The anxiety of cultural authenticity in Turkish communitarian thought: Ahmet Hamdi Tanpinar and Peyami Safa on Europe and modernity

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 27 July 2010

Keywords:
Peyami Safa
Ahmet Hamdi Tanpinar
Modernity
Europe
Cultural authenticity
Hermeneutics

ABSTRACT

The uneasy tension between ongoing disputes about Turkey’s Europeanisation and an emphasis on cultural authenticity has characterised much of Turkish social and political thought over the last two centuries. This article explores conceptions of Europe, modernity and tradition contained in the writings of two twentieth-century Turkish writers, Ahmet Hamdi Tanpinar (1901–1962) and Peyami Safa (1899–1961) whose writings express an anxiety of cultural authenticity. Varieties of communitarian thinking, coupled with an emphasis on a ‘synthesis’ between past and future, tradition and modernity, Turkey and Europe, had been invoked and advocated by many writers and scholars who sought to come to terms with the challenges surrounding Turkey’s Europeanisation throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Tanpinar and Safa are widely considered to be among the most influential representatives of this deeply rooted communitarian tradition in modern Turkish social imaginary. By drawing on Tanpinar’s and Safa’s essays on politics, society, culture and the East–West distinction, this article demonstrates the radical divergences between their perspectives and draws out the political implications of their views of Europe, modernity and tradition. Although he appears to be one of the advocates of Turkey’s Europeanisation and the idea of a civilisational synthesis, Safa’s conservatism is based on a sketchy theory of radical particularity and cultural essentialism that reflects a repudiation of universalism and cosmopolitanism, and which shows a tendency bordering on a celebration of all collectivist self-assertions and struggles against liberal democracy. Tanpinar’s communitarian vision, on the other hand, with its emphasis on ‘tradition’ and ‘continuity’, aims to reconcile the political ideals of European modernity with a restored cultural tradition. One of the primary purposes of this article is to fully work out the originality of Tanpinar’s thought by highlighting the intimations of a distinctively hermeneutical dimension that figure prominently in his writings, and which have largely gone unnoticed.

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Introduction

The idea of Europe has been one of the most hotly debated topics in modern Turkish social and political thought since the second half of the nineteenth century. The ways in which it has been articulated are accompanied by an interrelated controversy regarding the ‘peculiarity of Turkish modernity’ and the ‘authenticity of Turkish culture’. This outlook, which can be construed as reflecting an ‘anxiety of cultural authenticity’, particularly manifests itself in the insistence ‘to go back to our own selves’, an assertion that has come to occupy a prominent place within Turkish social and political thought over the last century.1 The uneasy tension between an ongoing debate over the meaning of Europe – and Turkey’s position within it – and a strong emphasis on an ‘authentic localness’ has thus become integral to modern Turkish ‘social imaginary’ almost in its entirety.2

1 Nurdan Gürbilek, one of the most distinguished expositors of Tanpinar’s work, agrees on this: N. Gürbilek, Dandies and Originals: Authenticity, Belatedness, and the Turkish Novel, The South Atlantic Quarterly, 102-2/3 (2003), 599–628. See also Gürbilek, Küti Çoçuk Türk (İstanbul, 2001), 94–134. Serif Mardin’s analysis, too, shows that this anxiety is deeply rooted in Turkish literature and modern Turkish social imaginary: Mardin, ‘Tanzimattan Sonra Araştırma Batılılaşma’ icin: Türk Modernleştmesi (İstanbul, 1991), 21–79. Tanıl Bora suggests that such an emphasis on a supposedly pure, authentic localness has been the fate of Turkish ‘belatedness’: Bora, ‘Muhaçazaların Değişimi ve Türk Muhaçazalarının Bazı Yol İzleri’, Toplum ve Bilim, 74 (1997), 16. See also Orhan Pamuk’s remarks on this insistence on authenticity: Pamuk, İstanbul (İstanbul, 2003), 111–4.

2 Here I must acknowledge my indebtedness to Charles Taylor who has coined the term social imaginary. By this Taylor means the way a society imagines the cultural and social context it inhabits. See Taylor, Modern Social Imaginaries (London, 2004).
article is an attempt to address the challenges posed to an adequate understanding of modern Turkish social imaginary by this coexistence of an ardent insistence to rearticulate the meaning of Europe and a persistent call for a ‘substantial return to our own realities’ within the context of the works of two influential writers of twentieth-century Turkish literature, Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar (1901–1962) and Peyami Safa (1899–1961), whose writings reflect the anxiety of creating an authentic synthesis of European ideals and native characteristics.3

It needs to be stressed that this anxiety characterises almost all of the rival interpretations of Europe and modernity contained within Turkish social and political thought. But the political and philosophical significance of Tanpınar’s and Safa’s works is that in contrast to both the standard reactionary and radically modernist positions that either dogmatically reaffirm the authority and authenticity of Turkish culture in defiance of the challenges surrounding Turkey’s Europeanisation or conceive of this process as a complete denial of its cultural past, Tanpınar and Safa seem to advocate a third alternative; that is, a ‘synthesis’ between past and future, tradition and modernity, Turkey and Europe.4 The premise of my analysis is this: notwithstanding the emphasis Tanpınar and Safa place on synthesis and dialogue, their approaches represent two distinctive visions. In spelling out the differences between them, my aim is to highlight the existence of two essentially different perspectives that are more often than not lumped together and merely depicted as two instances of Turkish communitarian conservatism.

The Turkish social and political thought of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is dominated by disputes about Europeanisation, nationalism and Islamic conservatism. Safa’s thought shares in this sentiment and attempts to overcome these contradictions and weaknesses with the idea of a synthesis, but he fails to reconcile these opposing tendencies because Safa’s thinking likewise contains an apparent paradox that takes shape against the background of a continual oscillation between Europeanism and nationalism, between universalism and culturalism. This paradox particularly comes to the fore in his essays on European modernity, Turkish nationalism and the East–West synthesis. Safa’s writings, on the one hand, celebrate Turkey’s Europeanisation and show a genuine interest in examining the intellectual roots of European modernity. But on the other hand Safa, a spokesperson for Turkish nationalism and cultural conservatism, appears to be extremely critical of cosmopolitanism, humanism, Enlightened universalism and what he calls ‘excessive Europeanisation’. Despite all the talk of a synthesis between past and future, Europe and Turkey, tradition and modernity throughout his writings, Safa’s work in fact paradoxically points to the impossibility of such a synthesis because his conservatism is essentially inspired by a theory of radical particularity and cultural essentialism, which expresses profound scepticism about the leading political ideals of European modernity5 and shows a tendency bordering on a celebration of all collectiveist self-assertions and struggles against universalism.6

Tanpınar’s writings vocalise a criticism of such a combination of nationalism and cultural conservatism. As one of his most distinguished commentators has aptly put it, ‘Tanpınar was the man of possibilities’.7 Indeed, the major crux of Tanpınar’s vision is this: how to reconcile the European ideals with a restored cultural tradition and historical continuity. True, in some crucial respects, Tanpınar explicitly criticises the positivistic and atomistic moral and political outlooks of some of the boosters of modernity. This strain in Tanpınar’s thought comes out very clearly when he expresses the existential significance of some of his crucial terms such as ‘continuity’ and ‘tradition’. But in some other important respects, Tanpınar continues with the political legacy of European modernity.8 This manifestly distinguishes Tanpınar’s thought from Safa’s cultural conservatism, a perspective replete with cultural essentialism and ‘romantic deject’.9 In no account Tanpınar’s view of cultural tradition can be so construed as to refer either to some sort of an aggressive political nationalism that can be used as an instrument of social and political mobilisation10 or an epistemological essentialism concerning the notion of culture and tradition. Nonetheless, some of Tanpınar’s important concepts and writings have invited, with some justification, the interpretation that Tanpınar’s work expresses yet another romanticised version of conservatism or traditionalism.11 Many commentators, both his proponents and opponents, have stressed this ambivalence in Tanpınar’s writings.12 I will have something to say about this aspect to Tanpınar’s thought, but less to label him as a romantic conservative than to show the extent to which the anxiety of

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3 My analysis is drawn from Tanpınar’s and Safa’s essays on politics, Europe and Turkey. The sixty article could exhaust the social and political implications of their essays, much less of all of their writings. By concentrating on their understanding of Europe and the Turkish experience of modernity, I wish to draw out the political bearing of their essays for modern Turkish social imaginary. My analysis of Safa’s perspective focuses on Türk İnkılabı Boksçular [Reflections on the Turkish Revolution] (Istanbul, 1990 [1938]), Doğu-Batı Sentetisi [The East–West Synthesis] (Istanbul, 1963), and Objektif 8: 20. Araştırma ve Biz [Objective 8: Twentieth Century. Europe and Us] (Istanbul, 1990 [1976]). The first one remains Safa’s single most influential work on the Republican Revolution. The other works, which include some of Safa’s best-known social and political essays previously published in various journals and newspapers between the 1930s and 1961, recommend themselves both as a commentary and as a radical re-elaboration of some ideas central to Reflections and as containing some of Safa’s most candid assertions about Europe and twentieth-century politics. My assessment of Tanpınar’s thought focuses, by and large, on Yaşadığım Gibi [As I Lived] 2nd revised edition, ed. Birsel Emli (Istanbul, 1996) which is a fine collection of his essays on art, literature, politics and the East–West distinction. It must be noted that the essays compiled in this volume were all published in a variety of journals and newspapers in the 1940s and 1950s. But I shall also selectively draw on his other writings in order to further elaborate on the themes of my discussion and fully work out the originality of Tanpınar’s thought.

4 Tanpınar and Safa are important not because they inaugurated the tendency to assess Turkish modernity in terms of a synthesis; rather, their significance comes from their expressing almost all of the contradictions and anxieties of the tension between past and future, tradition and modernity in a way that has shaped the idea of synthesis in cultural history at once. Curiously, Tanpınar anticipated this and it comes out very clearly in a radio speech he delivered shortly before his death: Tanpınar, ‘Şehir’, in: Yaşadığım Gibi, 204.


7 Gürbilek, ‘Dandies and Originals’, 616.

8 Tanpınar’s essays, as I will show, abound with remarks that indisputably demonstrate his deeply-seated commitment to the philosophical and political discourse of European modernity. Many commentators agree on this. See for instance Selahattin Hilal who explores the theoretical and political implications of Tanpınar’s ‘rationalist optimism’: Hilav, Tanpınar Üzerine Notlar, Edebiyat Yazarları (Istanbul, 1993), 123–41.

9 René Girard argues that an overriding obsession with authenticity represents an anxiety of originality and purity, which in turn is an expression of what he calls romantic deject. See Girard, Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, 1976). Safa’s romanticism has been acknowledged by many commentators. See Hümi Yiya Ulken, Türkiye’de Çağdaş Düşünceler Tarihi (Istanbul, 2005 [1966]), 449. Bora has also pointed out that there is a romantic vein in Safa’s thinking: ‘Muhafazakarlık Değişimi’, 24.


cultural authenticity illuminates the predication and fragility of modern Turkish social imaginary. However, the primary purpose of this article is to point to another dimension in Tanpınar's writings that has largely gone unnoticed. In Tanpınar, as I will show, we see the intimations of a distinctively hermeneutical dimension that figure prominently in his 'expressivist' vision of human existence. This dimension may easily escape our attention if we remain fixated exclusively on conventional interpretations of Tanpınar's thought which have so far shown incredible resistance to situating Tanpınar within a much broader framework that can take cognisance of the affinities between his work and the major European philosophical movements of the twentieth century. However, it must be noted that my aim is not to detect the direct influence of different European philosophical movements on Tanpınar's writings and trace it back to the original European precursors. My own interpretation is more along the lines of what we may call philosophical attempts to search for new intertextual linkages between European philosophy and Turkish social and political thought. In this connection, it is important to recognise that the philosophical and political implications of Tanpınar's works of the 1940s and 1950s reach back into the early twentieth century tradition of hermeneutics and, more significantly, at the same time anticipate trends in philosophical hermeneutics and European thought that are of major importance today. Although Tanpınar himself has never uttered the term 'hermeneutics', this certainly seems to be a justified extrapolation from Tanpınar's thought. One of the purposes of this article is to fully spell out these intimations of hermeneutical thinking within Tanpınar's work that have curiously remained concealed.

Safa's romantic conservatism

Safa is widely considered to be among the most prolific and influential writers of his time whose professional competence extends from literature to journalism. Like most distinguished writers in the early years of the Republic, Safa had many interests apart from politics. He was the author of more than a dozen novels, contributing major writings in a wide range of subjects and genres including crime fiction. Yet he achieved his greatest distinction in terms of his centre-of-gravity thought which was primarily that of an essayist and a public intellectual, much like in the spirit of the philosophers of the French Enlightenment's republic of letters. His most important writings dealt with the arts and sciences, literature, contemporary history, religion, education and nationalism; however, the main enthusiasm and themes of his intellectual career as an essayist proved to be the idea of Europe, the East–West synthesis and Turkey's Europeanisation, to which he devoted, with sustained passion and eloquence, many articles and a collection of essays which were to initiate important debates in Turkey. While Safa had become estranged from mainstream currents and literary circles and had subjected the main intellectual movements of the world he inhabited to the most severe criticisms, he had managed to attract a large audience of thinkers and writers to the journals he had founded in the 1930s and 1950s.

Many commentators have often claimed that there is not one single Safa but many Safas in Safa's writings, defying all attempts to classify or periodise his numerous essays in an analytical fashion once and for all. This issue has invited many interpretations, ranging from those who stress the continuities in Safa's concerns throughout his whole life to those who put more emphasis either on Safa's swiftly changing political discourse which becomes markedly gloomier, more filled with the rhetoric of nation and collective spiritual renewal in the early 1940s. Nevertheless, his wartime essays (1939–1945), in which his anxiety of cultural authenticity takes an undeniably penetrating 'counter-Enlightenment' stance and an ultra-nationalistic twist, help us separate his early vision (pre-1939) from the later one (post-1945). In this respect, Safa's 1939–1945 period can best be grasped as a transitional episode between the early and later writings—a period which fundamentally contributes to the formation of some of his essential post-1945 conceptions, concerns and proposals. But already at the start of his creative work, Safa bases his initial perspectivity on modernity on a highly romanticised nationalism which is so politically charged that he can construe modernisation itself as a growing tide of nationalism. In his early writings on Europe, Safa succumbs to the tendency to subordinate Turkey's Europeanisation to the demands of nationalism. In Reflections on the Turkish Revolution, one of the most widely read treatises on Turkish modernisation, he advocates a thesis that tries to reconcile Turkey's Europeanisation with unbounded and romanticised nationalism. From the beginning, therefore, his endorsement of European modernity was in explicit tension with nationalistic themes found at the centre of his political commentaries.

Furthermore, it also needs to be emphasised that, just as it would be an error to separate entirely Safa's early writings from the post-1945 essays, it would be an equally great mistake to overlook the central place accorded to the fundamental assumptions of cultural and political conservatism – such as the imperative of the national soul, the limits of human knowledge, the authority and legitimacy of existing institutions, and the central role of cultural mores, national manners and religion in shaping character – throughout his whole life as an influential conservative intellectual. Thus, the major thread running through Safa's entire work appears to be his romantic obsession with the notion of 'national essence', which he defines in terms of the originality and authenticity of Turkish culture, 

13 I have borrowed this term from Ismail Berkin and Charles Taylor. See Berlin, Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, 2000), 170, 176, 188–205. Berlin's essay, 'Herder and the Enlightenment', in which he introduces the concept of 'expressivism' was originally published in 1965. See also Taylor, The Making of Modernity (Toronto; 1991), especially 25–69. See also Taylor, Hegel and Modern Society (Cambridge, 1979), 1–14, 69, 77, 114. I intend this notion as a substitute for Tanpınar's so-called 'organicist' vision—a term which appears to have become an obstacle to a more imaginative, creative engagement with Tanpınar's multilayered work.

14 That is, with the sole exception of 'Bergsonism' which has been quite influential on some of the leading intellectuals in modern Turkish social and political thought. For an overview of the Bergsonian influence, see Nazım İrem, 'Turkish Conservative Modernism: Birth of a Nationalist Quest for Cultural Renewal', International Journal of Middle East Studies, 34 (2002), 87–112. For a more detailed analysis, see A. İrem, 'Muhabbazlar Modernizm', 'Diğer Bati' ve Türkiye'de Bergsoncu-Luk', Toplum ve Bilim 82 (1997), 141–78. The Bergsonian strain in Tanpınar's thought has also been scrutinised in Öğuz Demiral's Kitap Noktasi (Istanbul, 1993). My suggestion is that while the Bergsonian influence on Tanpınar is indisputable, Tanpınar's own view cannot totally be subsumed under Bergsonism.


16 Elken, Türkiye'nin Çeşitli Düşünce Tarhı, 447.


18 For the purposes of my analysis, Safa's works may be periodised as three successive and only partially discontinuous phases: pre-1939 (e.g. Reflections on the Turkish Revolution), 1939–1945 (e.g. ‘Dünyada İnsan Var mı?’ ‘İnsan Yok, Millet Var’, ‘Miil CennetlerideIdeal Kendi Kendimiz Omaktan Izzatarmız’, ‘İnsanlık, Adalet, İlan, Galan’) and post-1945 (e.g. ‘Türk Düünscesi ve Bati Medeniyeti’, Doğu-Bati Seansı, ‘Bati Önemi’, ‘Eski-Yeni Kaygısı’, ‘İnsan Yeni Manası’).

19 This tension can also be observed in Büyük Avrupa Anketi (The Great European Survey) (Istanbul, 1938) in which Safa presents his most candid observations concerning the cultural differences between Europe and Turkey.

historical outcome of this long process of maturation? In other parts of European modernity, which is nothing other than the modernity? The fundamental question Safa poses at the end of his outlook that has successfully synthesised these three traditions concludes, is essentially the culmination point of a long process of intellectual landscape in which the ideals and institutions of assessment is to examine the ‘underlying cultural context’ that has Europe in his anxiety becomes manifest in his early interpretation of Europe and to turn to Safa’s Reflections on the Turkish Revolution to see how this anxiety becomes manifest in his early interpretation of Europe and the Turkish synthesis.

We encounter Safa’s first fully-fledged account of the idea of Europe in his Reflections. The primary purpose of Safa’s early assessment is to examine the ‘underlying cultural context’ that has shaped the European civilisation. By this Safa means the moral and intellectual landscape in which the ideals and institutions of European modernity is rooted. Safa ultimately wishes to show that the Turkish modernisation project can only be envisaged within the context of an overall Europeanisation of Turkish culture and society. In Safa’s view, the three formative ‘pillars’ of European consciousness are the ancient civilisations of Greece and Rome, and Christianity. In ancient Greece, Safa sees the philosophical roots of the ‘European spirit,’ in particular the idea that it is possible to understand nature and human existence through rational and critical analysis which Safa considers vital to the emergence of a scientific outlook and the rise of philosophical speculation and aesthetic consciousness. The crucial contribution of ancient Rome to this worldly mentality and critical orientation is twofold. First, its republican orientation has inaugurated the formation of a legal, participatory and associational tradition, which Safa defines as the very ‘essence of civic mentality.’ Moreover, it has contributed to the gradual rise of an ethic of individualism that has gradually turned out to be one of the essential ingredients of European modernity. What still seems to be lacking in this Greco-Roman synthesis is a spiritual understanding of human existence and a morally grounded notion of human dignity. Christianity, writes Safa, thus answers something in the human soul, which has been overlooked in the ancient world of the Greeks and the Romans, thereby providing European civilisation with a spiritual depth and a morality of love and humility. What we today call European modernity, Safa concludes, is essentially the culmination point of a long process of spiritual evolution which has produced an intellectual and moral outlook that has successfully synthesised these three traditions emanating from Greece, Rome and Christianity.

What does Safa aim to demonstrate with the help of this rather sketchy historical account regarding the formation of European modernity? The fundamental question Safa poses at the end of his discussion of Europe in his early phase is, Can Turkish thought and culture – i.e., modern Turkish social imaginary as a whole – become part of European modernity, which is nothing other than the historical outcome of this long process of maturation? In other words, can Turkey internalise Europe’s spiritual outlook and make Europe’s moral and cultural ideals its own? Safa answers this question in the affirmative, arguing that just as the birth place of the three fundamental pillars of the European civilisation is eastern Mediterranean, so too the ‘Turkish-Islamic world’ has come to its own and created a thriving civilisation within the cultural horizons of the same Mediterranean basin. Safa’s fundamental argument is that within this broader scheme of things, the ‘Turkish-Islamic civilisation,’ too, needs to be regarded as Occidental and European. Moreover, and this is perhaps one of his most controversial claims, since ‘Turkish-Islamic thought’ has not only encountered and absorbed classical Greek philosophy but also introduced it to Europe in the Middle Ages, it cannot be seen as a repudiation of the Occidental outlook. On the contrary, European modernity, Safa argues, should be viewed as a continuation of the Turkish-Islamic civilisation. How should we approach those passages and what is the sense we can make of Safa’s rather sweeping generalisations that ardently insist that the ‘Turkish-Islamic civilisation’ lies at the very root of European modernity? In his Reflections, Safa seems to point out that the eastern Mediterranean cultural context, particularly through some influential Jewish and Muslim medieval thinkers, has played an immense role in the transmission of the teachings of classical Greece into European thought and hence in the formation of the European philosophical, theological and literary canons. In so doing, Safa adds a dialogical and intercivilisational dimension to his analysis, arguing that both Europe and Turkey need to recognise the dialogical encounters between these neighbouring civilisations. But I would suggest that Safa’s anxiety of authenticity, which would later take a decidedly nationalist, anti-universalistic direction throughout the war years, is already at work in these passages, albeit in a different way. Safa’s main concern has always been (even in his early period which is characterised as ‘Westemist’ by some commentators) the question of how the political ideals of European modernity could be accommodated within Turkish conservatism and nationalism. These can easily be observed in those passages of his Reflections where Safa argues that the two underlying principles of the Turkish Republican Revolution are nationalism and Europeanisation, and that nationalism always has a priority over the latter. But we may also ask whether Safa convincingly answers the question of why the Turkish-Islamic civilisation, despite its so-called initial dynamism and vigour and its impact on the European civilisational landscape, has failed to go in the direction that Europe has gone. Safa has many things to say about this development and he does offer some explanations of this long historical and philosophical episode, ranging from the early Middle Ages to the Renaissance. The flaws or the strengths of Safa’s interpretation of this grand episode are beyond the scope of my analysis. Let me just touch briefly upon the heart of Safa’s conclusion where he expresses in some detail what he takes to be the ‘great possibility’ Turkish culture contains. Europe and Asia, Safa argues, can be designated as two continents signifying two essentially different worldviews, at the crossroads of which he places Turkey and its distinctive cultural orientation. [26] 26 Safa, Türk İnkılabına Bakışlar, 144–6. 149–54, 165, 169. 25 Safa here clearly subscribes to one of the best-known theses about European modernity, namely the idea that the moral and political horizons of European modernity are the direct legacy of the Christian ethic of love which has been the object of a continual critical reinterpretation. Safa sees no contradiction between this thesis and his subsequent argument that through the reception of Greek philosophy, thanks to the efforts of Jewish and Muslim thinkers, these impulses are also combined with the impetus of Judaism and Islam. 24 Ayvazoğlu, ‘Peyami Safa’, 222–3. 23 Consider also Safa’s critical reading of essentialist conceptions of Asia and the East in his essay ‘Aşık-Carp Münağakasa Bir Bıyık’, Objektif, 214–5. But in the end Safa, too, subscribes to cultural essentialism and offers portrayals of Europe and Asia in terms of conventional binary oppositions.
Europe, in Safa’s analysis, emerges as the intellect of the world, representing the attempt to demystify, analyse, conquer and hence subdue nature. Europe is male and acts like a captain who navigates the ship through dangerous waters. Fixated on the mastery of nature, the European mentality reduces the world to a collection of raw materials and makes sense of existence only through the lenses of the ‘microscope, machine and technology.’ Safa by no means completely rejects this technological and scientific attitude, but argues that it needs to be supported with the ‘spiritual values of the East.’ Thus, the Eastern world appears to be the exact opposite of what Europe represents: it is timeless, contemplative and female. ‘The further you go West,’ writes Safa, ‘the more everything becomes solid and material.’ What humanity needs is a synthesis between these two types of existence. Safa’s language alludes that his argument here is aimed both at Europe and Asia, each of which seems to be inherently lacking something that the other possesses. Safa stresses again and again the geographical location (between Europe and Asia) and the historical destiny of the Turkish spirit (‘gradually and historically moving towards central Europe from central Asia’) to show that historical destiny of the Turkish spirit (‘gradually and historically again the geographical location (between Europe and Asia) and the lacking something that the other possesses. Safa stresses again and therefore the European civilisation, the tone of Safa’s romantic obsession with the traditional and authentic sources acquires an unmistakable nationalistic edge which is ultimately rooted in his strong fixation on the ‘microscope, machine and technology.’

In the early 1940s, his stress on reconciliation and synthesis is to a large extent replaced by a sharp rhetoric subjecting the concepts of universalism and cosmopolitanism to a strongly moving towards central Europe from central Asia’) to show that Turkish culture has indeed every capacity to bring into existence ‘a great synthesis’ of the Occidental and Oriental characteristics. Not only does Turkey, unlike Europe and Asia, have this historical destiny and mission, but also possesses intuitive capabilities and spiritual qualities that have been bequeathed to the Turks by their tradition, history and geography. The Turkish synthesis, Safa suggests, is a reconciliation between the European spirit and Turkey’s own authentic, national values.

In his assessment of what he takes to be the ‘spiritual crisis’ of the European civilisation, the tone of Safa’s romantic obsession with the traditional and authentic sources acquires an unmistakably nationalistic edge which is ultimately rooted in his strong dismissal of the core ideals of the Enlightenment. But it is important to understand that Safa attempts to formulate and justify this ‘anti-humanist stance’ and his own take on the philosophy of ‘counter-Enlightenment’ from within the European tradition of social and political thought. His moralistic criticism of European modernity is a good case in point. Drawing eclectically on the European critics of cosmopolitanism, universal human rights and liberal democracy such as Joseph de Maistre, Friedrich Nietzsche, Oswald Spengler, and Maurice Barrès, Safa tries to elaborate a sketchy theory of radical particularity and cultural essentialism in the essays he writes during the Second World War. In these essays Safa attaches a pejorative meaning to the term ‘human being’, because he considers humanity to be a false abstraction. He appears to be at great pains to demonstrate that there is neither human being as such nor a world history of humanity: there are only the unique and independent worlds that have grown out of local, national struggles against an external threat or enemy. Moreover, human beings have no ‘pure freedom’ beyond the particular, national world to which they belong and are committed, and this commitment takes place nowhere except in the midst of a national struggle and a national destiny. Safa maintains that a people’s national heritage permanently discloses the fixed possibilities within which individuals live. At this point, Safa’s essentialist view of cultural tradition once again fully comes into view: the spiritual and national essence is what stays the same in the history of a people.

In the early 1940s, Safa’s presentation points clearly to what he perceives as the ‘hectic self-interest’, the ‘vulgar desires of the belly’ and ‘spiritually impoverished’ political theories of liberalism and socialism. According to Safa, the politics of liberalism and socialism, which he identifies with ‘f reemason universalism’, is nothing but a merely utilitarian reckoning of claims among egoistic and self-interest orientated individuals or classes. As such, this worldview ignores nothing less than the fact that the spiritual core of human nature transcends human being’s appetitive and natural desires. In his boldest departure, Safa argues that the problem with the universalistic claims of liberalism and socialist democracy is that they quite erroneously assume that human beings are fundamentally the same at all times and at all places, that historical variations or traditions are unimportant, and that there exist universal human goals which are valid for all cultures and nations. Explicitly referring to Joseph de Maistre, Safa rhetorically remarks: ‘Could you imagine a human being who does not belong to a particular race or nation by birth, who does not speak a specific language … or who does not stand under the influence of particular traditions or beliefs? No such human being exists at all.’ Safa comes to the conclusion that ‘human beings acquire authenticity only within the context of a particular race and nation in which they are situated’, and states that ‘we need to define and comprehend them within this national fabric.’

Safa, ‘The Ideal in National Societies’, which can be characterised as Safa’s conservative manifesto on nationalism, also communicates well with his growing emphasis on the ‘malaises of European modernity’. In this highly polemical essay, Safa writes: ‘We know that our individual lives are mortal whereas our national existence is immortal; we can only survive if we put our individuality as a whole, of the human race of which we are a part, to the service of our national existence. Safa, ‘Idealsiz Adamı Çok Evcirebildi’, Objektif 7, 90–2.


40 Safa goes so far as to argue that even his conception of nationalism is authentically Turkish, and that it cannot thus be modeled after the ‘theories of Durkheim, Barrès and Maurras’: Safa, ‘İste İnsan’, Objektif 7, 191. This view is also revealed in his early writings where Safa states: ‘Turkish nationalism is purely Turkish in its origins.’ Türk Inikalba Baskılar, 196. By the same token, Safa stresses that although he has benefited from Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s criticisms of universalism and humanism, he also claims that their philosophies are deficient in that they have not fully acknowledged the moral significance of nationalism in human existence. Safa, ‘Idealiz Adams Evcirebildi’, Objektif 8, 176–8.

41 Safa, ‘Tarık Kasırgası’, Objektif 8, 179.

42 The notion of the ‘treacherous cosmopolitan’ is one of the threads running through Safa’s writings—both fiction and non-fiction—of his latest novels, Safa notoriously portrays Europeanised Istambulites as snoopish, treacherous people who characteristically lack authentic Turkish manners and sensibilities. See Safa, Biz İnsanlar (Istanbul, 1998 [1958]), Safa’s disdain for liberal and social democracy can also be observed in his essays, ‘Millet Cemiyetlerde İdeal’, ‘İrks voi, Milliyetçi mi?’, ‘İnsan Yok, Millet Var’, ‘Demagoji Değil’, Objektif 7, 175, 186, 193–4, 198.

43 Safa, ‘Dünya İnsan Var mı?’, Objektif 8, 91.

44 Safa, ‘Dünya İnsan Var mı?’, 92.
impending triumph of nationalist movements in Europe must be understood on the basis of this encounter between the ideals of universalism and humanism, on the one hand, and nationalism and cultural authenticity on the other.

It is clear, in light of the foregoing, that Safa’s disdain for the ideals of humanism, universalism and liberal democracy is in accordance with his highly romanticised account of authenticity. This anxiety of authenticity is manifest both in his criticism of the ‘spiritual crisis of modernity’ and in his support for various forms of nationalist movements in twentieth-century European politics. It further reveals itself in the way in which Safa defines the concept of tradition: it is the ‘national essence’ that stays the same; it is the soul of a soulless age; it is the ‘essence of the national spirit’ that should be protected at all costs; it is the national, historical heritage to which individuals should submit themselves in order to live more fully; it is the source of ‘all of our ideals and our consciousness, our substantial realities and our cultural roots’; and, above all, it is ‘our continual insistence to be our own selves’, and, as such, it is ‘as absolute as a natural phenomenon’. The theoretical upshot of Safa’s romantic anxiety is thus his equally essentialist approach towards the notion of tradition which has produced in Safa a tendency to interpret Turkish culture as a hermetic and sealed whole with an inexorable spiritual imperative. It is as though Safa aims to provide modern Turkish society with an Archimedean point in a world of rapid transformation and increased uncertainty. This romantic obsession certainly has something to do with the erosion of earlier communities and identifications—that is, the withering away of local communities and the decline of religious identifications. Safa’s contention is that people still, and perhaps more so than in the past, need a collective commitment to unite them, and that a society which lacks a set of clearly defined national ideals would eventually suffer a ‘spiritual crisis’.51 This intimate connection between strong collective identification and spiritual wholeness gives Safa’s romantic anxiety almost a metaphysical edge: the very notion of an authentic collective identity or cultural tradition acquires a supernatural character.

Safa’s later important concepts such as the ‘spiritual crisis’ and ‘other Europe’, which are all but missing in his Reflections, begin to appear in his thinking in the war years—a period in which Safa’s voice, as we have seen, tends to be much darker, more filled with the talk of the spiritual essence of the nation and the like. In the aftermath of the Second World War, we also begin to see a second, more ‘spiritual’ Europe in Safa’s essays—a vigorous, but internally incompatible, and furthermore spiritually divided Europe struggling against its own once-celebrated positivistic and dogmatic worldview.52 According to Safa, those who have believed, or still believe, in this old Europe do so at their own peril, because this old Europe once mistakenly held the belief that all problems of human life can be solved through technical means. In his post-war world outlook, Safa thus combines his analysis of the spiritual crisis of the European civilisation and the idea of a newly emerging second Europe with his earlier notions such as the idea of a Turkish synthesis.53 Nevertheless, his anxiety of cultural authenticity, coupled with a profound hostility to cosmopolitanism and universalism, becomes an idée fixe that dominates Safa’s mature perspective. In the 1939–1945 period, this anxiety turns into a root and branch criticism of universalism, humanism and the Enlightenment. In the post-1945 period, it resurfaces again in a different vein when Safa defines two essentially different visions of Europe: that is to say, the old, purely mechanistic, positivistic and technological Europe as opposed to the new, more spiritually-oriented Europe which nevertheless suffers at the hands of an unstoppable spiritual crisis, and from which Turkish modernity can be saved thanks to its rich cultural tradition, its national and spiritual values.

**The intimations of hermeneutics in Tanpınar**

Tanpınar was a spirited storyteller with an extraordinary gift for describing nuances of feeling and moral outlook, and a perceptive observer of the contradictions and malaises of the social world he inhabits. All of this gave him a distinguished place among the major writers of his time. He was a novelist in an intellectual milieu where literature became the battleground on which social and political problems were debated and fought out. Nevertheless, unlike his many contemporaries, he was not a politically minded preacher. He was vehemently opposed to the conscious, instrumental use of art for ideological and didactic purposes. But this does not mean that Tanpınar was a pure aesthete, a believer in art for art’s sake or an escapist without civic sense. During much of his life, he was preoccupied with the cultural and political controversies, in particular the bitter conflicts between the conservatists and admirers of the West that divided the intellectuals of the new Republic. His major novels were deeply concerned with the central political and cultural questions that troubled the writers and thinkers of his generation. But his detachment and his refusal to subordinate his intellectual independence to the dictates of ideological thinking estranged him from both the radicals and the conservatives. His cautious optimism, his humanism, his sceptical irony, his disdain for both intolerant conservatism and authoritarianism, above all his determination to avoid easy social and political recipes irritated some of his readers who craved for dogmatic certainty and looked to writers for strict ideological guidelines. Tanpınar’s own intellectual and political controversies were to some extent marked by the same oscillation and its political implications. In his post-1945 period, it resurfaces again in a different vein when Safa defines two essentially different visions of Europe: that is to say, the old, purely mechanistic, positivistic and technological Europe as opposed to the new, more spiritually-oriented Europe which nevertheless suffers at the hands of an unstoppable spiritual crisis, and from which Turkish modernity can be saved thanks to its rich cultural tradition, its national and spiritual values.

52 Safa expresses quite frequently his conviction that ‘at the root of all spiritual and cultural values lies the belief that we do not live in a meaningless world’. Safa, Bir Mümazara Etrafında, Objektif 8, 261.
53 Safa, ‘Ruhumu Geriye Ver’, Objektif 8, 272.
56 Safa, ‘Kendi Kendimizin Olumaktan Israrımız’, Objektif 7, 188.
59 Irem maintains that this ongoing debate represents a continuation of similar disputes about modernity that had taken place in European philosophy in the beginning of the twentieth century. See Irem, ‘Muhafazakar Modernlik, ‘Diger Batı’ ve Türkiye’deki Bergsonculuk’, 141–78.
cultural self.65 Indeed, the echoes of this anxiety, with all of its strengths and weaknesses, can be unabiguously observed in many of Tanpınar’s writings. In his essay ‘The Essential Source’, Tanpınar says, ‘we are possessed of a past whose voice it is impossible to ignore when it speaks through us in its genuine essence’.66 In a similar vein, in ‘The Exchange of Civilisations and the Inner Self’, Tanpınar writes:

What is certain, if anything, is that the past stands right beside us, sometimes like a victim, sometimes as a lost paradise—it is a treasure that ensures our wholeness of spirit; and at the slightest uncertainty the past opens before us with the glimmer of an oasis; it calls to us, and when it doesn’t, it makes us doubt our lives, [causing] hesitation and a kind of guilty conscience.57

Furthermore, in a short essay entitled ‘Man and Society’, we encounter a specifically communitarian conception of the self where the priority, both morally and epistemologically speaking, is given to community, history and tradition. It is on a highly communitarian tone, expressed in a poetic language, is heard in this well-known essay by saying:

When the idea of society is introduced, the tragedy of fate diminishes, because unlike for the individual, there is no death for society. Continuity exists there. The chain continues for all eternity. . . . History, art works, traditions—all of these are society’s consciousness of continuity. . . . As individuals—that is, as people diverge from the consciousness of society—they are nothing but an aggregate of weaknesses. As they enter into and adopt the life of society, they overcome these weaknesses. . . . What is going to live for all eternity is neither the individual nor even the generations, but rather society. Only society, and its historical manifestation, the nation, can withstand fate and time. Only the oak tree that has put out its roots into the depths of the earth, not the individual leaf, can endure the storm (emphases added).

A communitarian tone, expressed in a poetic language, is heard in these essays. 66 It is not difficult to see how such a position could be so construed as to mean that Tanpınar makes the individual subordinate to society, that he aestheticises the notions of tradition and community in a way which hardly differs from Sa’a’s conservative romanticism, and that his vision, too, is essentially rooted in the same anti-universalistic ‘counter-Enlightenment’ stance. Indeed, it has been suggested that Tanpınar’s outlook celebrates the most particularistic accounts of social life and years for a completely dream-world of an organic community.69 Tanpınar’s strong emphasis on historicity and his exalted view of tradition and community have encouraged these accusations of ‘romanticised traditionalism’. But I would suggest that while there are clear and pivotal communitarian aspects to Tanpınar’s thought, simply assimilating Tanpınar into the conservative, organicist, corporatist thinking—a perspective that has arguably constituted the mainstream of modern Turkish social and political thought, and which has decidedly been anti-universalistic—1 is not the most helpful way of understanding his work.62 Tanpınar has in fact expressed some significant resistance to being labelled as a romantic or a traditionalist.63 But perhaps the more substantive reason for resisting the straightforward classification of Tanpınar as a romantic traditionalist or conservative is the ready inference that as a communitarian who has shown considerable interest in tradition, cultural heritage and the past he is ipso facto hostile to the Enlightenment. I would argue that in the case of Tanpınar, the assumption that because there are communitarian elements to his thought, he is necessarily hostile to European modernity is misplaced. It is also important to realise that an excessive fixation on such an interpretation has prevented his commentators from seeing different and more fruitful aspects of his thought. One such dimension is the intimations of a hermeneutical thinking in Tanpınar’s work. This proposition surely deserves to be further scrutinised and tested. To explicate it further, I would like to explore Tanpınar’s vision by means of a framework composed of two interrelated concepts—that is, his idea of historicity and his ‘expressivist’ account of human existence. My thesis is that these are the two crucial pillars of the hermeneutical dimension in Tanpınar’s thought. Moreover, his unique synthesis of historicity and expressivism must be seen as an attempt to formulate an alternative vision of social life which is critical of both Jacobinism and conservatism. Seen from Tanpınar’s standpoint, while the former tends to view tradition merely as an ossified relic of the past, the conservatives entertain an equally deficient view according to which tradition appears to be a monolithic, golden chain that bears witness to Turkey’s unique national and cultural heritage.64

The theme of historicity continually comes to the fore in many of Tanpınar’s writings.65 But the key point underlying both historicity and his expressivist vision of human existence is that, according to Tanpınar, the need to belong to a community is a basic human need. It has been suggested that Tanpınar is for a ‘cultural nationalism’,66 but we must pause here a little and avoid drawing hasty conclusions. When Tanpınar says ‘national’, one must understand national culture, not political self-assertion or fanatical and aggressive nationalism. Tanpınar uses the notion of national culture and tradition in a Herderian sense to convey the significance of language, habits, gestures that create solidarity, distinctive outlooks and common memories. The thrust of Tanpınar’s arguments is aimed at demonstrating that we cannot

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67 Tanpınar, ‘Medeniyet Değiştirmesi ve İç Insan’, Yaşadığım Gibi, 39. The translation is Göknar’s.
68 Tanpınar, ‘İnsan ve Cemiyet’, Yaşadığım Gibi, 22–3. I have relied, to a large extent, on Göknar’s translation of the same passage. Here Tanpınar’s emphasis on some of his most recurring themes such as time, eternity, continuity, tragedy and fate must not be looked upon as sentimentalism. Rather, the continual appearance of these themes in his writings needs to be seen as an expression of the hermeneutical dimension of Tanpınar’s thought. In a similar vein, Tanpınar says: ‘The purpose of both art and life is to overcome time.’ See Tanpınar, ‘Love and Death’, Yaşadığım Gibi, 134. For a discussion of the deep affinities between Tanpınar and Heidegger, see Hilsman Yavuz, ‘Tanpınar ve Heidegger’, Kaymak Dergisi, 13–20.
69 Tanpınar’s essays abound with similar communitarian remarks. For instance, in ‘Hayat Karşısında Münever’, Tanpınar argues: ‘Man can only realise his own individuality in the society in which he lives.’ Yaşadığım Gibi, 47.
70 This criticism has been vocalised in Hasan Bülent Kahraman’s detailed analysis of Tanpınar’s thought. See Kahraman, Vücutlum Sizmanın Ardında: Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar ve Muhabbetin Modernleştirilmiş Estetik Düzeni, in: Bir Gül Bu Karambolarda: Tanpınar Üzerine Yazılar, ed. Abdullah Üçman and Handan Inç (Istanbul, 2002), 612–45. See particularly 622–9 and 641.
72 Yavl créditez la trahison engagée par le corps social dans sa propre vie et son propre corps, le corps de l’individu humain. Le corps humain est une réalité sociale en tant que tel, et non une réalité individuelle en tant que tel. Le corps social est une réalité sociale, et non une réalité individuelle en tant que tel. Le corps social est une réalité sociale, et non une réalité individuelle en tant que tel.
74 Tanpınar repeatedly refers to the social and cultural significance of historicity; see for instance Beş Şehr, 7–8 and Yuhua Kemal (Istanbul, 2001 [1962]), 23. And many of his other important concepts such as continuity, chain and the like can be characterised as different variations on the same theme. See ‘İnsan ve Cemiyet’, 22–3.
75 Tanpınar repeatedly refers to the social and cultural significance of historicity; see for instance Beş Şehr, 7–8 and Yuhua Kemal (Istanbul, 2001 [1962]), 23. And many of his other important concepts such as continuity, chain and the like can be characterised as different variations on the same theme. See ‘İnsan ve Cemiyet’, 22–3.
76 Gürbilek, ‘Dandies and Originals’, 607. There are indeed some passages in Tanpınar that remind us of Sa’a’s nationalistic sensibilities. See ‘İstanbul’un İmarı’, Yaşadığım Gibi, 194. See also Pamuk, Istanbul, 110–4, 231–8, 424–2.
understand the human condition without taking into account our fundamental nature as beings with cultural identity, beings that use language and belong to a particular history and tradition, beings that cannot but exist in communities.

Like his notion of historicity, Tanpınar’s expressivism must also be seen as a criticism of and a protest against the positivistic vision of human existence, which is based on a purely instrumental account of society and a profoundly individualistic conception of human being. Tanpınar has never shown any sympathy for a dogmatically utilitarian and instrumental understanding of social existence at the heart of which lies a perspective that is atomistic in its ethical outlook, positivistic in its social philosophy. At the same time, as can be observed particularly in his novels, Tanpınar is extremely critical about the idea that a new republic can be established on purely instrumentalist and positivistic foundations. Against this, Tanpınar develops an alternative notion of the human condition in which human life is seen as having a unity analogous to that of a work of art, where every part and aspect only find its proper meaning in relation to others. This expressivistic view requires that human beings be a part of a larger society. The individuals, in Tanpınar’s view, are what they are by their inherence and participation in social and cultural life. Nevertheless, it would be a misunderstanding of Tanpınar’s thought to interpret this simply as a mishmash of organicism, authoritarianism and anti-universalism. Just as Tanpınar is critical of the atomistic account of human existence, so too he repudiates the inverse proposition, supported by such diverse groups as the Islamists, radical culturalists, conservatives and nationalists—namely, the idea of society as an absolute category over the individual. Against cultural determinism and authoritarianism, Tanpınar defends the modern ideal of individual freedoms, citizenship rights, moral autonomy and responsibility. But he attempts to combine this distinctively modern ideal with the rehabilitation of tradition. In stark opposition to Safa’s disdain for the moral and political ideals of the Enlightenment, which Safa regards as the illusions of the old, purely positivistic and technological Europe, Tanpınar endorses the notion of individual freedoms as ‘the most important fruit of humanity’. Unlike Safa, who considers the political ideals of peace, justice and individual liberty as ‘the narcotic of liberal democracy’, Tanpınar characterises the modern idea of freedom as the highest principle of European modernity and considers the fascist and nationalistic movements of the twentieth century to be the ‘betrayal’ of the idea of a ‘European union’ and the ‘ideals of justice and world peace’.

This is the major crux of Tanpınar’s thought: how to reconcile the ideals of European modernity with a restored cultural tradition. Tanpınar, particularly in his essays on the East–West divide, argues that the main drama of Turkish modernity has been opened by the breakdown of the static, anti-individualist, provincially ‘Oriental’ moral outlook in the Ottoman world. This moment, in Tanpınar’s view, represents the birth of the individual with a European consciousness. The nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, Tanpınar claims, have witnessed the slow and uneasy development of both the individual and the institutions embodying the European moral outlook in Turkey. There is a tendency in Tanpınar to aestheticise the ‘beautiful culture of the Ottoman past’ and to poetise the great chain of cultural continuity in Turkish culture. But Tanpınar attempts to construct this narrative of cultural continuity in a poetic manner not because he turns his back on European modernity, but because he, like his mentor Yahya Kemal, thinks that the way to European modernity passes through the creation of an authentic cultural narrative and an aesthetic, communitarian background to the Turkish modernisation process.

In this sense, most of Tanpınar’s essays make a compelling plea for recovering the traces of the obliterated layers of the past in order to preserve a collective narrative and memory. A genuine experience in modernity, Tanpınar insists, should not turn into an unprecedented and limitless destructiveness of the new. But Tanpınar sees no contradiction between this proposition and his continual insistence that the static unity of the Ottoman world is doomed because of its social and economic limitations, its political and cultural parochialism and its denial of individual freedoms. This development culminates in the synthesis of the European civilisation and Turkish culture, which represents an irreversible stage in the historical consciousness of modern Turkey. In this respect, contemporary Turkish social imaginary is utterly inconceivable without such a prior fusion of Turkish culture and European modernity.

Much has been written on the significance of the notion of tradition in Tanpınar, but less on what exactly he means by this term. At this point we need to refer to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutical account of tradition and situate Tanpınar’s thinking within the larger hermeneutical movement in twentieth-century continental thought; once we do that we see that the conceptions of historicity and expressivism articulated in Tanpınar’s essays cohere very powerfully with the core of philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics aims to show that there is tradition in all understanding, and to forget this is to be exposed more blindly to the hold of cultural prejudices. The notion of Wirkungsgeschichte is one of Gadamer’s key concepts. Gadamer uses this term, which means ‘the work of history’ in all we do, precisely to evoke the historicity and embeddedness of human existence. To say that there is ‘Wirkungsgeschichte’ in all we do is to emphasise that ‘history does not belong to us, but we belong to it’. The past or tradition, thus, constitutes a horizon we cannot eliminate. But at the same time, to understand something from the past, both Gadamer and Tanpınar insist, is to experience the fusion of its horizon with the present. In this respect, in Tanpınar we see an explicit repudiating of Safa’s radical culturalism upon which his essentialist conception of national tradition is based. In stark opposition to such an understanding of tradition, Tanpınar repeatedly points to the major role played by interpretation in every act of understanding. This basic hermeneutical strain of his thought comes out very clearly when Tanpınar says, ‘Every generation interprets the past in a different way’. By this Tanpınar does not mean that we just make up the past as we please. Rather, what Tanpınar wants to say is, ‘The past, in the final analysis, is a time that has passed. It can only continue to properly live in us if we add something to it from ourselves’.

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69 Tanpınar, ‘Mussolini’ye Dair’, Yaşadığım Gibi, 72. See also Tanpınar, ‘Sosy ve Barış Hakkında Düşünceler’, Yaşadığım Gibi, 79–80. In a passage where he expresses his criticism of continental fascism, Tanpınar remarks: ‘Europe is based on the idea of the liberty of individuals and nations. Any principle or course of action that fails to recognise this could only give harm to this civilisation.’ Tanpınar, ‘Vilbaşında Düşünceler’, Yaşadığım Gibi, 69.
73 Tanpınar insistently stresses this fusion in many of his writings. He goes so far as to argue that ‘Our historical destiny consists in our accession to Europe’ and describes Turkey’s Europeanisation as ‘the enlargement of Europe.’ Tanpınar, ‘Şark ve Garp’, 36–7.
argues that tradition is not something given that stands over against us. Rather, we create it ourselves as long as we participate in its evolution. Tanpınar not only points to the fragile and contingent element inherently present in every act of interpreting traditions by stressing that traditions are 'invented' and created. But he also argues that it would be wrong to conceive of tradition as pure, monolithic blocs separated from other traditions by insurmountable barriers. Tanpınar’s contention is that traditions, understood in the modern sense, are always filled with a variety of voices; and this is what distinguishes a cultural tradition from a tribal nationalism. As Tanpınar sees it, this is plurality of voices which provides a tradition with depth and vitality.

According to Tanpınar, human existence has a dialogical character. Human beings always find themselves in a social and cultural context in which they respond to and enter into relations with others, and define who they are through interaction with others. All this complex web of social relationships necessarily implies a communicatively shared lifeworld in which they experience the world, interpret their thoughts and feelings, and eventually understand their relation to others, as well as to the past, present and future. Tanpınar’s expressive vision of human existence thus hinges on the view that it is the particular way the individual situates himself within this cultural and historical world that we call his identity. On this view, humans are historical and story-telling beings whose fundamental way of being in the world takes place through understanding and interpretation. When Tanpınar attributes a ‘weakened state of being’ to the individual, what he wants to highlight is the finitude of human life. But it is vital to see that in Tanpınar the acknowledgement of human finitude goes hand in hand with the celebration of the notion of human dignity. By the same token, Tanpınar’s emphasis on history is just another way of underscoring the notion of human finitude. Our finite historical being is marked by the fact that the tradition or the past that has been down to us always has power over our attitudes.

It would be a grave misrepresentation of Tanpınar’s work to interpret these intimations of hermeneutical philosophy in his thought solely in terms of romantic nostalgia or sentimentalism. Tanpınar seems to be well aware of the fact that a tradition can be a danger when it acts as a narcotic. To understand this is to realise that Tanpınar is not interested in a conservative defence of provincialism or parochial populism. Nor does he aim to preserve social stability and harmony and subordinate the individual to the provincialism or parochial populism. Nor does he aim to preserve this as pure, monolithic blocs separated from other traditions by insurmountable barriers. Tanpınar’s contention is that traditions, understood in the modern sense, are always filled with a variety of voices; and this is what distinguishes a cultural tradition from a tribal nationalism. As Tanpınar sees it, this is plurality of voices which provides a tradition with depth and vitality.

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Tanpınar shares this concern with the leading philosophers of the hermeneutical tradition such as Heidegger and Gadamer. See Gadamer, Truth and Method, 290, 305. Tanpınar, ‘Paris Tesadüfleri’, Yaşadığım Gibi, 270.

It must also be noted that Tanpınar is not at all interested in the so-called teleological approach to history. He is concerned with understanding the way in which interpretations of the past ‘as a chain of interpretations that has gradually evolved and reached its maturity in the modern age. This also means that there is no such thing as the tradition, because every attempt to rearticulate it contributes to its ongoing reconstruction.

Perhaps the most important, and curiously overlooked, aspect of Tanpınar’s conception of tradition becomes manifest in the hermeneutical emphasis he places on the role of civic education. For Tanpınar, tradition, as we have seen, is a historically constituted dialogue in which fundamental ideas of a historical community are expressed. These ideas are articulated at their best, Tanpınar argues, in art, literature, architecture, philosophy and politics by great creators, poets, musicians, writers, thinkers and statesmen who both capture and give shape to the social imaginary of a society. Their creative works and ideas are common to a community because they are also embedded in its collective life, consciousness, history and culture as well as in its practices and institutions. It is certainly correct that Tanpınar tends to explain everything in historical, developmental terms. And yet Tanpınar’s admiration for the historical and traditional needs to be understood within the context of the role he accords to civic education. Tanpınar argues that certain ways of living and giving meaning to the human condition are implicit in traditions. Thus, Tanpınar’s stress on tradition is not purely motivated by aesthetic purposes; it has always been a matter of home and background.

Tanpınar’s contention is that the absence of a meaningful intellectual and cultural narrative dehumanises and vulgarises society and promotes mediocrity. True, the hierarchies and outdated political tradition of the past have become the obstacles blocking the evolution of Turkish society and hence they had to be questioned and discarded. But these need to be replaced with humanistic values of European modernity and complemented by the artistic and literary narratives of Turkish culture. Only such a combination, Tanpınar believes, can serve as a reliable moral and cultural narrative, which can provide an edifying orientation for a ‘European Turkey’. Moreover, this process should not be understood as a matter of social engineering, but rather as an educational, civic process in which a fusion of the horizons of the past and the present can take place. Thus, in Tanpınar’s work education is hailed as the foundation of the modern body politic: manners, arts, sciences and philosophy constitute the elements of culture and society. It is, Tanpınar claims, the prime duty of a modern republic to provide civic education, because ‘we have been utterly deprived of education, to the extent that we lack the freedom and its strength in human life… It is the most authentic power of human existence. It opens our eyes to life. This education is the utmost possibility of the human spirit, which passes from one generation to another.’

The main problem with which Tanpınar attempts to come to terms is thus the one-sidedness of both the conservative and positivist theses concerning the meaning of Europe and tradition. From the hermeneutical standpoint of Tanpınar, these two approaches the past ‘as a European’—that is to say, by interpreting.

In this respect, Tanpınar expresses a hermeneutical interpretation of tradition and conceives it as a kind of ongoing conversation, as a chain of interpretations that has gradually evolved and reached its maturity in the modern age. This also means that there is no such thing as the tradition, because every attempt to rearticulate it contributes to its ongoing reconstruction.
perspectives are equally rooted in one-sided and essentialist arguments. Tanpinar is for ‘a historically enlightened universalism’, to use a term recently coined by Seyla Benhabib.87 Thus, Tanpinar’s vision does justice to our situatedness within a shared context of meaning and experience, without thereby implying a dogmatic closure of the idea of universalism. On the one hand, Tanpinar thinks that the ethos of a modern, European republic grows slowly and at a certain pace, that it requires certain conditions in people’s identity, and that the idea of just designing institutions and putting them into practice treats the whole affair as an engineering problem.88 But on the other hand, Tanpinar also denounces the main opponents of these social engineers who put little faith in the fusion of European modernity and Turkish culture. Tanpinar’s conviction is that such a fusion can occur gradually and only through education and civic participation in the evolution of modern Turkey, in the transformation of its political and cultural tradition.

Conclusion

Despite the many and considerable differences between them, Safa and Tanpinar share a constellation of themes such as synthesis, tradition and authenticity through which they endeavour to articulate the idea of Europe and modernity. Tanpinar’s thought also shares with Safa’s work a concern with the problem of how to reconcile Turkey’s Europeanisation with a claim to cultural authenticity. However, it would be a mistake to conclude from these commonalities that their assumptions, proposals and conclusions are indistinguishable. Now that I have shown some of the radical divergences between their perspectives, it is possible to make some observations about the significance of their works for modern Turkish social imaginary.

As is well-known, Max Weber once characterised the emergence of modernity as a dialectical process of disenchantment and rationalisation. But in Safa this conception has been gradually replaced by a disenchantment with European modernity itself. This can be seen in Safa’s later repudiation of the humanistic heritage of Europe, in his identification of universalism with positivism, in his reactionary attitude towards cosmopolitanism, and in his endorsement of chauvinistic nationalism as the right antidote to the excesses of cultural romanticism and help us place Tanpinar within the twentieth-century hermeneutical movement in European social and political thought. I would like to conclude the essay with two theoretical and practical insights that directly flow from Tanpinar’s writings, and which have a deep philosophical and ethical affinity with Gadamer’s hermeneutics.

In very general terms, the first one is that the articulation of a historically enlightened universalism emerges as a possibility if we give up assuming that Tanpinar’s hermeneutical interest in history and culture or his stress on the essential factor of tradition, necessarily implies an uncritical acceptance of the past and socio-political conservatism. All that we have seen of the aims and presuppositions of Tanpinar’s thought belies this interpretation. Tanpinar’s understanding of tradition is based on the idea that modern consciousness takes a reflexive posture concerning all that necessarily implies an historically different encounter because ‘our horizons and culture or his stress on the essential factor of tradition, necessarily implies an uncritical acceptance of the past and socio-political conservatism. All that we have seen of the aims and presuppositions of Tanpinar’s thought belies this interpretation. Tanpinar’s understanding of tradition is based on the idea that modern consciousness takes a reflexive posture concerning all that necessarily implies an historically different encounter because ‘our horizons

87 Benhabib, The Claims of Culture, 8–41.
84 Pamuk, İstanbul, 235–6.
light of new encounters and experiences. In his novel *A Mind At Peace*, Tanpnar vividly describes the radical finitude and fallibility underlying the human condition and attempts to demonstrate how the articulation of a pluralistically enlightened universalism emerges from the Turkish experience of modernity as a possibility: 'How strange... I have two worlds... I am between two universes and two loves. That means, I am not a completeness! Is it the same for all of us?' His critical and hermeneutical vision not only helps us distinguish his perspective from the anti-cosmopolitan attitude of Turkish communitarianism, but also places Tanpnar at the heart of contemporary social and political philosophy as it revolves around the disputes about cosmopolitanism and multiple modernities.

**Acknowledgements**

I am most grateful to Emre Gönlügür, Serdar Tekin and Özgür Emrah Gürel for their constructive comments and detailed suggestions on different versions of this essay. Earlier versions of the essay were presented at the 2003 and 2004 annual meetings of the Middle East Studies Association, held respectively in Anchorage and San Francisco. The version published here has been extensively revised. I am grateful to the comments and suggestions of all the participants in the panels.