

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

July 28, 2015

Nergis Ertürk, *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey*, Oxford University Press, 2013, 216 pp., \$35.00 US (pbk), ISBN 9780199349777.

Nergis Ertürk's book on the role of language and language reform within modern Turkish literary developments during the first half of the twentieth century is, quite simply, one of the best books to have been written on Turkish literature in English. It is certainly the most important text to have been written on Turkish culture since the 2004 issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* (edited by Sibel Irzik and G. Güzeldere). Ertürk's book almost shamelessly celebrates a love of detail and precision, but in such a way that it drives the reader not to boredom and tedium, but rather arouses a kind of awe at the utter carefulness of each intelligent, subtly-crafted paragraph. For a book with a deconstructive agenda, there are moments where form ironically overshadows content, so judicious is the word-choice.

This is not a slavishly positive review. There are omissions, sweeping statements, and plenty of things in the book to argue with, especially for those disenchanted with the legacy of High Theory. But there is something so impressive about the book itself, its sturdiness and sense of purpose, and the lacuna it fills—namely, the paucity of really good work in English on practically any aspect of Turkish literature. Exhibiting an impatience many Turkish critics have with Pamukomania, Ertürk distances herself immediately from the “globalized fantasy of reconciliation” (ix) that Western interest in the Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk seems to represent. In a welcome change of focus, she turns our attention to figures largely overlooked in the prevailing “World Literature” industry—a novelist from the late nineteenth century, an early twentieth century short story writer, and a handful of novelists and poets from the 1940s and 1950s, only one of which—Nazim Hikmet—has genuinely international status.

Ertürk's essential argument is a combination of Derridean attention to the endlessly self-othering nature of language and a Foucauldian awareness of the exoteric power of the institution to mold the esoteric, perhaps inflected by a Freudian refusal to overlook the abiding sense of the *unheimlich* in all cultural and linguistic phenomena. *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey*, in essence, argues that not only did the transformative changes in Turkish language and script long pre-date the 1928 reforms (when the entire Turkish script was romanized in one stroke), but that the most important developments within Turkish literature—and in particular, within the Turkish novel—cannot be fully understood outside of this context of language-regulation: “...the historical emergence of the Turkish

novel...only becomes possible...with the ascendance of modern Turkish linguistic phonocentrism” (x).

Of the many strengths of the book, this reviewer finds three worth highlighting. First of all, Ertürk’s book brilliantly and comprehensively refutes the idea (cited by Pamuk amongst others) that literary modernism as understood in Europe “did not take place” in Turkey (x). In some ways, Ertürk belongs to a wider movement of non-Western writers (Amit Chaudhuri and Sudipta Kaviraj for South Asian literatures, Jason Mohaghegh for modern Persian literature, Jale Parla and Berna Moran for Turkish literature) who are trying to decenter Eurocentric notions of global literary theory and remind a global audience of the equally complex and sophisticated literary histories of non-Western regions. Many years ago, Berna Moran had already made the claim that the stream-of-consciousness novel of Dujardin well may have been pre-empted by the late nineteenth century Ottoman text *Araba Sevdasi*. Ertürk’s sophisticated portrayal of the writers she chooses, quite aside of any theoretical goals, has a supplementary effect of convincingly illustrating the depth and intricacy of nineteenth/twentieth century Turkish literary history. There is certainly a taste of Russian formalism in the reasons Ertürk values writers such as Tanpınar and Hikmet as restoring a sense of uncanniness to language (122, 167). An unwitting showcase for modern Turkish literature, the book provides further reasons to explore and translate a body of work largely ignored and untranslated at the moment.

Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey also draws much-needed attention to the kinds of changes, both in language reform and also in communication/print technology, which were already underway in the Ottoman nineteenth century—and which undermine the cataclysmic notion that 1928 was some kind of watershed moment for Turkish literature. Reminiscent not just of Derrida’s *De la grammatologie* but also of the use of authorship as “a fear of the proliferation of meaning” that we find in Foucault’s “What is an Author?,” Ertürk spends the first third of the book detailing the various attempts to regulate and phonocentrically modify Ottoman Turkish in the nineteenth century. Institutions such as the Translation Office (founded in 1821), the first official newspaper printed in multiple language editions (1831), the change in the 1840s from the *nesib* script to the more easily writeable *rik’a* script, not to mention the flood of translations in the 1860s and 1870s from French writers such as Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, and Eugène Sue (35-36), all illustrate a century in which a fear of writing vied with an explosion of material, political, and intellectual possibilities. The book’s representation of these processes strikes a welcome blow in favor of a longer historical continuity and against the idea of a fossilized, immobile pre-modern simply waiting for the cataclysmic Moment of Modernity to arrive and change everything forever.

On a more abstract level, the book also excels in showing the political ambivalence of language itself. Though by no means the first to make such a claim, the book shows how central language is to both the maintenance and the subversion of nationalist language-games. One example might suffice. There is a wonderful (sadly untranslated) story by the nationalist writer Ömer Seyfeddin called “Nakarat,” “The Refrain,” (1918). An Ottoman military officer, in a Turkish-occupied Christian village somewhere in Bulgaria, falls in love with a Christian girl who, every day, sings a love song to him across a stream: *Naş, Naş, Çarigrad Naş*. The Ottoman officer, who doesn’t speak a word of Bulgarian, becomes completely enraptured by the Christian village girl, until one day he learns the meaning of the words he had taken for a romantic phrase: “Ours, ours, Istanbul will be ours.” Ertürk, in a remarkable exegesis, suggests that death masquerading as language—death as a “volatile and

double-edged signifier” (79)—is one of the central lessons the text has to offer: death as “both the nation itself (embodied in the narrator) and its extra-Turkish outside” (79). An encounter with the foreign is an encounter with death—with the Othering extinction of one’s own identity—but it is also a reminder of the potential deathliness, as it were, of one’s own discourse. For Ertürk, the opposite of Seyfeddin is someone like Hikmet—a figure whose work embraces a range of different languages, and draws on them in an affirmation of otherness, a celebration of “translatability ‘in all directions’” (178). For Ertürk, the poet Hikmet embodies an interruption of Seyfeddin’s “nationalist grammatology,” proffering instead an absolute openness towards the foreign Other which will ultimately culminate in what she calls Hikmet’s “non-identitarian revolutionary collectivism” (175).

Any book which so openly and brazenly employs a Derridean register in its project will inevitably have its critics. Two problems, however, rise above the mere repetition of theoretical differences and force us to ask questions, in a productive as well as a critical way—about what it means, today, to revise literary histories of regions whose own intellectual/cultural trajectories have only recently become familiar to outside audiences. The first of these problems is perhaps the most obvious one: a book which (quite rightly) has fierce words for “Eurocentrist critical discourse” (x) and the “Eurocentrist evolutionary teleology” (20) of much World Literature scholarship, is nevertheless a book which—let’s say the argument out loud, we all know it’s coming—uses French theory and Austrian psychoanalysis to explain the “real” history of Turkish literary modernism. The irony doesn’t stop Ertürk from taking other literary approaches to task for their ethnocentrism. Franco Moretti’s own school of genre-based interpretations—whilst lauded by Ertürk as a “methodological alternative” to Eurocentric approaches—are ultimately seen to mask “a persistent ethnocentrism” (20) by overlooking the volatility of language in their use of genre to re-designate extra-European writing on the basis of “area” identities.

How seriously deconstructive critiques should take themselves has always been a contentious point. Claude Levi-Strauss famously described his book on myths as just another kind of myth. Ertürk, however, shuns ironic self-deconstruction and takes a different approach. She laments the “energetic repudiation of deconstruction” in the 1990s by, amongst other things, the emergence of a “new globalist transnationalism,” one which has merely resulted in the “re-digestion of extra-European literatures” (25). The rolling back of “high” literary theory by the global and postcolonial has been no victory for subaltern literatures, but rather the re-establishment of a faux global consciousness, more concerned with narratives and allegories than text and context. There is a good deal of truth in this (indeed, the first person Ertürk thanks in her book, David Damrosch, has been a leading figure in the production of anthologies of Western literature masquerading as anthologies of World Literature). Ertürk sees her own deconstructive project not as some “alien Judeo-Christian Euro-Atlantic” interpretation of Turkey’s literary history, but rather as a return to “literary and historico-institutional specificity” (25). A full discussion of this question is outside the scope of a review, but it would have been nice to see Ertürk dedicate a few more pages, at the very least, to the point. No book is morally obliged to devote a chapter to the legitimation of its methodology—but on a point as important as this (who gets to talk about non-European literatures? who gets to theorize about them? on what grounds? to what effect?) a fuller discussion would have been welcome. Simply conflating Derridean/Foucauldian theory with an attention to textual/institutional detail isn’t enough—or at least, as a sympathetic reader, I wasn’t convinced.

A second problem with the book has some tangential relation to the first: there is almost no mention of capital, and very little of economic class. To announce this as a lacuna is not

to demand some Marxist re-writing of the book, but more quietly to express a disappointment with an attention to detail which takes in so many things, but yet repeatedly omits any mention of the economic. I should qualify this, out of fairness to the author; there are moments where some sense of capital is briefly mentioned: her description of “uneven economic development” is forcedly invoked in a paraphrase of Franco Moretti (20); in her compelling analysis of the Peyami Safa novel, she points out the protagonist’s benevolence towards two of the poorer characters as a fake “resolution” of socio-economic equilibrium (154); in Part One, she even describes how the poet Namık Kemal refused to discuss “questions of arrested social, political and economic development” concerning the need for writing reforms (41); finally, in her chapter on Hikmet she dramatically (and I think quite rightly) alludes to the current global-culture-in-translation-industry as “the agents of global imperial capital” (181).

And yet apart from these moments, economic parameters remain largely out of the picture. The driving, irrepressible, endlessly self-othering force of language—and the inevitable attempts to resist, strangle, control it—are what drives the changes Ertürk relates and examines. The fact that the period Ertürk examines is a period of unprecedented socio-economic change in Turkish society (a burgeoning middle class and the growth of mass popular literacy) does not seem to put *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey* under any pressure to include class or capital as even a referential, secondary factor. As much as one admires the book, it is difficult to resist the impression that the narrative unfolding within it does so within a socio-economic vacuum. It explains possibly the most striking absence in the book—that of Orhan Veli, after Hikmet the most famous modern poet in the Turkish language, a poet whose *Garîb* manifesto (a word meaning “strange” but also connoting “poor”) initiated a re-poeticization of the quotidian. It also explains how Ertürk, in an otherwise rich and insightful interpretation of Hikmet, is able to deliver a Communist poet whose self-deconstructing, endlessly-open language is “revolutionary” in the most liberal sense of the word (accepting all cultures and idioms, tolerating other identities, etc.) but never really seems to mention the poor. Ertürk is right to speak of a “non-identitarian revolutionary collectivism” (175)—but surely for Hikmet it is economic poverty and injustice, not merely semantic *différance*, which spills over all identities to form a “collective”?

I hope people read *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey*, and more importantly I hope people teach it. It is a book that deserves to be read. The book ends on a political note which, I think it is fair to say, has inspired Ertürk’s project as a whole—Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (the current Turkish Prime Minister) and his party, the AKP. Ertürk is certainly right to see Erdoğan’s party as an aggressively hegemonic ideology—it is corrupt, intolerant, and has manufactured a clever populism that appeals to the masses but actually serves a very specific set of economic elites.

One thing, sadly, needs to be added: Erdoğan is overwhelmingly supported by a working class, religious, Anatolian base. His opposition, whilst by no means exclusively middle class (many of the urban poor, disaffected Kurds and working class Alevis are against him), is dominated by a secular middle class/upper class petit bourgeoisie. Erdoğan’s success is at least partly due to the effectiveness with which he exploits working class contempt for a secular elite which, when *they* had power, were utterly indifferent to the struggles of the poor. So many commentators, particularly those of the *New York Times*-ilk, report the religious fundamentalism of Erdoğan’s party without ever mentioning the class tensions underpinning it. It would be a shame if Ertürk’s excellent book were an academic version of this oversight.

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Citation Information

Almond, Ian, Review of *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey*, *SCTIW Review*, July 28, 2015. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/659>.

ISSN: 2374-9288