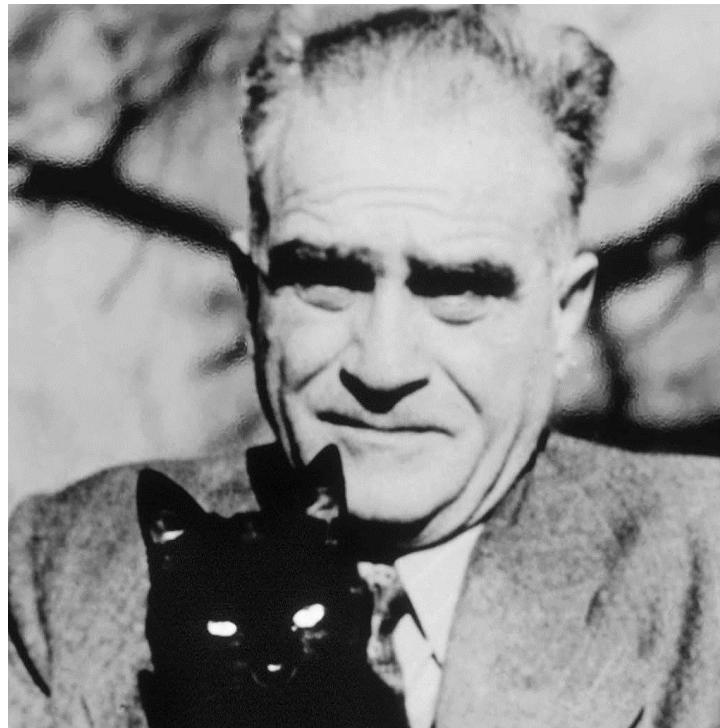


The New York Times

A Ramshackle Modernity

‘The Time Regulation Institute,’ by Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar

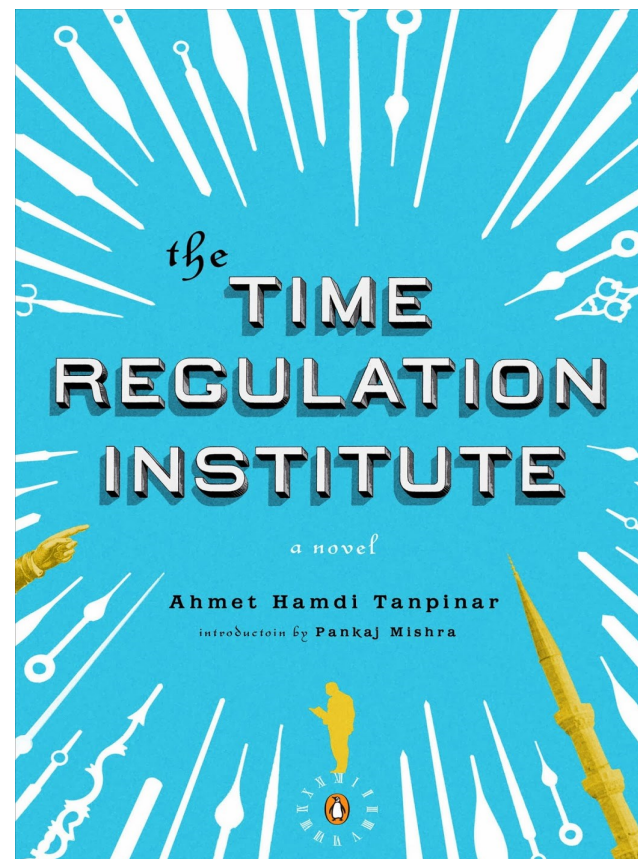
By MARTIN RIKERJAN. 3, 2014



Tanpınar (1901-62) was a formative figure in modern Turkish letters, although 50 years after his death, his career in English is just getting off the ground. His monumental “A Mind at Peace” (1949), which Orhan Pamuk has called “the greatest novel ever written about Istanbul,” found its way into English in 2008. Set just before World War II, it conjures on a vast scale the world of Istanbul during the early Turkish Republic, a time when modern Western values were abruptly imposed upon a people and a culture unprepared for them. The ramshackle modernity that resulted, in which Ottoman history and tradition were largely written over, became Tanpınar’s lasting subject: the “void,” as he once described it, of a people “suspended

between two lives.” Years later, Tanpınar revisited this void, but more overtly and comically, in his other major novel, “The Time Regulation Institute.” Having floated around for some years in a little-known English edition from a Turkish publisher, this excellent book has now landed more firmly in a new translation by Maureen Freely and Alexander Dawe, published by Penguin Classics. The Penguin edition provides plenty of context, including a timeline of Turkish history, an explanatory note from the translators, text notes, and an introduction by Pankaj Mishra detailing the cultural history behind Tanpınar’s work. Yet with so much packaging, it also suffers a little from that tic we sometimes bring to translated literature, of making the foreign book seem more foreign than it is.

For all its historical and cultural specificity, “The Time Regulation Institute” is before all else a first-rate comic novel, one with a fairly large foot in the Western literary tradition called Menippean satire. Works within the orbit of this genre stretch across the centuries, including Aristophanes’ “The Clouds,” Erasmus’s “In Praise of Folly,” Huxley’s “Point Counter Point” and those “Fortuna’s wheel” sections of Toole’s “A Confederacy of Dunces.”



” What such otherwise dissimilar books have in common is a delight in exposing the limits of human reason, with particular scorn for any intellectual system that attempts to comprehensively explain the world. Throughout history, whenever a theory arises that seeks to encapsulate human experience — politically, philosophically, economically, whatever — a Menippean satire emerges to make fun of it. So too with “The Time Regulation Institute,” in which Tanpınar creates an allegorical premise at once specific and broad enough to effectively satirize the entire 20th century, a century of systems if ever there was. The



book presents itself as the memoir of Hayri İrdal, assistant head manager of the ill-fated Time Regulation Institute and author of the once famous, now infamous (because entirely fake) historical study “The Life and Works of Ahmet the Timely.” İrdal is an earnest if slippery old fellow, who constantly professes his ignorance even while pointing out his accomplishments, and who regularly digresses into side notes that tend to be rather smart.

“Sometimes I consider just what strange creatures we are,” he says; “we bemoan the brevity of our lives but do everything in our power to squander this thing we call ‘the day’ as quickly and mindlessly as we can.” The sudden death of his longtime mentor, the entrepreneur Halit Ayarç, has provided İrdal with the opportunity to reflect upon the incredible course his life has taken — a course that resembles at many turns the journey of the Turkish people into modernity — and he now wishes to set the record straight on a number of key points.