

## The Black Book and Black Boxes: Orhan Pamuk's *Kara Kitap*

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His enthusiasm for the plan came from his ambition to write a book. No matter if the book were made entirely of errors, intentional, deadly errors. As long as you remain in your private vacuum, you can pretend you are in harmony with the One. But the moment you pick up the clay, electronic or otherwise, you become a demiurge, and he who embarks on the creation of worlds is already tainted with corruption and evil. (Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*, 1989: 49)

**Black box** 1. any unit that forms part of an electronic circuit and that has its function, but not its components, specified. 2. any comparatively small, usually black, box containing a secret, mysterious, or complex mechanical or electronic device. (*Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, Second Edition, Unabridged)

Orhan Pamuk's *Kara Kitap*—or, in Güneli Gün's English translation, *The Black Book*—is several things, quite obviously. These are things that come trippingly off the critical tongue, usually sounding more or less like “postmodern meta-narrative,” which is a way of saying that it is about the ironies of writing about how we are going to write about being “about” something. In our “modernity” we have learned that between brute reality and its representation is a gap, an uncanny space in which things are altered and things are lost. The fact that we can conceive of a reality that we cannot make present to ourselves presupposes a “black box”, an opaque space between input (“the Idea of the world”) and output (“the capacity to show an example of it”), in which a mysterious transformation occurs by mysterious means (Lyotard 1984: 79). When art is most modern, it celebrates—in the form of the Kantian “sublime”—both an anguished longing for knowledge of what is hidden within the “black box” and a worshipful,

ecstatic pleasure in the ineffable mystery of knowing that there is an “unpresentable”. When art is postmodern—a state that, as Lyotard points out, both anticipates and follows modernity—it maintains an ironic stance towards itself and its own forms, which prevents us from taking seriously the existence of a community (of understanding or taste) that can indulge itself in creating an aesthetic out of the desire for unattainable knowledge.

So, to go back a step, we might say that *Kara Kitap* is about the knowledge that writing cannot really be “about” anything except the wish that this were not the case. Yet, in doing this, it also dangles a “black box” tantalizingly in front of us, inviting or demanding that we interpret, analyze, detect . . . I doubt there has ever been a Turkish novel so much written about in such a short time. There are reviews in major periodicals throughout the world; and there is already a whole book about *Kara Kitap* (*Kara Kitap üzerine Yazılar* [1992]) devoted to essays and articles, mostly by Turkish scholars and critics, collected by Nüket Esen, who told me in the fall of 1995 that she had already gathered almost enough articles for a second volume (and she does not include what she calls “political” or “polemical” articles, which are legion in Turkey). I must also mention that this collection contains some extremely sophisticated work by Turkish critics, and, especially relevant to this essay, a long and perceptive article by Orhan Koçak that anticipates several of the points I will be making below.

The book is a trap for critics, scholars, and all manner of interpreters. It is also very obviously a trap. We know what’s coming, and still cannot avoid it. The lure of mystery and the need to find answers are compelling. The fact that we are so copiously and enthusiastically entrapped stems less from the understandable fear that one might end up being the only person who never wrote anything about *Kara Kitap* and more from the seductiveness of the (somehow corrupting) power of writing to create a world—a world contained in our answers—by offering an explanation of how the “black box” works.

*Kara Kitap* itself maintains precisely this parodic stance towards its own writing—or perhaps, a “post-parodic” stance, if one considers Jameson’s (1991) contention that in its postmodernity such writing is parody without vocation, revolving as it does about the suspicion that there is nothing actually “there” to parody. On the surface the story is rather simple. A man named Galip returns home to find that his

beloved wife and cousin, Rüya (Dream), has left him. He then sets about to seek her out, driven by the conviction that if he locates his older cousin (and her half-brother) Jelal, the popular author of an intentionally mysterious newspaper column, he will also locate his wife. The tale of his detective work is interspersed with columns by Jelal that intimate a secret message in a secret code, and thus motivate a heterogeneous host of fanatical interpreters whose paths Galip crosses and whose fantasies about Jelal begin to work themselves into his quest. In the end, Galip “captures” Jelal by enacting him (or inhabiting his persona) as an author (and “authority”), while the “actual” Jelal (and Galip’s “Dream”) are murdered by an assassin created by Jelal’s ironic fictions. The complexity of the tale comes from the writer’s—Jelal’s—vocation as a creator of clues, and the retrospective adoption of his role by Galip (and by the author-voice of the novel). Everything comes either to anticipate something else or to be the consequence of it, and everything is meaningful or soon to be meaningful. Everything is a clue, everything is an effect of the black box.

When we call a story like this “postmodern” we say very little (or far too much), given the slipperiness of the term, except to indicate that the story itself is a “meta-clue”—the representation of a suspicion that the clue has no referent, that the black box will always be impenetrable and may, in fact, be empty. Nonetheless, that we see it as a clue at all (“meta-” or otherwise) is an indication that emptiness is intolerable, and impenetrability only a bit less so, because possibly it can be raised to the level of theistic metaphysics. The voice of Derrida that speaks our uneasiness will not let us forget that it is facile to announce the death of God when the role has been quite adequately assumed by such as Sublimity or Truth or, most essentially, by Meaning. But how can we live and be human without “meaning”? To go without would be the ultimate “relativism” stemming from the ultimate irony: that we brought history back into our thinking about meaning and it taught us what (or that) we cannot know. It is exactly this “relativism” that is denounced as a cardinal sin from both the left and the right. It represents either the sin of treating an effect (“the logic of late capitalism”) as an “essence”, or of trying to replace a true “essence” (the Word, the moral imperative) with a false (and unproductive) one.

To be sure, the black abyss of meaninglessness is a long-familiar anxiety, the antagonist of a host of existential heroes who screamed

the affirmation of meaning (and the ground of humanness) into the teeth of a pitiless, blank, and senseless reality. But the issue that motivates *Kara Kitap*—and, perhaps, our perception of the “postmodern condition” itself—is not so much the void of meaninglessness (which modernism readily accepts), but the sense that our perceptible world teems with potential meaning. We are inundated by connections, links, relations that must be “meaningful”; and yet we “know” at some level that to make a link, to assert the meaningfulness of a connection, to discern a history of influences, are all creative and terribly dangerous acts. Indeed, caught up in some such discerning of my own, I cannot help but think that there must certainly be a mysterious connection between *Kara Kitap* and Umberto Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum*. Mustn’t there? The two do read each other so perfectly . . .

*Foucault’s Pendulum* is a simple story too, of great complexity. A young man named Casaubon (a name fraught with “connections”) is studying at the university and writing a thesis on the trial and punishment of the Templars and their leader, Jaques de Molay, in the early 14th century. The young “philologist” happens to encounter an older man, named Belbo, who is connected with a publishing company that, as a sideline, turns a tidy profit by inducing the wildest of interpreters, “theorizers,” and “discoverers” to self-publish their work. Belbo hatches a scheme to employ Casaubon and another scholar (who is, among other things, a Kabbalist) to create a diabolical “Plan of the Masters of the World” out of the myriad fanciful “solutions” to the “clues” that history has cast before our gaze. This plan is deeply ironic. It is motivated, on the one hand, by the (cynical?) desire to profit from the delusions of a sad crew of “true believers,” and on the other hand, with the passing of time, by the idea of the Plan itself, which “stirred” in their minds “as a desire to give shape to shapelessness, to transform into fantasized reality that fantasy that others wanted to be real” (Eco 1989: 292). What begins as a game grows into a doubt: perhaps it is all a game! “Maybe a Plot really exists, and history is simply the result of this battle to reconstruct a lost message” (*ibid.*: 326). And Belbo is caught. As the Plot coalesces to manifest itself tangibly in a Map (uninterpretable except in relation to Foucault’s Pendulum, the instrument which functions only at the mystical axis of the universe), there comes a crucial moment when “Belbo decided to take the universe of the Diabolicals seriously, not because of an

abundance of faith but because of a total lack of it" (*ibid.*: 435). For the sins of incredulity and creation Belbo is entrapped and punished. First he comes to love the golem he created in the arrogance of his disbelief; then he is destroyed by it, murdered by the Planners that his own Plan brought into existence. But his existential victory—that "he refused to bow to non-meaning" (*ibid.*: 516)—is tainted and irreducibly equivocal. His blood sacrifice, like those of Jelal and Rüya, brings into being the physical presence of a corruption and threat that was once only a fantasy, a madman's dream. If this is victory, it is also, in some way, a victory for evil.

*Foucault's Pendulum* begins ending where *The Black Book* begins beginning; Casaubon says, "But I'm no literary critic. I'm Sam Spade again, looking for the final clue" (*ibid.*: 518). Literary critic or detective, written text or world-text? . . . Galip rushes from role to role: is the clue to Rüya in Jelal's writing, or concealed somewhere in the labyrinth that is Istanbul? And *The Black Book* ends where *Foucault's Pendulum* begins, with the issue of writing, Belbo's "ambition to write a book" and Galip's final words: "After all, nothing can be as astounding as life. Except for writing. Except for writing. Yes, of course, except for writing, the sole consolation" (Pamuk 1994: 400). In *Foucault's Pendulum* we are spectators, observers of the process of creating "solutions", "meaning", "the secret to why history is the way it appears to be." In *The Black Book* we are recruited as discoverers ourselves—we become Casaubon, Belbo.

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They came across assumed names that were no secret, names derived from these assumed names, names that were portions of the derivative names. They deciphered acrostics, letter codes that were less than perfect, and semi-transparent anagrams which might have been intentional or entirely accidental. (Pamuk 1994: 65)

Since the signs were everywhere and in everything, the mystery was also everywhere and in everything. Like the beloved's face in poems, the pearls, roses, wine goblets, nightingales, golden hair, night, and flames that Galip kept reading about, the objects around him were both signs of themselves and of the mystery that he was slowly approaching. (*ibid.*: 262)

The painful sticking-point of the "postmodern condition" is that it conceives of a world filled with "clues", and thus fraught with the

promise of meaning, and yet leaves one suspended over the abyss of undecidability, caught between the poles of an equivoque with no hope of dialectical rescue. This is what Linda Hutcheon calls “the doubleness of post-modernism” (1988: 223). Does the name Casaubon point to the sixteenth-century philologist (Isaac), or perhaps to Meric (1599–1671), author of a significantly-named work, *A treatise concerning enthusiasm as it is an effect of nature, but is mistaken by many for either Divine inspiration or diabolical possession*, or even to the aged scholarly fraud of *Middlemarch*? Is the name Galip (Victor) a sardonic gesture towards the existential triumph over meaninglessness, or (as Pamuk broadly hints) is it intended to evoke the 18th-century Mevlevî sheyh, Galip, who wrote *Beauty and Love*, the last great Perso-Ottoman mystical allegory in rhymed couplets? This Ottoman sheyh was the ephebe of the mystical grand master Jelaluddin Rûmî—another prominent Jelal, overwritten by another Galip.

It takes no special insight to find “hidden” meanings in the clues of *The Black Book*. Everything reeks of “doubleness,” lingers between revelation and fraud (is Jelal a prophet—the Mahdi/Messiah—or a cynical charlatan?), between “historical reality” (Sheyh Galip, Rûmî) and “fiction” (the “made up” historical characters Bottfolio, Ibn Zerhani), between history and memory, between a fragmented present and a unified past, between the “true” self and its roles. There was a time . . .

In those distant felicitous times, significance and action had been identical. In that Golden Age, things in our houses and our dreams of them were the same. People who woke from their sleep on foggy mornings could not tell apart their dreams from reality, poems from life, and names from human beings. Back then, stories and lives were so real that nobody even conceived of asking which was the original life or which was the original story. Dreams were lived through and lives were thoroughly interpreted. (*Ibid.*: 263)

There was a time—or so Galip imagines (and can we hear a sardonic chuckle from Jelal as he does?)—when there was no gap between reality and its representation, the moment of a lost arcadia, the day in which the Plan was at once hatched and hidden, when the signs of secret meaning were there, written on faces for all initiates to read. This is the deeply troubling aspect of postmodernism that *The Black Book* lays bare: that we are profoundly influenced by both the need to affirm—desperately affirm—our compulsion to restore meaning, to offer

a solution, no matter how cynically, and the need to reject all solutions by foregrounding our cynicism (Jelal's chuckle, Casaubon's fraud) over what is offered. The Plan (which appears in *The Black Book* as the secret survival of Hurufism) is seductive, and even diabolical, because of what it promises to restore to the world: the reason why everything is the way it is, why history seems to be telling such a tangled tale, the unity of what we experience and what it means. "A Plan, a guilty party. The dream of our species. An Deus sit. If He exists, it's His fault" (Eco 1989: 433). Even if the reason is an evil one, we need to know; even if my "dream" (Rüya) has run off with my enlightenment (Jelal), I need to know. We are suspicious of all answers, and desperate for them.

At the beginning, *The Black Book*, in its very Turkish obsession with personal (and cultural and national) identity, fingers an obvious culprit in the case of our guilty doubleness and the mysterious disappearance of golden-age unity. According to Galip, "Jelal had written a great deal that explained everything, even our miserable lives, in terms of this frightening and incomprehensible subconscious he called darkness" (Pamuk 1994: 29). The very idea of a "darkness", of a subconscious, locates the "black box" internally, within the psyche, where it is either the origin or the sign of our irreparable fragmentedness.

Jelal is understood to assert (in a very Foucauldian and, therefore, "postmodern" manner) that the subconscious is not an essence, but the product of a certain historical pattern of thought (a phrase-regime, in Lyotard's jargon). It is even a "foreign" construct (a colonizing of the psyche), for, in his words, "the subconscious didn't originate with us but came out of the pompous novels of the Western world and their movie heroes whom we never quite learned to imitate..." (*ibid.*: 29). I am going to skirt the issue of whether the idea of the subconscious itself is at the root of our sense of psychic fragmentedness, or whether the problem is that we are caught up in, and perhaps deluded by, the Freudian assumption that there is a semioticity to the subconscious that would allow us to interrogate it in some rational way (this being more or less the problematic that Guattari and Deleuze's "schizoanalysis" forces upon us). What I want to do instead is to focus briefly on a notion that, as I have hinted, surfaces here and there in *The Black Book*, the notion that not only the subconscious, but modern (and postmodern) conditions themselves, are a plot by "the West" to take from "the East" a unity of self-presence it once

had. This is certainly parody, but serious and hardly “vocationless” parody. Quite overtly, in the Turkish situation (and more covertly, I would argue, in “the West”) the reaction to postmodern skepticism has been two-sided (in a typically postmodern way). The opposition to the political center, most prominently on the “Islamicist” right but on the far left as well, has welcomed critiques of “modernization”, “westernization”, “nationalism”, and the particularly Turkish synthesis of all the above (Kemalism). Islamist critics in Turkey have written extensively on post-modernist thought, with particular (and appreciative) attention to skeptical appraisals of the “master narratives” of modernity. The “two-sidedness” of this program stems from a readiness to accept the existence of a “postmodern condition” and “the West’s” deconstruction of its own foundational narratives, on the one hand, and, on the other, from a desire to situate themselves outside postmodernity and avoid skepticism with regard to their own narratives. The “post-modern condition” is portrayed as a disease (of western origin) for which the “cure” is the imposition of an answer, a “Plan”, a solution to the case—an especially “Eastern” solution (i.e. Islam and the Islamic state; see Kafadar 1992).

Postmodernism in general, and *The Black Book* in particular, have come under a barrage of criticism from some elements of the Turkish left. The dilemma this appropriation presents to the Turkish left (the liberal Kemalist left, anyway) dramatizes quite starkly the problem that notions of “postmodernism”, and postmodernism’s “double” character, present to the left wherever it is invested in particular answers or in “enlightened critique” as the grounding of programs for social reform. As the outstanding example of Turkish post-modern expression, *The Black Book* is described as cruelly and thoughtlessly “elitist” for its playful, parodic, and skeptical treatment of narratives, ideologies, and programs that have obviously benefited and will benefit the underclass. It flirts with “historical” topics—in this case, Ottomanism, Ottoman culture, Islamic themes (the *Ḥurufis*, the Messiah, for example)—that make it complicit in the project of the Islamist right to restore precisely the kind of imaginary “golden age” of psychic and social (and confessional) unity that *The Black Book* parodies. But the fact that this is parody makes little difference. If the right can force a “bloody-minded” reading, then so *must* the left. The argument is precisely parallel to one that Christopher Norris makes:

It is a short step from the claims of postmodern skeptical historiography—as exemplified in the work of Hayden White—to the arguments of proselytising right-wing historians who more or less openly advocate a return to the teaching of history as a vehicle for Thatcherite values and principles. (1990: 40)

This “short step” is actually a preposterously huge one—in both cases. The step involves constituting an author (Pamuk) or historian (White) as, in the most charitable interpretation, unwitting dupes and fellow-travelers of a right-wing ideological program. As an example of how the equivalent Turkish argument goes, Süha Oğuzertem gives the following overview in an analysis of *Kara Kitap* that I will bring up again below:

In my opinion, the ideals of professionalism and elitism prevalent among the upper strata of society and among intellectuals in general, a view that belittles political activity and the social life of the masses, the infatuation with the artificial and decorative instead of the natural and simple, criticism of the previous age’s intellectuals for being too “social(ly activist)” and “political,” and, in general, the acceptance, as a norm, of the values of modernism in cultural production are related to class changes that have occurred in the past forty years. (1990: 127; my parentheses)

The “changes” referred to are, according to Oğuzertem, the increasing conservatism of the bourgeoisie and the (resultant?) appearance of an intellectual class that shamelessly delights in its privileged status (i.e. doesn’t “care” about the less fortunate). Interesting enough, the rhetoric of the Islamist right now similarly attacks its opponents in the same groups (Kemalist intellectuals and the bourgeoisie) by calling them *rantiye* (a term taken from the French *rentier*), which commonly means “someone who lives on unearned income,” or what populist rhetoric in the USA used to call “coupon clippers.” (This information was provided to me by Kutluk Özgüven in an e-mail communication.)

In order to affirm Oğuzertem’s view of the postmodern intellectual, one must also confuse a “condition” with a “program” or ideological stance. Moreover, the argument that Norris and the “anti-post-modernist Turkish left” make is odd and, as we have seen, aligns them with the same argument as it is made from the right, leaving one to wonder at the (postmodern?) appearance of a convergence of the far right and center-left. Indeed both appear to accept the existence of a “postmodern (or late-modern) condition”, and both appear to see it as a disease to which they, uniquely, are immune and for which they,

uniquely, have a cure. Anyone who accepts that “conditions” are just that—the conditions of possibility for thinking and talking about things at certain times—and anyone who explores the question of how one can honestly and with self-awareness speak and write under the conditions that obtain is seen as a heretic and a fool from both extremes. Anti-foundationalisms are permissible only when they undermine the foundations of the opposition’s ideology. When they extend to general cases—the literary “pragmatisms” of Stanley Fish or Richard Rorty, for example—they are anathema.

In summing up her seminal study of postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon sets out the issue with great clarity.

... the basic defining feature of postmodernism in this study has been its paradoxical, not to say, contradictory nature. In both formal and ideological terms, as we have seen, this results in a curious mixture of the complicitous and the critical. I think it is this ‘insider-outsider’ position that sets the postmodern up for the contradictory responses it has evoked from a vast range of political perspectives. What frequently seems to happen is that one half of the paradox gets conveniently ignored; postmodernism becomes either totally complicitous or totally critical, either seriously compromised or polemically oppositional. This is why it has been accused of everything from reactionary nostalgia to radical revolution. But when its doubleness is taken into account, neither extreme of interpretation will hold. (1988: 201)

It is one thing to argue that the postmodern is a “condition” of our age (Lyotard) or even that it is a condition that has reoccurred (*mutatis mutandis*) throughout history (Maria Menocal’s *Shards of Love*). If we accept this argument, we are faced with the problem of living under conditions which result in doubt about our beliefs in the institutions of thought that have ordered, directed, segmented our lives and we find ourselves (often frighteningly) free to transgress or ignore boundaries—national, linguistic, class, cultural, etc.—in ways that are quite unprecedented for us. In the language of Deleuze and Guattari’s *Thousand Plateaus*, there is a movement into “smooth” space, space that is not segmented, gridded, mapped by institutions of thought. And when we start thinking of history as being about space rather than about chronology or origins, then we are also faced with a tremendous upheaval in our relationships to the world and each other.

However, it is quite another thing to see postmodernism as a program (albeit with quite mysterious goals) enacted by promoting skepticism and the critique of everything including the idea that things

can be made better. When the “doubleness” of postmodernity is ignored, we elide the fact that it subsumes both a “condition” (a “phrase regime” or general form of semiosis) and a variety of “programs” (the ideological consequences of the form of semiosis) emerging from that condition. In addition, the reduction of postmodernity to a “singleness” too conveniently allows us to forget that its characteristics include both extreme skepticism (most often deplored) and extreme credulity (equally as often exploited). If the extreme skeptic—Casaubon, Jelal (who give answers without believing them)—is a creature of postmodernism, so too is the “true believer”—the diabolicals, Jelal’s “loyal readers”—and, between these extremes, so is the “detective” (the scholar, scientist, reporter, Galip, Belbo) who is emptied out by the skepticism of a skeptical age and being thus emptied is in danger of becoming a receptacle for the most fantastic of beliefs.

The fascination of postmodernism, as exemplified by *The Black Book* and its stunning popularity, somewhat paradoxically lies in the richness and range and abundance of the “answers” it proposes. The vehement opposition it arouses for the most part takes rise from its (parodic) refusal to take any of its answers seriously. And “taking seriously” is the minimal requirement of most ideological projects. *Foucault’s Pendulum* seems to suggest that when one presents an answer and thereby proposes the existence of a secret “Plan”, one, willy nilly, engages a community of belief that is not lightly betrayed. As a character in *The Black Book* puts it:

But you don’t really understand me; if you had you’d have immediately joined in. That’s why I’m going to kill you, exactly why! For feigning to understand although you never have, for having the temerity to insinuate yourself into our souls and showing up in our dreams at night, even though you have never been with any of us. (1994: 334)

The words of Jelal’s “loyal reader” and (perhaps?) murderer seem very much to be the emotional expression of the unmistakable frustration lurking in the following from Jameson’s analysis of Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, which I believe could as well be said, with appropriate emendations, of *The Black Book*: “the novel not only resists interpretation, it is organized systematically and formally to short-circuit an older type of social and historical interpretation which it perpetually holds out and withdraws” (Jameson 1974: 23).

Jameson is incisive, and knows the difference between a “program” and a “condition” (*ibid.*: 44–45). What pains him is not that the “post-modern” represents the assertion or ascendance of some reactionary program but because it heralds the spread of a manner of thinking that casts fundamental doubt on all programs.

E. L. Doctorow is the epic poet of the disappearance of the American radical past, of the suppression of older traditions and moment of the American radical tradition; no one with left sympathies can read these splendid novels without a poignant distress that is an authentic way of confronting our own current political dilemmas in the present. (*Ibid.*: 25)

This is precisely the distress with which the Turkish Kemalist left encountered *Kara Kitap*. And it is understandable. In both *Ragtime* and *Kara Kitap* the portrayal of “history” (or more broadly, the “real world”) is detailed and dense, and, at the same time, without either *direction* or any distinction between the real and the fictional. What we are accustomed to see either as trivial or important exist at exactly the same level, the latter trivialized and the former exalted. The stories of the Messiah and the whore, the sultan and the mannekin-maker, Jelal the Persian mystic and Jelal the journalist, J. P. Morgan and the piano player, a family without names and great names without substance, all roil together related not by their places in an over-arching narrative but solely by coincidence. History is revealed, not as the story of personages and events, but as a random collection of lost signs, the detritus of a dried-up Bosphorus, of a well, or an air-shaft, or the beach beneath the Boardwalk. The odd, coincidental, grotesque, and rare intermingle with “historical figures,” stereotypes, icons, until it seems impossible to tell which is which. We seem to be told over and again that we will never know what life is “really” like, but that we *can* know what history is like, and it is like a freak show or museum or Aladdin’s store.

The world is, as we have seen, full of clues; but it is impossible to determine which are proleptic and which retrospective. They are signs bound to other signs not by some fathomable connection but by uncanny, magical links devoid of sequence or temporality. For example, in *Ragtime*, at the end of the first chapter, Houdini (yes, the famous escape-artist Houdini) chances to meet a young boy and, as they part, the following exchange occurs: “‘Goodbye, Sonny,’ he

said, holding out his hand. 'Warn the Duke,' the little boy said. Then he ran off" (1974: 9). And the chapter ends. Eleven chapters later, Houdini meets the Archduke Ferdinand and does not warn him of anything, because there is, of course, nothing yet to warn him of—or because he has forgotten, only to remember hazily, after the assassination in Sarajevo, while he hangs in a straitjacket over Times Square. Such magically anachronistic assaults on temporality, on cause and effect, seem to rob us of the future, to steal from us the sense that there is a line of progress, a direction that can be influenced by a particular program and a common effort. No wonder this is perceived as an affront to both liberal good-will and the conservative desire for order.

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But as Jameson clearly indicates (taking Lyotard's contention seriously), it is not the writer who is the thief. The distress we feel is already there. Loss of faith in the traditional great radical projects, skepticism about institutions of thought that provided us with an imagined "critical distance" from which to "dispassionately" institute and analyze projects, are already there. And they would be there if there had never been a "postmodern" anything (although it is difficult to imagine a postmodern world without its own authentic modes of expression). Thatcherism/Reaganism and Islamism are one set of responses to the need to reconstitute the world as something we can understand in the way we are accustomed to understanding it. The conspiracy theory, be it cosmic and occult (Hurufism/the Masters of the World/the Pyramid Society) or local and political, is another response, another way of organizing a chaos of experience.

In the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* of Monday, February 5, 1996, an article under the byline of Paul Shukovsky, entitled "Couple charged in get-rich-quick plan," contained the following:

James McAleer, along with his wife Shirley McAleer, was accused Friday of persuading thousands of people to invest in the scheme through which they would share in a \$157 trillion fortune "owned by four international entities in Europe—La Cosa Nostra, the Illuminati, the CIA and the Vatican," according to a federal grand jury indictment.

The Illuminati is thought by some to be a secret organization of "one-worlders" who are plotting to take control of the earth.

Beneath the con—and a fairly successful con it was at that—and beneath the petty greed or less-than-petty needs that all con-jobs require, is a willingness to believe a story that makes sense of it all, a story affirming that *somebody*, however malevolent, is in charge of things and knows what is going on. And this story covers all the bases. If one has a favorite candidate for manipulating the world, it is most likely represented in this cabal: organized Religion (the Vatican), the Spies (CIA), the Criminals (Mafia), the Secret (occult) Organization (the Illuminati). This is certainly an element of the general formula for a large number of the hundred most successful popular novels of the past fifteen years, in which an often unsuspecting, honest person is drawn unwittingly into contact with the global Plot of the \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank with one of the above mentioned) to control everything or almost everything. (As an aside, I would mention that one sign of how far we have come from an earlier day of positivist modernism might be the waning of “the mad scientist” as one of our major epistemological villains.) Neither the con nor the novel works unless there is predisposition to believe a conspiratorial premise. And herein lies the present-day crisis of compassionate government, of good-will, of the traditional radical program: that we are beset by a tendency to be profoundly suspicious of even the best intentions.

In the chapter of *The Black Book* entitled “We Are All Waiting for Him,” the Messiah/Mahdi, whom I take to be (in some part) the embodiment of impulses evoked by notions of “compassionate government,” “good-will,” etc., is confronted by “the Grand Pasha” (of the untranslatable name and title “made foreign”—in my paperback version of the original strangely spelled *pacha* rather than *paşa*)—whom I see as embodying, at once, both the power to impose solutions and the logic of present conditions, late capitalism or whatever. The Pasha, among other things, points out the futility of making a victory of the masses dependent on defeating vastly powerful external adversaries. At the same time, he describes what Richard Rorty (1991) would call the cruelties necessary to enforce the (metaphysical) propositions of liberalism or radical reformation or revolution, cruelties (imprisonment, torture, execution) that in the end bring no practical victory. And so the Pasha says:

You must have already realized that on Judgment Day they will believe neither you nor the stories you tell them; and when there remains no single story that they can all believe in collectively, then they will begin believing their own private fictions, everyone will have his own story which he will want to tell. (Pamuk 1994: 138)

Well, Judgment Day is here, at least from the perspective of the metaphysical, Messiah/Mahdi solution. If the grand dream of the right is forever tainted by the reality of German facism, the project of the left is haunted by the events of 1968: the betrayal of student rebellion in the universities of France and the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia. What seems to have gone out of the world is a profound belief in the great project (and with it—apparently—the passion, the fervid commitment). Kundera (in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*) describes the project vividly:

The Grand March is the splendid march on the road to brotherhood, equality, justice, happiness; it goes on and on, obstacles notwithstanding, for obstacles there must be if the march is to be the Grand March.

The dictatorship of the proletariat or democracy? Rejection of the consumer society or demands for increased productivity? It is all beside the point. What makes a leftist a leftist is not this or that theory but his ability to integrate any theory into the kitsch called the Grand March. (1984: 257)

To Kundera a *kitsch* is composed of two movements, both grounded in sentiment: first, I recognize a global image that moves me (the evil of despotism, the glory of justice, acts of selfishness and generosity, the *Volk*/common people, “children running on the grass”), and second, I have the feeling that all humankind (those worthy of the appellation “human”) are similarly moved by the image. But we have learned—and some have learned quite cruelly—that it is in the nature of the state or of any collectivity to propagate and enforce its own *kitsch* with its own version of the Grand March. As one of Kundera’s characters learned at the bitter end of the Prague Spring: “Behind Communism, Fascism, behind all occupations and invasions lurks a more basic, pervasive evil and . . . the image of that evil was a parade of people marching by with raised fists and shouting identical syllables in unison” (*ibid.*: 100).

Every deviation from the *kitsch* (from the *kitsch* of libertarianism as much as from the *kitsch* of totalitarianism) must be repressed, every dissent, every individual act is traitorous. In fact, at the root of

postmodern skepticism, is the knowledge—or, at least, the suspicion—that the *kitsch* is a lie and, thus, from the perspective of one *kitsch* or another, every escape from the totalitarianism of sentimental affiliations is a betrayal or trivialization or rejection of an emotional truth. For Kundera's characters, the only refuge from oppression is the betrayal of all ties: love, vocation, country, friends, home, family . . . ; and this is precisely a metaphor for one aspect of the postmodern condition. It manifests itself to many of us as the betrayal of precious and needful things—from fundamental emotional bonds to a passionate commitment to collective action and even to the “semi-autonomy” of culture (Jameson 1991: 48). We devoutly wish that it were otherwise. And the result is a host of sincere, well-meaning attempts to reconstruct or repair the foundations of a (metaphysical) collectivity, attempts to reconstitute “a single story that (we) can all believe.”

For example, Süha Oğuzertem (1990), who is brilliant and erudite, cleverly reads *Kara Kitap* as a modern revenant of the medieval mystical allegory (which he terms “romance”)—a reading for which the book provides ample, if misleading, clues. The foundational, metaphysical state he allegorizes is not religious but psychological. It has as its referent the Freudian/Lacanian narrative of the son's (Galip's) appropriation of the power and potency of the father figure (Jelal) as represented by the sign of the Phallus (Jelal's role as writer/interpreter). This quest for power “explains” the hidden ideological and programmatic lack of compassion in the author (and his elitist ilk) and their supposed indifference to the sufferings of ordinary people. Oğuzertem makes a number of intriguing arguments that I will overlook in favor of my own admittedly reductive “uncovering” of what I take to be his underlying assumptions. They are more or less these:

1. Despite the “postmodernists'” claim that there is no foundational narrative premise or agenda to their writing, such an agenda is (inevitably) present and can be brought to the surface by a sufficiently perceptive reading (in this case a Freudian/Lacanian one).
2. The revelation of a coherent agenda that has its origin in “the intention of the author” can be the ground of a collective interpretation—a “valid” interpretation, in Hirsch's sense—that can, in turn, be the basis of a second order critique, a critique of “effects.”

3. The hidden (unconscious) agenda (effect) of “postmodernism” is to undercut the possibility of an ethical critique and, thereby, to free privileged intellectual elites to pursue their own selfish ends unencumbered by pressures to support the common good. (This contention is especially telling in the case of a highly successful author from an upper class background—an Orhan Pamuk—whose circumstances are privileged and intellectual and whose very success is evidence of selfish ends.)

At this point, I will digress slightly and briefly to E. D. Hirsch, Jr.’s (1967, 1984) notion of “valid” interpretation, because I believe it clarifies some of the assumptions that support the power of the conspiracy theory and foreground the seriousness of the problems that “postmodernist” thought presents to the traditional programs of both the left and right. When Hirsch says that a “valid” interpretation is based on the “intention” of an author, he does not mean “intention” in the sense of “what the author wanted to do” (except insofar as s/he “wanted” to communicate). He means “intention” in Husserl’s sense of “something attended to” (at some particular historical moment). What the author “intends” or has as the object of his attention, Hirsch terms the “meaning” of a work (a bit like the Plot or Map or mystical secret), which can also be recuperable in some degree as the object of historical study and which can be presumed, therefore, to remain stable over time. In Hirsch’s account, the work will also have “significance”, which is the sense attributed to it at other times under other circumstances, sense that is subject to change as our perspective changes. He argues that when we are doing the business of scholarship, our object is “meaning”, whether we recognize it or not, because “meaning” is the only object that we can subject to rational scrutiny and for which we can hope to adduce the kind of evidence that can ground a collective understanding.

As I outline above, Oğuzertem’s response to *Kara Kitap* makes an obvious (but unstated) appeal to Hirschian “meaning.” He even makes an oblique (and to me highly significant) reference to Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar’s novel, *Saatleri Ayarma Enstitüsü* (*The Clock-Setting Institute*), which is easily read as an evocative parody of the need to create a collectivity of understanding. The story involves a person who has the idea that the problems of “the nation” are caused by the fact that

everyone is running on a different time. If all the “clocks” could be set to the same time, he argues, then everyone could and would work together for the general good. It is the possibility of precisely this kind of “clock setting” (note the chronological metaphor) that Hirschian “meaning” holds out to Oğuzertem and to the project of scholarship as a valuable communal activity. The lure of a clock-setting meaning is evidenced everywhere around us by the appearance of a myriad cults and answers from Scientology to Nurcus, Branch Davidians, Refah, Bible-based, neo-Nazi, white-supremacist, super-patriot militias, Aum Shinrikyo, and creationist science. And scholarship is hardly immune.

A story/report appeared in *The New Yorker* magazine of November 20, 1995, written by David Remnick and titled “Hamlet in Hollywood.” It is the account of an interpretation—a “valid” interpretation—or, more accurately, of desperate (and somehow, postmodern) *needs* for the kind of validity that emerges from uncovering the Plot, decoding the cypher, solving the crime. The story has two main characters. One is Dr. Mary Ann McGrail, a professional scholar, Harvard Ph.D. in English literature, a bright but struggling tenure-seeker of a quite familiar sort, who, in Remnick’s words,

worked on her thesis with the resident Shakespeare specialist Marjorie Garber, but, as a political conservative, found herself drawn less toward Garber’s feminist readings and more toward the views of Harvey C. Mansfield Jr., a leading figure in the Government Department and a conservative follower of the late political philosopher Leo Strauss. (1995: 70–71)

Leo Strauss, as early as his 1952 publication *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, had put forward the notion that many major thinkers (e.g. Maimonides, Plato) had concealed, in esoteric writing, their “true” intent (to write on what contemporary conservative intellectuals call “natural rights”) in order to evade the scrutiny of tyrannical and oppressive rulers or governments. Fascinated by the notion that Shakespeare might have been writing, esoterically, in response to local political conditions, McGrail, following her graduation, began the groundwork from which she was to develop a theory that *Hamlet* may have encoded and referenced a version of the life of Martin Luther and that this could turn out to be the key to *the* (valid) interpretation of the play based, as it could then be claimed, on the

playwright's manifest "meaning". While teaching a Shakespeare course at Boston University in 1989, she encountered the other major character in the tale.

Steve Sohmer was not the usual graduate student. After several profitable years as a television and movie producer he had, in 1986, lost his job as head of Columbia Pictures and turned to writing novels, television shows, and some producing. He also found himself able to indulge his passion for scholarship and, while working on his M.A. at Boston University, began a scholarly relationship with one of his professors, Mary McGrail. Sohmer went on to enroll in a Ph.D. program at Oxford, where he spent two terms. During the summers he paid McGrail rather munificently to work with him on *Hamlet* at his Bel Air home. In the course of this relationship, the two began to converge on a theory of how Shakespeare had used the life of Luther as a template for *Hamlet*. Sohmer had written a doctoral dissertation on his own proposition that Shakespeare had concealed in his plays complex mathematical references and calendar clues that established correspondences between Caesar and Christ and between Hamlet and Luther. McGrail, on the other hand, had narrowed her search for the hidden "source" of *Hamlet*'s Luther connection to a passage on Luther in John Foxe's biographies of Protestant martyrs (*Actes and Monuments*). Remnick quotes her as having written, "The play is a play of riddles to which the Foxe provides the answers." Given the keys—calendars and correspondences—the other mysteries of *Hamlet* began to suggest ingenious solutions which materialize as its "meaning" (in Hirsch's sense of the discernible historical work apprehended by the author).

The rest of Remnick's report concerns the rather sordid, silly (and somehow "post-modernist") tale of litigious attempts to "possess" this meaning by assertions of prior discovery or even by claiming it as the "intellectual property," bought and paid for, of "Steve Sohmer and his independent production company, Steve Sohmer Incorporated." As the Plot reifies itself—in the form of the Map, or the "writing on faces," or the "meaning" of *Hamlet*—it becomes an object of disputed ownership (between left and right, Sohmer and McGrail, Belbo, Casaubon and the Diabolicals, Jelal and his "loyal readers") and so takes on an air of immense importance and an almost palpable reality.

What the “postmodernist” does most effectively (and disturbingly) is to let the air out of “meaning,” or out of the idea that there is something important at the center or origin of a work, something that we can access and use for our own edification. In *Ragtime*, for example, Coalhouse Walker, a black piano-player with an almost aristocratic bearing, suffers the painful indignity of seeing his precious automobile vandalized by a group of rowdy, racist firemen. Predictably, the police refuse to see that justice is done and Walker embarks on a resolutely single-minded campaign to have his car restored to its original condition. As the campaign and its consequences escalate, he loses his beloved, becomes a terrorist fugitive, and begins to draw into the orbit of his cause a range of supporters from the upper-class family that is caring for his child to a band of young and revolutionary blacks. Coalhouse and his band of blacks (including the family’s Younger Brother in black-face) finally hole up in J. P. Morgan’s private museum and hold the authorities at bay by threatening to blow it up. We are primed by every detail to expect a story of class warfare and radical revolution, a story we can, if we are properly enlightened, use as an origin and inspiration for our own struggles. But, in the end, the authorities agree to restore the car and humiliate the official most responsible. And Coalhouse Walker, his honor satisfied, sends his band of followers off into hiding and walks out of the museum to his inevitable death. We can derive no grand moral from this, not even a grand tragedy, only a rather little and local story of one man’s stubborn and inexplicable willingness to sacrifice everything to right a very particular wrong in what is ultimately an act of trivial symbolism.

Coalhouse Walker and Jelal and “the postmodern novelist” (not to mention postmodern scholarship) are certainly guilty of seeming to betray our expectation that the subject of a story, as well as its author (or, in the case of Jelal, the postmodern author as the subject of a story), will point us to some meaningful and larger purpose. But even the ultimate sacrifice—the death of Walker, of Jelal, of Belbo—creates no instructive martyrs because we are not allowed to imagine their involvement in a cause worth being martyred to. So, when we long for a worthwhile cause, we are disappointed and drawn to condemn both the story and its author . . . for leading us astray, “For feigning to understand although you never have.”

What Pamuk (and Eco and Doctorow) *do* understand is precisely our disappointment and the conditions that produce it. We live in an age of disturbing complexity, in which, try as we might, we no longer trust the grand narratives that segmented and ordered our thought and thus reduced the complexities of our lives to something we could hope to control: religion, science (whose most powerful tool is this very skepticism), the class struggle, truth, progress . . . It is less easy than it was (or impossible) to tell what is an important story and what is a trivial one, or what constitutes a great woman or man and what an inconsequential one, or what the difference is between fact and belief, history and memory, progress and decline. It is difficult as well to avoid feeling that something vastly important has been lost in all this. The myth of decline is a pervasive subtext of our postmodernity for good reason.

But instead of taking myths of loss and decline too seriously, we might refer, glancingly again, to Guattari and Deleuze who, I believe, have produced the seminal speculation on the possibilities of postmodern life and thought. They suggest a manner of thinking, of making connections, both notional and social, that they describe as “rhizomic”. In their botanical metaphor, as I read it, the *rhizome* contrasts with the *seed*. Instead of an ordered (and hierarchical) structure—from kernel (seed) to root, to stem, to branch, to leaf, to fruit (and back to seed)—the rhizome is simply a node that makes connections (and is the object of connections) without origin, without limit, without direction. Galip’s “detective work” (like Pamuk’s novel) is certainly “rhizomic:” a random walk through crazy-quilt space (Istanbul, the pages of the novel), chance encounters, haphazard connections, a host of clues and signs and signals . . . many solutions and none. There is an inescapable comparison here between Galip and Sherlock Holmes—detection by rhizomic connection and detection by reasoning from a “seed” (the clue)—a comparison which allows us a return to Hutcheon’s notion of postmodern “doubleness.”

I understand Hutcheon to argue that a thread runs through postmodernist writing that generally re-visualize as “doubleness” what usually appears to us as opposition or polarity. This is to say that where we are accustomed to seeing difference, we are now forced to see a kind of “twinning:” Galip and Holmes, the “populisms” of the religious right and the Kemalist left, scholarly argument (Casaubon,

Belbo, McGrail, Sohmer) and the conspiracy theory (the Diabolicals), the Messiah and Satan (*Dajjal*), the elites and the common people, rhizome and seed . . . For example, near the end of *Ragtime*, Doctorow explores the pairing of two children—brilliant, beautiful, uncanny children—of two families, one from the privileged elites (an Orhan Pamuk, perhaps), the other of poor and immigrant origin.

She left imprints in the sand of a street runner, a climber of dark stairs; her track was a flight from the terrors of alleys and the terrible crash of ash cans. She had relieved herself in wooden outhouses behind the tenements. The tails of rodents had curled about her ankles. She knew how to sew with a machine and had observed dogs mating, whores taking on customers in hallways, drunks peeing through the wooden spokes of pushcart wheels. He had never gone without a meal. He had never been cold at night. He ran with his mind. He ran toward something. He was unencumbered by fear and did not know there were beings in the world less curious about it than he. He saw through things and noted the colors people produced and was never surprised by a coincidence. A blue and green planet rolled through his eyes. (1974: 221)

The connection Doctorow implies is not what we are accustomed to perceive between individuals, but more resembles two rhizomes, part of the same plant, bound by ties that neither originate in nor belong to one or the other. But this “doubleness” is not “synthesis”, or precisely a mystical “union of opposites” either (although it is much more like the latter). Clearly, experience and innocence, poverty and wealth, female and male cannot be synthesized in one term and yet, equally clearly, neither can exist without the other. In this sense they are a unit whose doubleness cannot be transcended. Moreover, this kind of twinning cannot help but seem quietistic to those who seek a program driven by oppositions; one cannot choose this or that because there is no *or*, only *both/and*. And so today, one cannot be a “postmodernist” without also being a “modernist,” and no modernist can escape his or her own postmodernism.

In this “doubleness” also lies one of the issues that surfaces often in *The Black Book*: the problem (and impossibility?) of “being oneself.” In Turkey, “being oneself” is not just a private anxiety or a topic for the psychiatrist’s couch, it lives very much on the surface of public dialogue. For Turkey to be “modern” and “secular” it had to cease—abruptly—being something else; and Turks of more conservative political persuasions have long struggled with the feeling that the

dislocations and discontents of their modernity may be bound to the loss of that something which might well have been the “true Turkish self.” Meanwhile, on the left, the feeling is quite the reverse: that something was lost far earlier—under the Ottomans—only to be recovered by Turkish nationalist modernity. For Turks these feelings then become powerful points of leverage in political rhetoric. For example, political Islamists often use the phrase “imperialists and imitators (*taklitçi*)” to describe Kemalist secularists, openly implying that their opponents’ very “selves” are contaminated by (Western) others. In the United States this same sense of loss has its own, less overt expression in rhetorical strategies such as calls for a return to “traditional values” or the popular conspiracy-narrative asserting that sovereignty (the national “self”) is in danger of being lost to (or stolen by) the UN or some other international (foreign) entity.

The ironies given rise to by anxiety about “being oneself”—especially when the “self” is in (large?) part a “national self”—are not lost on Orhan Pamuk, whose (black) book often, in retrospect, appears prescient with regard to its own reception in Turkey. *The Black Book* admirably fulfills one desire often voiced by Turkish critics—the desire for a Turkish novel that stands out in the world, that can (or must) be read with the Ecos and Doctorows, that is reviewed in the *TLS* and translated into umpteen languages. And in so doing, it also, quite inevitably, disappoints another desire: that there might exist a world-masterpiece expressing (and demonstrating) an uncontaminated Turkish self, a self that is not somehow “imitative” or that escapes, in the words of Pamuk’s Prince, this “miserable copycat culture” (1994: 375)—either copycat Ottomanism from the viewpoint of the left or copycat modernism from that of the right. Pamuk’s language has been questioned—it is not “Turkish” enough; his background has been questioned—too elite, too westernized, too “Robert College/internationalized.” The argument often seems to go: if Pamuk is “Turkish”—as in “Turkish novelist”—then his work, despite its success, is a failure, and if he is not “Turkish,” then his success, whatever it might be, bestows no honor on “Turkishness”. But, of course, we also know, although we might wish it were otherwise, that the “doubleness” of strong authors and literary works lies precisely in their ability to be both “themselves”

and “something/one else,” to be uncontained by the boundaries of single “nations” or “selves.” Can Galip be Galip except by being Jelal?

“Yes, yes, I am myself!” Galip thought when he had finished telling the Prince’s story. “Yes, I am me!” Now that he had told the story, he was so certain that he was capable of being himself and pleased for having finally done it, he wanted to tear off for the Heart-of-the-City Apartments, sit down at Jelal’s desk, and write brand-new columns. (*Ibid.*: 380)

This is, perhaps, the final irony—or the final betrayal—that postmodernism forces us to confront: the notion that the ego itself is a construct and agent of an oppressive collectivity of belief (a *kitsch*), and not at all a single thing (even capable of being “itself”), not at all a center of “individuality.” In the universe of such a notion, to be “rational” and, in fact, to be truly revolutionary, is to be psychotic (schizophrenic, in Guattari and Deleuze’s sense), to be detached from the ordered, integrated (and, in the end, subjugated) “self” of psychoanalysis. When the “Grand March” shrivels under the glare of skepticism (and its agent, parody), its parallel, the “Oedipal ego” shrivels as well—or deconstructs to reveal itself as a node for numerous (rhizomic) connections, as a collective of collectives. Despite wistful (or passionately angry) nostalgia for a day when we could believe in our beliefs, we cannot wish ourselves magically not to know what we have come to know, no matter how much our knowledge distresses us. Insofar as *The Black Book* is a “postmodern novel” it situates us (and itself) within the postmodern condition. And, insofar as it is successful, this is in large part because we know the place already and in it recognize the shards of our shattered selves.

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