



Orhan Pamuk: *Istanbul: Memories of a City*

(2006)

Norbert Bugeja (University of Malta)

Genre: Memoir. Country: Turkey.

Istanbul — Memories of a City is a memoir written by Istanbul-born novelist and 2006 literature Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk (b. 1952). First published in English in 2005 and translated by Maureen Freely, this autobiographical work follows on from Pamuk's preceding novels, most of which are set in his native Istanbul, and narrates his childhood and early teenage years as an aspiring painter and architecture student during the early years of the Cold War era, in the 1950s and 1960s. The memoir is at once a passionate lyrical tribute to the late-Ottoman imperial metropole and a lament for Istanbul's political and cultural degradation following the rise of the Turkish Republic, with its ensuing architectural and demographic ravages on a city that has historically stood as a literal and symbolic "bridge" between East and West, Asia and Europe.

In the memoir's first chapter, titled "Another Orhan", the author confesses that major world writers like

Conrad, Nabokov, Naipaul [...] are writers known for having managed to migrate between languages, cultures, countries, continents, even civilisations. Their imaginations were fed by exile, a nourishment drawn not through roots but through rootlessness; mine, however, requires that I stay in the same city, on the same street, in the same house, gazing at the same view. Istanbul's fate is my fate: I am attached to this city because it has made me who I am. (Pamuk 2005: 6-7)

Pamuk opening gambit here is clear: this is the book that ties his fate to his native space as a lost object of love towards which he readily surrenders his most intense and intimate emotions.

The novelist's recourse to the memoir form here is itself important: Pamuk seeks to inscribe his memories of the politically and culturally "peripheralized" Istanbul (Edhem Eldem 2001) following the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 by using a historically expansive narrative form that does not seek shelter in a fictional realm. The memoir becomes, instead, a narrative space that can begin to host the complex experience of the city over a period of one hundred and fifty years, from the late Ottoman period to the present, even as it holds its author to account as a work of profound historic responsibility. In this sense, Pamuk's intimate bond with the city is an admission of the dimensions of its vast urban consciousness: this is a city big enough to consume his writerly imagination and to underpin, as it in fact has, his entire lifework.

But how does Pamuk go about intertwining the politically troubled years that characterised his childhood with the demise in his bourgeois family's fortunes? The first chapter's title, "Another Orhan", is itself an important telltale sign of Pamuk's approach to narrating his "memories of a city". By its very nature, Istanbul provides all the dialectical tensions the memoirist needs, and which form the backbone of his account: those between East and West, the Ottoman past and the Republican present, the cultural intricacy of Ottoman culture as opposed to what Pamuk pitches as the "black and white" perspectives of the early Cold War city, the influence of the nineteenth-century European sojourning diarists, artistes and writers like Gustave Flaubert, Gerard de Nerval, Theophile Gautier and Antoine-Ignace Melling, and their influence on Turkey's own late Ottoman and early Republican writers, which included the poet Yahya Kemal and the novelist Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar.

Pamuk premises his account on other important tensions. There is the anxiety between the impact of the marginalised Ottoman metropole on his own individual psyche and that of the post-war Istanbul community he purports to speak for. There is the *angst* of an aspiring creative mind torn between his family's and society's expectations of him and the personal quest that led him to "find" his writerly self. But in its heart of hearts, this memoir remains an impassioned and nostalgic lament for the ravages the Turkish Republic wrought upon the city's imperial stratum, and the consequences of the so-called "Hausmannisation" of Istanbul upon its inhabitants' psychic self-identification: all in the name of the secular modernity endorsed by the nation's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. This long intimation of cultural loss is, according to Pamuk, why writers such as Tanpınar and Kemal, whose work straddled the end of a centuries-long political era and the beginning of another, drew inspiration from French diarists like Gautier "to weave together a story from the fall of the Ottoman Republic, the nationalism of the early Republican years, its ruins, its Westernising project, its poetry and its landscapes" (Pamuk 227).

Pamuk concludes that the outcome of this delicate cultural positioning, reflected in the late Ottoman and early Republican representations of a city in profound and degenerative political transit,

was an image in which Istanbul could see themselves, and a dream to which they could aspire. We might call this dream, which grew out of the barren, isolated, destitute neighbourhoods beyond the city walls, the "melancholy of the ruins", and if one looks at these scenes through the eyes of an outsider (as Tanpınar did) it is possible to see them as picturesque. First seen as the beauty of a picturesque landscape, melancholy also came to express the sadness that a century of defeat and poverty would bring to the people of Istanbul. (228)

This "melancholy of the ruins" is premised upon a long historical sense of *ennui* that Pamuk embodies as a self-narrative by excavating the archives, memories, documents and images of the city's rapidly vanishing Ottoman and pre-industrial visages — not least the legendary Istanbul photographer Ara Güler's images that accompany Pamuk's text. Its ruin-inflected melancholy takes on a diversified set of characteristics throughout the memoir, all of them variations or nuances of a certain *tristesse* or melancholic urban-psychic mood that Pamuk notably identifies as *hüzün*. *Hüzün* is in itself a profoundly dialectical concept, one that stems from the "picturesque", the aesthetically and even spiritually consoling solace invoked by the post-imperial city's derelict features, but one that also suggests itself as a salient mode of political and cultural self-affirmation for those who inhabit the lingering vestiges of its imperial splendour. As such, the long historical loss captured by *hüzün* becomes for Pamuk also an indispensable form of agency or means of expression and even self-exhibition, with the sense of historic paralysis it embodies, according to the memoirist, endowing its inhabitants with a "poetic licence" (129) to feel and thereby express themselves through this self-same paralysis, this lapsed or even "afterwardly" (Jean Laplanche 1999: 234) dimension of identification.

This is, perhaps, why the memoirist emphasises that

to understand the central importance of *hüzün* as a cultural concept conveying worldly failure, listlessness and spiritual suffering, it is not enough to grasp the history of the word and the honour we attach to it. [...] The *hüzün* of Istanbul [...] is a way of looking at life that implicates us all, not only a spiritual state, but a state of mind that is ultimately as life affirming as it is negating. (Pamuk 113)

The haunting lyrical sequences that characterise this memoir are ones through which Pamuk the keen *flâneur* goes to great lengths to invoke and unpick the city's multi-layered and century-old past in intimate, emotionally searing and intricate detail. What these ultimately suggest is that Pamuk here is not so much describing the historical melancholy of the city's urban landscape as he is unravelling the affective landscape of melancholy itself — opening up, in the process, its resources and untapped potentials as a complex, diversified conglomeration or “city” of poignant and often convoluted and paradoxical emotive experiences.

This may well be Pamuk's idiosyncratic way of addressing the haunting absences, spaces, objects and stories left behind by the city's Greek, Armenian, Jewish, Kurdish and other ethnic communities, many of whom were either expelled or viciously persecuted throughout the Turkish nation's century-long history. This is a concern he addresses both in the memoir, especially its nineteenth chapter (situated right at the physical heart of the book), titled “The Turkification of Constantinople”, and elsewhere in his writing, including the catalogue to the actual Museum of Innocence he set up in the Çukurcuma quarter of Istanbul, based on his penultimate novel *Masumiyet Müzesi* (*The Museum of Innocence*).

True to his recurring concern with the East-West dialectic that Istanbul embodies — perhaps more conspicuously than any other ex-imperial metropole — one of the boldest and most meaningful assertions Pamuk makes in the memoir is that, as he puts it, “the roots of our *hüzün* are European” (Pamuk 233). This axiom lies at the very kernel not only of the memoir, but of the cultural impulses that led Pamuk to conceive it. Which tools of representation does or should one use to describe “the fact of living in an impoverished country, in a city that no longer mattered in the eyes of the world” (Pamuk 221)? How does a writer who has inherited an impoverished and reduced post-imperial polity, one that is, moreover, possessed of relatively few visual images of itself after more than four hundred years of rule under the sign of Islam and during which figurative visualisations, including those of the city, were not well-regarded, including as tropes of the metropole's and its subjects' self-representation? Pamuk's answer to these questions is precisely to look towards European representations of the late Ottoman metropole, to regard the city “through the eyes of an outsider” (326) — not only as a question of collecting and archiving these representations of the city's memorial layering, but, more importantly, as a manner of parsing and understanding the *ennui*, at once collective and intimate, that the memoir sets out to diagnose and reaffirm.

Pamuk writes that “The melancholy Tanpınar first discovered in Nerval's and Gautier's arresting observations about the poor neighbourhoods, the ruins, dingy residential districts and city walls, he transforms into an indigenous *hüzün* through which to apprehend a local landscape [...]” (Pamuk 222). The memoirist is here suggesting a dynamic that in many ways runs counter to Edward W. Said's own thesis in his *Orientalism*, namely that Europe and the imperial West have projected their own representations of how they desired to perceive the Orient. For Pamuk, his native city's indigenous brand of *tristesse* marks a crucial bequeathal that came through, amongst other salient influences, the nineteenth-century French orientalist diarists — Gautier, Nerval, Flaubert and various others.

“The roots of our *hüzün* are European”: *hüzün* is, perhaps more than anything else, a poetic means towards

sensitising the memoir's readers to the quality of a long and enduring intimation of historical loss — one which the memoirist himself embraces as the *force majeure* that governs the complex emotional itinerary of his writing. In this melancholy tribute to the spaces that replenish his imagination, Pamuk self-consciously places the influence of Western artists, writers and intellectuals at the basis of his city's self-identification over a century and a half of political, economic and cultural decline. But, at the same moment, he is acknowledging this indigenous ennui, this *hüzün*, as an outcome of the political, diplomatic and economic maneuvering of the European Great Powers, foremost amongst them Britain and France, that accelerated the demise of the Ottoman empire and many aspects of its heritage. These concerns, of course, are not limited to Pamuk's memoir — they pervade his fictions, too, from the multi-perspectival narrations of Ottoman Istanbul to the play between Frankish portraiture and Eastern miniaturist art.

“At times when I was most desperate to believe in a glorious past [...] I found Melling's engravings consoling. But even as I allow myself to be transported, I am aware that part of what makes Melling's paintings so beautiful is the sad knowledge that what they depict no longer exists. Perhaps I look at these paintings precisely because they do make me sad” (Pamuk 55). Pamuk's tribute to German engraver Antoine-Ignace Melling's visualisations of the eighteenth-century Bosphorus, the vital waterway that, in physically dividing it, gives the city's urban geography its symbolic status to the world, is ultimately also a tribute to the city's own generative aesthetic. Pamuk's aesthetic carefully rummages amongst the ruins of history to find and to hone a trans-historic sense of cultural dignity: one that, like this memoir itself, will not be held hostage to the expediencies of history's powers-that-be, even as it emphatically partakes of both political history and its turbulent times.

Works Cited:

Eldem, Edhem. “Istanbul: From Imperial to Peripheralized capital.” *The Ottoman City between East and West: Aleppo, Izmir and Istanbul*, edited by Edhem Eldem, Daniel Goffman and Bruce Masters, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 135-214.

Laplanche, Jean. *Essays on Otherness*. Edited by John Fletcher, Routledge, 1999.

Pamuk, Orhan. *Istanbul — Memories of a City*. Translated by Maureen Freely, Faber and Faber, 2006.

Norbert Bugeja (University of Malta)

Citation: Bugeja, Norbert. "Istanbul: Memories of a City ". *The Literary Encyclopedia*. First published 31 August 2016 [<https://www.litencyc.com>, accessed 21 February 2023.]

This article is copyright to © [The Literary Encyclopedia](https://www.litencyc.com).

All entries, data and software copyright © The Literary Dictionary Company Limited

ISSN 1747-678X