

## Istanbul

### *Memories of a city*

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*Hüzün.* This is the Turkish word for melancholy. A melancholy of bitter sweetness and consolation, shared communally not in the character of an individual torment. A word that if anything characterizes the conception of Istanbul. A city in steady decay. Once the capital of an empire - the Ottoman empire, it now is but a shadow of its former self, clinging to as well as repuditating its inheritance.

Orhan Pamuk has lived all his life in Istanbul, thus the city provides the cosmos of his being, and the memories of the city are hence an extension of the memories of his own life, a way to place it in history. Thus the book tries both to be a memoir of his own life as well as that of the city. The memoir of a pampered boy growing up in a rich extended family, sufficiently endowed by an enterprising and prematurely deceased grandfather to persistantly withstand the financial ineptitudes of a father and uncles slowly grinding it down. The two aspects are supposed to reflect each other, as the author writes 'I poured my soul in the city's street and there it still resides', yet the engaging part of the book draws not surprisingly on the universal appeal of the story of growing up, while the description of the city remains largely vicarious and shadowy and slightly unreal, not unlike the many black and white photographs that stud the pages of the book. It is an evocation of the city based on old news-clippings, distant travellers accounts, interspersed with glimpses of the Bosphorus viewed between interstices of buildings. It is a focusing on the old city, the traditional Istanbul, the successor of Constantinople, the fusing of a western past with and eastern tradition. What only emerges in the very margins of the vision through oblique allusions to apartment blocks of concrete, is that a city of a million people in the last thirty years has been transformed into city of ten millions, yet another Third World Collossos, obscenely bloated, without history and rooted presence.

Pamuk is a Turk, of a well-to-do westernizing elite, thus his view is that of the divided perspective, viewing the city as a western outsider and to be viewed by the same. As Pamuk puts it 'to become at once the object and the subject of the Western gaze'. It is as if Istanbul was being defined by the gaze of outsiders, that its own inhabitants never possessed the confidence to define it themselves but had to look for outside instruction. Pamuk does not go further back than the 19th century 'orientalising' travellers, refering to Nerval, Gautier and Flaubert. Visitors from abroad who focused on the 'other', the slave markets, the harems, the strange clothing, the Arabic calligraphy, finding in the Orient an alternative reality, an uneasy but fascinating reassurance that the world is truly bigger than the familiar, the search of which is after all the object of true travel. But, as the author remarks ironically, by focusing on the very differences, they also made sure that those were eventually ironed out. As an instructive example: Gide travelled in the early twenties, critically assessing the country, incidentally assuring himself of the superiority of

French culture (see yet another motivation for travel), making fun of the Turkish clothing, and as a result (really?) Atatürk abolished it shortly thereafter in his relentless drive to Westernize. Pamuk, as a member of the western elite, becomes in many ways a stranger, a tourist in his own city. He grew up in it, but he basically knows it nostalgically from its representations in the eyes of others, westernized painters or westernized chroniclers, through old newspapers or encyclopedias, and through his own obsessive wanderings in the back alleys of the city, just as a curious foreign tourist. And just as a foreign tourist he is fascinated by the decay producing its own aesthetics as Ruskin perceptively once remarked. I personally did not know that there were so many wooden houses in Istanbul. A rapidly, by fire and neglect, diminishing legacy from its Ottoman past, of which there now remain so precious few<sup>1</sup>. Wooden structures age, they become dilapidated and miscoloured, and in this very ageing they acquire an individuality, which like all individuality, according to Ruskin, is non-replicable as it is the outcome of unpredictable accidents. And it is this individuality, this accidental and hence unique, pointless, except by its very being, that evokes the sense of soul, the fragility of the ephemeral, which is alone in having the power to generate nostalgia and the temporal presence out of which it grows. Because what is not accidental, is predictable and hence replicable, and is thus not tied to time. To the outsider the cracked wall, the non-working fountain, the decrepit woodwork, are all imbued with meaning; while to those who live with those manifestations of time, those are just sordid signs of deprivation. But to Pamuk it is feed to his nostalgic aesthetics, and he returns from his excursions, with mementoes such as old books, postcards, calling cards, or simply strange pieces of information, culled to reassure himself that his excursions were after all real, not virtual, that those dreams left tangible footprints.

The author dreams about becoming a painter. In one of the most perceptive passages of his memoirs, he recalls the intense pleasure he as a child received from his paintings. As the exemplary school-boy (never mind that he often skipped classes) he is used to the appreciation of adults, in fact it constitutes an irreplaceable source of nourishment. In his painting he discovers a seemingly inexhaustible font to elicit such praise and appreciation, a font which in addition is so easy to tap. Concomitantly it provides internal gratification in his own powers. To paint is to apprehend reality, yet also to create it. He marvels at his ability to produce a likeness, and he is proud of every one of his accomplishments. His eye tutored by western models is almost exclusively directed to the street-scapes around him. To draw is to assume complete control, and as such an exercise in solipsism. Not surprisingly it merges with masturbation. Later on, his relation with painting will transcend its erstwhile innocent fascination and become troubled and marred by frustration. The font will run dry, and paintings will be discarded half-finished, yet it persists nevertheless as a vocation. The dwindling fortunes of his family will necessitate various moves, and his mother will provide him with a studio of sorts in a storage apartment of hers. It is here he experiences his first love-affair, a young school-girl who becomes his model. Like all true first-loves it is awkward, born in mutual silence, maturing to kisses and exalted promises. The girl is spirited away to Switzerland by a concerned father, where she is quickly accustomed, never deigning to answer his entreating letters. The problem is his painting. Finding himself in a lacklustre career as an architect student (what better combination of an

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<sup>1</sup> The author describes regularly how one after another of the old Ottoman yalks are consumed by fire.

artistic ambition with an engineering competence?) he is inexorably dropping out, his mother is aghast. In the west you can survive as a painter, she tells him, but in Turkey you cannot. No matter how good you are, you will be reduced to scraping and bowing to an indifferent bourgeois. Better to go through with the rigmaroles and get a respectable means of supporting yourself, then doing the painting on the side. (And much better too, than would it be your sole source of income). His mother is concerned, both genuinely and socially, leary of revealing his stigmatized status as a drop-out to her friends. The author is in crises, roaming the streets of Istanbul. In the end he decides to give up painting for writing.

An integral part of the book is its photos. Most of them are culled from the archives of professional photographers and documenters of Istanbul, some of them the author has taken himself. Unfortunately the quality of their reproductions leave much to be desired. First they are with few exceptions too small to be done justice, there are after all some things to be said for the coffee-table book. Secondly the poor printing tends to blur them. This is a pity. Some of them are exquisite. They reveal a city hovering between the real and the magical, the latter represented by the skyline of its Byzantine churches turned Ottoman mosques and tall spiky minarets which defiantly probe into the sky. Sometime they are covered in snow, a fairly rare yet regular enough of an event to be part of the city's character. The photos also lack captions, thus they do not directly speak to us, but remain mute and disconnected reminders. And finally why is there no map? An essential part of a city is its geography, how different parts relate to each other. Even the uninformed reader knows that Istanbul is clustered around the Bosphorus, and that this expanse of water makes out the heart of the city, spanned by bridges and criss-crossed by ferries and transversed by ships from all over the world, presenting a view of which all people in the city desire a slice of. But what about the other parts? The names are repeated, but they convey no meaning.

The city of Istanbul is viewed over two centuries, the memoir of the author spans two decades. As the age of the author is very close to that of mine, ethnic separation is overlaid by what is often stronger - contemporaneity. Add to that a certain similarity of temperament, and the reading of the memoir becomes yet another exercise of discovering the familiar in the unfamiliar setting, the basis, according to William James, of curiosity. The Turkey of the 50's is desperately wanting to be Western, yet as a reaction desperately wanting to be Turkish. This patriotic fervour produces many an ugly thing, like the terrorization of Greek merchants, strongly reminiscent of 'die Kristallnacht'<sup>2</sup>, dismantling one of the defining features of the Ottoman Empire, namely its tolerance and multi-ethnicity. The Turkey of the 50's has not yet caught up with the West. The cars that roll along its streets are bulky older models, and TV seems not to be a regular part of life, not until the late sixties. Yet the background of international politics and the Cold War, remains, just as the celestial sky, common to us all. During the night Soviet ships pass through the Bosphorus, the main naval artery of an essentially landlocked empire, and for so long part of its imperialistic ambition. Pamuk watches them and keeps tabs, just like so many others in Istanbul, the cold war throwing its shadow on its water. Of the Istanbul of the

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<sup>2</sup> Although officially tolerated, maybe even condoned and encouraged, it does not sit in a larger context of persecution and genocide, which otherwise would retroactively darken it

last thirty odd years, the author has little to say. As the city grows, it steadily becomes less interesting, its vivid past being suffocated by its bland present.

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