

Orhan Pamuk and the Construction of Turkey's National Memory in *Istanbul. Memories of a City*

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ABSTRACT

Pamuk's *Istanbul. Memories of a City* (2005), more than a book of individual memoirs, is a review of significant moments of Turkey's history, through which the writer addresses issues of national representation and identity. By analysing how Pamuk's book revises Turkey's cultural memory when the country's membership in the EU is considered a controversial key issue to the stability of Europe in the future, my aim is to examine to what extent the debate on Turkey's membership in the EU perpetuates Western representations of the oriental world in cultural and ideological terms.

RESUMO

Istanbul. Memories of a City (2005), mais do que um livro de memórias, constitui-se numa revisão de momentos significativos da história da Turquia, através da qual o escritor problematiza questões de representação da nação e da sua identidade. Ao analisar como o livro de Pamuk revisita a memória cultural da Turquia, quando a adesão do país à União Europeia é considerada um assunto chave para a estabilidade da Europa no futuro, o meu objectivo é examinar em que medida o debate sobre a referida adesão reproduz as representações que o ocidente tem feito do mundo oriental em termos culturais e ideológicos.

“As the very shape and texture of the nation change,
history takes on radically different meanings.”

Daniel Walkowitz and Lisa Knauer, *Memory and the Impact of Political Transformation in Public Space*.

One of the most controversial issues in the European Union when it celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2007 was Turkey's membership. European citizens thoroughly discussed their identity and the political stability of Europe in the future. The heated debate was informed by two facts: on the one hand, the refusal of France and of the Netherlands to endorse the European Treaty through popular referenda in 2005, and, on the other, the enlargement of the membership to 27 countries when Bulgaria and Romania became European members on January 1, 2007. Since discussions have mostly focused on the

Western point of view and interests, it becomes inviting to examine how Turks addressed the issue, fact that leads me to consider Orhan Pamuk's opinion and his symbolic construction of the nation, bearing in mind he is one of the most outstanding Turkish personalities in the world scene.

Orhan Pamuk, who was awarded the 2006 Nobel Prize for Literature, cannot be considered Turkey's spokesperson, and this explains why his opinions should be valued, bearing in mind his critical positions on his country. It is widely known how he has been attacked by some conservative religious and secular sectors of the Turkish society due to the perspective from which he reflects on national identity and on the country's present world position. The polemic results, among other aspects, from his insistence on discussing Turkish fractured sense of identity, since he portrays the nation as being divided between the ghostly presence of a lost great empire and the constraints imposed by the construction of a secular nation¹. This problematic is addressed in detail in Pamuk's *Istanbul. Memories of a City* (2005), a book whose genre remains undefined until its last page. If the volume depicts Pamuk's memories of Istanbul, city where he was born and where he has been living most of the time so far, the reader has the impression from the first page on that s/he is reading a novel, whose main character is the author himself who projects onto Istanbul's public space eastern and western representations of the Turkish nation throughout time². In this essay my aim is to examine how Pamuk's *Istanbul* revises Turkish cultural memory at a crucial moment of the country's history and how this review addresses and questions the issue of national representation and of a complex and labyrinthine identity³. Two interrelated aspects will be focused on my analysis: (i) the writer's style and aesthetic devices and (ii) the characterization of Istanbul and adjacent areas as

¹On how and why some sectors of the Turkish society have attacked Orhan Pamuk, see, among others, the interview conducted by Maureen Freely with the writer, and Jon Blitzer (2006).

²On how Pamuk understands the relationship East-West, and how he objects to generalizations related to the latter, see the interview the writer gave to Farnsworth. On the way Turkey has allowed these generalizations to influence the course of democracy, Pamuk stated:

“East and West in a way, as generalizations, exist, but then if you believe them too much, then you are paving the way for war. Turkey, I believe, has destroyed its democracy in years because its intellectuals, its media, its press believed in, too much, in the westness of West and the eastness of East”.

³ On what cultural memory is, see Jan Assmann (2006: 8-9).

privileged spaces in the narrative that can be interpreted as “lieux de mémoire” (Pierre Nora, 1989).

Pamuk's narrative about his Istanbul's reminiscences is a puzzle whose small pieces are personal and collective memories that are crossed and that often disrupt the reader's expectations. The disruption is initially marked by a paratextual element, that is, the title. In it the city is personalized, as if it were a kind of entity able to narrate its own memories and those of its inhabitants. This suggestion rests on the fact that Istanbul is a very special location. Its geographical position transforms it into a “border city”, since it constitutes a gate that connects Europe to Asia. Moreover, it has been under the rule of different peoples along history, and has enjoyed a position of hegemony for several centuries. The various names it received illustrate, among many other examples that could be mentioned here, why Istanbul can be considered a multicultural city, *par excellence*. However, its prominent political and historical importance that, in principle, could have made the city be considered the centre of the world has not prevented Europeans from considering Istanbul peripheral in geopolitical and cultural terms, even when the greatness of the Ottoman empire was taken into account.

The marginal position to which the city has been voted can be explained if a Eurocentric perspective is privileged⁴. According to a strict Eurocentric point of view, the Bosphorus is considered the physical element that divides Europe from Asia, and ultimately the European from the Asian sides of Istanbul. Nonetheless, I defend that, more than a factor of divide, the Bosphorus should be seen as an element that celebrates the encounter among diverse cultures and a prolific exchange of knowledge, religions and languages throughout time. In this sense, Istanbul *per se* can be understood as an ambiguous place. On the one hand, it gives access to a different world from Europe, even if the latter has symbolically configured, under Western eyes, the Eastern identity. The question is that when the European traveller arrives to Istanbul, s/he cannot be indifferent to its cultural

⁴On how the West has shaped the world's understanding of Asia, see Edward Said (1994; 2003). On Eurocentrism and how it has symbolically fabricated the so-called Eastern world, see Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994).

Shohat and Stam believe that “Eurocentrism sanitizes Western history while patronizing and even demonizing the non-West; it thinks of itself in terms of its noblest achievements – science, progress, humanism – but of the non-West in terms of its deficiencies, real or imagined” (3). The critics' position explains why, in their view, “Eurocentric thinking (...) is fundamentally unrepresentative of a world which has long been multicultural” (4).

diversity and richness. The conscious or unconscious confrontation between the way Europeans represent Istanbul and what the city is really like is inevitable and the traveller starts forming a very personal view of the city that rests, first of all, on the experience of alterity, as if, once in Istanbul, the traveller were constantly crossing borders, hereby considered as privileged spaces of development and not as zones of conflict and separation⁵. From a Turk's perspective, on the other hand, the Bosphorus is mainly considered as a symbol of collective cohesion and strength (see note 6), but it is possible to say that on its shores much of the greatness and decadence of the nation has been projected through the houses that were built there and that were afterwards left in ruins. This architectural projection of historical cycles onto one of the city's icons (the Bosphorus, but the city as a whole could be equally considered here) deserves critical attention, since it somewhat configures the different views the Turks have had of themselves as a nation and the image they have projected abroad through their relations with the *other*. In other words, and resuming the initial discussion raised in this essay, Pamuk's depiction of Istanbul becomes particularly interesting when Europeans and Turks continue discussing Turkey's membership in the European Union at international and national levels. This polemic is parallel to an internal debate that is closely related to the degree of laity a republic requires when the Muslims progressively acquire popular political support at the beginning of the 21st century, thus endangering, according to less conservative social sectors, the freedom brought by the republic, even if human rights and civil liberties continue being one of the most controversial issues internally and abroad.

Pamuk's *Istanbul. Memories of a City* invites the reader to assess the validity of many Europeans' opinions, according to which Turkey's membership is a real threat to Europe's history of liberty and democracy, despite the country's advantageous geographical position as far as the Middle East is concerned, fact that translates an unequivocal Eurocentric position. Moreover, the book highlights the Turks' internal division as a nation when the maintenance of a secular government (even if the leading politicians nowadays are confessed religious people) and the wish to reach economic development with

⁵On the notion of frontier and the semantic richness underlying the concept, see António Ribeiro (2001). On how the concept can be applied to the analysis of sentiments of belonging in post-imperial spaces, and in the Lusophone world, in particular, see Ana Margarida Fonseca (2007).

the financial support given by the European Union are at stake. If it is true the reader will learn from Pamuk's memories of Istanbul, it is undeniable that the man and the city are so closely related that one cannot be understood without the other, since Pamuk assumes Istanbul as *his* city, a space where he has projected his anxieties, his joys and his melancholy since he was a child. This special relationship with space makes Istanbul reflect not only the writer's feelings, but also those of the collectivity. By acknowledging that Istanbul is his home, as the writer wanders through the city, recalling his personal memories, he transforms Istanbul into the nation's home; in other words, into a symbol that consequently embodies the nation's identity.

The merging 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. This ghostly fancy resulted from a forced separation from his brother imposed on him for the need his parents had of meeting in Paris, and set off Pamuk's tendency to create fictional worlds whenever he felt discontented or uneasy. Curious is to observe how Pamuk in the very first chapter of the book associates his self and his double to his view of his native city by considering the latter his "fate". In fact, his professional fate is unavoidably related to his experience of the end-of-empire city, whose melancholy has definitely shaped his identity as a man, as a writer, and as a Turk. Pamuk's reference to a fictional character (a double of himself, "the other Orhan") and his special relationship with Istanbul can, thus, be considered a clever device through which the writer not only makes the genre characterization of the book rather ambiguous (is it a book of memories or a novel?), but also opens the path to the interpretation of his process of anamnesis as a symbolic rereading of national history on the basis of Pamuk's detailed descriptions of Istanbul's sites.

Pamuk's first memories are of the building where his family and most of his direct relatives lived in different apartments. This micro and familiar space, connoted with the republican leading classes, starts by representing, on the one hand, the contradictions experienced by a whole nation divided between the memories of the greatness of the Ottoman empire and the need to shape a secular nation, which justifies the characterization of sitting-rooms as a kind of museum, since "they were not meant to be places where you could hope to sit comfortably; they were little museums designed to demonstrate to a hypothetical visitor that the householders were Westernized" (10). On the other

hand, Pamuk's examination of the countless photographs found in his grandmother's apartment indicates the importance given by the writer to the preservation of memory, which is stressed by his own book that is illustrated with several old photos and pictures that introduce the reader to a city that does not exist anymore. It is worth calling attention to Pamuk's subtle criticism of the Turks' need to prove they were Westernized when he describes what was supposed to be an intimate and comfortable division of a family's house. This criticism introduced in the second chapter of the book gains particular relevance when it is extended to the macro space of the city that has been progressively altered to assert the aforementioned need of the country to seem Westernized.

The most interesting aspect in Pamuk's description of Istanbul is the importance he gives to melancholy, a feeling that is considered a bond that unites all Istanbulis no matter their social, cultural or economic status, and that helps the writer address the complex Turkish identity, as I will try to demonstrate in this essay. In Pamuk's point of view, Istanbul is a city of melancholy, aspect that is not considered negatively, when the book's epigraph quoted from Ahmet Rasim, one of his favourite Istanbul's columnists and writers, is taken into account, for "the beauty of a landscape resides in its melancholy". The aforementioned melancholy is manifold and deserves to be examined. First, it has to be considered as an effect of some policies implemented by the republic and fed by the increasing nationalism, since many signs of the Ottoman presence have been deliberately erased from the city as, among many other examples, the fourth chapter of the book discloses when the destruction of the pashas' mansions is discussed. Melancholy is, in fact, a pretext that allows Pamuk to address the abuses and manipulations of memory (Paul Ricoeur, 2000) in Turkey's recent past:

Still, the melancholy of this dying culture was all around us. Great as the desire to Westernise and modernise may have been, the more desperate wish, it seemed, was to be rid of all the bitter memories of the fallen empire (...). But as nothing, Western or local, came to fill the void, the great drive to Westernise amounted mostly to the erasure of the past; the effect on culture was reductive and stunting, leading families like mine, otherwise glad of Republican progress, to furnish their houses like museums. (Orhan Pamuk, 2005:27)

The writer's sense of melancholy is shaped, and, consequently, reinforced by the peculiar way he apprehends the city's soul, that is to

say, in black and white, fact that stresses the symbolic value he gives to the city, since

[t]o see the city in black and white is to see it through the tarnish of history: the patina of what is old and faded and no longer matters to the rest of the world. Even the greatest Ottoman architecture has a humble simplicity that suggests an end-of-empire melancholy, a pained submission to the diminishing European gaze and to an ancient poverty that must be endured like incurable disease; it is resignation that nourishes Istanbul's inward-looking soul. (Orhan Pamuk, 2005: 38)⁶

Istanbul's and Istanbul's melancholy seems, according to Pamuk, unparalleled. The writer does not hesitate to dedicate an entire chapter to *hüzün*, a communal feeling of melancholy he believes the city of Istanbul "carries as its fate" (Orhan Pamuk, 2005:80). The feeling 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 landscape and in its inhabitants' feelings, thus contributing to explain the latter's ambiguous sense of identity, divided they are between the traces of a glorious past and the republican drive to forget or to erase it. With his descriptions Pamuk seems to make the ruins of Istanbul breathe and speak (the book's title already suggested this possibility), thus bearing witness to how authorities have addressed the national past in the 20th century. The following excerpt illustrates how contradictory state policies are, since it is paradoxical that in a country that needs so desperately to seem Westernized historical remains cannot be treated as if they are "museums of history" as it happens in the West. Consider Pamuk's critical tone:

(...)[I]n Istanbul the remains of a glorious past and civilisation are everywhere visible. No matter how ill-kept they are, no matter how neglected or hemmed in they are by concrete monstrosities, the great mosques and other monuments of the city, as well as the lesser detritus of empire in every side street and corner – the little arches, fountains and neighbourhood mosques – inflict heartache on all who live amongst them.

These are nothing like the remains of great empires to be seen in Western cities, preserved like museums of history and proudly displayed. (...) [f]or the

⁶Despite focusing on Istanbul's melancholy, Pamuk calls the reader's attention to the importance of the Bosphorus, associated with life, pleasure and happiness, and considered a source of strength as the excerpt below illustrates:

"(...) [O]ne thing remains the same: the place the Bosphorus holds in our collective heart. As in my childhood, we still see it as the font of our good health, the cure of our ills, the infinite source of goodness and goodwill that sustains the city and all those who dwell in it". (Orhan Pamuk, 2005: 54)

city's more sensitive and attuned residents, these ruins are reminders that the present city is so poor and confused that it can never again dream of rising to the same heights of wealth, power and culture. It is no more possible to take pride in these neglected dwellings, in which dirt, dust and mud have blended into their surroundings, than it is to rejoice in the beautiful old wooden houses that as a child I watched burn down one by one. (Orhan Pamuk, 2005: 91)

The approach to *hüzün* allows Pamuk to enter into dialogue with some of the most important Turkish artists, who, in various domains and in different times, portrayed Istanbul, helping Istanbul shape their view of the city and their sense of belonging to it. This dialogue expands and enriches the puzzle of artistic and historical references the book comprehends, making Pamuk present Istanbul's neighbourhoods from multiple perspectives. The author's kaleidoscopic view of the city owes much to four melancholic writers⁷, who, in Pamuk's opinion, "gave modern Istanbul its melancholy" (Orhan Pamuk, 2005: 96). According to the Nobel Prize winner, they were able to learn the best from French models by associating "great writing" (Orhan Pamuk, 2005: 101) 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. Nonetheless, this praise for melancholy should not be considered a sign of alienation that prevented Turks from facing the reality of the country. In fact, the poetic beauty reflected on the city's ruins constantly reminds Turks that the past glory is definitely lost. What Pamuk suggests throughout the book is that that same past should not be denied or circumscribed to the "museums" into which wealthy Istanbul's sitting-rooms have been converted with the advent of the republic, since the Eastern legacy is not a motive of shame. In other words, the four great writers' "melancholy of ruins"⁸ can be translated by Pamuk's comment on Hisar's awareness of the beginning of a new era for Turkey with the fall of the empire:

⁷The writers were Yahya Kemal, Resat Ekrem Koçu, Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar and Abdülhak Hisar.

⁸I am borrowing the expression from Orhan Pamuk (2005: 102).

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'All civilisations are as transitory as the people now in cemeteries. And just as we must die, so too must we accept that there is no return to a civilisation whose time has come and gone'. What unites these four writers is the poetry they made of this knowledge and the melancholy attending to it. (Orhan Pamuk, 2005: 102)

Pamuk's book shows how politics of space can be closely related to politics of memory, for, as Daniel Walkowitz and Lisa Knauer (2004: viii) state, "historical interpretations of public sites have shifted with the rise and fall of political regimes and changing political currents all over the world". By focusing on various representations of Istanbul's monuments and ruins, Pamuk transforms the city sites into an arena that reflects how the imagined community of the nation has been configured in the 20th century with the demise of the empire and the instauration of the republic. Thus, Pamuk's memories and his comments on the works done by those who portrayed Istanbul not only question the official version of collective memory, but also show how heterogeneous narratives on identity can be. By describing *his* Istanbul (that is the product of his readings, his photos and his wanderings through the city), Pamuk, in a certain way, speaks for the nation and makes his reader aware of the manipulations to which representations of collective memory can be subject.

Let me now try to articulate my two aims in this work, that is, to examine Pamuk's devices and the conversion of Istanbul's sites into "lieux de mémoire". In order to do so, I borrow the definition of palimpsest from Gore Vidal, who in his book of memoirs, symptomatically entitled "Palimpsest: A Memoir", states about the earliest meaning of palimpsest:

"Paper, parchment, etc., prepared for writing on and wiping out again, like a slate" and "a parchment, etc., which has been written upon twice; the original writing having been rubbed out." This is pretty much what my kind of writer does anyway, Starts with life; makes a text, then a *re-vision* literally, a second seeing, an afterthought, erasing some but not all of the original while writing something new over the first layer of the text. Finally, in a memoir, there are many rubbings-out and puttings-in or, as I once observed to Dwight Macdonald, who had found me disappointingly conventional on some point, "I have nothing to say, only to add." (Gore Vidal, 1995: 6)

My reference to Vidal is deliberate, since I consider that Pamuk's memories of Istanbul reveals the writer in formation and his "crossing" of the frontier between child and adulthood. This "crossing" comprehends the passage across another border, that of the aesthetic realm, entailed into the artist's search for the most

appropriate language and aesthetic codes; in Pamuk's case, that of literature instead of painting. The book can thus be read as a kind of personal palimpsest, through which the artist reveals himself, aspect that is suggested by the end of the first chapter of the book, in which the writer warns the reader:

Because – for people like me, at least – that second life is none other than the book in your hand. So pay close attention, dear reader. Let me be straight with you, and in return let me ask for your compassion. (Orhan Pamuk, 2005: 8)

This somewhat enigmatic tone hints at Pamuk's transformation into a kind of fictional character that does not differ much from "the other Orhan" he invented when he was a child, which makes me stress the difficulty underlying the characterization of the book either as a book of memories or as a novel. The most interesting aspect in this transformation of the writer into a kind of character is the fact that, contrary to what happens in a book of memoirs, Pamuk is not his main subject. The writer subverts this convention when he transforms his native city into the main issue of his book, even if he had stated that his city was his fate. The seed of his productive imagination cannot only be found in the belief in the other Orhan, but also in the drawings the writer made on the windows full of steam during the winter and that disclosed blurred views of Istanbul, whose depictions allow the reader to travel across time, and, led by the writer's hand, discover the layers of civilizations that made Istanbul one of the most important capitals in world history. By visiting, painting and describing the Istanbul of the present through the remains of the past, Pamuk revises and rewrites Turkish official memory, making Turks and foreigners aware of the importance of the blend of the East with the West, teaching that "actually what matters are not civilizations but human lives, little things about daily life – little smells, colors, and atmosphere of daily life and little stories that we live" (Elizabeth Farnsworth). Smells, colors and atmospheres that bring peoples together by acknowledging their equality in their difference no matter if they are from the West or from the East. This is the gentle and poetic murmur the reader listens to when s/he reads Pamuk's book and wanders around Istanbul and its ruins hand in hand with the writer. It would be good if all those discussing Turkey's membership in the European Union could listen to the same sound...

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