ORHAN PAMUK

My City in Ruins

Istanbul: Memories and the City

Translated by Maureen Freely

Alfred A. Knopf, 371 pp with 206 photographs

All happy cities resemble one another (as Tolstoy famously observed of families) but each melancholy city is melancholy in its own way. The *saudade* of Lisbon, the *tristeza* of Burgos, the *mufa* of Buenos Aires, the *mestizia* of Turin, the *Traurigkeit* of Vienna, , the *ennui* of Alexandria, the ghostliness of Prague, the glumness of Glasgow, the dispiritedness of Boston, share only on the surface a common sense of melancholy. According to Orhan Pamuk, the melancholy of Istanbul is *hüzün*, a Turkish word whose Arabic root (it appears five times in the Koran) denotes a feeling of deep spiritual loss but also a hopeful way of looking at life, "a state of mind that is ultimately as life-affirming as it is negating." For the Sufis, *hüzün* is the spiritual anguish we feel because of not being close enough to God; for St John of the Cross, this anguish causes the sufferer to plummet so far down that his soul will, as a result, soar to its divine desire. *Hüzün* is therefore a sought-after state, and it is the absence, not the presence, of *hüzün* that causes the sufferer distress. "It is the failure to experience *hüzün*," says Pamuk, "that leads him to feel it." According to Pamuk, *hüzün* is not a singular preoccupation but a communal emotion, not the melancholy of an individual but the black mood shared by millions. "What I'm trying to explain," he writes in this delightful, profound, marvelously original book, "is the *hüzün* of an entire city: of Istanbul."

Pamuk begins his enquiry with an image, a kitsch child's portrait brought back from Europe that hung in the house of Pamuk's aunt. "Look! That's you!" the aunt would say to the five-year-old boy, pointing at the picture. For Pamuk, the painted child (who resembled him slightly and wore the same cap he sometimes wore) became his double, another Orhan Pamuk leading a parallel life in another house in the same city, another self whom he would meet in his dreams with shrieks of horror, or with whom he'd bravely lock eyes, each trying to stare the other down "in eerie merciless silence."

Like the picture of the other, Pamuk suggests that Istanbul his haunted by another Istanbul, a shadow presence in the shadows. He sees the city in black and white, mirrored by the images of ancient engravings and old photographs that serve to illustrate the book, a city in which ruined buildings conjure up the ghosts of their former selves, and stately monuments insinuate their future collapse. Through the descriptions of other writers –several Turkish masters, various travelling foreigners— Pamuk parades yet more double-images of the Istanbul he knows. Seen by the poet Yahya Kemal or the encyclopedist Resat Ekrem Koçu, by Gerard de Nerval or Gustave Flaubert, Pamuk's Istanbul keeps unfolding like a Rorschach test, multiplying its ink-stained ghosts and tempting the reader with endless interpretations.

Pamuk tells the story of the city through the eyes of memory, warning the reader at every step that "these are the words of a fifty-year-old writer who is trying to shape the chaotic thoughts of a long-ago adolescent." The story of his parents' difficult relationship, of his eclectic grandmother, of his own embattled friendship with his brother,

of his sexual awakening and his first self-guided explorations as an artist, inexorably leads the reader to Pamuk's final and decisive words: "I'm going to be a writer." And yet, even that foregone conclusion is lent a slightly duplicitous tone, a dreamlike remembered quality. There is a past tense in Turkish that does not exist in English, that allows the writer to distinguish between hearsay and that which he has seen with his own eyes: "when we are relating dreams, fairy tales, or past events we could not have witnessed, we use this tense." This is the tense in which Pamuk's book seems to be written, in a voice on the edge of reality, halfway between what he knows has happened and what he believes imaginatively to be true. This voice, this tone, this tense is perfectly suitable to describe melancholy.

Istanbul as shared melancholy, Istanbul as double, Istanbul as black and white images of crumbling-down buildings and phantom minarets, Istanbul of maze-like streets seen from high windows and balconies, Istanbul invented by the eyes of foreigners, Istanbul of first loves and last rites: in the end, all these attempts at definition become Istanbul as self-portrait, Istanbul as Pamuk himself. "Here we come to the heart of the matter," says Pamuk on one of the opening pages of his book. "I've never left Istanbul, never left the houses, streets, and neighbourhoods of my childhood." Such a city becomes the inhabitant's in more senses than one. "To Be Unhappy Is to Hate Oneself and One's City" is the title Pamuk gives to the book's thirty-fourth chapter. The reader must therefore deduce that Pamuk is not an unhappy man, because *Istanbul* is a book by a man in love.

A city in which we have lived long enough shapes itself into our own image, acquires the traits of our own person, the features of our own

soul, becomes what Borges once called “a map of my humiliations and failures,” or, as in the case of Pamuk, of his *hüzün*, both of his intimate miseries and betrayals, and of his secret victories.