

**A Melancholy of my Own: Melancholy in Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul: Memories and the City***

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*It is a melancholy of mine own, compounded of many simples, extracted from many objects.*<sup>1</sup>

Abstract: Turkish novelist and 2006 Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk's memoir *Istanbul: Şehir ve Hatıralar (Istanbul: Memories and the City)* (2003) is a recent addition to the literature on melancholy. In the memoir, Pamuk identifies with the city, and diagnoses its predominant mood as the melancholy of a city in a state of decrepitude. Istanbul in his account is a humanized city suffering from chronic, even pathological, sadness, which transmits its mood to its inhabitants. Pamuk uses a Turkish word, *hüzün*, denoting a medley of melancholy, sadness and *tristesse*, to unite the city, its past and its present within a timeless as well as transnational feeling. This article addresses a key question in the context of Pamuk's personalised understanding: how does melancholy make sense when relating to Istanbul, and, reciprocally, what makes the city's melancholy, as it arises from Pamuk's work, stand out from the large body of literature on the term? I respond by tracing the imagery of melancholy in Pamuk's work, in relation to the complex meanings and imagery of the term, to show how they find expression in the memoir.

'The Tower of Babel never yielded such confusion of tongues as this chaos of melancholy doth variety of symptoms,' laments Robert Burton in his colossal *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621).<sup>2</sup> Burton's complaint, dating from four centuries ago, highlights the difficulty in defining the term. Derived from the Greek *melan khole*, or black bile, and linked to the theory

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. by S.C. Burchell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), IV.1.17.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy* (London: J.M. Dent, 1932), p.12.

of the four humours, melancholy was originally viewed as a form of mental illness, caused by an invasion of the brain by vapours rising from the spleen, the source of black, bilious humour. It was also associated with gloom resulting from intellectual talent, scholarly pursuits and creativity, defining thus a gamut of contradictory mental, emotional and intellectual states.<sup>3</sup> Its conceptions and representations, ranging from Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) to Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* (2005) and Lars von Trier's 2011 film *Melancholia*; from the theory of the four humours to psychoanalysis; from the blues to *fado*; from spleen to *saudade* and *tristesse* are connected, though not necessarily equivalent, to the term. With theorists such as Aristotle, Avicenna, Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud and Judith Butler, melancholy traverses the arts, sciences and literatures across cultures and histories.<sup>4</sup>

Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (2003) is a recent addition to the literature on melancholy.<sup>5</sup> In the memoir, Pamuk identifies the predominant mood of the city

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<sup>3</sup> See Jennifer Radden, 'Introduction: From Melancholic States to Clinical Depression' *The Nature of Melancholy from Aristotle to Kristeva*, ed. by Jennifer Radden (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 3-51.

<sup>4</sup> For Aristotle, Avicenna and Sigmund Freud, see Jennifer Radden, *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). For Walter Benjamin's elaboration of the term, see his *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006). Judith Butler's comprehensive discussion of melancholy can be found in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 132-198.

<sup>5</sup> This article is based on the Turkish title, *İstanbul: Şehir ve Hatıralar (Istanbul: City and the Memories)* (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2003). I use the English translation by Maureen

as the melancholy of a city in decrepitude:

Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun yıkım duygusu, yoksulluk ve şehri kaplayan yıkıntıların verdiği hüznün, bütün hayatım boyunca, İstanbul'u belirleyen şeyler oldu. Hayatım bu hüznle savaşarak ya da onu, bütün İstanbullular gibi en sonunda benimseyerek geçti. (15)

For me, it has always been a city of ruins and of end-of-empire melancholy. I have spent my life either battling with this melancholy or (like all *Istanbullular*) making it my own. (6)

Pamuk's Istanbul is a humanised city suffering from chronic, even pathological sadness, which transmits its mood to its inhabitants. The inhabitants of Istanbul accumulate and personalise melancholy through experiencing the city. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the attribution of melancholy to a city, the above lines echo the quotation from *As You Like It* which opens this article and encapsulates the struggle to come up with a personal and personalised conception of melancholy. This article stems from a key question about Pamuk's personalised understanding: how does melancholy make sense when relating to Istanbul, and, reciprocally, what makes the city's melancholy, as it arises in the memoir, stand out from the large body of literature on the term? The following pages aim to answer these questions by tracing the imagery of melancholy in Pamuk's work, particularly the memoir.

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Freely, *Istanbul: Memories of A City* (London: Faber-Farrar, 2005). Freely's translation omits subtleties of meaning crucial for a nuanced reading of Pamuk's melancholy which, due to space constraints, will be traced elsewhere.

### *Melancholy in Pamuk's work*

In the contemporary popular sense of the word, melancholy, denoting deep, pensive and long-lasting sadness, is a recurrent theme in Pamuk's work. His earlier novels, *Cevdet Bey ve Oğulları* (*Cevdet Bey and His Sons*) (1982), *Sessiz Ev* (*Silent House*) (1983), and *Beyaz Kale* (*White Castle*) (1985), recount bitter opposition between the main characters and their surroundings.<sup>6</sup> In later novels, the melancholic disposition becomes an attribute of the main character: Galip in *Kara Kitap* (*The Black Book*) (1990) in search of a lost lover; Osman in *Yeni Hayat* (*The New Life*) (1994) on a quest to find Canan, the object of his unrequited love; Kara in *Benim Adım Kırmızı* (*My Name Is Red*) (1998) commissioned to revive a fading art and solve a murder case, while trying to rekindle an old love; Ka in *Kar* (*Snow*) (2002) reconciling bitter oppositions to win the heart of the beautiful İpek, an old flame, in the derelict city of Kars in northeast Turkey; Kemal in *Masumiyet Müzesi* (*The Museum of Innocence*) (2008) realising the strength of his love for Füsun, a distant relative, only after he loses her.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Orhan Pamuk, *Cevdet Bey ve Oğulları* (*Cevdet Bey and his Sons*) (İstanbul: İletişim, 1982); *Sessiz Ev* (*Silent House*) (İstanbul: İletişim, 1983); *Beyaz Kale* (*White Castle*) (İstanbul: İletişim, 1985). Dates in this and the following note refer to publication in Turkish.

<sup>7</sup> Orhan Pamuk, *Kara Kitap* (*The Black Book*) (İstanbul: İletişim, 1990); *Yeni Hayat* (*New Life*) (İstanbul: İletişim 1994); *Benim Adım Kırmızı* (*My Name Is Red*) (İstanbul: İletişim 1998); *Kar* (*Snow*) (İstanbul: İletişim 2002); *Masumiyet Müzesi* (*Museum of Innocence*) (İstanbul: İletişim, 2008).

Melancholy appears as a leitmotif that characterises the plot and the protagonists, entailing futile quests or searches that end in vain. This loss, however, does not simply convey sadness or pessimism; it leads to a generative urge that accompanies the feeling of loss. All of Pamuk's novels end with a character transfiguring the story into a novel. Melancholy as such is not simple sadness. With a further twist, the creativity that accompanies loss is itself melancholic. Pamuk's use relates to the contemporary conceptions of the term. The uses of melancholy in social and cultural studies mostly take their cue from Sigmund Freud's 1917 essay, 'Mourning and Melancholia'.<sup>8</sup> Freud differentiated mourning from melancholia, and defined the first as a normal, and the second as a pathological reaction to loss. In usual mourning, the subject overcomes the feeling of loss after a period of grief; with melancholia, however, the subject resists confronting the loss of the object and preserves it through a process of introjection. Recent conceptualisations of melancholia, on the other hand, provide alternative readings of Freud's essay. Melancholia is not about loss, but about the introjection of the lost object, an idealised identification with it and the emerging confusion between the object and the self.<sup>9</sup> In other words, it is a loss that feeds the sufferer.

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<sup>8</sup> 'Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholy" (1917)' in *The Nature of Melancholy from Aristotle to Kristeva*, ed. by Jennifer Radden, pp. 283-94.

<sup>9</sup> See Ross Chambers, *Mélancolie et Opposition: Les débuts du modernisme en France* (Paris: Corti, 1987) and Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) on the link between melancholia and imagination; see Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997) on the link between melancholia and the ego.

The blur between the self and the object, loss and gain, resonates in the distinction between melancholia and melancholy. Pamuk's melancholy feeds upon this same blur: drawing from the intimate link between the popular and the pathological, the individual and the collective, he develops an understanding of the concept that becomes a trademark of his writing. It is in his *Istanbul*, however, that the aesthetic is explored in terms of its cultural implications.

*Hüzün: the names of melancholy in Istanbul*

Pamuk's own brand of melancholy has a specific name: *hüzün*. In the memoir, he uses this Turkish word, denoting a medley of melancholy, sadness and *tristesse*, to unite the city and its past and its present within a timeless as well as a transnational feeling. In the eponymous chapter devoted to its definition, *hüzün* emerges through a dialogue with definitions from Eastern and Western traditions. Starting with the Arabic etymology of the word, Pamuk bases the Turkish understanding of the word on Islam, and its use in the *Koran* (82). However, he cites two contradictory approaches in Islam to evoke the ambiguity of the concept. In the traditional Islamic understanding, *hüzün* is considered a sign of excessive attachment to earthly pleasures. In the Sufi understanding of the word, on the other hand, *hüzün* is cherished as an awareness of the separation of the self from God, as well as an effort on God's part to break away from loneliness and it is therefore a constitutive part of the Creation.

The Islamic conception is contrasted with the Western tradition, as melancholy is introduced as the counterpart of *hüzün*. With references to the etymology of the word, to Aristotle, and to Montaigne, Pamuk's melancholy reveals a scholarly disposition, alluding to the role of creativity and scholarly learning in the concept. Pamuk's Western-perspectived account of *hüzün* draws mainly from Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, a work that praises melancholy, and, while not excluding collective or religious melancholy, focuses on it as an individual feeling of loss (82–3). The second Western source in this chapter on *hüzün*, on the other hand, shows that the term generates mixed responses in Western traditions as well. The link between *hüzün* and the fall of the Ottoman Empire, for Pamuk, evokes *tristesse* -- the same sadness that the late French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss detects in the ex-colonies in the tropics and defines in his *Tristes Tropiques* (1955). Involving another major temporal leap, *tristesse* allows for an allusion to the legacy of Western colonialism, and thus for the incorporation of a political note. Nevertheless, Pamuk is quick to fend off the likeness he evokes between *hüzün*, melancholy and *tristesse*. *Hüzün* in Istanbul diverts not only from its Islamic understanding but also from Burton's individualistic and from Lévi-Strauss's anthropological approach. Unlike the Islamic understanding, Pamuk's use of the concept is about the relation to the city and not to God; unlike Burton's scholarly melancholy, *hüzün* is collective and rooted in the everyday. And finally, unlike *tristesse*, the legacy of colonialism on a 'guilt-ridden Westerner', *hüzün* is a local feeling that escapes the outside observer (93).

An idiosyncratic appreciation of the city's 'beautiful places', it is a local aesthetics conjoined with this feeling.

Pamuk's emphasis shifts his historical source of the term to incorporate opposites. In this autobiography moulded around a city, tracing personal feelings is inextricably linked to tracing collective ones, particularly the city's cultural history and its present. Pamuk comments:

Çocukluğumun İstanbul'unun bende uyandırdığı yoğun hüznün duygusunun kaynaklarını sezmek için, bir yandan tarihe, Osmanlı Devleti'nin yıkılışının sonuçlarına, bir yandan da bu tarihin şehrin "güzel" manzaralarında ve insanlarında yansıtış biçimine bakmak gerek. (93)

If I am to convey the intensity of the *hüzün* that Istanbul caused me to feel as a child, I must describe the history of the city following the destruction of the Ottoman Empire, and - even more important - the way this history is reflected in the city's 'beautiful' landscapes and its people. (82)

The feeling as such becomes the motif that combines experiences of the city with its history and geography. The same point helps makes sense of the difference between melancholy and *hüzün*. In Pamuk's words,

Şimdi hüznü melankoliden ayıran şeye geliyoruz. Tek bir kişinin duyduğu melankoliye değil, milyonlarca kişinin ortaklaşa hissettiği o kara duyguya, hüzne yaklaşıyoruz. Bütün bir şehrin, İstanbul'un hüznünden söz etmeye çalışıyorum. (94)

Now we begin to understand *hüzün* as, not the melancholy of a solitary person, but the black mood shared by millions of people together. What I am trying to explain is the *hüzün* of an entire city, of Istanbul. (83)

What distinguishes *hüzün* from melancholy is its communality. This recurring theme throughout the memoir marks Istanbul, emerging in its views, its imperial past and decrepit present, and in its inhabitants.

A recurring theme throughout the memoir, *hüzün* also marks the representations of the city. Pamuk's memoir draws from a wide array of travellers, ranging from a fellow Nobel laureate, the Russian Joseph Brodsky (214–15), to the eighteenth-century Austrian painter Antoine-Ignace Melling (Chapter 7, 'Melling's Bosphorus') and Le Corbusier (34). Nevertheless, the main emphasis is placed upon the French writers who visited the city in the nineteenth century, Gérard de Nerval, Gustave Flaubert, Théophile Gautier and the great Turcophile, Pierre Loti. To cite an example, in the chapter on Gautier, Pamuk refers to Gautier's account of his sojourn in the city, *Constantinople* (1853), as a proclamation of the melancholy of the city: a walk through the neighbourhoods and cemeteries along the Byzantine walls, for Gautier, is the most melancholic on earth (209). Nevertheless, for Pamuk, rather than simply poeticising the exotic decrepitude of the city, these writers mainly reflected on their individual problems: the beginnings of a deadly depression in Nerval in Chapter 23, a friend's cherished memories overlapping with rekindled public interest in Istanbul for Gautier (Chapter 24), syphilis for Flaubert (Chapter 31) and wanderlust coupled with belle-époque ennui in Loti's case. These, and similar depictions of the city, according to Pamuk, are formative to the melancholy image of the city:

Anlatmaya çalıştığım şey, [hüzün] bir kavram olarak keşfi, ifade edilmesi, seslendirilmesi ve bunların itibarlı Fransız şairlerince (melankolik arkadaşı Nerval'in etkisiyle Gautier) ilk yazılmış olmasının sonuçları. (220)

What I am trying to explain is that the roots of our *hüzün* are European: the concept was first explored, expressed, and poeticized in French (by Gautier, under the influence of his friend Nerval). (210)

The above lines both pay homage and convey a sense of indebtedness to the work of the nineteenth-century French writers.<sup>10</sup> The choice of period and writers is significant: the nineteenth century marks the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent impoverishment of the city, as opposed to the unprecedented expansion of the Western European Empires, notably the French and the British. These writers' outlook on Istanbul epitomises the Orientalist tradition that Edward Said has problematised in *Orientalism*.<sup>11</sup> Pamuk's preoccupation with the Western origins of *hüzün* displays melancholy not simply as an aesthetic sensibility but also as a sign of an East-West rift and as a 'Western' product

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<sup>10</sup> Absent from the memoir, but pivotal to Pamuk's understanding is the urban melancholy of Charles Baudelaire, and Walter Benjamin's interpretation of it (*Les Fleurs du Mal*, trans. by James N McGowan [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993]). Baudelaire's melancholy, almost always associated with the streets of Paris, is characterised by glorification of melancholy and the man of sensibility who is prone to the feeling. In 'The Swan' from *Parisian Tableaux* (1861), a stroll along the boulevards newly designed by Baron Haussmann, makes him remember all who have lost something they may not find again. Baudelaire's Paris in this poem is an allegory and his melancholy feeds on the loss brought by the rapid urbanisation of the city. Baudelaire's Paris and the link between melancholy and urbanscape are made even more significant by Walter Benjamin's writings on the topic, notably *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*. Benjamin contributes to the tradition of the melancholic thinker not only through his depictions of Baudelaire as a genius nourished by melancholy, but also through his persona. Due to space constraints, this line of thought will be traced elsewhere.

<sup>11</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1978).

introjected by the East. Nevertheless, instead of setting East against West, as in the initial theorising of the concept in the eponymous chapter on *hüzün*, the rest of the memoir presents the concept in its myriad faces within the perimeters of Istanbul. In other words, Pamuk's response to the Western origins of *hüzün* is one that makes them part of *his* literary cityscape.

With Abdülhak Şinasi Hisar the Bosphorus memoirist, Reşat Ekrem Koçu the writer of the unfinished *Istanbul Encyclopaedia*, Yahya Kemal the great poet of the republic and of Istanbul, and Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar the novelist of Istanbul, or 'the four lonely melancholic writers' of the early twentieth century, as Pamuk refers to them in chapter 20, the western 'roots' of *hüzün* acquire different undertones.<sup>12</sup> *Hüzün* is not the same as the melancholy of the scholar. Like Burton's *Anatomy*, Koçu's *Encyclopaedia* stems from the writer's melancholy. However, unlike Burton's work, Koçu's encyclopaedia is unfinished, a failure that Pamuk considers a sign of Istanbul's disorientating cityscape, as well as the writer's melancholy. Pamuk's favourite Turkish writers of the early twentieth century reflected on the decrepitude of the city through their knowledge of French literature in order to develop a sensibility that bridges the remains of the Ottoman Empire and the emerging culture of the Turkish Republic, and to find in it a means both to be authentic and to emulate their favourite writers (101). Thus, we read about Tanpınar and Kemal following Gautier's footsteps in the

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<sup>12</sup> Esra Akcan points to the similarity between Baudelaire's and Pamuk's conceptions of melancholy, where the term becomes a feeling attached to the object, and not to the subject (179). See Esra Akcan, 'Melancholy and "The Other"', *Cogito*, 43 (2005), 1-11.

1940s, almost a century later, as well as the young Pamuk travelling into the same derelict parts of the city in the 1970s, nearly thirty years later. The presence of the Ottoman past through the monumental buildings feeds these writers' nostalgia for past grandeur as well as their awareness of present decrepitude: *hüzün* becomes a 'choice' (93).

Pamuk'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 (83). The two-page-long inventory of the scenes that evoke the feeling ranges from

hiç kimsenin altı yıldır yes ve no demekten başka bir şey öğrenemediği, bitip tükenmez İngilizce derslerinde canları sıkılan öğrencilerden. (98)

bored high-school students in never ending English classes where after six years no one has learned to say anything but "yes" and "no". (88)

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sonbahar yaklaşırken Balkanlar'dan, Doğu ve Kuzey Avrupa'dan gelip Güney'e giderken Boğaz'ın, adaların üzerinden geçen leylekleri bütün şehrin seyretmesinden. (101)

the storks flying south from the Balkans and northern and western Europe as autumn nears, gazing down over the entire city as they waft over the Bosphorus and the islands of the Marmara. (89)

*Hüzün* in this context is not an elitist feeling exclusive to artistic creativity, but a sensibility that informs both high and low culture—the poetics of the city and a quotidian way of dealing with them. The memoir doubly implicates the city as a locus of melancholy, one that draws from multiple histories, heritages and traditions.

## *Conclusion*

Melancholy is private and public, personal and collective; it can be affirmative, but also pathological and hostile. *Hüzün*, or Istanbul's melancholy according to Pamuk, speaks to the same contradictions inherent in the concept. It allows the self to connect to society, the city to Islamic and Western traditions, the individual to the public, and high culture to low. Istanbul's *hüzün* does not simply combine the city with the self, the East and the West, and the past and the present; 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.

A means of self empowerment, *hüzün* in the memoir is glorified. The city and the text, in other words, lament, but also celebrate decay, loss and the resulting melancholy and isolation, making Istanbul's *hüzün* something exceptional and definitive. The literary as well as the philosophical representations of *hüzün* invoked in the memoir establish melancholy not as a lack but as an ideal, not pathological but poetic, with Istanbul as its literary capital.