The Remedy for Reception Aesthetics in Interpreting Istanbul: Memories and the City

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ABSTRACT

*Istanbul* by the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk accumulated his popularity before his winning of the Noble Prize for Literature in 2006. The unique genre of autobiographic city annal challenges the reception aesthetics interpretation advocated by Jauss and Iser and evermore widely accepted as an effective way of interpreting literary works. The theory emphasizes that the reader enjoys the most important role in the literature interpretation whose embodiment of the “indeterminacies” in the text schema is the source of the text meaning, without which the literary work is incomplete. However, how does this theory apply to Chinese readers in their interpretation of *Istanbul*, a foreign experimental work of unprecedented genre? According to the concept of “expected vision” of Gadaner, the reader needs to construct a new “expected vision” by reading the extensive knowledge of the social factor—the city of Istanbul, and the ideological factor—the life of the author. It is a remedy for reception aesthetics in interpreting *Istanbul*. In this way, the “expected vision” accords to the text. An accurate and comprehensive interpretation is likely to be achieved.

INTRODUCTION

Orhan Pamuk, the Turkish novelist, created an autobiographic city annal *Istanbul*—*Memories and the city* in the year of 2005, which won him the German Peace Book Award and the nomination of the Nobel Prize in Literature. The next year witnessed his winning of the laurel of Nobel Prize. What kind of work is it which stirred up a Turkish storm in the world literature, made Hüzzün a pronoun of a city and a nation overnight, and let the elegant Swedish judges argue so heatedly that they postponed the award ceremony? How to interpret this work? Reception aesthetics has been regarded as an effective way to interpret literary works. However, when Chinese readers interpret *Istanbul*, the effectiveness of this method needs discussing.

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THE THEORY OF RECEPTION AESTHETICS

Originated from hermeneutic theories, reception aesthetics blossomed in the 1960’s and flourished in the 1970’s. It was developed by two German literary theorists and aesthetes Hans Robert Jauss and Wölfgang Iser. The theory focuses on the function of the reader in interpreting literary works. It holds that there are “appealing structures”, or “indeterminacies” in the text schema. In order to understand the text, the reader needs to decode the “indeterminacies” by allowing full play to his previous reading experiences. The process of appealing is called “embodiment” of the meaning by the reader. It realizes “a general shift in concern from the author and the work to the text and the reader”. The embodiment of literature is not arbitrary and frameless but a historic process. It abides by the specific logic in the formation and variation of the aesthetic principles. The logic meant by Jauss is “a dialectical process of production and reception”. He believes that the reader is not only a judge, a critic, but also another author. More than one interpretations from readers produce more than one texts with diverse meanings. This is the value of the text where the life of literature lies. He even further asserts that the embodiment of the reader is the source of the literature meaning. The indeterminate text is only a carrier to bear the load of meaning.

THE LIMITATIONS OF RECEPTION AESTHETICS IN INTERPRETING ISTANBUL

According to reception aesthetics, a literature work is composed of two poles: the indeterminate text and the embodiment of the reader. Literary work is a structure full of indeterminate points and vacant schemas. As Ingarden stated “every object, person or thing consists of many indeterminate points.” The text itself cannot decode the “indeterminacies” no matter how many details it provides. It is up to the reader to call out the reflected world from the schema structure of the text. Embodiment is associated with the life experiences, reading visions, mood, and other accidental factors of the reader. The text is meaningless without embodiment.

Being unique in form and meaning, Istanbul is a novel with many non-novel features. According to Wikipedia, it is an autobiographical memoir that is deeply melancholic about the vast cultural change that has rocked Turkey—the unending battle between the modern and the receding past. It is also a eulogy to the lost joint family tradition. When interviewed by Paris Review, Pamuk mentioned that “I tried to combine the romantic sceneries of Istanbul and personal feelings for this city in this work. No one has done it before. It is a creative work free from impacts from other writers.”

No “Indeterminacies”

Istanbul is anti-traditional. You cannot find heroes or heroines in this novel, and there are no designed plots, no ending, nor theme. What suffuse the book are the extremely detailed miscellaneous depictions of the city. As a city annal, Pamuk describes the city in extreme details which decode the “indeterminacies”, if there are any. He depicts an afternoon scenery for six pages: fathers going home, old ships on Bosphorus, sailors cleaning the deck, the aged bookseller undergoing bankruptcy, children chasing among vehicles on the street, the old man peddling religious materials,
beads and pilgrim oil in the temple yard, vacant boat stores, silent women with veils waiting for the never-coming bus, a prostitute walking up and down the square patiently to spot the last drunken client, passengers for the ship shift at winter midnight, the creaky wooden building once being the Pasha office and now the municipal headquarters, the wife gazing out behind curtains waiting for her midnight-returning husband, millions of identical apartment gates fading color due to filth, rust, smog and dust, sea-gulls perching on the rust barges, steam whistling from the ship amid the fog.

This depiction of afternoon scenery is typical of the writing of Pamuk. Exquisite style, paratactic paralleling sentence structures and hairy details with numerous old pictures intervening as supplements make the work full and sure in meaning. Reading it is a continuous and passive message reception process. No “indeterminacy” exists in the schema structure of the text for the readers to embody. Meanwhile, reading the novel is like standing before a huge, complex, and compacted Turkish fine painting. For Chinese readers who have limited relevant reading experiences, there is nothing to resort to call out the embodiment of the text. Even if they know the Bosphorus strait and the Muslim temple, how much do they possibly know the Byzantine Empire and the Ottoman Empire? How much do they understand the hopelessness and the melancholy behind the sceneries? Istanbul is a work exceeding the visual and spacial experiences of Chinese readers. Because no “indeterminacy” is left for them to decode and because they have limited reading experiences to embody the meaning, the reception aesthetics interpretation has limitations in interpreting this novel.

A Personal Memoir of the Life in the City

Apart from being realistic and objective, the novel is also subjective and fictitious. Pamuk said, “I wrote the changes, emotions and memories of the city in an unrealistic and perceptual style. I did not describe it as a tourist handbook. I wrote the humanistic sensibilities and compassions of the people living here. A city can be an index to evoke your memory.” The novel is an opportunity to pursue his dream and propose his questions in literature. He wonders how foreign writers such as Gérard de Nerval, Théophile Gautier and Gustave Flaubert look at this city and how their viewpoints on literature affect the Turkish writers. He imagines “the four solitude and melancholy writers” passing different places in Istanbul.

He wrote about the fat poet Yahya went to the restaurant where Pamuk’s grammar visited once in a week and complained about the food once returning home. When the poet had his lunch, the famous historian Koçu passed by under the window to seek for the materials for his Encyclopedia of Istanbul, with a piece of newspaper in his hand on which there was an article of the famous novelist. Meanwhile Hysar, the author of Bosphorus Memorandum, a short indoorsy neat freak was quarrelling with the meat seller who wrapped his cat’s food, a package of giblets up in a piece of dirty newspaper.

In the eyes of the boy Pamuk, Istanbul at this moment is an old city with childlike interests full of innocent fancies which enrich the time and space dimensions of the city with his imaginations and sensibilities. Reception aesthetics holds that literature text is a meaningless incomplete work without the embodiment of the reader. In this work, however, Istanbul is no longer a material city, but a private museum of Pamuk. It is complete for the author. Every street, building, coffee bar, post, and sign has special meaning for Pamuk himself like that in a diary. The text has been embodied by the author himself. If the reader resorts to his previous reading experience which is not
relevant, his embodiment may result in unnecessary misreading and arbitrary distortions.

REMEDY FOR RECEPTION AESTHETICS IN INTERPRETING ISTANBUL

In his book *Truth and Method*, Gadamer, the German philosopher and the advocator of ontological hermeneutics proposes the concept of “expected vision”. He believes that the vision of the reader points to an expectation. “Once a certain initial meaning appears, the interpreter designs it for the entire text. The same meaning keeps reappearing because we read the text with this certain initial meaning.” The more accordant of a text to its “expected vision” is, the smoother the realization of the interpretation will be. For Chinese readers, it is impossible to accord their “expected vision” to the text of *Istanbul* because the lack of related knowledge hinders the construction of the desired “expected vision”. Pre-existing thinking patterns from previous reading experiences may lead to improper “expected vision”, which will interfere, constrain and even distort the text meaning.

No work exists in the vacuum of knowledge and is free from interpretation possibility. *Istanbul* is interpretable even for Chinese readers on the condition that they accumulate new reading experiences, broaden their reading horizon and construct new “expected vision”. According to Gadamer, literature text is associated with not only social factors but also ideological factors. For this novel, social factor involves the present and history of the city; ideological factor refers to the role of author as a person. In order to comprehend the novel, Chinese readers must read about the knowledge of the writing object—the city of Istanbul and the knowledge of the author—the life of Pamuk, which are the social and ideological factors playing parts in the novel. The redeeming reading helps them to construct new “expected vision” and accord it to the proper comprehension of this novel. The reading is an effective approach and a remedy for reception aesthetics in interpreting *Istanbul*.

The Glorious but Receding Past of the City

Istanbul is a city with a long history of three thousand years. The earliest beginning of it can be tracked down to the seven century B.C. Since then it underwent four empires of Persia, Macedonia, Byzantine and Ottoman. It was once the capital city of the Rome Empire and the Ottoman Empire. As the terminal of the ancient silk route and an important junction of transportation, military, trade and religion, it incorporated the quintessence of diverse thoughts, cultures, and art forms from various nations of the continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa. It could be called a world city at that time. After the seventh century, the Empire was involved in economic depression, government corruption, and disputes among nationalities, which eventually led to a crisis. As a defeated country in the First World War, the Empire clasped. It lost all its colonies. The territory of the newly-established Republic of Turkey reduced to the Turkish mainland. Ankara is the new capital. With the downfall of the Ottoman Empire and the change of the capital, the ancient city of civilization began declining.

The reading of the declination of the Empire and the city helps readers to understand *Hüzün*, an important sentiment of the Istanbul people. It is a collective melancholy, a mutual part of their culture, psychology, and identity, permeating into their daily life. East and West, modernity and tradition, politics and art, religion and
secularizations contrast to each other in the city, amid of which the Istanbul people choose to live with numb souls, experiencing sentiments like loss, grudge, blame, shame, anxiety, etc.

**The Author as a Person**

The author as a person is another necessary and essential part of the redeeming reading. *Istanbul* is an autobiographic prose. Pamuk wrote it as a personal memoir of his life, memories, and childlike fancies.

**DESTINY TRAJECTORY**

The downfall of the nation and the declination of his family are concurrent with each other on Pamuk. Born in a wealthy engineer family, he spent his childhood with his well-being and happiness comfortably cared. Like his nation, his life went along a similar trajectory of ups and downs. When he grew up, he underwent parent divorce, educational problem, and financial hardship. His loss of “good old days” is a miniature of the nation.

Understanding his life helps Chinese readers to understand *Hüzün* more profoundly. Witnessing the declination of his family and the nation, Pamuk wrote *Hüzün* with an insightful perspective. It is the reason of his inner melancholy and the cause of dismal of the city. In his novel, Pamuk investigates the philosophical and cultural origin of *Hüzün*. He believes that at the superficial level, the word *Hüzün* was coined by some European visitors who were touched by the declining sceneries of the city. However, multinationalities and diverse civilizations, declination of the Ottoman Empire, conflicts between native secular elites and Islamic Fundamentalists are the three profound factors accounting for the formation of the word. “*Hüzün* is not an incurable disease,” he wrote, “It teaches the Istanbul people to be content, harmonious, respectful and humble. It encourages them to read back their glory and make it a starting point to march forward.”

**IDENTITY ANXIETY**

Pamuk has trouble with his identity. He was brought up, educated and writes in a western way. Meanwhile in the west, he is a writer with oriental mysticism. The identity anxiety besets Pamuk the same way it plagues the city of Istanbul. “The Republic country once adopted Turkification policy”. Later, “a small group of elites who advocates westernization desire complements from the western writers and presses when they regard Turkey is more western.” “With the thriving of the westernization and the Turkish nationalism, the situation is more complicated.” At the Nobel Prize award ceremony, Pamuk read, “As for my place in this world, in life and in literature, my basic feeling is away from centre. In the world, in Turkey, in Istanbul, anywhere, there are centers where the life is more colorful and more exiting. Unfortunately, I do not belong to it. Similarly, the world literature has its centre which is far away from me and other Turkish writers.”

The Pamuk house locates on the west coast of Bosphorus strait. From his study on the top of the building, he often overlooks the entire Istanbul, the Saint Sophia Church and the blue Muslim Temple foiling to each other, the Bosphorus strait within striking distance. “The best place to enjoy the Istanbul scenery is not on the European side, nor
on the Asian side, but on the bridge connecting the two continents. However, it is both the advantage and the dilemma of Turkey. It is attacked by other Islam countries for “blaspheming” and adopting westernization policy. Pitifully, the western countries are not ready to accept Turkey as a part of their culture.” The former American President George Walker Bush quoted these pertinent words by Pamuk at the NATO summit in Istanbul in June, 2004.

In the world literature, as Pamuk said, Turkish literature is away from centre. When the Chinese readers are attracted by the exoticism of the novel, meanwhile they may find that due to their lack of knowledge of this culture, the book is as strange as the extra-terrestrial civilization. Reception aesthetics is no longer effective in that Chinese readers has very limited and even no relevant reading experiences as a source to use their imagination in the process of “embodiment” when the writing leaves no “indeterminacy” and when the novel is a private memoir only for the author himself. The extensive reading of the city and of the author is a remedy for reception aesthetics in interpreting Istanbul.

CONCLUSION

“In the quest for the melancholic soul of his native city, he has discovered new symbols for the clash and interlacing of cultures.” This is the ultimate reason of the Swedish judges when they decided to grant the Prize to Orphan Pamuk after heated discussion. Pamuk wrote Istanbul in the way of feeling his own pulse. He tracks down his family history while visiting the historical remains and makes a record of his life in describing the city. The destinies of the author and the city are so similar and so solidly combined to each other. This interweaving writing feature is indexical for Chinese readers to study the social factor—the historical and present status of the city and the ideological factor—the life of the author, which play parts between the lines of the novel. Knowing these factors helps Chinese readers to construct their “expected vision” and accord it to an accurate and comprehensive interpretation of Istanbul.

REFERENCES