think are the function and significance of the landscape descriptions in your novels? What does the word “landscape” mean to you?

**Pamuk:** It means what landscape *is*: some view of lands, distant and close mountains, some sea. I agree with the Chinese understanding that there should be some water; there is no landscape without water. I also use the word “landscape” metaphorically: the landscape of a novel. What do I mean by that? It is not the landscape described by the writer, but all the things and pictures that are described in that novel. But I also care about landscape descriptions because I wanted to be a painter. And in my novels, I self-consciously write landscape descriptions which I know some readers are skipping, or they say: Oh, what is this? Nothing is happening. Why don’t I skip it? I know some bad readers may do that, or maybe I’m exaggerating. But I like to do that.

We can look at a 16th-century Persian painting: a guy is on a horse. It’s a very common medieval topic. And a girl is on the third floor of some castle. And they are looking at each other, nothing interesting. But the landscape, the embellishment, the decor, the side decorations and the clouds and the trees, these are not about the boy on the horse and the girl at the window, who are very small — but look at these flowers, these leaves, whatever. That part of a landscape sometimes expresses the feelings that the picture or the text generates in us. If you are a good novelist, the landscape is there to dramatize the feelings that the novel should honor. The most clichéd one would be *Wuthering Heights*. They are running. Here we are, on a cliff. The landscape in *Wuthering Heights* is perfect. It is chosen for that subject. It is all romantic, drama, human passions. And we see cliffs and water or whatever. Of course, not in all novels does a landscape correspond to the feeling that the novel should generate in the reader. But this is how I look at it.

**Question:** I notice that nostalgia has a very important role in your novels. That’s what makes them unique. What are your thoughts on this?

**Pamuk:** Nostalgia honors a sentiment, that of remembering, and also remembering overabundantly, remembering too much and being carried away. A nostalgic is the guy who forgets to say that these bad things were also happening, or says the bad things were happening, but they were also sweet, too. No, in that sense, I’m not nostalgic. In the sense that I refer to the past, if you consider a person like that nostalgic, you may consider me nostalgic. But I don’t think
I am. I don’t want to be nostalgic. I’m not nostalgic about the Istanbul of my childhood. I’m not nostalgic about the early Turkish modern years. And when I write an historical novel, I may seem to be nostalgic about that period. But actually, I like that period because I’m interested in its details, and after a while human beings begin to love details they are preoccupied with. That’s the reason I may look nostalgic. After I finish the novel, I’m not nostalgic about that period anymore.

**DD**: That’s fascinating. I think with *The Museum of Innocence*, maybe your hero Kemal is nostalgic for his lost relationship, but you’re saying you’re not nostalgic for that period as such. So you’re different in that sense, obviously, from him.

**Pamuk**: Okay, I agree, yes, Kemal lived the best years of his life during his youth. In fact, when he experienced his relationship with Füsun and also with Sibel, the proper girl he was about to marry, he had so much fun at that time. I understand his nostalgia, but I’m not like him. After his engagement with Füsun, Kemal’s life goes all the way down. There is no happiness in that sense, and we understand Kemal’s nostalgia for the 1970s. I’m not like that.

And also, nostalgia, especially as it is invented and developed in urban culture, nostalgia for old Istanbul or about this or that Istanbul, nostalgia about Chicago of this era, Paris of that one, it is also something I don’t like, because it’s a political discourse about the newcomers. It’s a discourse about lower classes who don’t understand your sophisticated city and make it vulgar. And it’s a very bad political thing. Turkey’s so-called lefties, leftists, in the 1970s, especially after the military coup of 1980, they all went to nostalgia, because the guys who made the military coup were very brutal, not sophisticated. So they thought their nostalgia for the old Istanbul was something sophisticated. Yes, definitely so. But they didn’t see that it’s something against these newcomers, these poor people who were working in the factories of these people who were writing about nostalgia.

**DD**: Let me just say how delighted we are and grateful to you for taking this time with us. And it makes me feel nostalgic for being in Istanbul, for being able to actually leave my house, having students and colleagues in a room –

**Pamuk**: You are nostalgic about being a professor. That’s also nice ... Thank you, Delia; thank you, Michael; and thank you, David, and the participants who listened. Some of these people I know; thank you for being patient and listening to us.