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Saving Arnavutköy: The Contemporary Cultural Politics Of Turkey

Rogelio Miñana

I don't want to be a tree, I want to be its meaning.

Orhan Pamuk, *My Name Is Red*

Can a tree speak? Can a dog talk? Can a man narrate his own beheading? According to Orhan Pamuk's novel *My Name Is Red* (1998), in sixteenth-century Istanbul they could. The most internationally acclaimed Turkish novel of recent times focuses on the artistic process itself. In the novel, the Sultan commissions a group of artists to undertake the illumination of a book celebrating his realm, but asks them to employ European-style artwork. Affronting the rules of Islam, which prohibit the use of representational images and allow only figurative ornamentations, these artists paint following the Venetian dictates of perspective and realism. Soon after their project secretly begins, a series of murders occur.

But the power of art does not only determine the fate of the characters in the novel. The narrative style is also influenced by the art of Islamic miniaturism. Instead of using a conventional omniscient narrator, Orhan Pamuk fragments his story into a myriad of narrators who, like symbolic figures in a miniature, narrate events from their own (often non-realistic, highly symbolic) perspectives. Thus, the first narrative miniature of the novel is told by a corpse: "I am a corpse" are his first words (3). Later, a talking dog challenges the reader when he claims, "I'm a dog, and because you humans are less rational beasts than I, you're telling yourselves, 'Dogs don't talk.' Nevertheless, you seem to believe a story in which corpses speak and characters use words they couldn't possibly know. Dogs do speak, but only to those who know how to listen" (11). In similar fashion, a man tells of his own

beheading (404), two painted dervishes speak to their readers/viewers (307), and a painted tree confesses its contentment in not being realistic, and “not because I fear that if I’d been thus depicted all the dogs in Istanbul would assume I was a real tree and piss on me: I don’t want to be a tree, I want to be its meaning” (51).

According to Pamuk’s interpretation of sixteenth-century Istanbul, art and religion are intimately connected. As one of the master illuminators in the novel states, “Through our colors, paints, art and love, we remember that Allah had commanded us to ‘See!’ To know is to remember that you’ve seen. To see is to know without remembering” (76). If art is a means to know the world, we can better appreciate Allah’s creation only through art: “Allah created this earthly realm so that, above all, it might be seen. Afterward, He provided us with words so we might share and discuss with one another what we’ve seen. We mistakenly assumed that these stories arose out of words and that illustrations were painted in service of these stories. Quite the contrary, painting is the act of seeking out Allah’s memories and seeing the world as He sees the world” (79).

But as the Prophet commanded, art should never compete with Allah’s creation, and therefore should never use representational, realistic images. Words and art must depict the world through a symbolic discourse, since only when “the world had been newly created,” words carried their meaning within themselves: “you’d say ‘horse,’ then mount it and ride away” (386). Art and words are codes that must be deciphered to interpret their hidden meanings, lost shortly after the creation of all things. According to Pamuk, the power of symbolism in art is thus an essential part of Turkish cultural and even religious heritage. And as one of the main characters in *My Name Is Red* affirms, the power of miniatures is such that “if you stare long enough your mind enters the time of the painting” (405).

Entering the meaning of art is certainly an inescapable (and pleasant, I must add) activity in Turkey. In a country where East and West meet, and where ancient civilizations from all across Europe and Asia have left traces of their wealth and traditions, one could argue that the history of Turkey is written in its architecture. Turkish buildings, like dogs and trees in *My Name Is Red*, do indeed talk. Hittites, Mongols, Greeks and Romans, Kurds, Armenians, and Ottomans, to name only a few, established the physical foundation of their respective cultures by means of their unique architecture. The most recent layer in Tur-

key's history thus far, the Kemalist republic, continues to leave its own imprint in the public buildings erected after 1923.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the father of the Republic of Turkey that ended centuries of Ottoman rule in 1923, initiated a process of modernization based on Westernization and secularism. As part of this movement, Atatürk and his followers created a cult of personality that sharply contrasts with Islamic iconoclastic principles.¹ Even today, chances are that every square and public space (and even restaurants and businesses) displays an image, painting, photo, figure, or statue of Atatürk. Keenly aware of the power of art, Kemal was savvy in his use of painting, sculpture, cinema, writing, and of course architecture to contribute to his main cause: the consolidation of the new republic.

Atatürk and his followers soon realized that architecture was essential in winning the hearts and minds of Turkish nationals who, after centuries of Ottoman rule, were embarking on the construction of a nationalistic, modern, secular state. As Resat Kasaba explains, "the underlying assumption was that once the environment was altered, the behavior of individuals could be easily molded and made to fit the requirements of the newly created circumstances" (24).² In fact, as Sibel Bozdoğan points out, "the new architecture effectively legitimized the architect as a 'cultural leader' or 'agent of civilization' with a passionate sense of mission to dissociate the republic from an Ottoman and Islamic past."³ The new architects broke with previous architectural and artistic trends in two key senses. First, they looked for inspiration in European cubism and modernism with a strong Classical-style component, acknowledging Greek and Roman influences over Islamic, Ottoman ones.⁴ Later, they developed the "*Milli Mimari*" or new nationalistic architecture, which stressed the idea that the Turks were the originators of modern civilization, while still recognizing Hittite, Classical, and even Islamic influences.⁵ No matter what the new architecture looked like, it certainly required both massive construction (the capital city of Ankara being the best example), and grand-scale processes of destruction and reconstruction. This was the case in Istanbul, especially during the 1950s under the personal supervision of Adnan Menderes (a sort of Turkish Robert Moses of the time) when "the cutting of wide thoroughfares and traffic arteries through historical fabrics" became a common practice in cities such as Istanbul.⁶ It was only after the 1980s that a group of architects and urbanists began to react to what Bozdoğan describes as "the austerity and paternalism of official modernism,"⁷ but without truly opposing the dictates of the

government to advance their process of modernization and renewal in Turkey. Only in recent years have architecture and urban construction ignited an international movement to oppose the destruction of Istanbul's Arnavutköy neighborhood in order to build a third bridge over the Bosphorus strait.

The nationalistic and religious implications of official Kemalist architecture cannot be dismissed. Under Atatürk's direction, the First Historical Congress of Turkey took place in Ankara in July of 1932. According to Resat Kasaba, during that "historical" congress there was "no mention of the ethnic diversity of the Ottoman Empire and no discussion of what had happened to its Christian subjects."⁸ The modernizing efforts of Kemalist architecture, especially during the first decades of the republic, emphasized the Classical, Greco-Roman style while making no artistic reference to the Christian Orthodox tradition of the Byzantine period. As Atatürk was secularizing Turkish political practices, religious minorities were directly affected by the strife the country had suffered (and would suffer again) during the tumultuous first thirty years of the twentieth century. Most Turkish ethnic and religious communities, if not all, have suffered their own trials since the end of the nineteenth century. Even within the Islamic majority, Sunnis and Alevi Muslims clashed during the 1960s riots in Istanbul.⁹ And the Christian minority in particular (Armenians, Greeks, Albanians) was subject to a series of political measures and popular dislike that, to offer but one example, slashed the population of Greeks in Istanbul from 100,000 circa 1923 to a few thousand in 1997.¹⁰ The forced migrations after the Turkish-Greek war in January of 1923, the Capital Tax in 1942, the consequences of the Cyprus conflict for Greek Turks in 1955 (attacks on Greeks in Istanbul) and 1964 (12,000 more Greek Turks expelled) all contributed to the tensions between the government and Turkish Christian minorities.¹¹ Even though Christians were not officially forced to convert to the "official faith" (Sunni Hanefi *Mez Heb*), Christian conversions increased as tensions and clashes became more apparent.¹² By the end of the nineteenth century the Ottoman Empire acted ruthlessly against Christian minorities in Trabzon and Ankara.¹³ For Çağlar Keyder, the deportation and massacre of Armenians in Anatolia (nine-tenths of the population was eradicated) and of the Pontus Greeks on the Black Sea coast still provoke "embarrassment and shame."¹⁴ By 1997, the Armenian population in Istanbul (approximately 30,000–35,000) found itself under political pressure because of terrorist attacks by Armenian radical groups against Turkish interests

abroad during the 1980s, and for the popular belief that Armenians sympathized with the PKK (the Kurdish independence group) during the 1990s. The assumption was that both the Kurds and the Armenians favored the disintegration of the republic.¹⁵

If buildings talk in Turkey, as we might assert from Orhan Pamuk's talking corpses, dogs, and trees, there is no doubt that Turkish urbanism and architecture reflect the clashes and tensions between the government and minorities. In fact, one of the most prominent manifestations of the tensions between Kemalists and the Christian minority during the 1980s was the destruction of numerous Byzantine historical monuments.¹⁶ The actions of the Turkish government prompted Patriarch Demetrius I to complain to former President George H. W. Bush in 1990, seeking international sympathy for the preservation of Christian monuments in Turkey.

In recent years, Turkish cultural politics have been affected by the country's aspirations to join the European Union. Early on, Brussels imposed a number of conditions for giving Turkey a starting date for the negotiation process toward accession. One requirement is a clear commitment by the Turkish government to respect the rights of ethnic and religious minorities. In fact, as recently as June of 2004, the state-controlled television broadcasted in Armenian, Kurdish, and other minority languages for the first time.

In another key shift, several governmental decisions affecting historical sites and monuments are being challenged by locals. For example, conservationists are fighting to stop a dam project that would destroy the eastern medieval town of Hasankeyf. In addition, the government intends to transport the ancient mosaics found in Zeugma, a Roman site on the Euphrates now submerged by a dam, to Istanbul; however, locals are protesting this decision in an effort to keep the mosaics in the area. It is in Istanbul itself where the tensions between the central government and locals have acquired a more significant dimension regarding the magnitude of the protests and their international repercussions. The Ankara proposal to build a third bridge over the Bosphorus, which would require the destruction of practically the entire neighborhood of Arnavutköy, located on the European side of Istanbul, has been met with a vigorous and so far successful civic movement to preserve the area and its unique architecture.

H. H. Günhan Danisman and Ismail Üstün recount the convoluted history of this multi-ethnic neighborhood, which covers a period of more than 1,500 years. Throughout seven stages of migration, “the ratio of 90% Christian to 10% Moslem at the beginning of the twentieth century becomes 95% Moslem to 5% Christian at the end of the century.”¹⁷ First called Hestai, Arnavutköy, it became a notorious place of worship during the Byzantine period, when it was known as Promotu or Anaplous. The name Arnavutköy is first recorded in 1568, most likely due to Albanian (*Arnavut* means Albanian in Turkish) settlement in the area after Fatih Sultan Mehmet conceded sovereignty to Albania (Altinisik). Predominantly Greek from then on, Jewish and Armenian settlers also inhabited the town for most of the pre-20th-century era. Following the turmoil and forced migrations of 1923, 1942, 1955, and 1964, the town lost most of its Christian population, yet managed to preserve (albeit in a precarious state) its unique architecture. According to the Armenian Patriarchate, Arnavutköy is the last standing example of “the famous wooden-house architecture which characterized the rich style of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is one of the last areas to support a functional Greek school and church, and contains the ruins of an ancient, and yet undocumented synagogue and other sites.” The Decree 9483 of the High Council of Monuments claims that in Arnavutköy there are 38 monumental constructions, 292 examples of civil architecture, 5 natural green conservation areas, 42 Yalis or waterfront houses from the Ottoman era, 30 monumental trees, and several retaining walls and garden walls. In fact, the government has awarded this town protection by special decree.¹⁸ Currently, approximately 5,300 people live in the village, including 250 ethnic Greeks, Armenians, Jews and the U.S. Consul General,¹⁹ as well as the pop star Tarkan, among other famous residents.²⁰

In late 1998, the Highways Department of the central government announced controversial plans to build a third bridge across the waterway, which would “devastate the neighborhood’s important architectural and historic fabric.”²¹ Even though the government has never put forward a formal proposal on the Bosphorus bridge between Kanidili, on the Asian side, and Arnavutköy, several high officials have hinted that the beginning of construction could be imminent. Faced with this prospect, the people of Arnavutköy quickly mobilized and attracted rare international attention for their cause. Conservationist efforts claim not only that the architectural and historical heritage of Arnavutköy is at risk,²² but also that the third bridge will not solve traffic congestion

problems. In 35 points, the association in defense of Arnavutköy presents the case that a third bridge would increase the number of vehicles, not passengers, that cross the Bosphorus every day. Traffic-related pollution, construction costs, and the practical destruction of Kandili and Arnavutköy on both sides of the Bosphorus are, according to conservationists, enough reasons to favor the construction of an underwater railway tunnel rather than another Bosphorus bridge.

Saving Arnavutköy is, in sum, a case in point in contemporary Turkish cultural politics. A country constantly struggling to keep up with the European Union's incessant demands, Turkey is facing a new period in which the political class needs to be more attentive to the whole of Turkish society, including its minorities. In the case of Arnavutköy, environmentalist concerns and the preservation of the architectural heritage of the Christian minority go hand in hand with an effort to confront a government that has historically (especially throughout the 20th century) been hostile toward the ethnic inhabitants of the area. As the Armenian Patriarchate notes, "the fate of Arnavutköy, and the disregard with which the government approaches this important historical site, ultimately reflects to Turkish citizens, visitors, and architectural historians everywhere, the fate of our society as a whole." Turkey's image within and beyond its borders is at stake.

The international press has echoed this unusual development in contemporary cultural politics in Turkey, where environmental, artistic, and minority-rights concerns all converge in the struggle to save Arnavutköy. The political situation in Turkey has not traditionally encouraged resistance to the government. As late as 1999, as Amberin Zaman noted in the *Los Angeles Times*, "Turks are reluctant to join in any organized challenge to the state. Those who do, be they Islamists seeking the right to wear head scarves in public buildings or Kurds demanding schooling in their own language, usually face arrest." In that sense, Zaman concludes, "The 'Say No to the Bridge' campaign reflects a new willingness among Turks to stand up to the government." The efforts directed at saving Arnavutköy do not mark the first time civic protests have delayed a state-proposed project, such as the construction of power plants; however, the Arnavutköy movement possibly constitutes the first objections leveled at a large-scale public works project in a nation where "the power of the state has always been strong and all

but unquestioned.”²³ The significance of Arnavutköy thus goes beyond the struggle to save the singular architecture of the neighborhood. As Ozen Danisman, one of the leaders of the Arnavutköy Citizens Initiative states, “We [local residents] became aware of our own power—that we are citizens and we have our own rights.”²⁴

The consequences of the campaign to save Arnavutköy are therefore far-reaching and may even help reassure the European Union of the truly democratic nature of the Turkish state. On March 7, 1999, the former Minister of Public Works and Housing, Mr. Ali Iliksoy, was expected to attend a meeting between high-ranking officials of the Ministry of Transport and the residents of Arnavutköy. Mr. Iliksoy had to postpone his visit, but the briefing still took place in the Sports Club, marking “probably the first time ever that high officials of any ministry in Turkey took ordinary citizens seriously to give them a briefing.”²⁵ For that reason, and perhaps with the help of the European Union’s pressure to open up the Turkish government to its people, “the concept of NGOs and citizen’s initiatives such as the Arnavutköy initiative are, no doubt, the rising values of a coming era.”²⁶

Ultimately, saving Arnavutköy is also a campaign to strengthen and renew democratic practices in Turkey. From a previous, rather authoritarian politics of culture, Turkish citizens and the government are moving towards a different political culture, in which decisions are openly challenged, causes are championed, and the nation’s architectural patrimony is hopefully saved. ●

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Notes

1. Bozdogan, *Modernism and Nation Building*, pp. 283–85.
2. The examples of what Deniz Kandiyoti calls “cultural nationalism” are numerous, from architecture to the emancipation of women from Islamic fundamentalism, which the new Republic employed as a hallmark of secularization. (p. 125.)
3. Bozdogan, “The Predicament,” p. 138.
4. Bozdogan, *Modernism and Nation Building*, chap. 1–5, pp. 1–238.
5. *Ibid.*, chap. 6, pp. 240–93.

6. Bozdogan, "The Predicament," pp. 140–141; pictures of these massive urban renewals appear in pages 142–144.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
8. Kasaba, p. 29.
9. Poulton, pp. 262–65.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 272–78.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Deringil, pp. 68, 84.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 78–81.
14. Keyder, p. 44.
15. The controversy over the Armenian massacre continues. Last year, the Canadian-Armenian filmmaker Atom Egoyan premiered his movie *Ararat*, in which he denounces Turkish political and ethnic violence against Armenians. The Turkish government reacted by setting up a webpage, linked to the official Ministry of Tourism page, denying some of Egoyan's claims and contextualizing the Turkish-Armenian conflict from its own perspective. See Poulton, pp. 275–78.
16. Poulton, p. 274.
17. Danisman and Ustün, p. 3.
18. Aslaneli.
19. Zaman.
20. Aslaneli.
21. Danisman and Üstün, p. 1.
22. *Heritage at Risk*.
23. Kinzer.
24. Moore.
25. Alemdar, p. 4.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

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