

Response to Umunç and Raw Don Randall

I appreciate Himmet Umunç and Laurence Raw's written response ("Reassessing English Studies in Turkey," *ARIEL* 48.1) as it testifies to the considerable impact my article ("English Studies in Turkey: An Assessment," *ARIEL* 46.1–2) has had in Turkey. However, I am unhappy with the fact that their response does not engage much with my article's concerns. For the most part, Umunç and Raw's essay has its own agenda. The authors gesture toward my article repeatedly but represent it inaccurately and often misconstrue it.

In their first sentence, Umunç and Raw affirm their interest in my article and take note of its two main concerns, writing of my "comments on language acquisition and how it dictates the ways in which learners and educators alike perceive the subject as a body of knowledge rather than a field of study." The immediate problem here is that I do not state or suggest that the first concern "dictates" the shape or coming-into-being of the second. I see and specify two problems: "ineffective practices of English-language teaching impede English-language acquisition, and a long-standing misconception of literary studies as a field of scholarly endeavour precludes effective contribution to scholarly research and publication" (Randall 50). I would ask readers to note the coordinating conjunction. I do not state that the first topic leads to or causes the second—an interesting argument, and one that probably could be made. But my article's ambitions are more modest: present two problems, which are serious and substantial problems if they exist, and then demonstrate that they do exist. Umunç and Raw, however, need the second problem to depend on the first, because their main challenge to my argument, which they promptly state, is that they "doubt whether translation occupies as significant a place in the learning agenda as Randall suggests." This is a relatively minor objection, unless the big university-level problem of misunderstanding English studies as a

domain of knowledge rather than a field of study depends on language acquisition and the specific impediments it faces.

For Umunç and Raw, the language acquisition problem is not mainly a matter of poorly implemented translation practices. They first mention “large classes taught by overworked educators”—can this be considered a problem specific to Turkish education? They then conduct a somewhat lengthy discussion about the bureaucratization of education in Turkey (a very real problem I mention in my article), complaining of “[o]fficial textbooks and curricula,” monitoring by “government-appointed inspectors,” emphasis on completion of tasks and passing of examinations, and a resulting disillusionment and “lack of confidence” in both educators and learners. The authors wrap up this section of their discussion by stating that “[i]n this kind of educational context, it is hardly surprising that language learning is dominated by notions of equivalence—in other words, the need to find the ‘exact’ way of translating source into target languages.” So, ineffective translation practices are not the main impediment to English acquisition (as I suggest); ineffective translation practice is merely the minor (but strangely summary) problem to which all of the more important problems lead.

The authors then state a key thesis of their independent (that is, unresponsive) argument: “The principal objective of any literature course should be to increase self-confidence—to make learners aware that their point of view on a text matters.” I, for one, would very much like to have an authority for this—some prominent, fairly recent critical voice with whom the authors concur. Personally, I believe (and I think Gayatri Spivak, my duly cited authority, would agree) that a principal objective of a literature course is to help students recognize the otherness of texts, the way texts manage to cogently articulate ideas and values that differ from those they already have in place.

There are important political reasons why the authors do not, cannot, agree with my statement of position. The short word is *Kemalism*, which the authors clearly advocate and which I will identify and explain subsequently. But first, I must note another instance of the misrepresentation of my argument, which serves Umunç and Raw’s distinct agenda: “One may argue, as Randall does, that literature

specialists ‘are not expected . . . [nor] really enabled to teach English language skills in an applied manner.’” I do not “argue” the stated position; I merely say it is part of my professional situation. This distinction is important given that Umunç and Raw, near the conclusion of their argument, reconstruct, though not very articulately, my supposed position as elitist: “We need to set aside the stigma associated with language teaching and learning, compared to the higher purpose of an ‘aesthetic education’ in literature (Randall 67).” The two halves of this sentence don’t really fit together, but if one puzzles it out, Umunç and Raw seem to be saying that I assert that to teach literature is to serve a “higher purpose”—higher than that of the poor stigmatized teaching of language. This would be elitism, I suppose, but it is not a position I ever adopt or advocate. Indeed, the idea of “aesthetic education,” which Umunç and Raw clearly have not grasped adequately, is wrongly ascribed to me; the phrase appears in quotation marks in my text, where I appropriately attribute it to Spivak. My putative elitism is, however, quite useful for Umunç and Raw, serving as a springboard for the advancement of their own independent, unresponsive argument in favour of “a transdisciplinary pedagogic model designed to encourage learners to take charge of their own education.”

A moment ago I proposed Kemalism as the political foundation of Umunç and Raw’s argument. Briefly stated, Kemalism is faithful adherence to the ideals and values put forward by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the Turkish republic. Umunç and Raw announce it first when noting the importance of English studies “to the westernization program initiated by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk following the creation of the Republic in 1923.” They present a brief and elliptical history of English studies in Turkey for the ostensible purpose of demonstrating the relative autonomy of the Turkish approach. Then their Kemalist position becomes clear: “Students of English Literature are much more understanding . . . and open to new ideas,” provided that they are sustained by the firm belief that “the [Turkish] state[,] . . . [and] nationality, is of the first importance.” In short, good Turks can become still better Turks through the study of English literature. Thus, the grand old “civilizing mission” of English literary study, a key feature of the Macaulayan

legacy, can be recruited to serve in the consolidation of Turkish national identity.

Umunç and Raw actually convince me that there are still some Turkish faculty, and even a few ex-pat scholars, who understand their teaching of English language and literature in Turkey as a worthwhile contribution to Atatürk's project of westernization and, more broadly, to Kemalist republican and nationalist ideals. But I must observe that this sociopolitical fact, if it is one, does nothing whatsoever to counter my article's unfavourable assessment of the poor quality of university-level scholarship and teaching. Indeed, Umunç and Raw may be providing me with a new factor impeding the development, in Turkey, of international-quality scholarship and teaching in the literary humanities. Here is their own summary statement of the case: "[W]e have to reconsider 'ideological transformation' in an educational context in which learners are brought up with Kemalist beliefs in westernization and individual transformation and continue to take courses in Atatürk's thought in their undergraduate curricula." For me, this can only be understood as the advocacy of the circumscription and containment of critical thinking within the bounds of a nationalist political project. Such a disposition impedes the fullest possible development of critical thought, especially in the humanities where contemporary scholarship aims to constantly review and renew the understanding of such key topics as gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and—yes, necessarily—nationality. In so saying, I do not speak against Kemalism itself but only against a simple-minded, anxious Kemalism that suggests that Turks, through education, should learn to understand and tolerate difference but never, ever be transformed by it.

I have much more I could say against Umunç and Raw's essay, but I will restrict myself to one noteworthy case of misrepresentation: the authors' presentation of Talât Sait Halman as my "former department chair." Most readers of *ARIEL* will not recognize this use of Halman for what it is: a manoeuvre aimed at assuring local—that is, Turkish—support. At the time I wrote my article, Halman was my dean—the dean I mention as informing us that we, as a department, would no longer consider local hires. He was at the time also my department's

acting chair—acting because he did no teaching in the department, and because he had no history and no experience as a member of a department of English language and literature. Very briefly and colloquially, he was not *in* English. He was chair of the department of Turkish literature and had been for several years before becoming dean of faculty; he did some teaching in that department, and he certainly had credentials and experience—including an earlier career at NYU—in Turkish literary and cultural studies. The fact that he is not in English studies but in Turkish studies is fully evident in Umunç and Raw’s use of a quote from Halman in which he speaks against “applying western theory uncritically to Turkish culture and literature”—an egregious instance of Umunç and Raw’s beside-the-point argumentation.

But it should also be noted that Halman was a kind of celebrity in Turkey, a poet and scholar, the nation’s first minister of culture and indeed, the creator and founder of the Turkish Ministry of Culture. He was my dean at the time of my writing, but by the time of Umunç and Raw’s writing he had become a subject of national bereavement. Halman died suddenly and unexpectedly in late 2014. It shocks me, therefore, that Umunç and Raw would make such shameless use of his legacy, striving to suggest that I had guidance and enlightenment awaiting me just down the hall but chose nonetheless to abide in benighted ignorance.

Having read through Umunç and Raw’s essay, I find that it confirms rather than contradicts my assessment of the poor state of English studies in Turkey.