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ORHAN PAMUK

THE NAIVE AND THE SENTIMENTAL NOVELIST

Orhan Pamuk won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2006. His novel *My Name Is Red* won the 2003 IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. His work has been translated into more than fifty languages. He lives in Istanbul.

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THE NAIVE AND THE SENTIMENTAL NOVELIST

ORHAN PAMUK

TRANSLATED BY NAZIM DIKBAŞ

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To Kiran Desai



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1

What Our Minds Do When We Read Novels

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Novels are second lives. Like the dreams that the French poet Gérard de Nerval speaks of, novels reveal the colors and complexities of our lives and are full of people, faces, and objects we feel we recognize. Just as in dreams, when we read novels we are sometimes so powerfully struck by the extraordinary nature of the things we encounter that we forget where we are and envision ourselves in the midst of the imaginary events and people we are witnessing. At such times, we feel that the fictional world we encounter and enjoy is more real than the real world itself. That these second lives can appear more real to us than reality often means that we substitute novels for reality, or at least that we confuse them with real life. But we never complain of this illusion, this naïveté. On the contrary, just as in some dreams, we want the novel we are reading to continue and hope that this second life will keep evoking in us a consistent sense of reality and authenticity. In spite of what we know about fiction, we are annoyed and bothered if a novel fails to sustain the illusion that it is actually real life.

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We dream assuming dreams to be real; such is the definition of dreams. And so we read novels assuming them to be real—but somewhere in our mind we also know very well that our assumption is false. This paradox stems from the nature of the novel. Let us begin by emphasizing that the art of the novel relies on our ability to believe simultaneously in contradictory states.

I have been reading novels for forty years. I know there are many stances we can adopt toward the novel, many ways in which we commit our soul and mind to it, treating it lightly or seriously. And in just the same manner, I have learned by experience that there are many ways to read a novel. We read sometimes logically, sometimes with our eyes, sometimes with our imagination, sometimes with a small part of our mind, sometimes the way we want to, sometimes the way the book wants us to, and sometimes with every fiber of our being. There was a time in my youth when I completely dedicated myself to novels, reading them intently—even ecstatically. During those years, from the age of eighteen to the age of thirty (1970 to 1982), I wanted to describe what went on in my head and in my soul the way a painter depicts with precision and clarity a vivid, complicated, animated landscape filled with mountains, plains, rocks, woods, and rivers.

What takes place in our mind, in our soul, when we

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read a novel? How do such interior sensations differ from what we feel when we watch a film, look at a painting, or listen to a poem, even an epic poem? A novel can, from time to time, provide the same pleasures that a biography, a film, a poem, a painting, or a fairy tale provides. Yet the true, unique effect of this art is fundamentally different from that of other literary genres, film, and painting. And I can perhaps begin to show this difference by telling you about the things I used to do and the complex images awakened within me while I was passionately reading novels in my youth.

Just like the museum visitor who first and foremost wants the painting he's gazing at to entertain his sense of sight, I used to prefer action, conflict, and richness in landscape. I enjoyed the feeling of both secretly observing an individual's private life and exploring the dark corners of the general vista. But I don't wish to give you the impression that the picture I held within me was always a turbulent one. When I read novels in my youth, sometimes a broad, deep, peaceful landscape would appear within me. And sometimes the lights would go out, black and white would sharpen and then separate, and the shadows would stir. Sometimes I would marvel at the feeling that the whole world was made of a quite different light. And sometimes twilight

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would pervade and cover everything, the whole universe would become a single emotion and a single style, and I would understand that I enjoyed this and would sense that I was reading the book for this particular atmosphere. As I was slowly drawn into the world within the novel, I would realize that the shadows of the actions I had performed before opening the pages of the novel, sitting in my family's house in Beşiktaş in Istanbul—the glass of water I had drunk, the conversation I'd had with my mother, the thoughts which had passed through my mind, the small resentments I had harbored—were slowly fading away.

I would feel that the orange armchair I was sitting in, the stinking ashtray beside me, the carpeted room, the children playing soccer in the street yelling at each other, and the ferry whistles from afar were receding from my mind; and that a new world was revealing itself, word by word, sentence by sentence, in front of me. As I read page after page, this new world would crystallize and become clearer, just like those secret drawings which slowly appear when a reagent is poured on them; and lines, shadows, events, and protagonists would come into focus. During these opening moments, everything that delayed my entry into the world of the novel and that impeded my remembering and envisioning the characters, events, and objects would

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distress and annoy me. A distant relative whose degree of kinship to the real protagonist I had forgotten, the uncertain location of a drawer containing a gun, or a conversation which I understood to have a double meaning but whose second meaning I could not make out—these sorts of things would disturb me enormously. And while my eyes eagerly scanned the words, I wished, with a blend of impatience and pleasure, that everything would fall promptly into place. At such moments, all the doors of my perception would open as wide as possible, like the senses of a timid animal released into a completely alien environment, and my mind would begin to function much faster, almost in a state of panic. As I focused my full attention on the details of the novel I held in my hands, so as to attune myself to the world I was entering, I would struggle to visualize the words in my imagination and to envision everything described in the book.

A little later, the intense and tiring effort would yield results and the broad landscape I wanted to see would open up before me, like a huge continent appearing in all its vividness after the fog lifts. Then I could see the things recounted in the novel, like someone gazing easily and comfortably out a window and watching the view. Reading Tolstoy's description of how Pierre watches the Battle of Borodino from a hilltop, in *War*

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and Peace, is for me like a model for reading a novel. Many details that we sense the novel is delicately weaving together and preparing for us, and that we feel the need to have available in our memory while we read, seem to appear in this scene as if in a painting. The reader gets the impression he is not among the words of a novel but standing before a landscape painting. Here, the writer's attention to visual detail, and the reader's ability to transform words into a large landscape painting through visualization, are decisive. We also read novels that do not take place in broad landscapes, on battlefields, or in nature but that are set in rooms, in suffocating interior atmospheres—Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is a good example. And we read such stories just as if we were observing a landscape and, by transforming it in our mind's eye into a painting, accustoming ourselves to the atmosphere of the scene, letting ourselves be influenced by it, and in fact constantly searching for it.

Let me give another example, again from Tolstoy, which deals with the act of gazing out a window and shows how one can enter the landscape of a novel while reading. The scene is from the greatest novel of all time, *Anna Karenina.* Anna has happened to meet Vronsky in Moscow. Returning home at night by train to St. Petersburg, she is happy because she will see

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her child and her husband the next morning. I quote from the translation by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky:

> Anna . . . took a paper-knife and an English novel from her handbag. At first she was unable to read. To begin with, she was bothered by the bustle and movement; then, when the train started moving, she could not help listening to the noises; then the snow that beat against the left-hand window and stuck to the glass, and the sight of a conductor passing by, all bundled up and covered with snow on one side, and the talk about the terrible blizzard outside, distracted her attention. Further on, it was all the same: the same jolting and knocking, the same snow on the window; the same quick transitions from steaming heat to cold and back to heat, the same flashing of the same faces in the semi-darkness, and the same voices, and Anna began to read and understand what she was reading. Anna Arkadyevna read and understood, but it was unpleasant for her to read, that is, to follow the reflection of other people's lives. She wanted too much to live herself. When she read about the heroine of the novel taking care of a sick man, she wanted to walk with inaudible steps round the sick man's room; when she read about a Member of Parliament making a speech, she

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> wanted to make that speech; when she read about how Lady Mary rode to hounds, teasing her sister-in-law and surprising everyone with her courage, she wanted to do it herself. But there was nothing to do, and so, fingering the smooth knife with her small hands, she forced herself to read.

Anna is unable to read because she cannot help thinking of Vronsky, because she wants to live. If she were able to focus on her novel, she could easily imagine Lady Mary mounting her horse and following the pack of hounds. She would visualize the scene as if she were gazing out a window and would feel herself slowly entering this scene she observes from the outside.

Most novelists sense that reading the opening pages of a novel is akin to entering a landscape painting. Let us remember how Stendhal begins *The Red and the Black*. We first see from afar the town of Verrières, the hill it is situated on, the white houses with their peaked red-tile roofs, the clumps of flourishing chestnut trees, and the ruins of the town's fortifications. The River Doubs flows below. Then we notice the sawmills and the factory that produces *toiles peintes,* colorful printed textiles.

Only a page later we have already met the mayor, one of the central characters, and have identified his cast of

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mind. The real pleasure of reading a novel starts with the ability to see the world not from the outside but through the eyes of the protagonists living in that world. When we read a novel, we oscillate between the long view and fleeting moments, general thoughts and specific events, at a speed which no other literary genre can offer. As we gaze at a landscape painting from afar, we suddenly find ourselves among the thoughts of the individual in the landscape and the nuances of the person's mood. This is similar to the way we view a small human figure depicted against crags, rivers, and myriad-leaved trees in Chinese landscape paintings: we focus on him, and then try to imagine the surrounding landscape through his eyes. (Chinese paintings are designed to be read in this manner.) Then we realize that the landscape has been composed to reflect the thoughts, emotions, and perceptions of the figure within it. Likewise, as we sense that the landscape within the novel is an extension of, a part of, the mental state of the novel's protagonists, we realize that we identify with these protagonists via a seamless transition. Reading a novel means that, while committing the overall context to memory, we follow, one by one, the thoughts and actions of the protagonists and ascribe meaning to them within the general landscape. We are now inside the landscape that a short while ago we

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were gazing at from the outside: in addition to seeing the mountains in our mind's eye, we feel the coolness of the river and catch the scent of the forest, speak to the protagonists and make our way deeper into the universe of the novel. Its language helps us to combine these distant and distinct elements, and see both the faces and the thoughts of the protagonists as part of a single vision.

Our mind works hard when we are immersed in a novel, but not like Anna's mind as she sits in the noisy, snow-covered St. Petersburg train. We continually oscillate between the landscape, the trees, the protagonists, the protagonists' thoughts, and the objects they touch—from the objects to the memories they evoke, to the other protagonists, and then to general thoughts. Our mind and our perception work intently, with great rapidity and concentration, carrying out numerous operations simultaneously, but many of us no longer even realize that we are carrying out these operations. We are exactly like someone driving a car, who is unaware that he is pushing knobs, depressing pedals, turning the wheel carefully and in accordance with many rules, reading and interpreting road signs, and checking the traffic while he drives.

The analogy of the driver is valid not only for the reader but also for the novelist. Some novelists are un-

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