Criticism in Translation

Letter to a Young Girl from Antalya

AHMET HAMDİ TANPINAR

INTRODUCTION AND TRANSLATION BY SHAJ MATHEW AND SELİN ÜNLÜÖNEN

Introduction

Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar (1901–62), the face of Turkish literary modernism, owes much of his popularity in the anglophone world to Maureen Freely and Alexander Dawe's recent translation of *Saatleri Ayarlama Enstitüsü* (*The Time Regulation Institute*). The novel, originally published in serial form from 1954 to 1961, recounts the beleaguered attempts of a government agency to synchronize all the clocks in Turkey, satirizing the modernization project that took place in the late Ottoman Empire and early Turkish Republic. In the process, the novel captures the fallout of Turkey's political, social, and linguistic transformation through the 1920s—a decade when Tanpınar himself was in his twenties.

The philosophy of composition that underpins *The Time Regulation Institute*, as well as Tanpınar's 1948 novel *Huzur* (*A Mind at Peace*), finds its most explicit expression in his 1961 "Antalyalı Genç Kıza Mektup" ("Letter to a Young Girl from Antalya"), translated here into English for the first time. This letter—an endearing twist on Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*—doubles as an artistic credo. A bit of mystery shrouds its writing: the letter was in fact addressed to a high school boy from Antalya named Mustafa Erol (İnci). Tanpınar apparently received many letters from young people seeking advice, and early editors of his diaries mistook Erol for another correspondent, a young girl who was also from Antalya, and gave the letter its misleading title.

While Tanpınar implies that his letter was composed in haste—"I was not able to get to your letter in time," he begins in a huff—the existence of at least one additional amended version of the letter suggests considerable forethought. Tanpınar had reason to consider its reception: today the letter is widely viewed as a chronicle of his path to modernism. While his tone appears wary at first, Tanpınar's guardedness soon melts as he opens up to the high schooler. His correspondent is from Antalya, a city on Turkey's Mediterranean coast where Tanpınar lived from 1916 to 1918. Sketching his experiences

SHAJ MATHEW is assistant professor of English at Trinity University, where he teaches world literature in English, Spanish, Turkish, and Persian. His book manuscript, "Out of Sync," offers a theory of global anachrony. His scholarship has appeared in *New Literary History*, *Modernism/Modernity*, and *Modern Language Quarterly*.

SELİN ÜNLÜÖNEN is the Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in Art History in the field of Islamic art, architecture, and material culture at Oberlin College. She is writing a book about how manuscript paintings shaped the court culture of sixteenth-century Iran.

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of life and art there and across Turkey, the letter braids Tanpınar's early reveries with his formative encounters with art.

These experiences soon give way to a discussion of aesthetics. "The basis of my aesthetics," Tanpınar writes, "is the idea of the dream." Tanpınar visits the dream by looking, watching, and wandering—perceiving, that is, not thinking. The dream then enters the world by the hand of the artist, who "knead[s] language with meter and rhyme." Shaping the oneiric into the poetic, Tanpınar becomes in essence a cosmic emissary. His best-known poem, "I Am Neither inside Time," exemplifies this movement: between the poem and the dream the poet hovers in "a state of watchful meditation." In this meditative state flows a subjective temporality outside the mechanical tempo of clocks and calendars, in what Henri Bergson called "duration."

Tanpınar identifies Bergson and other influences in "Letter to a Young Girl from Antalya," and for this reason it wields a degree of prominence in Turkish literary criticism. He describes his immersion in the work of Marcel Proust, Paul Valéry, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Friedrich Nietzsche, but he is also careful to note his reverence for the titans of Turkish literature, such as Yahya Kemal and Ahmet Haşim. Tanpınar's forebears, a mixture of European and Turkish writers, reflect the composition of Turkey's own creole modernity.

Reaching that synthesis, however, was no easy feat. "They wanted to write like Frenchmen, of this there is no doubt," Orhan Pamuk says of Tanpınar and his generation. "But in a corner of their minds they also knew that, if they wrote exactly like Westerners, they would not be as original as the Western writers they so admired" (111). In fact, the question was at the forefront of Tanpınar's mind. In the essay "Bizde Roman" ("Our Novel"), Tanpınar lamented, "It is impossible for Europeans to admire us because of things that we have borrowed from them. The most they will say is a short 'Well done!' It is only when we introduce to them things that are specifically ours that they will like us, treating us as their equals in the path of beauty and self-realization" (qtd. in Gürbilek 602).

"For Tanpınar," Nergis Ertürk adds, "the impossibility of catching up quickly with a 'twenty-five-century [literary] inheritance of the Occidental civilization,' combined with the weight of an 'Oriental inheritance,' had produced an unresolved 'identity crisis' ('benlik buhranı')" (*Grammatology* 111). But the double consciousness experienced by Turkish intellectuals of Tanpınar's generation had a salutary effect as well. It enabled them to realize that "problems . . . of belatedly modernized literature" were in fact true "of all literature, itself always belated to what we call individual experience" (Gürbilek 624). As a critic, Tanpınar had reflected on the critical paradigms of (European) imitation and (Turkish) indigeneity, but only by doing away with the construct of originality itself did he arrive at the cosmopolitan synthesis of cultures that characterizes his mature work—and this letter.

In the light of his nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire and melancholic interest in the city, Tanpınar has been compared with Walter Benjamin (Dolcerocca; Ertürk, "Modernity"). But he has another striking analogue. In 1939, Tanpınar was appointed chair of modern Turkish literature at Istanbul University, where he was colleagues with Erich Auerbach. While the latter was working on *Mimesis*, Tanpınar was composing his own towering study, *On Dokuzuncu Asır Türk Edebiyatı Tarihi* (*A History of Nineteenth-Century Turkish Literature*). Although we do not know whether Tanpınar and Auerbach influenced each other, their "missed intellectual encounter" helps reimagine comparative literature without dispensing with its essential origin story (Khayyat xii). Some of that potential comes to light in this letter, which reveals how an ambling teenager in Antalya has belatedly, and thus appropriately, found his place in the constellation of global literary modernism.

NOTE

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Letter to a Young Girl from Antalya

I was not able to get to your letter in time. Unfortunately, I do not have a scribe, even though I am very busy as a poet, writer, and professor.

Do you really love literature? Are you familiar with my writing? I do not know. In your letter I have not come across any sign that you have read me. Yet, you are a high school student and you live in Antalya. In other words, you are living the life I lived from 1916 to 1918. That is why I am writing to you. The town you find yourself in, perhaps where you were born, holds an important place in my life. Looking at that sea on your beaches, watching those southern waves, wandering the fruit gardens that until now have yielded little fruit, slowly I became a dreamer.

You can find my life story in any anthology. I was born in 1901. My father was a judge. I spent most of my childhood in the places in Anatolia where he was appointed. In between these appointments, we stayed in Istanbul. One day in the Ergani mines, when I was three, I found myself. It was a snowy day. I was looking at a slope covered in snow through a hot and foggy glass. Then, suddenly, it began to snow again. I entered a kind of delicious awe. Every snowy day, I recall this moment and await the snowfall. After Ergani we went to Sinop (1908–10). There I became friends with the sea. The greatest pleasure of my childhood was playing on the shores of the sea that surrounded both sides of that city, founded on an isthmus. On the Tophane side (the main trading port) there was a shipbuilding yard that belonged to a master named Delibaş. I was seven or eight years old when I joined the volunteer workers there. But mostly I enjoyed watching the arrival of the waves from the large sands behind the shipyard. They used to call this place Yazı, I suppose, and it had two fortress ruins buried in the sand that piqued my imagination more than the Sinop Fortress. Later, I would learn how much this place resembled Şile and Kilyos. Nothing can be as beautiful as a line of waves arriving on a sandy beach, one after the other.

In Siirt, I got to know the loneliness that descends upon the distant mountains in the evening hours and the starry nights that followed. In this land of hot summers, we used to sleep on the roof. The starry nights would enchant me. Eternity would fill my body and soul in waves. Like a Sumerian priest, my imagination was always busy with stars. I swam in their mystery. Add to this that crushing purple, that terrible loneliness which the distant mountains would take on in the evening.

In Kirkuk, we would again sleep on the roof (1913–14). Night and stars once again. I was thirteen when we came to this city we have since lost.[1] We stayed in three houses. All three had large gardens.

I came to Antalya in the fall of 1916. I had grown quite a lot. I was allowed to wander at night by the sea or the cliffs at Hastahanebaşı by myself. I would stay there until nightfall when the shadows of the rocks would begin to scare me. Two views of

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the sea used to drive me wild. One was the view that these rocks created on their sea-facing side along with the stones and the seaweed at the bottom of the sea during the morning and evening hours, in the light of the calm sea. Something else that made me happy was the way the water filled and emptied the cavities of rocks during calm hours. And the dilation of the water, like a diamond pool, under the noon sun. These had great meaning for my imagination.

This is a state I can only call enchantment. But perhaps that too is not enough; truth is, it had the effect on me of a mystery I just could not make out, a lesson belonging to a time yet to come.

In the year 1921, when I returned to Antalya for vacation, in between two houses on the way to Hastahane, I again came across this water, which had once more united with the sun and had become the sun's palace and its pool. The view was simply spectacular. But this beauty reached me amid a strange thought of death. Nothing could be so close to a person, and, despite it, so crushing and detached. This was the year I dedicated myself to poetry. I had read many poets. I knew Yahya Kemal, I knew Haşim. I believe that that day, I saw an instance of my own poetry outside myself. Did I really understand it? A person can find oneself only when one sheds away the small trifles of one's life, or else when one gives them a mental form. Our luck is within ourselves, in a well-hidden place. But in order to reach it, we need to get rid of many things. This happened very late for me. In 1921, I was not yet at that age. I could not dwell on anything outside language. In the same days, again in our common land, I came across another view of the sea. I saw the sea cave called Güvercinlik. This cave, whose brightness flickered with every rush of water, became a thing of consequence for me. As I said, I was not at a level to turn what I saw into a little discovery. However, the basis of my aesthetics, the idea of the dream, is connected in some measure to this cave.

There is a mention of Antalya in my novel *A Mind at Peace*. The rocks at Hastahanebaşı, the dovecote, and the sea, knit together, so to speak, the inner life of Mümtaz. But it is essential to read carefully to find the secret knots. The Istanbul sea and the Bosporus nights again overlap with these years. My dream world is constituted primarily by what I say of the sea—leaving aside the starry nights of my childhood and mountains, which symbolize human desolation and helplessness. I would say that this is the algebra of my poetry. I arrived at the starry night and the sea from the sense of loneliness that the mountain awakens in us. The sea talks to us constantly. Despite this, a sense of loneliness has not left me. Naturally, I had to start my life in a sea town like Istanbul in order to see such views in this way. In poetry and in thought, the teacher who I first had, and perhaps whose face I saw last, was Yahya Kemal. Before him, I had read and liked Haşim. These two poets made me forget those who came before them. From Yahya Kemal's lectures—he was my professor at the university—I had the taste of old poetry. I learned Galib, Nedim, Bâki, and Nailî from him and I loved them.

Yahya Kemal influenced me mainly through the idea of perfection in his poetry and the beauty of language. He was the one who opened the door of language for us. Others view this influence in a different light. In reality, our aesthetics are different. I will explain this below. However, this great man had almost absolute influence over my ideas about nationhood and history. My book *Five Cities* follows the path of his ideas. It was even dedicated to him. Both times, this book was not published in the same place as I was, and I was not able to include this dedication.

My main influences are from French poetry, and its Baudelaire-Mallarmé-Valéry branch. But this line is not complete either. It is necessary to acknowledge the contributions of an important French poet named Gérard de Nerval, [E. T. A.] Hoffman and Edgar Allan Poe, Goethe with his *Faust*, Dede Efendi, Mozart and Beethoven, Bach, the French and Italian painters I like, and some moderns. Finally add to these my favorite novelist, Marcel Proust.

My actual aesthetic took shape after getting to know Valéry in the years 1928 to 1930. This aesthetic or understanding of poetry can be organized around the word *dream* and the ideas of conscious work. Or, music and dreams. Change Valéry's sentence "the

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best way to make your dreams come true is to wake up" to "the construction of the dream state in language through waking effort and work," and you will get my understanding of poetry.

You can find this understanding of poetry in the first and last poems of my *Poems*.

The poem "I Am Neither inside Time" communicates a state of poetry, the union of the cosmos with a person, which itself is a state of watchful meditation and dreaming. As you see, it has nothing to do with the coincidences and oddities of actual dreams. Besides, in my view of poetry, what matters more than the dream itself is the inner feeling that accompanies the dream. The principal thing is this feeling. Music enters into the picture here. Because this feeling resembles the sensation that music awakens in music lovers as long as they are not professionals. I would describe this as entering a time different from the one we live in. A time that has a different kind of rhythm, one that internally merges with space and things.[2]

"Night at the Bosporus," the second poem, narrates the construction of the world of a poem [*şiirin örgüsü*]. The only tangible thing in this poem is a single cloud. This cloud changes with the evening, becomes an arc and dies, its screams blaze in windows, but a little later it returns as a star and swims in the waters of Bosporus. Thus, it tells the story of building an atmosphere around a cloud, an object. Here too there is a semblance of music. Music changes constantly. By changing, it constructs its world inside us.

Aside from all this remains the structure of the poem [*şiirin yapısı*], or the work that will deliver us to its structure. Poetry is, for me, a matter of form. And form, above all, is a matter of kneading language with meter and rhyme. Slowly, meter and rhyme and other rules of poetry become a technique of our own. First through our voices, then through our selves and inner lives, experiences find their way into language. If I have spoken a lot about sound, it is because we humans are sound. The point for the poet is to turn language into sound itself, or to make it sound like oneself. If we achieve this, what we call a line will take shape. Sometimes, in poems with tight meters, it is not the line itself that serves this function but couplets or stanzas. Mallarmé, whom I admire, would describe a line of poetry as "a single word that is composed of a great particular surge of many other words." Valéry says that a poet's ear should always be alert, which amounts to the same thing. The ear, coming between the poem and our world of sentiments, saves us from being captive to our emotions. In my opinion, the most important and the most difficult issue in poetry involves the cooperation between the poet and his ear. I would say your ear should be in charge. Only in this way will verse become melody [*nağme*]. Entering our world of emotions through poetry prevents us from being held captive to them and puts the work back in our hands. It allows us to shape the clay of language as necessary. If you write poetry, try to look outside at language and at your inner world, as you would a statue.

Bergson's concept of time plays an important role in my understanding of poetry and art. I did not read much of him, but I owe him a great deal. Around 1932, I read a good amount of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. The subject of dreams led me to Freud and the psychoanalysts.

You might ask why someone who thinks about poetry in this way and who, in the end, separates it from the person, should write novels. I would answer that poetry is more about silence than speech. My novels and stories say what I am silent about in my poetry. For that reason, my novels and stories provide the main outlines to my poems, which I want to be closed-off worlds, to the extent they can be. That said, my understanding of the novel does not stray much from my understanding of poetry. What I said about the word *dream*, and even the order of dreams, also holds when it comes to novels. The difference is that I am searching for myself in poetry, whereas in my stories and novels, I am searching for life and for others. Or the time of others. In my works *The Dreams of Abdullah Efendi* and *A Mind at Peace*, there are places where these two branches of my art—if such a thing exists—coincide.

Now you know my ideas about art. What have you gained? That I cannot tell.

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As for myself . . . a person is not that important. I am like everyone else.

In a way, it is as if I sent this letter to my own childhood. I do not know if your high school is still in the old building in Anbarlı. I imagined you there as I wrote this. You have reminded me of the young man I once was. I relived my excitement and surprise, and I thank you for this. I send my regards to your friends and teachers, and I wish you success. I am grateful for your interest in me. Be happy and work hard, my dear child.

Translators' Notes

1. Tanpınar refers here to the British occupation of Kirkuk after the First World War.

2. Tanpınar gestures here to the deeper form of Bergsonian time that he identifies later on in the letter, as well as in the Bursa chapter of *Beş Şehir* (*Five Cities*). See Tanpınar 96.

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