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Melancholy and identity in Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul: Memories and the city*

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Abstract

Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul: Memories and the City* is an extraordinary addition to the literature on melancholy. Istanbul in his account is a humanized city suffering from an incurable even pathological sadness, which transmits its mood to its inhabitants. Pamuk uses the word, *hüzün*, denoting a mélange of melancholy, sadness and *tristesse*, to unite the city, its past and its present within a lasting as well as transnational feeling. This article analyses his approach to *hüzün*, which allows him to enter into dialogue with some of the most important Turkish and French artists, who, in various domains and in different times, portrayed Istanbul, helping Istanbulis shape their view of the city and their sense of belonging to it. This discourse dilates and enriches the puzzle of artistic and historical references the book encompasses, making Pamuk present Istanbul's neighbourhoods from multiple perspectives.

Keywords: *Hüzün*, melancholy, Ottoman Empire, eastern, western

Introduction

"From a very young age, I suspected there was more to my world than I could see..."

(Pamuk, 3)

Revisiting the past in his unique memoir *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, Orhan Pamuk weaves his own story of growing up into the fabric of Istanbul's history. The author writes himself and sets his own story against the backdrop of a city which itself carries a torn identity. The uniting of the personal and spatial planes, bearing in mind that the latter comprises the collective plane, becomes evident in the frame of the narrative, when Pamuk refers to his fantasy related to the existence of a double of himself, who lived in an imaginary house in Istanbul in the opening of his book. Pamuk grew up in a close but dysfunctional family and as a child and young adult, Pamuk watched his city struggle with becoming more westernized while clinging to its eastern heritage, simultaneously resenting and accepting both sides of its evolving culture. He organises his haphazard and emotionally inadequate memories of his once rich and famous family's gradual decline into obscurity, his early interest in painting, his spiritual affinity with the place of his birth and its melancholy and finally his decision to pursue a career in writing. The book ties Pamuk's family's gradual decline to the similar decline of Istanbul since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and it describes at length the melancholy that pervades both the city and its residents. He says in a chapter of the book:

"As my father and my uncle stumbled from one bankruptcy to the next, as our fortune dwindled and our family disintegrated and the quarrels over money grew more intense, every visit to my grandmother's apartment brought me sorrow, and a step closer to a realisation: it was a long time coming, arriving by a circuitous note, but the cloud of gloom and loss that the fall of the Ottoman Empire had spread over Istanbul finally claimed my family too." (22)

To begin with the particulars of the novel, Pamuk presents himself as a resident of Istanbul, an Istanbulis; this term denotes an intense relationship with the awkward soul of the city, which makes the people shun vibrant colours among other things, their own way to grieve for their city. The private melancholy of his parents' failed marriage and the public, communal, end-of-Empire desolation that filled Istanbul in the mid twentieth-century are explored through Pamuk's recollections of childhood.

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His father, a loveable but rather reckless man, was frequently absent when Pamuk was growing up in the second half of the twentieth century. He squandered the family fortune in unsuccessful business ventures; consorted with his mistresses while his mother waited despondently at home playing patience. His mother too disappeared sometimes while he and his brother would be handed over to the cook or the caretaker for days. The chilly and doleful bourgeois atmosphere that permeated the Pamuk family home created a reek which expanded beyond those stuffily over-furnished rooms. It created a solipsistic cell that Pamuk seems unable to escape. He would lose himself for hours playing his 'disappearing game' in his reflection on the mirror in the room. He remembers how on snowy evenings he would stand with his aunt and his cousin and watch from afar with the rest of the neighbourhood as noisy children would merrily slide down the alley on sleds, chairs and planks of wood. Being divided into a memoir and a cultural history, the vision of his home city that Pamuk presents in this book is occluded by the mists of reminiscence.

The author writes at length about the air of melancholy that he says envelopes the entire city of Istanbul and its people. Although from time to time he notes other reasons for its existence, he comes back to the idea that it stems from the fall of the Ottoman Empire, which led to an overall decline in the fortunes of both the city of Istanbul and its people, with the exception of an increasingly small number of wealthy families. Pamuk's state of mind in this autobiographical reverie is suffused with melancholy or, to give the emotion its distinctly Turkish inflection: *hüzün*, which has an Arabic root and means "melancholy." The word carrying the central emotion of his book, Pamuk points out its history and its philosophical tradition. He says that the feeling of *hüzün* is central to Turkish poetry and music, and that the people of Istanbul are resigned to living lives of poverty and depression so they accept melancholy as an honour and a way of life. He says, "The *hüzün* of Istanbul is not just the mood evoked by its music and its poetry, it 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."

Hüzün is an ambiguous term similar to Aristotelian melancholy, and the Romantics' fetishisation of ruin and solitude. It is unlike Burton's view in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* which has an encyclopedic view of melancholy and the sources it emerges from, like death, love, defeat, evil deeds or may be another comprehensive list of its cure. As the Islamic incarnation of that emotion, the term also implies a state of grace, a collective yearning for the divine and the bittersweet recognition of spiritual lack. It binds people together. Pamuk writes: "...we begin to understand *hüzün* as, not the melancholy of a solitary person, but the black mood shared by millions of people together." (114)

The roots of *hüzün*, as Pamuk points out, are European: the concept was explored and expressed by the French poet Charles Baudelaire who identified the air of melancholy in art in a positive way, as praise. Theophile Gautier, under the influence of his friend Gerard de Nerval, who briefed him about the 'wonders' about the place and on whom he heavily relied on for his materials, laments his own experience of the Orient. Pamuk writes about Gautier and his French guide's experience: "He describes the grass in the cracks and the fig trees whose large green leaves soften the tops of the towers, the dullness of the abutting districts,

the silence of these neighbourhoods and their ramshackle houses. 'It is difficult to believe there is a living city behind these dead ramparts!' wrote Gautier. 'I do not believe there exists anywhere on earth more austere and melancholy than this road which runs for more than three miles between ruins on the one hand and a cemetery on the other.'" (209) This portrayal of Istanbul imprinted itself deeply on several writers of Istanbul who deeply cared about what the westerners had to say about the ruins and melancholy of Istanbul and later also used the extreme melancholy as a praise of the city.

Pamuk's preoccupation with the Western origins of *hüzün* displays melancholy not simply as an aesthetic sensibility but also as a 'Western' product. Absent from the memoir, but central to Pamuk's understanding is the urban melancholy of Charles Baudelaire, who talks about the link between the man and the city that can essentially be compared to the link between an actor and his stage property an artist and his canvas, or a writer and his writing which reflect a collective unconscious. Baudelaire's melancholy, almost always associated with the streets of Paris, is characterised by the glorification of melancholy and the man of sensibility who is prone to the feeling. On a similar note, the presence of the Ottoman past through the monumental buildings feeds Pamuk's nostalgia for past grandeur as well as his awareness of the general air of malaise in the city. The writer's *hüzün* infiltrates the city itself as its mark of distinction, its collective emotion and part of everyday reality, uniting the city and its inhabitants, the newcomers with the locals. The two-page long inventory of the scenes that evoke this feeling of *hüzün* ranges from:

"...the evenings when the sun sets early, of the fathers under the street lamps in the back streets returning home carrying plastic bags. Of the old Bosphorus ferries moored to deserted stations in the middle of winter, where sleepy sailors scrub the decks, a pail in their hand and one eye on the black-and-white television in the distance...of the covered women who stand at remote bus stops clutching plastic shopping bags and speaking to no one as they wait for the bus that never arrives;...of the crowds of men fishing from the sides of the Galata Bridge; of the cold reading rooms of libraries; of the street photographers...of the clock towers no one ever notices; of the history books in which children read about the victories of the Ottoman Empire and of the beatings these same children receive at home...of the crowds of men smoking cigarettes after the national football matches, which during my childhood never failed to end in abject defeat: I speak of them all." (Pamuk, 84-89)

Hüzün in this context is not an elitist feeling, but a sensibility that informs both high and low culture, the poetics of the city and an unpretentious way of dealing with it. The memoir doubly implicates the city as a locus of melancholy, one that draws from multiple histories, heritages and traditions of both the old and the new that seeks to replace the former. For the Istanbulis this melancholy is, according to Pamuk, unmatched. He believes the city of Istanbul carries as its fate this feeling. It describes the city's soul, and allows the writer to discuss the fall of the empire and the marks that loss has left in the city's landscape and in its inhabitants' feelings, thus contributing to explain the latter's ambiguous sense of identity, disjoined as they are between the traces of a glorious past and the republican drive to forget or to efface it. The lack of pride and its acceptance thereof among the Istanbulis is evident

in the vocabulary they use to merely give direction to any specific location; their landmarks mostly consist of words like 'ruins', 'dilapidated house' etc. Some people attempt to escape from this melancholy and identify with the more modern 'western' landmarks ignoring the historical buildings but their attempts to sever connection with their past fails and the *hüzün* returns only with a severe impact. *Hüzün* is an emotion felt only by the native, in something that may be so close to them as their arabesk music; it is not a detached worldview of a miserable place, but a feeling in between physical pain and grief, this ache gives them an emotional depth which they cherish. It does not speak of a hero's struggle against the society, but his acceptance of not being desirous in the face of money, success, or the women he loved:

"The *hüzün* of Istanbul suggests nothing of an individual standing against society; on the contrary, it suggests an erosion of the will to stand against the values and mores of the community, encourages us to be content with little, honouring the virtues of harmony, uniformity, humility." (129)

The author's protean view of the city owes much to the four melancholic writers, who, in Pamuk's opinion, gave modern Istanbul its melancholy. The novelist refers to Abdülhak Şinasi Hisar the Bosphorus memoirist, Reşat Ekrem Koçu the writer of the unfinished *Istanbul Encyclopaedia*, Yahya Kemal the greatest and most influential poet of Istanbul who throughout his life refused to publish any book at all, and Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar the novelist of Istanbul, as 'the four lonely melancholic writers' of the early twentieth century who bring an awareness of the beginning of a new era for Turkey with the fall of the empire. He says, "For these four melancholic writers drew their strength from the tensions between the past and the present, or between what Westerners like to call the East and West; they are the ones who taught me how to reconcile my love for modern art and Western literature with the culture of the city in which I lived." (138) According to the writer, they were able to learn the best from French art and literature by associating great writing with originality, authenticity and truthfulness, which led them not only to find an important and authentic subject – the decline and fall of the Ottoman Empire – but also to be proud of the city where they were born. This pride is shared by Pamuk, who, as the epigraph has already demonstrated, sees beauty in melancholy. This praise for melancholy is about finding a voice of their own in the ruins, loss and destruction and being honest by looking into the city's past and finding an authentic voice. To borrow the expression from Orhan Pamuk:

"What unites these four writers is the poetry they made of this knowledge and the melancholy attending to it." (142)

The blend of eastern and western cultures, so characteristic of Istanbul, is something Pamuk explores with mixed feelings. Encouraged by Atatürk's Republic to identify with Europe, the Turks inhabit a space that is both East and West; and also a space between that is neither one thing nor the other. The Ottoman past is, literally, a foreign country for the Turks. Pamuk mourns the replacement of the Empire with "the little, imitative republic of Turkey" and the descent of "the grand polyglot, multicultural Istanbul of the imperial age" into "a monotonous, monolingual town in black and white". Pamuk tries to make sense of the debatable representations of European travelers and Turkish writers, the changing fortunes of Istanbul, and his own place

within it. He is drawn to the blackened ruins of old wooden mansions, the dark back streets and the conflagration of burning ships on the Bosphorus. He doesn't like "afternoons in spring when the sun suddenly comes out full strength". The book includes extensive discussion of other writers who spent time in Istanbul and described it in books and newspaper stories, including a few French authors and several Turkish writers. Pamuk reveals how these other writers have influenced him and his view of Istanbul both as a child and an adult. His fascinating account of European visions of the city that moves from Flaubert, Nerval and Gautier through Gide to Brodsky and from the work of native Istanbul residents like the novelist Tanpınar to the poet Yahya Kemal is beautiful.

In the 1920s and '30s, the Republic of Turkey experienced a fifteen-year "westernizing" cultural revolution that attempted to distance it as much as possible from its Ottoman-Islamic past by transforming everything from the alphabet to the legal system, from education to the clothes people wore. Access to the past was restricted for the sake of developing a future-oriented "new" society. Writers like Tanpınar lived through this transition and knew how to read and write in both the "old" Ottoman script and the "new" Latin Turkish; in short, they were familiar with two mentalities and the Ottoman legacies from Mevlevi Sufism to art and architecture weighed heavily upon them. In Tanpınar's ironic vision the promise of "modernization" gives way to anxiety. What is unquestionable about this new world is not progress, but fragmentation and destabilization, the reader is never made to forget that he is accessing a world through the perspective of a voyeur, a tourist of one's native city, an aesthete, and one who has learned to see life from the outside through a self-Orientalizing gaze. Pamuk hails Tanpınar's hero as the one who perfectly understands as well as embodies the melancholy of Istanbul: "...it seems to me that *hüzün* does not come from the hero's broken, painful story, or from his failure to win the hand of the woman he loves; rather, it is almost as if the *hüzün* which infuses the city's sights and streets and famous views has seeped into the hero's heart to break his will." (131)

In 1914, Andre Gide in the account of his travels through Turkey describes the Turks as ugly and a race which deserves no better. In the following year Atatürk, another Westerniser, initiated the mission of bringing about a revolutionary change in whatever was rejected by the Western observer as rubbish, the ruins, the harems even the street dogs. Thus to escape surrendering to the narrow nationalism that was on the rise, Pamuk says he would resort to reading accounts of Western travelers or the Turkish writers and accept their memories as his own. Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, in his 'A Stroll through the City's Poor Neighbourhoods', describes how he would take walks through the neighbourhoods to acclimatize himself to the fact that he lived in an impoverished country. But behind the strolling around to feel the loss and dense melancholy was a political agenda, to address the reality of Istanbul. Tanpınar and Kemal on their walks would pick their way through the ruins looking for signs of a new Turkish state, a new Turkish nationalism and they wanted to show that though the Ottoman Empire might have fallen, yet, suffused with melancholy they were still standing tall. Kemal in his 'On the City walls of Istanbul' recounts how they wanted to create a national image, unfamiliar to the observer who was taught that the Western Civilisation is superior to all others,

and thus preferred to look to the poor, defeated and deprived Muslim population to prove that they hadn't lost a bit of their identity and to satisfy their craving for a mournful beauty express the feelings of loss and defeat. Tanpınar, Yahya Kemal and others amongst their contemporaries, although influenced heavily by Western thinkers, were actively seeking thought structures that would allow them to negotiate their existence at the end point of Ottoman political and cultural formations that were fast disappearing, and giving way to the pressures of Turkification and Republican nationalism. Pamuk's *hüzün* therefore does not essentially point to an east-west rift but the Western origins of *hüzün* is one that makes them part of his literary cityscape.

Thus, *Hüzün*, or Istanbul's melancholy according to Pamuk, speaks of the same conflicts inherent in the concept. It allows the self to connect to society, the city to Islamic and Western traditions, and the individual to the public and high culture to low; it emerges as an emotion, which draws from and relates to different, even contrasting conceptions of the term. What starts out as a natural outcome of the past glory of a bygone empire is elaborated so that its definition changes with each perspective included; drawing from histories that took place and are unique to Istanbul's distinctive history and topography, comprising all, and yet reducible to none and perhaps the skill with which Pamuk can join these within the literary cityscape of Istanbul leads him to claim that the melancholy of the city has no counterpart in either Eastern or Western cultures.

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