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THE WINNER OF THE FRANCES BERGEN MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR POETRY IS WINTER BY CHRISTINE KWON.

THE WINNER OF THE FRANCES BERGEN MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR FICTION IS PUPPETS: THE LAST DISPATCHES OF ALBAN STREIG, LITERARY CRITIC BY CORY FINLEY.

J.D. MCCLATCHY JUDGED POETRY. THE EDITORS JUDGED FICTION.
IT WOULD BEHOOVE US TO REMEMBER, even as we bear witness to the fruits of his singular genius, falling on our knees before the first and greatest of the Literary Reductivists, the high priest of modern hermeneutics and the most staggering mind of our age, that Theodore Gerthewitz was once, like so many of us, a bad writer. Open a copy of the March 1967 edition of the Columbia Journal of Literary Criticism and you will find near the end an entirely unspectacular and often abhorrent essay entitled “In Search of Lost Rhyme: The Influence of Pope’s Heroic Couplet Form Upon Proust’s La Prisonnière,” penned by Mr. Gerthewitz, then an undergraduate. The essay’s thesis is forced and unilluminating, its language convoluted and dull, and the pun that comprises its title positively offensive. The work, I think, might be converted to pamphlet form and installed at psychological clinics and high school counseling departments around the country for use as an antidepressant: the reader, upon discovering the horrid drivel in which such a colossal intellect once trafficked, will surely become heartened in regard to his or her own disappointing performance on the basketball court, or at the workplace, or even in that hallowed temple of matrimonial strife, the bedroom.

Yet to imagine Mr. Gerthewitz’ literary career as a pat peripeteia from ignorance to genius would be not just an insult, but worse, a oversimplification. For in the same year that the young Theodore Gerthewitz published his missive on Proust, he also submitted a short story to a contest held by the National Hemingway Society. The story was, as stipulated by the contest rules, only six words long and consisted of a single sentence, with which we are all, no doubt, familiar:

*Man enters room; room exits man.*
In an act of ignorance that later resulted in their abrupt loss of academic gravitas, the members of the Hemingway Society conferred upon his story no special recognition. The prize went instead to the trite aphorisms of one Alvin Stamford, an accountant from West Pine, Colorado, who submitted,

Dyslexic God: "Let light be there."

We can only thank the real God and His almighty justice that Stamford's mirthless story has been relegated to the dustbin of literary history, while Gerthewitz' has taken its rightful place as the first major work of a modern master. Now what happens in Gerthewitz' story? On first reading, it seems nothing really happens. A man enters a room, and the room exits him. What does this mean? The story obstinately eludes understanding: it makes sense only on the most purely grammatical level. Yet in its brutal primitivism—language pared down to razor-like concision—in its binary building-and-unraveling, it reaches out into the abyss and grabs the throat of that dark muse, the hem of whose garment most modern fiction aspires only to touch. To quote De Chautelex,

Gerthewitz' story, if we can call it that, joins together the disorientation of Kleist, the authority of Dostoevsky, and the aching emptiness of Beckett. The sentence encapsulates in its chiastic sweep the whole of postwar literature and simultaneously makes it obsolete. With six words and one semicolon, Gerthewitz has captured the spirit of the age. 2

Those of us who spend our days running the gilded hamster wheel of Academia have seen many forests of paper and many gallons of ink lavished upon every facet of Gerthewitz' story: the symbolism of the "man" and of the "room," the significance of the number six, and the

allusions, once doubted but now generally recognized, to the films of Jean-Luc Godard and to the Book of the Dead. But no element of the story has proven more fascinating to critics and scholars than the central punctuation mark. Marcus Lewis’ masterful (if occasionally sensational) analysis, “The Gate of the Apostle,” calls it “arguably the most significant symbol since the Cross of Jesus.” Linguist Linda Allison writes,

> It is at once doorway and barrier. It marks the conclusion of one thought and the undertaking of another, yet refuses to pronounce a complete termination of communication. It is a signifier of betweeness: in between its grounded comma, an earth-analogue, and hovering period, a heaven-analogue, the reader’s understanding sits, as if amidst Dante’s “dark wood,” and shudders in the limbic whiteness of the page.

Of course, the story has its detractors, and remains the most polarizing of Gerthewitz’ works. But even Arnold Ketterling, one of its staunchest opponents, cannot deny the “strange, incantatory rhythm of its language, like a witch-song of old.” Its own artistic merit aside, the story serves as a crucial bit of archaeological evidence. Infinitely concise and infinitely multilayered, it prefigures the aims and means of Gerthewitz’ Reductivist movement.

After the publication of his First and Second Essays on The Process of Analysis as Reduction and his appointment as tenured professor at the University of Pennsylvania, Gerthewitz spent a year largely confined to his office, memorizing, translating, and internalizing...
Vergil’s _Aeneid_ and, on March 15th, 1988, emerged with a single line of text, scrawled in messy hand upon a piece of college-ruled paper—his so-called Reduction of the epic to its poetic essence:

*O! In these things and in all things, blessings be sung from the mouths of old men.*

With the appearance of this curious sentence, a wave of uncertainty fell upon the critics: had Mr. Gerthewitz gone too far? The late great Reginald Petterson’s “Letter to the Editors of The New York Literary Review” 8 dissected each of Gerthewitz’ words, plumbing their linguistic and cultural valences, and in conclusion pronounced the sentence an incoherent mishmash. The author himself, his sentence spoken, remained silent on the matter. Rebuttal of Petterson’s claims came, of all places, from Jalal Muhammed Walad, the expatriate Sufi mystic living in London. “We must understand Mr. Gerthewitz’ sentence,” wrote Walad,

> not as a web of allusions, or a construct of words, but as a complete entity of its own. If we meditate upon it, and let its sound ring in our ears, and finally allow it to throb simultaneously with our heartbeat and with our every intake of breath, we will discover that it is not a summing-up of or a commentary on the _Aeneid_: it is the _Aeneid_, different in form but identical in meaning. Just as water freezes to ice, Vergil’s text crystallizes into Mr. Gerthewitz’ sentence. 9

And with these words, Reductivism was born. Gerthewitz Reduced text after text: _Beowulf_ became the sentence

*So black, so black, alas, so black is the well that drops into the land of dew*

scrawled on the wall of a Denny’s bathroom, now converted

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8 IN THE PRESS’ JUNE 1988 ISSUE.
THE YALE LITERARY MAGAZINE

into a roadside museum, where inspiration struck Gerthewitz as he sat upon the toilet one night in 1990. At a dinner party the next year, Gerthewitz interrupted a toast being given by the Associate Dean of Brown University to shout out his Reduction of *The Brothers Karamazov*:

*The cupboards smile and the ceiling gapes.*

As the Reductions became shorter, Gerthewitz began to retreat from the public eye. Never one to give interviews, he ceased teaching classes and finally retired from his post altogether. All the while, he continued his transformation into the great Delphic oracle of the literary world: Gerthewitz spoke, and the huddled masses of critics and intellectuals and university students interpreted and discussed and marveled.

After a half decade of intensive foreign and ancient language study, he spent the whole of 1996 in his basement, poring over books brought to him in stacks each morning along with cans of Campbell’s soup and glasses of orange juice. 1997 through 1999 he retreated to his remote country home in the Catskills and spent entire days nude and motionless on the porch, listening to the sounds of the mountain. When he returned, he no longer spoke except when Reducing. They came at this point in single words. “Convergence,” he said of *The Faerie Queene*; “dichotomize,” he pronounced of *The Tale of Genji*. His Reductions of *Moby-Dick*, and, oddly enough, the February 4, 1976 edition of The Wall Street Journal, came in Chinese; he summed up Borges’ entire corpus with a thirteen-syllable word from an early dialect of Welsh. After further Reducing his own first Reduction of the *Aeneid* to “curdle,” he retreated from public view.

In his absence, the movement that he created, almost involuntarily, continues apace. The first Reductivist School, loosely affiliated with Cambridge University, has recently opened under the direction of Mr. Walad,
who is present with us tonight. And indeed many of us here, myself certainly not exempted, have found our own thinking influenced by Reductivist tenets. The movement teaches us to brush aside the crude veil of a work's surface meaning, and then even to remove the mask of its symbolic, metaphorical and allusory meanings, and to stare directly into the bleak eyes of the unnamable beast within these books, and within our very selves. Of course no Reductivist can ever hope to do so with the unwavering eye of the first and greatest of his ilk: Mr. Gerthewitz. The movement has missed its creator dearly. His way is prepared: it is high time for his return.

After nearly five years, the great Gerthewitz comes to us today to perform his first ever premeditated Reduction in front of a live audience. He has indicated by gesture that his chosen text is *Don Quixote*. The work is monumental; the occasion even more so, and the genius most of all. Please stand and join me in welcoming this literary giant into our humble home.

THUS READ MY OPENING REMARKS, delivered at the Western New England Postmodern Literary Critics Society before an audience packed into the Reginald D. Boise auditorium like so many tuxedo-wearing sardines. Not my greatest work (I’d misplaced my thesaurus the week I wrote it), but it certainly fit to the task.

I sit, at present, in a dim restaurant booth, and as I add another cigarette butt to the veritable funeral pyre on the table before me, I fold the pages of my speech along their well-worn creases and return them to the left pocket of my coat. My headache begins to hammer away once again and my tie feels like a noose, but I hesitate to loosen it for fear that without its silken grip tying my head to my body, I might come apart. I glance at the crusted kitchen knife on the table before me and a thought comes to mind: would cutting off my ears bring escape from the silence?
How, dear reader, did I come to this point? What cruel trajectory pulled me from my lectern and dumped me into this soundless purgatory? Sing, Muse, the long stumbling and the tragic fall of Alban Streig, literary critic.

Oh, but that old bitch of a Muse is busy with her arms and men and wine-dark seas. I suppose I’ll have to relate the wretched business myself.

Let us begin, in a mood of defiance, at the ending—the ending of my speech.

“Please stand and join me in welcoming this literary giant into our humble home.”

As applause rained down from the many-tiered auditorium, the first and greatest Reductivist was wheeled onstage. The applause slowed, stuttered, and expired with a sigh.

The stillness of the man sitting in the black wheelchair, his unspeakable stasis, spread like a plume through the whole room, which turned pin-drop silent and cavernous. His beard lay tangled and damp on his face, like a cat come snarling in from the rain, and spilled down to his chest. He wore a crisp tuxedo, but it hung desperately from his limbs, the bow tie and vest tilted and vertiginous like a cubist painting. His head slumped languidly on one shoulder. His every feature seemed a mute player in a decayed tableau, melted and sloping into entropy. His eyes, two points of infinite density, lay inert in their sockets.

Someone coughed. A few shuffled on their feet. Those present had certainly expected an older Gerthewitz, perhaps a balding Gerthewitz, a Gerthewitz going gray and wrinkled in the face—but not this. Where was the bold, silent visionary, all rolled-up shirtsleeves and thick, unkempt hair? Crushed, dried out, and stuffed inside of this taxidermized shell?
After a long pause, Dr. Andrew Thurm, the Society's chair, dared to approach Mr. Gerthewitz. He crossed the stage and held out a leather-bound copy of Don Quixote as if offering a dead hare, dripping and limp, to a boa constrictor. When Gerthewitz failed to move, Thurm dropped it gingerly into his lap and scurried into the wings.

Another cough echoed through the space. The television cameras zoomed in guiltily on Gerthewitz' face, and in every cultured home in the world, men and women paused, forks half-raised to their lips, pens stilled in mid-sentence, glasses of wine swirling gently to equilibrium, little children tugging on legs. For an agonizing stretch of time, the entire literary world held its breath.

Then the microphone on Gerthewitz' lapel picked up a sound. Soft, high-pitched, instilled with infinitesimal vibrato, it rippled with the sadness of a dog howling at its master's cold feet, with the desperation of a gazelle as the crocodile's jaws enclosed it and the light of day receded through layers of murky blue. Standing behind the lectern, I felt as though the floor had opened up below me and my body had fallen through too quickly for my mind to follow. My intellect, it seemed, was suspended in a quivering shell of feeling and sound. The cry continued for what must have been nearly a minute, picking up volume as it dropped in pitch. At last it came to rest on a low note, rough but pure, that seemed a call for vengeance, a rallying cry, a command, pointing its sonic finger at the empty void of life—its amorality, its futility—reckoning it up and, finally, as the note dropped off into nothing, dismissing it. In the ensuing hush, I understood, with a swelling ecstasy, that this was Gerthewitz' most eloquent Reduction yet: this vocalization, pathetic, limping, old, but able to swell to something grand and terrifying and all-encompassing, was Don Quixote, tilting at windmills, the figure eternal of hope standing against the overwhelming terror of existence.
Applause crashed into the auditorium like a tidal wave, jolting all present out of a shared reverie. From out of the first row and onto the stage clambered Arnold Ketterling, Gerthewitz’ greatest literary opponent, aged seventy-three. Tears streaming down his cracked and worn face, he knelt down and kissed the Reductivist’s feet.

Two hours later I stood behind Dr. Andrew Thurm as he sat at Gerthewitz’ side, gently clasping his hands.

“Thank you,” he said. “Thank you, thank you, thank you. Words fail me, Mr. Gerthewitz. You have given our society—no, you have given the world—a gift beyond our powers of conception. You are our Prometheus, Mr. Gerthewitz, and I count myself among the luckiest of men even to sit here in your proximity.”

Gerthewitz showed no signs of recognition. After much awkwardness and profuse smiling, Thurm receded and turned towards me, indicating, by a gesture, that it was my turn with the genius.

I sat at Gerthewitz’ side. He smelled overpoweringly of industrial cleaner, or perhaps of ammonia. From the back wall his two aides and three bodyguards looked on, along with the mystic Walad, in suit and turban, with an air of aggressive dignity.

“Mr. Gerthewitz,” I began, “when I was fifteen years old, I read Don Quixote for the first time.” He continued to stare past me. I looked around, swallowed, and returned my attention to his face. I felt like I was addressing a wooden icon. “When I had finished the book, I slept more deeply than I ever had before, and I dreamt dreams the likes of which I had never known. I noticed that every color in the leaves of the autumn trees shone more brightly. My corn flakes at breakfast tickled my taste buds with...with a sweeter flavor. The sunlight, when it fell on my back at the pool, sent a stronger sensation galloping down my spine.
When you spoke just now, Mr. Gerthewitz, I felt it again. I heard your voice and I—"

Suddenly Gerthewitz' hand shot up and grabbed me by the neck. It was warm and wet, and smelled of vinegar. He pulled me in with terrifying strength and certainty. My ear was inches away from his mouth, and I could feel the sea-spray of his saliva as he rasped a single word:

"Fantoccio."

Italian: puppet.

I had been Reduced.

***

AS "THE GROAN OF CERVANTES" COVERED the front pages of the nation’s finer newspapers, Theodore Gerthewitz' first ever Reduction of a human being remained, if you will pardon the use of a wretched cliché, a dark secret. Shaken as I was, I returned to life as normal, delivering my biweekly lectures and continuing research.

A week and a half later, as I drove home from a dinner date with an old friend, I looked out of the window and saw an immense neon sign, filled with unlit and flickering letters like a gaping, gap-toothed mouth, which read, "Geppetto's." Above the sign, a great hollow effigy of a gray-haired old man, his face locked in a smile, with a wooden-limbed puppet on his knee.

Crack, went a fiber of my thread.

I shuddered slightly and drove on.

That night, as I brushed my teeth before the bathroom mirror, my thoughts turned again to that word—fantoccio—that word in which my whole being, Gerthewitz seemed to say, was translated. I scrutinized the tiny crow’s feet blossoming across the flesh beneath my eyes, sniffed
the ripe scent under my armpits, and felt the dampness of my spittle, mixed with toothpaste, on my finger. How could all this be summed up in a word? I was a human being, throbbing with life.

Sleep brought strange dreams. I looked out across a stretch of New England highway at night, as if from a great height. A clump of trees on the left, a snatch of clouds up to the right, arrayed like a Romantic landscape-painting. Calm sat deep in my bones, in the dream, as cars streaked by in spurts. The dream continued with very little event—a man in a puffy Patriots jacket dragging a shopping cart along the shoulder of the road, head hanging low; a police car shrieking and igniting in a blaze of lights as it launched into pursuit of a speeder—for what seemed like hours. Then I woke.

At breakfast, I switched on the broken-down television on the kitchen counter.

“—and how do you respond to those critics who say that Mr. Gerthewitz is really just a very sick man, and that his...um, cry, if we call it that, was only coincidentally related to Don Quixote?” asked an interviewer. At the bottom of the screen, the letters “Sufi Mystic Jalal Muhammed Walad Explains Critic Gerthewitz’ Latest Reduction” scrolled leisurely by.

“I believe Mr. Gerthewitz is very sick, I do not deny that,” responded Walad, fiercely telegenic with a strong jaw line, again wearing a sharp black suit and a tightly-wound yellow turban. On his left lapel, a Receding Scroll, the Reductivist symbol. “No human being can devote their lives so fully to the workings of the mind and maintain a healthy physique. His mind, however, is not only healthy, but...how would I put it?...transcendent. Some have misinterpreted his vegetative state as a symptom of mental illness. This could not be further from the truth. Mr. Gerthewitz simply finds the physical processes that we take for granted...”
take for granted—standing, making eye contact, maintaining an upright posture—an unwelcome distraction.”

“But the central question remains: how do we know for sure,” said the interviewer, “that his interpretation of Don Quixote is accurate?”

“Accurate? Accuracy is not Mr. Gerthewitz’ goal. Mathematicians seek accuracy. Chemists and engineers seek accuracy. Authors seek truth. I might even go far as to claim that the greatest authors create truth. And I consider Gerthewitz among our greatest authors—I’d even grant him a special place in their ranks.” He looked directly into the camera, which zoomed in slowly as if beckoned by his gravitational pull. “It does not matter whether Cervantes consciously encoded into his novel the same spirit that we heard in Mr. Gerthewitz’ vocalization. You see, when Mr. Gerthewitz speaks, the book becomes his Reduction. The original author’s intent is immaterial.”

I switched off the television and finished my corn flakes in silence.

THAT DAY, AS I DELIVERED MY BIWEEKLY lecture, entitled “Shakespeare: Father of the Modernist Instinct,” I experienced a strange sensation. I was holding forth on the scene in Twelfth Night in which Malvolio reads aloud Maria’s forged letter. “The original audience members, sitting in the Globe,” I said, “are watching the three characters, who in turn watch the hapless steward. At the same time, they are being watched, perhaps, by the playwright, who has designed the entire scene for their amusement. And all of the above, Shakespeare would have us remember, fall under the omnipresent gaze of the Lord. These levels of awareness, and the audience’s awareness of these same levels, effect, as I claimed previously, what we might call a distinctly postmodern sort of blurring: where does the play end and the spectator begin? On a metaphysical level, how can we categorize or demarcate the—"
Suddenly I fell silent. I felt at once as if I was a thousand miles above, looking down upon my own body. And I was pulling away, zooming away at nauseating speeds. My own body became a blotch, then a speck, then a speck within a speck, then the mere suggestion of a speck...I became aware at once that the auditorium was completely empty, and then that the podium at which I stood was empty as well. Soon the whole auditorium broke apart, its walls dissolving and its chairs sucked up into the nether. For a moment that spanned lifetimes, my mind was filled with the horrid expanse of Nothing.

Then I turned, and found myself staring into the terrified face of one of my teaching assistants.

"Who is Fantoccio?" he asked me ten minutes later, as the students filed out.

"What did you say?"

"Fantoccio. Who is he? You were whispering his name for at least a minute."

MY KITCHEN SEEMED PARTICULARLY DARK as I ate alone that night. The sky outside crackled with thunder and gusts of rain swept along the streets like huge and lonely phantoms searching for lost lovers amidst the pools of colored light. In the shuddering illumination of a single hanging lamp, I shuffled peas onto my fork, one by one.

In my dream it was also raining. The same stretch of highway, the same trees, now bending in the wind, the same cars, racing their own reflections on the slick pavement. Again the quiet, again the waiting, again the empty serenity. But after what felt like hours, I perceived something crackle and spark below me. I could feel its momentary heat on my leg. Startled, I moved to turn my head downward. But it was stuck. With effort, and with a great cracking sound, I pulled it free and looked down into a
haze of flickering neon lights. I turned and looked to my left. There, huge and plasticine and slicked with drops of rain, was the smiling, dead-eyed face of Geppetto.

The phone rang. I reached over and answered it, panting.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Streig, this is Jalal Muhammed Walad."

I regained composure. "What on earth, Mr. Walad, would possess you to call me at—" I looked over at the clock—"three-thirty AM?"

"How goes the great mute play?" he asked.

"What?"

"On which level are you functioning?"

"On...I..."

"Are you feeling iterable? Discursive?"

"Excuse me?"

"Allow me to rid myself of obfuscations. Mr. Streig, it has come to my attention that you have been Reduced."

A great, heaving pause.

"And I would very much like," he continued, "to study the effects of Reduction on a human being."

"Is that so?"

"I understand that you must be in an unusual state of mind at present, Mr. Streig. I can only imagine. But I think I may be able to help you. And you, beyond question, can help me. As acting head of the Reductivist School, I am seized with hermeneutic fascination at your condition and its implications."

I rubbed my eyes and sighed. "Where shall I meet you?"
“Are you familiar with Geppetto’s restaurant?”

A cold hand ran up my spine and gripped my throat, making my voice small and rough. “How do you know about that?”

A low chuckle became barely audible over the receiver. “Come to the restaurant. I will be waiting.”

Click, went the phone. Crack, crack, crack, went the fibers of my death-thread.

I SEEMED TO BE DRIVING THROUGH a great recumbent cloud, through a forest of howling night, deeper and deeper into the stomach of a greedy and chained beast. The thought of it makes me shudder as my next cigarette, with a dying cough, becomes a stump, an incinerated amputee.

A FEW MINUTES LATER I FOUND MYSELF standing in the rain, my umbrella hanging useless at my side, craning my neck upwards to behold the great plastic effigy of Pinocchio, smiling and wet, his plastic head slumped forward, broken loose from its support. Impossible. Simply impossible, I told myself, fighting back the urge to weep, or perhaps to retch.

I trudged like a dead man into the abandoned restaurant, my boots squeaking on the tiled floor. Many of the stools at the bar had been overturned, and the jukebox in the corner tilted tipsily against the wall. Dust filled the air, and bits of insulation hung from the ceiling and peppered the tables. A hand shot out from behind one of the tall booth seats and stilled me as I passed.

“Sit down, Mr. Streig.”

I did so.

The sharp features—a strong jaw, a predatory brow—that made Jalal Muhammed Walad so telegenic made him
almost frightening in the flesh. There was a quality to his face that bespoke great intellect, but just as surely bespoke a certain brutality, or, more frightening still, a certain desperation. His eyes were sunken wells and the corner of his mouth twitched disconcertingly.

"A question," he said.

I half-nodded.

"Are you a man, Mr. Streig," he said, pulling an ashtray towards him and flicking the tip of his cigarette into it, "or are you a word?"

"I am a man," I said, with embarrassing confidence.

He stared into my eyes as if searching for confirmation. "I see," he said. "How can you prove this to me?"

So we are playing games, now. My eyes narrowed. "I woke up this morning, Mr. Walad. I ate breakfast. I drove my car here to meet you. These are things that human beings do. I do not think I am being too presumptuous if I assert that words lack these capabilities."

"Ivan Karamazov wakes up," he said in a measured tone.

"Edna Pontellier eats breakfast. In great detail, in fact. Any number of characters in modern fiction have learned to drive cars, and even do so, on occasion. How are you any different?"

"If you're going to use that kind of asinine logic I suppose I can't prove anything. The best I can do is quote Descartes: 'I think, therefore I am.'"

"But wouldn't you agree that Woolf and Faulkner show us a great number of individuals who most certainly think?"

"Yes, but their thoughts proceed from their author. I am authorless, Mr. Walad. I am my own author."

He smiled, took a long drag, and produced from his coat
pocket a small piece of paper, which he unfolded and pressed flat on the table before him. It contained a few lines of typewritten text. “I’d like to read you something. Just listen, please.”

My head bobbed, almost on its own volition.

He inhaled deeply and began.

Alban Streig, a man of late middle age with green-brown eyes and a sullen disposition, walked slowly into the abandoned restaurant. Many of the stools at the bar had been overturned, and the jukebox in the corner tilted tipsily against the wall. Dust filled the air, and bits of insulation hung from the ceiling and peppered the tables. The hand of Jalal Muhammed shot out from behind one of the tall booth seats.

“Sit down, Mr. Streig,” he heard.

He did so. The two spoke briefly, and then Mr. Walad pulled from his jacket pocket a small piece of paper. He unfolded it and placed it on the table and began reading. The text went as follows:

“Alban Streig, a man of late middle age with green-brown eyes and a sullen disposition, walked slowly into the abandoned restaurant...”

With each word I felt my perception receding further and further into my head. The sound of Walad’s voice became blurred and indistinct, as if coming to me from outside of an ever-deepening cave. Then at once with a feeling of great suction I seemed to be standing behind myself, watching. In a flash I was looking down from above the table, and in another I was inside of Walad, hearing my own voice echo inside my head. In yet another I was inside the table — no, I was the table, feeling the gentle weight of the ashtray and the paper on my back. Then I was Walad’s cigarette, screaming silently as flame inched up my spine.
Then the restaurant’s rear wall, stretched and grunting under the strain of the roof, then a bubble rising up the jukebox, observing the two men through a haze of yellow glass. I became the air in the room, then the room itself, then the notion of rooms, then the concept of enclosure, then the process of differentiation...

My head hit the table.

When I looked up, I saw Walad, an expression of horror on his face, trying in vain to form words with his quivering lips.

“Mr. Streig,” he said finally, “what can this mean?”

“You felt it too?” I asked feebly.

He reached across the booth and touched the skin of my face, prodded it, grabbed it roughly. His eyes stared into mine. There was something frightfully biological about them, about their tense wetness and about the tiny brown branches that sprouted from his iris and extended outward. His hands smelled of corpses.

He stood up in a daze and collected his things. “I have to go.”

And at once I found myself alone in a restaurant which now seemed quietly, terribly alive.

AFRAID OF FINDING MYSELF ON A DARK ROOF with limbs of wood, I lay awake in bed all night, clutching at the sweat-stained sheets. By daybreak it became impossible to function. Standing before my mirror, I could not help but think of the act of my brushing my teeth as an allusion to similar acts earlier in my life, and to great acts of tooth-brushing in history. Every time I so much as moved my arm, I imagined the consequences of that particular movement in a second, a minute, an hour, a year. The sheer multiplicity of it made my stomach turn and
twist. As I doubled over, a thought struck me: how does my toothbrush feel to be ground so brutally against my teeth each morning? I snapped back up and instead of a mirror, I saw a white page, on which was inscribed:

ALBAN STREIG, WITH GREY-BROWN EYES AND A SULLEN DISPOSITION, BRUSHES HIS TEETH.

I covered my eyes and spat violently into the sink.

In my study, penning a letter to an old friend of mine, I looked down and found suddenly that I could not tell where my hand ended and where the words I was writing began. The two seemed equally real, equally confusing. I began to cry.

My secretary had to half-carry, half-drag me to the cab that took me home.

BY MIDNIGHT MY INCREASINGLY ELABORATE cocktails of caffeine and sugar failed to fend off sleep and I collapsed into a spate of feverish dreams. They seemed like borrowed dreams: their images and words, their smells and tastes and shadows felt foreign and distant and wet. Only one sight recurred amidst this queasy phantasmagoria: the picture of Theodore Gerthewitz, his head slumped, his beard grotesque, arrayed like a Byzantine saint with a broken set of marionette strings in his hand.

The radio alarm clark woke me with grim tidings:

“Sufi Mystic and Newly-appointed Dean of the Cambridge Reductivist School Jalal Muhammed Walad was found dead in his stateside New York apartment last night. At six-twenty-two AM, police responding to a noise complaint were startled to find Walad’s body, thrown upon an antique sword that he kept in a box over his mantelpiece. Investigators discovered no pills or alcohol of any kind around the body, but did find a copy of Homer’s Iliad
and a suicide note, written on a page torn from a copy of Macbeth in neat hand. The note read,

'We are not men. We are not men at all. The best I can do is allude, in my death, to that of the great Ajax, and hope thereby to align my life with a greater and more fully developed narrative, and to cast off this gross metaphor of my skin and blood.'

Mr. Walad was an intellectual ally and, by some accounts, personal friend of Theodore Gerthewitz. Mr. Gerthewitz could not be reached for comment."

I sat in silence. The “new voicemail” light on my answering machine was blinking infernally. I pressed “play.”

For a moment, I heard only slow, laborious breathing.

Then: “Jalal Muhammed Walad...holds the reciever up to...up to his mouth and whispers...

“Mr. Streig...Mr. Streig, you told me earlier this evening that you were authorless. You were wrong, Mr. Streig... when Mr. Gerthewitz spoke that word...that horrible little word...he translated you. You were once a holy text, written perhaps by God, or by Nature, call it what you will. Now...now you are simply a translation, and your author is a man named Theodore Gerthewitz.

“And yet I am no more real than you, Mr. Streig. I touched your face with my own hands. We are the same. We are not men. We are his texts. We are his words. We are creations of his mind, mere sparks that leap between his synapses. Can you live in this reality, Mr. Streig? Can you reconcile yourself to such an existence? I refuse my master. I...I reject him. For this moment, Mr. Streig, I will be my own author. And so...

“Fin.”

Beep, said the answering machine.
As the first rays of morning caught upon swirling constellations of dust, I held the cold machine in my hands. Then I ripped it from its socket and threw it on the floor. The thousand television screens of my mind, arrayed in honeycomb pattern like an insect’s compound eye—can you see it?—switched in unison to the hideous image of Theodore Gerthewitz.

Alban Streig, with grey-brown eyes and a sullen disposition, walked forth from his bedroom with vengeance swirling in his tormented head.

AT THIS POINT, TIME CEASED TO FUNCTION in any sort of reliable way. I don’t remember how I found Gerthewitz’ home; I only remember rolling up the gravel drive and parking my car under the luxuriant sweep of a weeping willow. I don’t remember exactly what excuse I used to gain entrance, or precisely which names I dropped, or if I seduced, or coerced, or begged; I only remember watching my own shadow passing across the lavender wallpaper beside a spiral staircase, and feeling my head throb with his proximity. I can’t recall how I came to be alone in front of the door to Gerthewitz’ room, but I do remember with absolute clarity the smell of ammonia and the profusion of light that spilled out upon me as I opened it.

He lay on a cot in the center of a great white room, still as an icon, fetal. He wore what looked like a white hospital uniform, and his eyes were open, his mouth slack. From tiny black speakers at the corners of the room leaked a slow, chiming melody, as though from a music box. In the great white quiet my footsteps, cautious and soft, sounded like punches in the gut, like clanging cymbals, like crashing cars.

“Mr. Gerthewitz,” I whispered, “come with me.”

THE DISTMANTLING OF A GOD: A TRAGEDY in Three Acts. Written by and starring Alban Streig,
Puppets

Literary critic, aged 52. Enter vengeance; exit regret. Enter darkness; exit humanity.

The footlights crackle to life and the great mauve curtains swing open. With a ferocious swelling of strings and horns and perhaps the lilting vibrato of a pump organ, the stage is revealed: the back kitchen of Gepetto's, that den of dirt and dead things. We see our hero enter, a limp and corpse-like prophet slung across his shoulder. He strikes a match and the floor alights with small scurrying things that scamper into their various holes. With a length of orange extension cord, he lashes his human cargo to a groaning refrigerator, its plastic outercoat mostly flayed away to expose its metal surface. "I will be back soon," he says, and we see him blow out the match and exit to the adjoining room. He sits down at a booth, lights a cigarette and begins to write. What is he writing? A diary? An apologia? A vulgar dime-store novel?

My dear readers, a brief intermezzo. I have pressing business to attend to.

A.S., March 4th.

It is a question of authorship, really. Not so much revenge as redefinition. "Can you reconcile yourself to this existence?" asked the doomed mystic on sword's edge. I cannot. I simply cannot. And the blade, as seductive as its fatal curve may be, is not my fate. I must conquer. I must defeat my author.

But how to do it? I am like Achilles, fighting the wet swell of the river with spear and shield. I wage a metaphysical war with merely physical weapons.

In the dark I stood before him.
“Take it back,” I said. I gripped his brittle chin between my thumb and finger and jerked his head upwards into a jet of bleached, dust-muddled light. “I am not fantoccio; I am Alban Streig. Say it.” His eyes were dead. He was drooling. “You are not my creator. I am a man, not a word. Say it.” I forced his head back. The refrigerator clanged and a cold echo shimmered through its hollow insides. “Say it!”

Nothing.

I kicked him, roughly, awkwardly. “Say it!”

I could hear my own breathing. I glanced around the kitchen, and my eyes fell upon a rusted butter knife.

No. Whatever I may or may not be, dear reader, I am no torturer. Besides, pain would not open those jaws. Physical force would not pry words from his atrophied throat. I knew this.

I needed another kind of torture, another kind of duress. Something to draw out a confession, a vindication.

MY STEREO BLASTING FRANKIE VALLI’S “Can’t Take My Eyes Off You” across the New England highway, I commenced a whirlwind tour of the area’s less reputable bookstores. I procured armfuls of romance novels bearing photographs of shirtless sword-wielders and titles like The Doors of the Harem and Under a Blood-Red Moon. I picked up the latest self-help books and the most recent issue of USA Today. I grabbed greedy handfuls of tabloids—“Young Starlet X Found In Hotel Room With Chimpanzee!” “Country Singer Y Cheats on Wife—With a Priest!”—and insipid young adult bildungsromans. I bought a portable television and rummaged through one-dollar DVD bins at gas stations, selecting the titles with the densest concentration of sensational adjectives. An hour later I was sitting in the candlelight next to my captive, reading lustily from the trashiest of my haul.
Surely, I thought, if I drown his intellect with trash—if I assault his mind, so acutely tuned to the words of geniuses, with amateurish drivel, he will be jarred, shaken, overwhelmed. He will break.

Two days have elapsed from that point, dear reader. And still the false prophet remains as motionless and inscrutable as ever. My copy of "The Best Cowboy Poetry of Northern Minnesota" sits unfinished at his feet, and I fear I cannot take much more. I feel as though my own intellect, not his, is disintegrating: clauses and constructions lapse together like crumbling buildings. Grammar and syntax seem fleeting hummingbirds, forever slipping out of my grasp. For now, sleep beckons.

A.S., March 6th

THE DAYS WEAR ON WITH LITTLE PROGRESS.
I am at the end of my rope, so to speak. I struggle now to remember why I brought him here in the first place. And more distressing, I am beginning to lose words. I shed them, like snakeskin; I drop them, like marbles through a holey pocket. They become strange and unwieldy: pure sound, signifying nothing. "Window," "absolute," "re-capitulate:" what do they mean? They leak from all my languages, the simplest words as well as the most complex: I piece together what remains for me of language in order to write. I read over this very manuscript and whole paragraphs mean nothing: they are great black holes in my own history, wounds in my own body, ever widening.

"History," "own—" no sooner do I write it than they are gone.

Dear reader, it is cold, and I am terribly alone.

A.S., March 10th

Reader, I bring you tidings of great joy. The Prophet is cracking. I saw it today for the first time. I was in the middle of a particularly lurid passage from Martha

The water was still and welcoming, like my dear prince's eyes once were. I felt like I could jump in and be away from all these men, away forever from them and their cruelty and their lies. I wanted nothing more. So I plugged up my nose and whispered to myself, "here goes nothing!"

Suddenly he made a gasping noise, like a man struggling for breath. His head slumped forward and his eyes began to water.

I sat for a moment in shock. The book dropped from my hand. I scrambled to pick up another: Thirty-Six Adorable Stories for Cat Lovers. I flipped to a page at random.

"That's where he keeps all the biscuits," whispered Newton. "But nobody ever goes there. That's where Fluffy lives." Sophocles covered his face with his paws.

Gerthewitz made hoarse croaking sounds. I pressed on with fiendish glee. From Song of the Forest Druids:

Kalendos was a man of great strength. His eyes shone like brazen torches and his chest seemed carved from bronze. No man could claim greater knowledge of the ways of the Ancients, nor greater dedication to their tenets.

He began to shake his head back and forth, as if trying to unseat some kind of parasite. I cackled and picked another book from the pile.

I have left him now watching Film Noir 3: The Judgement. I can hear his crying and whooping now. Oh, blessed, blessed sound! I feel we are near a breakthrough!

A.S., March 15th
In the whale-belly dark I sit at the cold limp feet of the first and greatest literary Reductivist. Drool crusts his mouth, and his whole body hangs limply from its extension-cord cradle. Dear reader, what happens now? His breath is stilled, but my humanity has not returned. My head throbs still, and my mind hums darkly. Worse, the words continue to leave me. “Over,” “seem—” hollow shells, chicken scratches, marks on Magdalene caves, their meanings long forgotten.

As I weep he hangs over me like a cloud. I can hear a long plasticine hiss as his weight strains against the cords.

_A.S. March 16th_

Reader, the prophet is gone. His body was once here; now it is gone. It was here, wasn’t it?

Getting colder.

_A.S., March 18th_

Reader, listen:

This word “I—” it has gone. It hums particularly loud, but cannot be placed. I, I, I, I... its echoes, hollow.

_March 19th_

He sits alone at the table with his last cigarette; he cannot last much longer. He is afraid to enter the room where the prophet was: he is afraid of what he might see. Last time he went there the refrigerator was gone. He looked in later and there was no ceiling. Things are leaving.

He is afraid. He is afraid of what might be there. Of what might not.

_March 21st_

In nights he comes, the orange extension cord a twisting umbilicus, snaking from his naked form, its loose end unraveling the room, the world. A crowd of dust and
breath about his head, he leans in low, his fingers churning the floor, and whispers...

Sometimes he sings, and the walls bend and throb and the air shakes to hear. He is lost. His eyes glow but they are dead as leaves.

A man sits writing in a great empty room. Cars pass by far away. Man writes slowly, now.

Pen carves out letters Waiting now Something big coming

Man enters room ;
Chloe and Mary played in the sand
And with the pebbles. They built
A tall castle that fell down and
Went into the bramble bushes
To hunt for the red berries.

They crushed the berries with their palms
And mixed them with the sand
And spread the dusky grit into flat leaves.

It was evening and the air was cool
Against their faces. The wind
Blew a little through the trees.

Chloe and Mary grew bored and
Decided to play a game. In the game
Chloe was a princess and Mary
Was a dinosaur that ate princesses.

Chloe won the game.

Mary pushed Chloe into the swings
And Chloe fell over the rubber into the sand
And cried. Mary ran away. Mary ran
Into the baseball field and pulled grass
Out by handfuls and cried.

When the dinosaur found Mary
It ate her and coughed up the shining
Blue bones. This was the story
Chloe told herself in the night,
Piling pebbles on pebbles.
The summer when even the bridges
were exhausted
large and groaning in the heat
you came to me—
me in my pretty dress
hair plastered
pulling a long face
hungry as anything—
you came
hair cut short and in a pickup
and fed me a blackberry
said this is how we do things
around here pretty girl.
Pretty girl.
Visiting the poet’s house in Valparaiso, Chile

The family resemblance between one Pacific town and another is strong enough to mock our swollen pilgrims’ feet. Morning fog. No one in the snaky streets to call stranger. I woke today from a dream of plucked birds on the hostel floor—woke naming animals, naming habitats.

And you, fat poet, must always have another house on the horizon like a Silk Road outpost, local color to color: one front room yellow inside like the mouth of a sick man.

You are no sicker than the rest, tripping down the lacquered stairs, a poem smarting like burnt tastebuds on your tongue. In blew the fruity breeze. Who can blame you for wishing your woman near? She was almost a poem in her departing drift. Dearly departed—

I touch your table. I sit briefly on your bed. Your odes hover, premature halos, over a bowl of today’s apples, tart and mute. Please, take one—the permission nature seems to grant, poetry prohibits.

What I lost in my travels, I regained at the water’s edge. Es decir, what I lost in desire I gained in desire.

Either way, the mind fills with fragrance.
I.

The cops stopped caring because they are tired of walking through the snow for twentysomethings who can’t feel the cold. They are barefoot, we are drunk—I imagined the whiskey, but not shoes, there was no anger in this dream, only fear.

II.

In the airport, my father leans against the glass, looking at the planes without appetite. He spends the entire morning yawning. We go up on the escalator, words falling like a loose cat’s cradle.

III.

I sit at home, my college transcripts spread out like tarot cards. Praise me, praise me, tell me I am good.

IV.

There were no cops. I didn’t have a dream, no one was in it, snow didn’t fall in straight windless lines. I just needed to tell a story without accusing everyone—
V.

The awnings are arched like wings, poised and frozen. My father used to call me into the living room and make me do tricks. I got pulled out of my shell like a rabbit, his jaws gently clamped on my neck.

VI.

He tries to pause, lighting a cigarette, as if acknowledgement delays defeat. But there has never been a delay. A voice ushers me away into some narrow corridor, some narrow plane, some thin road in the sky. He says, *I imagined carrying you on my back like a snail carrying his house. You can't live in children, though, their roofs are not up for it.* In real life, he put out his cigarette and commandeered my luggage.

The day my father dies, I will make him breakfast in bed, so I can heat it up, put it on ice. I do not do anything for him that isn't something I need.
Wrapped in a blue blanket
I wear your father's wool sweater
That falls over my wrists
At the cabin; you looked through my eyes down the hill
Toward the creek and the Vermont birches,
And the granite bridge -
A film of white frost rests on frozen dirt.

Before you were—
There you are.

A bird of the paradise
Clay beginnings
Still shaking off your black wings.
Against the new sun, the moon, the planets,
In the first garden, you float
In a time without a south, without scents.
There, blue currents, soft winds -
A thousand fruit trees
To perch dinosaur feet.

There is no migration -
No enemy set before us,
Nothing to take
But the honey of cloud orchids
Mangoes of the sunset tree.
when I came home
to the house on chicken feet
my mother wore a mask with a bird’s beak
and said things I could not understand,
so I dragged my duffel downstairs
to ask my father, evaporating
his hands over the stove,
and he laughed,
and the match I held startled
and caught,
a soft combustive pop
I took to mean I loved my father,
but not my mother,
or that it was somehow useless
to love my mother,
her forehead’s lattice of lines
the work of forces
distilled in me,
prophetic filaments
of blood and bone,
flaring to attention like
a wing’s dark glitter
in the vasculature
of clouds

then, eating dinner,
wear a dingy coat
patched with endearments: calves
and eyebrows
identical to hers—
the moon flooding
the window
felt heavy on me,
so lightly the weave
pressed down
Orhan Pamuk, winner of the 2006 Nobel Prize in Literature, is one of Turkey's most prominent writers. The author of more than ten books, he divides his time between Istanbul and New York City, where he teaches at Columbia University. The Yale Literary Magazine spoke with Pamuk on November 11, 2009 in his office at Columbia.

We want to start with your most recent novel, The Museum of Innocence. How do you go about writing after winning the Nobel Prize?

The regular journalistic reaction to the Nobel Prize, and it's a traditional one, is "Oh oh, he won the Nobel Prize, and he cannot write now, he is under so much pressure." This was not true for me, because I began writing this novel years, years before the Nobel Prize. When I received the Nobel Prize I was more than half-way through with it, and all the rest of the novel was chaptered, plotted, all the ideas were there, all I needed to do was to finish it. So, there was no such anxiety. And then, also, the Nobel Prize did not come to me in old age, but at a relatively young age, so it's not a sort of a retirement pension for me. I have planned so many novels. I have to write them, execute them, finish them.

How many novels do you have planned to write?

I have probably now some five or six projects, some of them already written, not chaptered, but about which I have lots of notes. More or less one or two months before I finish a novel of mine, I decide about what will be the next book, and then work extensively on chaptering, plotting, elaborating the details of that book. Of course, you cannot imagine the complete details of a novel; it's almost like an ocean, there are so many details. But I am, I think, disciplined, in the sense that I chapter, sort out. I know more or less the basics of the plotline, I know the ending. Then, when I'm stuck in one place, in one chapter, I can skip chapters; I can give myself a little prize of "This is the
Is it important that you know the ending before you begin writing?

You have to know it before you come to the end. Although beginnings I write a hundred times, I write the ending only once—I don’t know why, but this is my policy. I retouch the ending very lightly, while the first pages I rewrite and rewrite a hundred times. For example, I remember, when writing the ending of My Name is Red, I decided that I would write it once. The reason for this is that, by the end, you are so much accustomed to the narrative voice that you feel comfortable, while at the beginning you’re uncomfortable, you’re not acquainted well enough with the narrative voice you’re assuming.

It’s interesting that in My Name is Red there are many different points of view of narration. Were you most comfortable, then, with Shekure’s voice, because she ends the book?

Some narrative voices I am comfortable with, but they do not come out distinctly. Shekure was obviously a distinct narrative voice. Some of the narrative voices came across well, such as Esther, and I realized that Esther has a very distinct voice, so I gave her a more prominent space in the book. A good example of how I write novels is that when I thoroughly manage to identify with a narrative voice, and I’m happy with that voice, say Shekure’s voice, then I write chapter 17, then 25, then 33, so that I’m Shekure for a while, and I know her voice. Then I go back being another voice.

In the beginning of The Museum of Innocence, at the engagement party, we are introduced, almost peripherally, to an anxious Orhan Pamuk, who is twenty-three years old, smoking cigarettes, and ill-at-ease at the party. Much later, Kemal searches out the same Orhan Pamuk and asks him to write his story. Knowing that you are creating a real
museum in Istanbul, we feel that there is a relationship between you and the character Kemal as well. So where do you find yourself in the novel?

Of course, I wrote the novel, first of all! And then, I am not the first person who projected himself as a figure in a novel. But that's not something so important, I don't dramatize this. Inserting myself into the fiction is saying, look, in a postmodern way, perhaps, or an experimental way, look, this is fiction, please don't forget the artificiality of fiction. I'm warning the naïve reader about the self-consciousness of the text. In this novel, also in Snow, but especially in this novel, putting myself as a figure into the end of the novel is a way of pulling the story together after the first person singular voice, Kemal, is dead. Who's going to tell us what happened after Kemal died? That was also a technical problem.

We want to ask about translation. How closely do you work with your translator, Maureen Freely, and what specific problems are the biggest?

I work extensively with my English translators. There has always been a lot of drama. It's never perfect: there are always problems, troubles. In The Museum of Innocence, a lot of revisions. You may see that at the beginning of the book I thank the people who checked the translation, edited the translation, gave ideas. So this is not only Maureen Freely's work. Knopf also paid for a person to check the Turkish, whether the Turkish rendered, because there were so many mistakes in the Turkish too. It was a painful, damning, long process.

The Istanbul that we see in the novel is a very specific portrayal of one moment in the 1970s, in the modernization of Turkey. Is the Istanbul we see meant to be viewed as representative of a fading past or as a reminder that things are very much the same?
There is a self-consciousness to writing about Istanbul in the book, but most of the time it's a natural thing to write about Istanbul, because that's where I've lived all my life. I write about human beings, I write about humanity, and I came across humanity in Istanbul. That's how I write it. And also, when you write fiction, you know that characters' moods are reflected in the city. My characters are doomed, melancholic lovers, so the city looks melancholic, but in another novel, the city might look somehow different. In this novel, there is no program of saying that it has changed or not changed. This I may have done in my autobiographical book called Istanbul. Here, in The Museum of Innocence, the town is part of the story, but I don't make more dramatic statements about its change. A city changes as everything changes, and it gives us sense that time is passing, but that's all.

Clearly a lot of research went into The Museum of Innocence. How does research fit into the process of writing?

Depending on the book, of course I do a lot of research. The research I did for Snow is not the research you do in libraries, but you go to the place, you meet people. I went there five or six times, each time for five or six days. At that time, I used to go there with my video camera, take photos, do interviews with people I met. Lots of interviews, because I went to Kars with the idea of writing an article in a Turkish newspaper about the town. I also announced that in the local TV channel, and then everyone knew me, and everyone was forthcoming and telling their stories. This is one kind of research, almost like the kind of research that journalists do.

Or as I wrote My Name is Red, I read all these books about painting, miniature painting, Renaissance, all these medieval Islamic paintings that illustrate basic, essential, classical Islamic allegories. So I read them, you may call these
things research. And also, looking at pictures and trying to understand what a miniature is, to be able to talk about it in a heartfelt, loving way. Miniatures are not attractive things compared to impressionist paintings or Van Goghs, so I spent a lot of time looking at them, looking at them, and trying to say something personal, something relevant, something deeply felt about them. That is also research.

If you decide to write a novel, you also decide to change yourself with that subject. When you write a novel, the writer and the subject exchange places. Novels are identifying with people that are not you. There is a morality in identifying with people that are different from you. That is, you do it over years; slowly and slowly, you change yourself. I want to immerse myself in the 16th century Islamic miniature painting atmosphere, a galaxy of images, which I produce. But as I imagine them, I also change.

So what kind of research brought you to The Museum of Innocence?

I explored art and pictures in My Name is Red, true politics in Snow, true Istanbul in The Black Book, and here I wanted to write, really, a love novel—see what I can do, how I can explore this one. Another thing was to write in an understanding way about museums, visiting museums. Also, authors like me, we choose subjects we want to immerse ourselves in: research that kind of imagery, research that subject. So I have a library only about museums, catalogues, museology. When I was writing My Name is Red, one of the reasons I wrote that, of course, one perfectly strong reason, was that I was a painter, and I wanted to write about the joys of painting, how one enjoys as one’s hand moves over the paper and draws a line, almost in amazement. That’s one reason, but it’s not the only reason.

Filippo Marinetti said in his Futurist Manifesto of 1909 that museums are like graveyards, and that automobiles are more beautiful than the Winged Victory of
Samothrace. Why should the objects that somebody has collected matter to others?

For me, museums are where objects which preserve human experience are stored and exhibited with a story. I like that. And, in fact, they are in that sense similar to novels. For me, “What’s the point of a museum?” is asking “What’s the point of a novel?” Why do we read people’s stories? They are places of introspection, observation about human experience. They are places where, of course, objects, signs, symbols of any culture are preserved and represented. More or less like novels. In novels, experience is related to language, various ways we talk, ups and downs and colors and shades of daily language, along with sights and smells and sounds of our experience. Museums have also these qualities of preservation—and not only preserving, but representing. You go to a museum and say, “Well, this museum is about love, or about the experience of something. So why don’t we have this picture, why don’t we have that picture?” We are always concerned about representing the things we put in a museum right. Novels also have these qualities.

You talk about how museums are more than just the objects that are in them. At one point, your protagonist says: “I felt such consolation...[in] the many empty museums I found in Paris, the collections that no one ever visits.” You can say that the Louvre is an amazing museum because of the amazing art in it, but there is the implication that the character of the museum is as important or more important than the art it contains.

My character, Kemal, says that he’s not critical of the Louvre in that sense, but he does not feel happy in crowded museums where mass tourism hits, where the power and signs and symbols of a nation are displayed. He’s more interested in the culture of collecting, the capacity that human beings have to attach to objects, that lead to the spirit of making collections. He’s more interested
in these issues than in problems of representation and politics in big museums where mass tourism hits, so he evades these places. Not that he’s critical of the Louvre, or Metropolitan, or Uffizi, but just he’s more concerned about small museums where the collector’s passion and drama are felt more easily.

In addition to publishing The Museum of Innocence, you also plan to open a real museum in Istanbul. Do you worry that your museum will be overrun by tourism?

Yeah, I worry about that, and fantasize about that. [Laughs.] We talk about that with the German architect, whether we should make the doors, the exits, the venues bigger or smaller. But since my novel is a tribute to the neglected and empty museums, their melancholic poetry, I sometimes think that even if nobody comes, then it’s also a success, or it’s not a dramatic failure, because I cherished and wrote in a heartfelt way about the museums that no one visits. But if it’s overpopulated by mass tourism, I don’t know whether I should be happy about that.

In the book, your protagonist’s father says, “Any intelligent person knows that life is a beautiful thing, and that the purpose of life is to be happy. But it seems only idiots are ever happy. How can we explain this?” How can you explain that?

Well, if I could explain it, I would write that! I will give an answer in my second volume of The Museum of Innocence.
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ALL SET IN PANTONE 648 (DARK SAPPHIRE BLUE) ON MARBLE WHITE MOHAWK PAPER.

THANK YOU ALICE CHUNG, CARMEN CUSMANO AND STEPH DINUT.
¡HASTA LUEGO!