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Acceptance speech
It is a great pleasure to be in Frankfurt, the city where Ka, the hero of my novel, *Snow*, spent the last fifteen years of his life. My hero is a Turk and therefore no relation of Kafka’s; they are related only in the literary sense of the word. I shall be saying more about literary relations later on. Ka’s real name was Kerim Alakuşoğlu, but he was not very fond of it, so he preferred the shorter version. He first came to Frankfurt in the 1980s as a political refugee. He was not particularly interested in politics - he didn’t even like politics: his whole life is poetry. My hero was a poet living in Frankfurt. He saw Turkish politics as someone else might see an accident – something that he got mixed up in without ever willing it. I would, if I have enough time, like to say a few words about politics and accidents. It is a subject about which I have thought a great deal. But do not worry: though I write long novels, today I shall keep my comments brief.

It was in the hope that I might describe Ka’s stay in Frankfurt during the eighties and early nineties without making too many mistakes that I came here five years ago, in the year 2000. Two people in the audience today were particularly generous in their help, and it was while they were showing me around that we visited the little park behind the old factory buildings near Gutleustrasse where my hero would spend the last years of his life. To better imagine the walk Ka made each morning from his home to the City Library where he spent most of his days, we walked through the square in front of the station, down Kaiserstrasse, past the sex shops and the Turkish greengrocers, barbers and kebab restaurants of Münchenerstrasse as far as Hauptwache, passing just in front of the church where we are gathered today. We went into the Kaufhof where Ka bought the coat he would wear so happily for so many years. For two days, we roamed around the old, poor neighbourhoods where Frankfurt’s Turks have made their homes, visiting their mosques, kebab restaurants, community associations, and coffeehouses. This was my seventh novel but I recall taking such needlessly extensive notes that I might as well have been a novice, writing my first novel and agonising over every detail. Asking questions like, did the tram really pass this corner during the eighties….

I did the same thing when I visited Kars, the small city in the northeast of Turkey where most of my novel takes place. Because I knew very little about this city, I visited it many times before using it as my setting; during my stays there, I met many people and made many friends; I explored the city street by street and shop by shop. I visited the most remote and forgotten neighbourhoods of this, Turkey’s most remote and forgotten city, conversing with the unemployed men who spent their days in coffeehouses, without even the hope of ever again finding jobs, conversing, too, with lyceé students, the plainclothes and uniformed policemen who followed me wherever I went, and the publishers of the newspaper whose circulation never rose above 250.

My aim here is not to relate how I came to write a novel called *Snow*. I am using this story as a way into the subject that I am coming to understand more clearly with each new day, and that is, in my view, central to the art of the novel: the question of the ‘other,’ the ‘stranger’, the ‘enemy’ that resides inside each of our heads, or rather, the question of how to transform it. That my question is not central to all novels is self-evident: a novel can, of course, advance the understanding of humankind by imagining its characters in situations that we know intimately and care about and recognise from our own experience. When we meet someone in a novel who reminds us of ourselves, our first wish is for that character to explain to us who we are. So we tell stories about mothers, fathers, houses, streets that look just like ours, and we set these stories in cities we’ve seen with our own eyes, in the countries we know best. But the strange and magic rules that govern the art of the novel can open up our families, homes, and cities in a way that makes everyone feel as if they can see their own families, homes, and cities reflected in them. It has often been said that *Buddenbrooks* is an excessively autobiographical novel. But when I first picked up this book as a boy of seventeen, I read it not as the author’s account of his own family - for at the time I knew very little about him; for me it was a book about a universal family with which I could easily identify. The wondrous mechanisms of the novel allow us to take our
own stories and present them to all humanity as stories about someone else.

So, yes, one could define the novel as an art that allows the skilled practitioner to turn his own stories into stories about someone else; but this is just one aspect of the great and mesmerising art that has entranced so many readers and inspired us writers for going on four hundred years. It was the other aspect that drew me to the streets of Frankfurt and Kars: the chance to write of others’ lives as if they were my own. It is by doing this sort of thorough novelistic research that novelists can begin to test the lines that mark off that ‘other’ and in so doing alter the boundaries of our own identities. Others become ‘us’ and we become ‘others.’ Certainly a novel can achieve both feats simultaneously. Even as it relates our own lives as if they were the lives of others, it offers us the chance to describe other people’s lives as if they were our own. Novelists wishing to enter into the lives of other do not necessarily need to visit other streets and other cities, as I did when preparing to write *Snow*. Novelists wishing to put themselves in others’ shoes and identify with their pains and troubles will draw first and foremost from their imaginations. Let my try to illustrate my point with an example that will call to mind what I was saying earlier on about literary relations: ‘If I woke up one morning to find that I had turned into an enormous cockroach, what would become of me?’ Behind every great novel is an author whose greatest pleasure comes from entering another’s form and bringing it to life – whose strongest and most creative impulse is to test the very limits of his identity. If I woke up one morning to find myself transformed into a cockroach, I would need to do more than research insects: if I were to guess that everyone else in the house would be revolted and even terrified to see me scuttling across the walls and the ceilings, and that even my own mother and father would hurl apples at me, I would first have to find a way to become Kafka. But before I try to imagine myself as someone else, I might have to do a little investigating. What I need to ponder most is this: who is this ‘other’ we so need to imagine?

This creature who is nothing like us addresses our most primitive hates, fears, and anxieties. We know full well that these are the emotions that fire up our imaginations and give us to power to write. So the novelist enjoying the rules of his art will feel that only good can come of identifying with this ‘other.’ The novelist will also know that thinking about this other whom everyone knows and believes to be his opposite will help to liberate him from the confines of his own persona. The history of the novel is the history of human liberation: by putting ourselves in other’s shoes, by using our imaginations to free ourselves from our own identities, we are able to set ourselves free.

So Defoe’s great novel conjures up not just Robinson Crusoe but also his slave, Friday. As powerfully as *Don Quixote* conjures up a knight who lives in the world of books, it also conjures up his servant Sancho Pancho. I enjoy reading *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy’s most brilliant novel, as a happily married man’s attempt to imagine a woman who destroys her unhappy marriage, and then herself. Tolstoy’s inspiration was another male novelist who, though he himself never married, found his way into the mind of the discontented Madame Bovary. In the greatest allegorical classic of all time, *Moby Dick*, Melville explores the fears gripping the America of his day – and particularly its fear of alien cultures – through the intermediary of the white whale. Those of us who come to know the world through books cannot think of the American South without also thinking of the blacks in Faulkner’s novels. In the same way, we might feel that a German novelist who wishes to speak to all of Germany, and who fails, explicitly or implicitly, to imagine the country’s Turks along with the unease they cause, is somehow lacking. Likewise, a Turkish novelist who fails to imagine the Kurds and other minorities, and who neglects to illuminate the black spots in his country’s unspoken history, will, in my view, produce work that has a hole at its centre.

Contrary to what most people assume, a novelist’s politics have nothing to do with the societies, parties and groups to which he might belong – or his dedication to any political cause. A novelist’s politics rises from his imagination, from his ability to imagine himself as someone else. This power makes him not just a person who explores the human realities that have never been voiced before – it makes him the spokesman for those who cannot speak for themselves, whose anger is never heard, and
whose words are suppressed. A novelist may (like me) have no real reason to take an interest in politics as a young man, or if he does, his motives may end up mattering very little. Today we do not read the greatest political novel of all time, Dostoyevsky’s *The Devils*, as the author originally intended – as a polemical novel attacking Russian westernisers and nihilists; we read it instead as a novel that reflects the Russia of its day, that reveals to us the great secret locked inside the Slavic soul. This is a secret that only a novel can explore. Obviously, we cannot hope to come to grips with themes this deep merely by reading newspapers and magazines, or by watching television. To understand what is unique about the histories of other nations and other peoples, to share in unique lives that trouble and shake us, terrifying us with their depths, and shocking us with their simplicity - these are truths we can glean only from the careful, patient reading of great novels. Let me add that when Dostoyevsky’s *Devils* begin to whisper into the reader’s ear, telling him of a secret rooted in history, a secret born of pride and defeat, shame and anger, they are illuminating the shadows of his own history, too. Behind this recognition is a despairing writer who loves the west and despises it in equal measure, a man who cannot quite see himself as a westerner but is dazzled by the brilliance of western civilisation, who feels himself caught between the two worlds.

Here we come to the East-West question. Journalists are exceedingly fond of the term, but when I see the connotations it carries in some parts of the Western press, I’m inclined to think that it would be best not to speak of the East-West question at all. Because what it means most of the time is that the poor countries of the East should bow to everything the West and the US might happen to offer them. There is also a strong suggestion that the culture, the way of life, and the politics of places like the one where I was raised provoke tiresome questions, and an expectation that writers like me exist to offer solutions to the same tiresome questions. But of course there is an East-West question, and it is not simply a malicious term invented and imposed by the West. The East-West question is about wealth and poverty, and about peace.

In the 19th century, when the Ottoman Empire began to feel itself overshadowed by an ever more dynamic West, suffering repeated defeats at the hands of European armies, and seeing its own power slowly wane, there emerged a group of men who called themselves the Young Turks; like the elites that would follow in later generations, not excluding the last Ottoman sultans, they were dazzled by the superiority of the west, so they embarked on a programme of westernising reforms. The same logic lies at the heart of the modern Turkish republic and Kemal Atatürk’s westernising reforms. Behind this same logic lies the conviction that Turkey’s weakness and poverty stem from its traditions, its old culture, and the various ways it has socially organised religion. Coming as I do from a middle-class, westernised Istanbul family, I must admit that I, too, sometimes succumb to this belief, which is, though well-intended, a narrow and even simple-minded way of seeing things. Westernisers dream of transforming and enriching their country and their culture by imitating the West. Because their ultimate aim is to create a country that is richer, happier, and more powerful, they can also be nativist, and – say what you will – powerfully nationalistic: certainly we can see these tendencies in the Young Turks and the westernisers of the young Turkish Republic. But as westward looking movements, they remain deeply critical of certain basic characteristics of their country and culture: though they might not do so in the same spirit and the same style as Western observers, they, too, see their culture as defective, sometimes even worthless. This gives rise to another very deep and confused emotion – shame – and I see shame reflected in some responses to my novels and to my own perceived relations with the West. When we in Turkey discuss the East-West question, when we talk of the tensions between tradition and modernity, (which, to my mind, is what the East-West question is really all about) or when we prevaricate over our country’s relations with Europe, the question of shame is always lurking between the lines. When I try to understand this shame, I always try to link it with its opposite, pride. As we all know: wherever there is too much pride, and whenever people act too proudly, there is the shadow of the ‘other’s’ shame and humiliation. Wherever there is someone who feels deeply humiliated, we can expect to see a proud nationalism rising to the surface. My novels are made from these dark material, from this shame, this pride, this anger
and this sense of defeat. Because I come from a nation that is knocking on Europe’s door, I am only too aware of how easily these fragile emotions can, from time to time, take flame and rage unchecked. What I am trying to do here is to speak of this shame as a whispered secret, as I first heard it in Dostoyevsky’s novels. For it is by sharing our secret shames that we bring about our liberation: this is what the art of the novel has taught me.

But it is at the moment of liberation that I begin to feel in my heart the complicated politics of representation, and the moral dilemmas of speaking in another’s name. This is a difficult undertaking for anyone but particularly for a novelist riddled with the fragile emotions I was just describing. The freewheeling world of the imagination can seem treacherous, and never more so than in the mirror of a prickly and easily offended novelist consumed by nationalist pride. If we keep reality secret, it will, we hope, only offend novelist consumed by nationalist pride.

If we keep reality secret, it will, we hope, only shame us in silence; but if a novelist uses his imagination to transform that same reality, he can fashion it into a second world that demands recognition. When a novelist begins to play with the rules that govern society, when he digs beneath the surface to discover life’s hidden geometry, when he explores that secret world like a curious child, driven by emotions he cannot quite understand, it is inevitable that he will cause his families, his friends, his peers and fellow citizen some unease. But this is a happy unease. For it is by reading novels, stories and myths that we come to understand the ideas that govern the world in which we live; it is fiction that gives us access to the truths kept veiled and hidden away in corners and nestled in their armchairs with their novels; I try also to imagine the geography of their everyday lives. Then, before my eyes, thousands, tens of thousands of readers will take shape, stretching far and wide across the streets of the city, and as they read, they dream the author’s dreams, and imagine his heroes into being, and see his world. So now these readers, like the author himself, are trying to imagine the other; they, too, are putting themselves in another’s place. These are the times when we feel humility, compassion, tolerance, pity and love stirring in our hearts: for great literature speaks not to our powers of judgment, but to our ability to put ourselves in someone else’s place.

As I imagine these all these readers using their imaginations to put themselves in someone else’s place, as I conjure up their worlds, street by street, neighbourhood by neighbourhood, all across the city, a moment arrives when I realise that I am really thinking of a society, a group of people, an entire nation – say what you will – imagining itself into being. Modern societies, tribes, and nations do their deepest thinking about themselves through reading novels: through reading novels, they are able to argue about who they are; so even if we have picked up a novel hoping only to divert ourselves, and relax, and escape the boredom of everyday life, we begin, without realising, to conjure up the collectivity, the nation, the society to which we belong. This is also why novels give voice not just to a nation’s pride and joy, but also to its anger, its vulnerabilities, and its shame. It is because they remind readers of their shame, their pride, and their tenuous place in the world that novelists still arouse such anger, and what a
Let me begin by saying that Europe is a very delicate, very sensitive question for a Turk. Here we are, knocking on your door, and asking to come in, full of high hopes and good intentions, but also feeling rather anxious and fearing rejection. I feel such things as keenly as other Turks, and what we all feel is very much akin to the ‘silent shame’ I was describing earlier. As Turkey knocks on Europe’s door, as we wait and wait and Europe makes us promises, and then forgets us, only to raise the bar – and as Europe examines the full implications of Turkey’s bid to become a full member, we’ve seen lamentable hardening of anti-Turkish sentiment in certain parts of Europe, at least amongst certain politicians. In the recent elections, when certain politicians took a political line against Turks and Turkey, I found the style just as dangerous as the political style adopted by certain politicians in my own country. It is one thing to criticise the deficiencies of the Turkish state vis a vis democracy, or to find fault with its economy; it is quite another to denigrate all of Turkish culture, or those of Turkish descent here in Germany whose lives are amongst the most difficult and impoverished in the country. As for Turks in Turkey - when they hear themselves judged so cruelly, they are reminded yet again that they are knocking on a door and waiting to be let in, and of course they feel unwelcome. The most cruel irony of all is that the fanning of nationalist anti-Turkish sentiment in Europe has provoked the coarsest of nationalist backlash inside Turkey. Those who believe in the European Union must see at once that the real choice we have to make is between peace and nationalism. Either we have peace, or we have nationalism. I think that the ideal of peace sits at the heart of the European Union and I believe that the chance of peace that Turkey has offered Europe will not, in the end, be spurned. We’ve arrived at a point where we must choose between the power of a novelist’s imagination and the sort of nationalism that condones burning his books.

Over the past few years, I have spoken a great deal about Turkey and its EU bid, and often I’ve been met with grimaces and suspicious questions. So let me answer them here and now. The most important thing that Turkey and the Turkish people have to offer Europe and Germany, is, without a doubt, peace;
it is the security and strength that will come from a Muslim country’s desire to join Europe, and this peaceful desire’s ratification. The great novelists I read as a child and a young man did not define Europe by its Christian faith but by its individualism. It was because they described Europe through heroes who were struggling to free themselves, express their creativity and make their dreams come true, that their novels spoke to my heart. Europe has gained the respect of the non-western world for the ideals it has done so much to nurture: liberty, equality, and fraternity. If Europe’s soul is enlightenment, equality and democracy, if it is to be a union predicated on peace, then Turkey has a place in it. A Europe defining itself on narrow Christian terms will, like a Turkey that tries to derive its strength only from its religion, be an inward-looking place divorced from reality, and more bound to the past than to the future. Growing up in a westernised secular family in the European part of Istanbul, it is not at all difficult for me – or people like me - to believe in the European Union. Don’t forget, since childhood, my football team, Fenerbahçe, has been playing in the European Cup. There are millions of Turks like me, who believe heart and soul in the European Union. But what is more important is that most of today’s conservative and Muslim Turks, and with them their political representatives, want to see Turkey in the European Union. Help to plan Europe’s future, dreaming it into being and helping to build it. Coming as it does after centuries of war and conflict, this gesture of friendship cannot be taken lightly, and to reject it outright would be cause for huge regret. Just as I cannot imagine a Turkey without a European prospect, I cannot believe in a Europe without a Turkish prospect.

I would like to apologise for speaking at such great length about politics.

The world to which I wish to belong is, of course, the world of the imagination. Between the ages of seven and twenty-two, my dream was to become an artist, and so I would go out into the streets of Istanbul to paint city views. As I described in my book, Istanbul, I gave up painting at the age of twenty-two and began to write novels. I now think that I wanted the same thing from painting as I did from writing: what drew me to art and literature was to leave behind this boring, dreary, hope-shattering world we all know so well, and to escape into a second world that was deeper, richer and more diverse. To achieve this other magic realm, whether I expressed myself in lines and colours as I did in my early life, or in words, I’ve had to spend long hours by myself in a room every day, imagining its every nuance. Though the consoling world I have been constructing for thirty years as I sit alone in my corner is most certainly made from the same materials as the world we all know - from what I’ve been able to see of the streets and interiors of Istanbul, Kars, and Frankfurt. But it is the imagination - the imagination of the novelist - that gives the bounded world of everyday life its particularity, its magic and its soul.

I shall close with a few words about this soul, this essence that the novelist struggles all his life to convey to his readers. Life can only be happy if we can manage to fit this strange and puzzling undertaking into a frame. For the most part, our happiness and unhappiness derive not from life itself, but from the meaning we give to it. I’ve devoted my life to trying to explore that meaning. Or to put it differently, all my life I’ve wandered through the clutter and roar of today’s chaotic, difficult, fast-moving world, thrown this way and that by life’s twists and turns, looking for a beginning, a middle, and an end…in my view, this is something that can only happen in novels…Since my novel Snow was published, every time I’ve set foot in the streets of Frankfurt, I’ve felt the ghost of Ka, the hero with whom I have more than a little in common, and I feel as if I am truly seeing the city as I have come to understand it, as if I have somehow touched its heart. Mallarme spoke the truth when he said that ‘everything in the world exists to be put into a book.’ The book best equipped to absorb everything in the world - without doubt – is the novel. The imagination – the ability to convey meaning to others – is humanity’s greatest power, and for many centuries it has found its truest voice in novels. I accept this great prize in recognition of my thirty years of loyal service to this sublime art, and I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.
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