

PROLOGEMON: HOW I DISCOVERED THE MEANING OF
“TRAVELING EAST”

L A U R E N C E R A W

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Abstract

This essay exposes the constructed nature of the east/west binary as a means by which westerners (especially) can reinforce their sense of superiority, while easterners can use it as an intellectual stick to criticize their western counterparts. In its place I advocate a more measured approach based on listening to and understanding alternative perspectives, not only in terms of interpersonal relationships but in terms of personal psychology. The importance of mesearch as a concept, uniting scholarly and personal approaches, is proposed as a means to achieve this aim.

Keywords: *colonialism, binarisms, mesearch, travel, psychology*

I received my doctorate from the University of Sussex, United Kingdom, in 1988. It was a difficult task to accomplish, involving much rewriting and consultations with my thesis supervisor who continually criticized me for a lack of substantial argument. I relished the experience of visiting archives and obtaining reams of photocopies during my research (no smartphone photography then!), but found it hard to shape my thoughts into an organized form. After several drafts I accomplished the task to the satisfaction of the examining committee, even though the thesis (to be honest) remains an unwieldy document, useful as a resource but requiring extensive revision if it were ever to appear in published form.

I emerged as a qualified expert in Renaissance Drama and modern performance, but discovered there was scant demand for early career academics in my field. After a couple of unsuccessful applications, including one to my institution where I completed my first degree (University of Exeter), I contemplated a career as a high school educator until I answered an advertisement in *The Guardian* for posts at Bilkent University, a relatively new private university in the Republic of Turkey. I was called to an interview where one of the professors immediately offered me a job, giving me until the end of that day to make up my mind. With no opportunity to debate the issue with my family, I said yes within two hours of the interview finishing: three months later,

in September 1989, I left Britain for the first time (apart from vacations) for a sojourn in the Turkish capital.

Most of my close acquaintances thought I was crazy: why should I quit the relative prosperity of a middle-class south London suburb for central Anatolia? I knew not one word of Turkish, and the only mental images that were current in the United Kingdom at that time had been shaped by Alan Parker's overheated *Midnight Express* (1978) that purported to expose the brutality inherent in Turkish prisons, but stacked the emotional cards in favor of the clean-cut American hero (Brad Davis).

In the late Eighties life in the Republic was not quite as fast-paced as it is today. İstanbul's Atatürk airport was housed in a cramped gray-stone building where the queues of foreigners for visas permitting entry into the country were legendarily long. Ankara's Esenboğa airport had very few flights save for the hourly shuttle operated by Turkish Airlines to and from İstanbul. British Airways provided a daily direct flight from Heathrow to Ankara which was predominantly peopled by embassy personnel and BP workers engaged on a major industrial project in the capital. No one, not least the cabin crew, knew anything about Ankara: the purser insisted on pronouncing it **Ankara** rather than the more familiar **Ankara**.

I begin with this fragment of autobiography to emphasize how, for this twentysomething Englishman at least, the process of "traveling East" represented a geographical and a psychological shift – I decamped to a city that was certainly not in Europe, but no one was quite sure of its true whereabouts ("Asia?" "the Middle East?" "Anatolia?" all of them?). The city's history had been shaped by a variety of historical moments; not only Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's western-focused regime of the Twenties and Thirties, but centuries of Ottoman rule that terminated as recently as 1923. When I entered the city for the first time I found that many of my mental assumptions proved unfounded: Bilkent had a modern campus that was in the process of completion with furnished faculty apartments that were not only well heated (a necessary amenity to withstand the harsh Anatolian winters) but provided all the necessary appliances for a young singleton such as myself to learn to cook for the first time. When I took the shuttle bus downtown for the first time, I found that the ambiance reminded me strongly of life growing up in south London in the Sixties and Seventies, with school learners happily walking home and purchasing sweets and fizzy drinks from the local corner shop (or *bakkal*). I was taken aback: where could I discover the "Eastern" aspects of this civilization that people back home had taken great pains to warn me about? Why did I feel so at home in this new land, even though I knew next to no words of Turkish for the first year at least, apart from yes (*evet*), no (*Hayır*), and one beer please (*bir bira lütfen*).

Twenty-seven years later I live in the same city but ask much the same questions of myself: why have I remained here so long, and why do I no longer really understand where my “home” is located? What I do know, however, is that the east/west binary that shaped my initial preconceptions of the Republic of Turkey no longer holds much significance: when I travel around the country (or to any new territories worldwide), I harbor few expectations but rather trust in first-hand experiences (inevitably recorded and analyzed in my journal).

Yet it is obvious that some of my fellow-foreigners in Turkey do not share these views. Don Randall, who started at Bilkent some years after I had moved on, recently published a critique of the discipline of English Studies in local universities, which in his view followed the pedagogic model put forward by Thomas Babington Macaulay as long ago as 1825, treating literature as “a new and potentially edifying subject for higher education and a powerful instrument for more effective imperial management” (45). Randall claims that his institution has deliberately discriminated against local staff, who are “overworked and poorly paid, and effectively prevented from advancing upward through the [academic] ranks” (50). Although this treatment might be deplored, it represents an inevitable outcome of “an under-performing educational system” that regards literary studies “as a field of scholarly endeavor [that] precludes effective contribution to scholarly research and publication” (50). Literature is conceived as a body of knowledge to be communicated to learners through lectures and rehashed in examinations, while the learners’ level of written and spoken English precludes effective engagement with often complex texts. Hence few people can break through the “low ceiling of achievement [in English departments] which is tellingly reflected in scholarly articles published by faculty” (65). Randall has no effective solution to this alleged problem: “The perceived value – indeed, the real value – of higher degrees awarded by Turkish universities will continue to decline, and standards of scholarship [...] will remain poor” (65-6). The only solution in his view is to engage more early career academics from “reputable Anglophone-world institutions” so as to “discover the power to productively challenge and transform the purpose and meaning of English studies from a position outside the English-speaking world” (67).

While Randall’s arguments are factually questionable (his use of Macaulay would certainly be resented by the inhabitants of a country whose sole experience of colonization took place for a few years after the end of World War One), what intrigues me more are the rhetorical strategies he employs to prioritize “western” over “eastern” modes of thought. Compared to foreign faculty such as himself (as well as other Britons and Americans), local academics are under-educated and poorly paid, the products of a third-rate system that cannot begin to match the standards set by their western equivalents. While local academics make the effort to write articles, their work is sadly deficient in “scholarly standards” – the kind of standards that can only be

reached in “reputable Anglophone-world institutions.” The only means to improve standards is to import more representatives of those institutions, and thereby perpetuate those strategies of “imperial management” whereby the west maintains its intellectual stranglehold over the east. Only then can Turkish learners understand “the purpose and meaning of English studies.”

The assumptions behind such statements reinforce Randall’s orientalism. Learning literature “properly” can only be enjoyed in western institutions, which will give graduates sufficient mental equipment to take the discipline into new areas of research. If they are unlucky enough to be employed in a Turkish university, they will be hampered by the “low ceiling of achievement” consigning them to the intellectual margins. Randall makes no effort to understand the culture-specific reasons why foreign literatures play an important role in Turkish curricula; he assumes complacently that the theoretical foundations of the disciplines in the west would be replicated in the east. Although traveling thousands of kilometers in terms of distance, it’s clear that he has resisted any form of imaginative travel, as he berates Turkish institutions for their perceived shortcomings.

None of the above discussion should come as a surprise; such colonialist strategies have been characteristic of western visitors to the Republic ever since travel became a fashionable pursuit in the eighteenth century. What is more startling is how they continue to dominate daily exchanges: a foreign colleague recently described their travels around the Republic of Turkey and how they felt that they had to protect themselves against possible attack from local people. The assumptions behind this complaint are breathtakingly arrogant, implying that a foreign visitor from the west is far more liable to attack if they move out of their home environment, as compared to their home cultures. In light of the fact that it is still possible to walk the streets of most cities without fear of molestation, I would respond by inviting that particular person to open their eyes and look more carefully around them rather than giving in to groundless fears.

It is not only foreign colleagues who resort to east/west binaries to confirm their prejudices against (or should it be fears of) the Other. There are others who disparage western scholars in an attempt to set up intellectual communities of their own. Gönül Pultar describes the creation of the Cultural Studies Association of Turkey (TKAG) in the early years of this century, which from the outset decided to conduct business in Turkish among locally co-opted members (apart from myself) (46-7). She claims that few people outside the country understand “the Turkish predicament of being both the hegemon and the subaltern [...] something is always missing, and the work ends up being not totally satisfactory” (57). Many westerners either teaching or writing about the Republic “acknowledge Turks as hegemon only to denigrate them as having been, and in certain cases still being, brutish despots” (57). Hence it is

incumbent on locals, whether western or locally-educated, to determine their own scholarly and theoretical agenda without “interference” from westerners.

I am not for one moment going to claim that similar intellectual dead-ends exist in other territories; it is likely that in contexts that were once ruled by the Ottomans and subsequently colonized by the Soviets, quite different histories of English Studies can be traced (Bālu). What I do suggest is that the binaries underpinning many of the arguments so far mentioned are transnational, based on Lévi-Strauss’s assumption that units within a structure tend to group in pairs or oppositions. Jacques Derrida develops this theory by suggesting that within such pair, one inevitably possesses a superior cultural value to the other; one is positive, the other negative. This provides a valuable tool for westerners, or those educated in the west, to reassert their territorial and psychological superiority. It foregrounds the belief in the self, the speaker, as the origin of what is being said, while writing does not necessarily indicate who wrote it. Such logocentric structures lie at the heart of western metaphysics (and hence of the humanism associated with English Studies) (Klages 54-5).

Transcending binaries requires a significant shift in perception based on recognizing their constructed nature. The west and the east cannot be definitively identified on a map; they are strategic modes of containment used to define the self in opposition to others. As I suggested earlier, since I moved to the Republic my identity has undergone radical changes, to such an extent that I find it difficult, if not impossible to define my subject position. This process has been complicated by the fall-out of an operation to cure a recurrence of thyroid cancer in 2013, which left me significantly vocally impaired. Once I cultivated a larger-than-life image of energetic vigor and vocal flexibility (I used to like singing and speaking in different voices if classes became too tedious), but now I had to get used to a voice microphone in all my public speaking engagements whether in the lecture theater or conference hall. The operation had a profound effect on my identity: even after two and a half years I feel I have been permanently damaged, as I can neither attract someone’s attention nor make myself heard in large public gatherings. I have kept a journal wherein I record all my impressions, whether academic or otherwise, while I have had to learn the value of silence and its attendant traits of detachment and observation. Trying to reconcile past with present conceptions has left me in a continual state of emotional flux.

Most of these struggles have been funneled into my “mesearch” combining shifting constructions of selfhood with scholarship to develop alternative constructions of sexualities, identities and cross-cultural engagements. This worldview throws up fascinating possibilities: if “I” engage in research that impacts on me, then “I” go into the classroom or conference hall with similar objectives. “I” engage in an intricate negotiation with myself, my research, my learners, and my environment (Rees).

While mesearch might appear to confirm rather than challenge the logocentric view of the world, I would argue that I am never sure of what my “self” actually comprises – a complex amalgam of my pre- and post-operation selves, a continually shifting kaleidoscope of impressions, responses, and imaginative promptings inspired by my southern English upbringing and my experiences of central Anatolia over the past quarter century. What I am aware of is the need to acquire more *openness* to cope with the major life-changes experienced over the last three years, as well as reflecting on how such changes have impacted on my identity and the relationship to the cultures I inhabit.

It is this notion of openness that individuals forget whenever they invoke the east/west binary, as well as any other binaries shaping their views of the world. Maybe we should set aside our beliefs in individual hegemony and embrace more community-focused modes of life instead. In an academic environment this shift would encourage us to set aside our preconceptions of the Other and accept that everyone pursues alternative modes of research, pedagogy and curriculum construction. Rather than imposing our prejudices on readers or learners, we should be prepared to listen: silence can prove as meaningful as speech in public gatherings. We should acknowledge the presence of complex psycho-social constructions that resist surface interpretation: just because some colleagues talk a lot does not necessarily denote garrulity, but could tell us more about the speech acts within which their discourses have been constructed. “Scholarship” as a concept might signify very different things for those inhabiting nonwestern territories using their native languages rather than English. Even after spending such a long time in one city I discover new insights almost daily through constant interaction with colleagues and learners of all nationalities and cultural backgrounds.

Skeptical readers might point out that they have neither the time nor experienced the kind of traumatic life-experiences that might prompt them towards such metaphysical reflection. Or perhaps they might claim that their roles as foreign-trained experts in language or literature teaching requires them to work with learners in the best way they know – i.e. employing western-inspired pedagogic and conversational strategies. I would counter by suggesting that exposure to locally-produced cultural phenomena (in written, online or oral forms) helps us gain insight into the conditions shaping their creation and/or production. They provide first-hand evidence of the arbitrariness of the east/west binary and how its construction (or lack thereof) depends solely on perception. A good example of this from my current research project is provided by the films of the Turkish director Nuri Bilge Ceylan. A winner of the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival for *Kış Uykusu* (*Winter Sleep*) (2014), he has been customarily categorized by scholars and critics alike as an “arthouse” director, whose leisurely narrative construction and sparse plots have been deemed too boring for mainstream filmgoers. In a piece on the boring movie past and

present, Erick Neher includes Ceylan’s previous film *Bir Zamanlar Anadolu’da* (*Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*) (2011) as an example of how a director criticizes mainstream cinema representations of police procedure that “ignores the way that real police officers interact with multiple cases at the same time [...] Ceylan’s style asks for a healthy skepticism on the part of the viewer in relation to genre conventions” (Neher). This view might satisfy western viewers, but I contend that Ceylan deliberately constructs his narratives with an emphasis on the *mise-en-scène* rather than narrative development. We reflect on the characters’ relationship to the Anatolian landscape, its vastness stretching apparently endlessly in the background of each exterior shot, reminding us of humanity’s insignificance in the overall scheme of things. Anatolians enjoy a close relationship to the land; they spring from the earth and return there when they die. They identify with the elements (water is a symbol of eternity, carrying everything in its path), and through such identifications they can appreciate the Creator’s presence in all things. Ceylan builds his narratives around these core beliefs, through lengthy shots of rivers with the sound of rippling water, birds singing in the trees, and lengthy panning shots of the mountains with human beings appearing like specks on the horizon. Another favorite stylistic device is to employ long close-ups of characters looking out to see or listening to the roll of thunder as if reminding themselves of their proximity to the elements. As spectators we meditate on what unfolds on screen rather than involving ourselves in the inexorable forward movement of a classical narrative.

A lesser-known Turkish director, Semih Kaplanoğlu, employs similar techniques in an attempt to redefine the viewer’s position vis-à-vis the text. The *Yusuf* trilogy (*Yumurta* (*Egg*) (2007), *Süt* (*Milk*) (2008), and *Bal* (*Honey*) (2010)) traces the life of a young male from childhood to maturity in terms of his relationship to a variety of landscapes. Growing up in the rural Black Sea region, he shifts southwards to the Aegean and ends up unhappily imprisoned in İstanbul’s urban sprawl. Kaplanoğlu is chiefly preoccupied with that sense of psychological and spiritual alienation that affects many internal migrants as they seek their future in the metropolis and by doing so lose all connection to their families and their homeland (which are indivisible to a large extent). When I began work at Bilkent University, I used to wonder at the frequency with which my learners used to return to their hometowns. Wasn’t university part of the experience of growing up, where youngsters could flee the familial nest and learn how to live independently for the first time? In western institutions, yes; but the decision to go home fulfilled a therapeutic function for many Bilkenters as they drew strength from renewed contact with their places of birth.

Contemplating the relationship between humanity and the landscape requires a reflective mode of thought that is less preoccupied with outcomes and more with process. Striving for an ideal – career success, a happy ending, a settled family life – might be desirable, but perhaps we should focus more

closely on our quotidian interactions with people and environment. We might begin by listening to birds singing, or looking at the sunset; as literary scholars we could appreciate poetry for its sonic and imagistic qualities rather than trying to decode its meaning; as filmgoers we could enjoy the pleasure of watching what is represented onscreen rather than prejudging the overall experience of the movie.

Such sensations might seem far removed from the subject discussed at the beginning of this piece – the east/west binary and its political implications. But this is precisely the point; by considering one subject “far removed” from another we are drawing on western-inspired categorizations marking one body of knowledge off from another. If nothing else, what I have learned from my daily encounters in the Republic of Turkey is the capacity to embrace contradictory notions at the same time: through exposure to alternative narrative conventions inspired by Anatolian folklore, I learn something about my past, present, and future. I can distinguish between my past and present modes of existence, but at the same time note their similarities: why shouldn’t we look at English literary texts through the prism of Anatolian folklore so as to discover something new about the relationship of authors to their environments? And can such insights enhance the process of mesearch described earlier?

In my specialized field of research – adaptation studies, scholars place great importance on notions of rewriting: adaptation, remediation, recreation, transformation, translation. Such strategies help to reclaim the author from the clutches of Barthesian theory (which questioned the author’s very existence) by asserting that everyone can be involved in the process of reworking texts into different media (literature to film, film to television, television to video-game, and so on). Audiences and reviewers are as important as screenplay writers in their ability to contribute to new trends and thereby influence opinions. Scholars of adaptation such as myself are regularly praised for their innovations, a point I explored in more detail with Tony Gurr in our *Adaptation and Learning* (2013). The emphasis on newness and innovation presupposes a desire for originality – a particularly elusive concept with an inevitable binary opposite (imitation) attached. We are faced once again with a conundrum that so preoccupied Randall in his criticism of Turkish scholars’ evident inability to produce work of sufficient quality in accordance with western-initiated theoretical models.

If we set aside this binary, however, then perhaps we might enjoy the unexpected sensation of thinking differently for its own sake. This is what is so attractive about mesearch, based on the desire not to obtain public recognition for our efforts, but rather to please ourselves. Such experiences are paramount in appreciating the work of filmmakers like Ceylan or Kaplanoğlu. I am reminded of Andrew Marvell’s famous lines from “Thoughts in a Garden” (c.1650) where he observes “How mainly men themselves amaze/ To win the palm, the oak, or bays” through “uncessant labours [...]. Crown’d from one single herb or tree.” It

is far more pleasurable to appreciate how “the flowers and trees do close/ To weave the Garlands of Repose” (Marvell). We can savor the aroma of those “Garlands of Repose” through listening to and observing ourselves as well as those around us and the worlds they inhabit.

Once again my argument seems to have strayed from the central preoccupation of this piece, which began with my autobiographical recollections of traveling east. I appear to have taken a lateral rather than a forward-looking path by covering an apparently disparate range of subjects: autobiography, English Studies, Turkish film, mesearch, and Marvell. Yet I maintain that some kind of thread links them all; rather than viewing my eastern travels through a binarist paradigm that foregrounds the superiority of western values, I have tried to suggest an alternative construction which has more to do with the quest for alternative thought-patterns. Maybe we can characterize this search as one of (self-) discovery, culminating in the realization that binaries are not only constructed but unnecessary, preventing us from achieving different forms of fulfillment – personal, emotional, societal. Perhaps we should embrace different forms of travel, not just by public transport, private vehicle or other forms of conveyance, but psychologically as well, despite the emotional difficulties involved.

The contributions in this issue of LINGUACULTURE exemplify this process in action in a variety of contexts, employing different theoretical and/or disciplinary strategies. I refrain from describing them as “radical,” because the term evokes the binarist opposite (conventional) that I am explicitly trying to avoid. But nonetheless they provide absorbing and interesting perspectives on a highly suggestive topic.

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