

## *Orhan Pamuk's Own Private Istanbul*

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For me the center of the world is Istanbul. This is not just because I have lived there all my life, but because for the last thirty-three years I have been narrating its streets, its bridges, its people, its dogs, its houses, its mosques, its fountains, its strange heroes, its shops, its famous characters, its dark spots, its days, and its nights, making them part of me, embracing them all.

—Orhan Pamuk

“I DON'T FEEL like eating tonight. I feel like drinking.” Murat Belge ordered more raki and personally oversaw the ritual of adding the right amount of water and ice to turn the clear anise into a hazy white. He had just come back from Armenia and deserved his drink. Well-known as a left-leaning intellectual and dissident, he has gained the trust of the Armenians and has been going there on his own private missions of reconciliation. We were waiting for some friends who had ended up in the wrong place. A cunning restaurateur had opened a restaurant by the same name as ours not far from here, bribing cab drivers to divert customers to his place. This, at least, was what our server explained to us, shouting and gesticulating wildly. Belge only shrugged his shoulders and turned his eyes to heaven, and I was secretly thrilled because it gave me the chance to draw him out about his life.

A once-time member of a Marxist group and implacable dissident ever since, Belge was thrown into prison and tortured during the seventies' coup, gained a professorship in literature upon his release, but resigned when the military staged another coup in 1980. Casting about for things to do, he started to offer city tours. They were not for tourists, but for “white Istanbul,” as Belge put it with a grin, by which he meant Westernized middle-class professionals

living in the well-to-do neighborhoods of the European side of the city. They were so in the thrall of becoming modern that they had forgotten the old Istanbul. Which was all right with the military rulers and nationalists because this older Istanbul was composed of many different religious and ethnic groups, who had made a home here during the long and relatively tolerant rule of the Ottoman Empire. This patchwork was something the modern, secular Republic had done its best to erase, often violently so, forcing out Armenians, Greeks, Bulgarians, and Romanians so that Turkey could become more Turkish. Belge's tours were pedagogical and political, preserving the deep history of the city in the face of different forms of nationalism, secular and religious.

Belge had since returned to his teaching post, but he still offered his tours, which have become a cultural institution. A week after our dinner, he took me along. Crisscrossing Istanbul, Belge would point to withered letters on hidden corners, testifying to its former residents; notice a timid cross peeking out behind a department store, remnant of a church; or bribe the disgruntled keeper of a Greek church so that we could steal a quick look at its Christian icons. Belge also took us to Balat, the former Jewish neighborhood, where old men were sitting in cafés, looking at us with distrust. On a backstreet, Belge pointed to a warehouse, now in ruins. If you looked hard, you could see fading Armenian letters—it used to be an Armenian school. Three girls, perhaps eight years old, came up to us aggressively, having sized us up as not belonging to this neighborhood. "Money, money, money," they shriek. Some of the men looked decidedly unfriendly as well, but others recognized Belge and greeted him. Over the last two decades, Belge has taken about fifteen thousand people into these backstreets, looking for signs of the past. In the process, he has become a recognizable, if controversial, figure. While nationalists see him as stirring up trouble, for his admirers he is the guardian of Istanbul's multicultural past.

While developing his tours in the 1980s, Belge also founded a publishing house that became expert at evading censorship. It was during this time that he became aware of a young author by the

name of Orhan Pamuk. Belge's tours became the lens through which I ended up viewing Pamuk and his relation to Istanbul.



"I never set out to be an Istanbul writer," was the first thing Pamuk told me a few days later; "I just didn't want to write about Anatolian peasants, like many of the writers a generation before me. I didn't know anything about Anatolian peasants. I knew about Istanbul." Over the course of his career, the city became much more than a familiar backdrop; it became the protagonist of his writing.

But which Istanbul? When I asked Pamuk about Belge's tours, he expressed his admiration for them, but said that he has not gone himself. The reason is perhaps that his Istanbul is a very different one. Where Belge takes Istanbul on the hidden backstreets of out-of-the-way neighborhoods, Pamuk's is the Istanbul of his own upbringing, of the Westernized bourgeoisie—Belge's target audience.

Pamuk's Istanbul begins with Nişantaşı, the fancy neighborhood where he grew up and where one can still visit the Pamuk Apartments, the apartment house that his extended family lived in. This part of the city is, perhaps, comparable to the Upper East Side of Manhattan, with well-dressed wives going shopping at elegant stores or meeting for coffee. Cihangir, the area where he now lives, is less elegant. Formerly a destination for poor migrants from rural areas in eastern Turkey, it has since acquired bohemian credentials and has recently become gentrified, reminiscent of Lower Manhattan. And then there is the picturesque island on which Pamuk spent summers as a child, just a short ferry ride away. Entirely without cars, it immediately engulfs you in the slow pace of walking, a relief after the hectic city, much like Fire Island.

Taking his point of departure from these neighborhoods, Pamuk has made forays into other parts of Istanbul as well, both present and past. So important is the city for Pamuk that in his nonfiction book *Istanbul* (2003) he interweaves his own history with a history of the city. Personal recollections of Nişantaşı and Cihangir give way to historical anecdotes and sketches of historical figures. On

occasion we venture farther afield, for example along the Bosphorus, the beating heart of Istanbul, where Pamuk remembers youthful outings and shows us ships colliding with wooden mansions built along the water, catching fire. When we leave the Western city, Pamuk tends to report not only his own experience but also enlists the help of other writers like Yahya Kemal (1884–1958) and Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar (1901–1962), through whose walks we are introduced to poorer neighborhoods.

I met Pamuk for drinks at his Cihangir apartment, which he still refers to as his “office” even though he has been living there for sixteen years. It is in a maze of small streets, on a steep hill. When I entered the study, I was faced with a breathtaking view. Large windows and a small balcony overlooked a mosque, placing me eye to eye with its turret because of the steep slope, and beyond unfolded the unobstructed Bosphorus. I was looking for boats catching fire, but none did. Traffic along the Bosphorus went smoothly, if busily, with small boats and ferries connecting the two parts of the city and large cargo freighters cutting through them on their way to or from the Black Sea. It felt like I was looking at the center of the world.

Pamuk’s Istanbul is often tinged with a sense of loss. The term that dominates *Istanbul* is *hüzün*, a form of melancholia that Pamuk detects in every corner of the city. As we were contemplating the view of the Bosphorus, he opened a large coffee-table book with photographs of Old Istanbul, then consisting mostly of three-story wooden houses, which had since burned down. Excitedly, with his singsong Turkish intonation of English, he pointed to different sites we could see from his window, enlisting me in an attempt to project the old photographs onto the new city, turning concrete and stone structures back into wooden ones, adding donkey carts, peasant women with kerchiefs, all in black and white or sepia.

Pamuk’s *hüzün* is different from Belge’s preservation of the past. For Belge Old Istanbul is a world before nationalism, the world of a multicultural empire dominated by Islam but tolerant of other groups. This world occasionally surfaces in Pamuk’s work as well. Some critics have attributed his success to the way novels like *White*

*Castle* (1985) and *My Name Is Red* (1998) conjure the lost Ottoman world, feeding on the widespread nostalgia for those days of glory. Pamuk rejected this interpretation. "I am not nostalgic for the Ottoman Empire. I am only nostalgic for the Istanbul of my youth." It may be true that his historical novels tap into a general nostalgia for all things Ottoman, but Pamuk's claim about his own childhood has the ring of truth. While he is servicing a longing for the Ottoman past, he is in fact pursuing a much more personal project of preserving, and subtly changing, the Istanbul of his own childhood.

As Pamuk was leafing through the book of old photographs, it occurred to me that he likes to ponder Istanbul's past because the current Istanbul has not always been welcoming to him. There was a time, before the 2006 Nobel Prize, when he had to leave, the victim of a smear campaign by right-wing thugs and a lawsuit charging defamation of Turkishness. Even now that things have quieted down, a bodyguard lingers at the entrance. Pamuk also had to change islands. The island where he spent summers in his youth is now the home of a naval academy and in the hands of the right-wing military; he feels unwelcome and threatened there. When I went there a few days later, I understood why. The naval academy is right next to the ferry terminal, and, after hiking up a mountain, I spotted no fewer than six battleships in the immediate vicinity, when suddenly a submarine surfaced as well. It didn't seem like a good place to be when being attacked by forces with ties to the military. Pamuk now retreats to a different island and was in fact going to catch a late ferry there after our dinner.

While Pamuk has had a tenuous hold on his city because of these political pressures, he has created a second Istanbul in his novels, one over which he has complete control. *The Black Book* (1990), a strange kind of murder mystery, takes place primarily in Nişantaşı. The protagonist seems to live not far from the Pamuk Apartments, across from the Teşvikiye Mosque, and his rival, a journalist who has mysteriously disappeared, lives in the same neighborhood. But when one tries to pin down the exact location, to connect the novel's geography to the actual geography of the city, things

become difficult. Usually, it's possible to narrow things down to a few houses, but no more than that; there are no street numbers that would allow one to identify the precise address. This is very different from Joyce's Dublin, for example, where we are given the exact street address, 7 Eccles Street, as Bloom's house. Joyce selected it because it was vacant on the day the novel takes place, 16 June 1904. There is a plaque now that informs visitors that regrettably the house where Bloom lived has been torn down.

While reading *The Black Book*, by contrast, you form a picture in your mind of the street, the apartment, and its relation to known landmarks like the mosque, but once you overlay it with the actual city, the image becomes blurred, like a Google Maps image that won't zoom in enough to show individual houses. The Istanbul of Pamuk's novels is tantalizingly close to Pamuk's Istanbul, but it is a strangely displaced version of it that turns hazy if one gets too close.

That hazy image has recently come more sharply into focus with an unusual project, the Museum of Innocence. Pamuk has always had a penchant for objects, and has sometimes given them speaking roles in his novels, as he did in *My Name Is Red*, where various inanimate entities, beginning with a corpse and ending with a gold coin, are introduced as narrators. In *The Museum of Innocence* (2008), objects once again play a crucial role. Pamuk wanted to tell the story of an obsessive love affair through the various objects that the narrator-lover had collected—an earring stolen from the beloved or a cigarette butt from a date. The objects wouldn't literally speak, but they would be the animating principle, the dots that the narrator would connect to form the story.

Originally, Pamuk had thought that the best form for this kind of object-based narrative would be something akin to an encyclopedia or museum catalogue. Object after object could be introduced as if they were exhibits in a museum. But the project didn't quite pan out that way because somehow, in the process of working on this project, the traditional novel form and its powerful history reasserted themselves. More and more Pamuk found himself wanting to write a novel in the nineteenth-century tradition, something grand and

expansive. The only remnant of the original design was a preponderance of objects.

The idea of the museum didn't fade away entirely, however, and took on unusual form: Pamuk began looking for suitable real estate to build an actual brick-and-mortar museum. An avid collector of everyday objects, Pamuk had started to collect objects associated with the novel as he was writing it. Sometimes a particularly good specimen would make it into the novel, subtly changing its course. This was all the more true when Pamuk finally found a suitable building. Nişantaşı, where much of the novel takes place, was too expensive, but the bohemian neighborhood close to his office apartment was more affordable. The Museum of Innocence was born, and part of the novel had to move there with it.

In truth, I had not liked the novel, whose repetitions had driven me almost as crazy as the obsessed narrator. This was probably the intended effect, but recognizing that didn't help me much. The museum is the product of the same obsession, but instead of making you read about the narrator's endless meditations on his beloved, it confronts you with something else: the obsession of a collector. Where before I had constantly wanted to shout at the narrator to get over it already, I now saw this annoying obsession transformed into a beautiful collection.

The museum occupies a narrow house that has been completely reconfigured, with an open staircase connecting the three stories and creating an open center in what otherwise would be a claustrophobic space. Some items are exhibited in glass cases and railings that form the staircase, and clips from old movies are projected onto some walls. As you ascend, you find yourself surrounded by remnants of a forgotten Istanbul.

Most items are exhibited in beautifully built wooden boxes that look like they have been stacked along the walls and could be rearranged, vaguely reminiscent of Joseph Cornell boxes. Inside are arrangements of everyday objects, photographs, and newspaper clippings that evoke the world of Istanbul from the fifties to the seventies. The scenes often produce surreal juxtapositions: a pack of

cigarettes suspended before a photograph of Old Istanbul, next to a tea cup. The boxes are numbered and coordinate with the chapters from the novel.

At first, I worried about how to use the museum and hectically thumbed through the novel, matching chapters to display cases. After a while I stopped worrying and started to enjoy the displays by themselves, vaguely remembering objects and scenes from the novel here and there. More important, the exhibit captured the atmosphere of the novel. The museum reconciled me to the novel, or rather to the overall Museum of Innocence project, and it made me wonder whether Pamuk's initial instinct, to write the novel in the form of an encyclopedia or museum catalogue, would have been the right one after all.

When, a few months later, the catalogue for the museum arrived, I was confirmed in this sentiment: halfway between the museum and the novel, it is the glorious culmination of the entire project. The catalogue, entitled *The Innocence of Objects* (published in 2012), walks you through the boxes, one by one, beautifully rendered by Pamuk, his designers, and his publisher, Abrams Books. The best thing about it is the combination of images and commentary. Sometimes, we simply get short quotes, a few sentences at the most, from the novel. This, one assumes, is an approximation of the original idea, with the fictional text now serving as a museum catalogue. Sometimes, Pamuk speaks in his own voice—or rather, adopts a Pamuk voice separate from that of the novel's protagonist, Kemal, and acts as if he had been conversing with Kemal, who has told him certain details about his love affair. At other times, Pamuk uses the occasion of particular everyday objects from the cases to tell us anecdotes about his own childhood or the mores of Europeanized Istanbul like his family.

"It is Kemal's museum, not Pamuk's museum," Pamuk has said repeatedly, presumably to make the whole enterprise seem less narcissistic. Many Turkish friends roll their eyes when I mention the museum, snidely remarking that Pamuk has now built his own museum. I understand these worries, especially since I think that in



the end the Museum of Innocence is indeed a Pamuk museum, not a Kemal museum and the catalogue reveals the extent to which this is the case. But even though I don't have a particularly high tolerance for narcissism, the museum doesn't rub me the wrong way. I see it as the logical culmination of the project, which now presents itself as a triptych consisting of a novel, a museum, and a catalogue, one of the most unusual projects ever undertaken by a writer. I have even come to think of the novel, despite its flaws, as a necessary step because it establishes a fictional Istanbul, which the museum and the catalogue then elaborate on and coax back into our world.

The most interesting thing about the Museum of Innocence project is how it relates to and affects the city of Istanbul. This process started when Pamuk was first working on the museum in the mid-1990s. Pamuk watched the neighborhood change, its junk stores slowly becoming gentrified and declaring themselves as antique stores. Before long, the junk-store-owners-turned-antique-dealers recognized Pamuk and his close assistants and realized that a major collection was underway. Prices went through the roof, and Pamuk had to hire new helpers to make purchases incognito. The museum was transforming the neighborhood.

This transformation is still going on, as became clear to me when I tried to find my way to the museum. It is situated in a maze of small streets and, even in its renovated state, blends in with the residential buildings around it; I walked past it several times without noticing it. But while it is difficult to locate the museum, getting to the neighborhood is easy enough. The museum announces its presence all over the city thanks to numerous large signs, in English, that point in its general direction. Astonished that this small and eccentric museum enjoys as many signs as the great landmarks of Istanbul, I asked Pamuk about it. He was delighted: "You see, I befriended the bureaucrat who is in charge of all the street signs of Istanbul. All of them. He liked my museum. And now I have many large signs all over the city."

The museum radiates outward to the city in other ways as well. One of the exhibits, number thirty-one, is a street map of Nişantaşı.

In the novel, Kemal draws a map of the neighborhood to help him avoid places he particularly associates with his beloved. The map also includes indications of where characters live and where particular events have happened. This map has now developed a life of its own. Pelin Kivrak, one of the assistants who helped Pamuk realize his museum, uses it to offer tours not just of the museum, but also of Nişantaşı. With a friend, she took me on a tour, pointing out sites, retelling scenes from the novel, and generally populating the neighborhood with Pamuk's fiction. And not just from the Museum of Innocence. It turned out that the map also included landmarks from other novels as if Pamuk had not been able to confine himself to just one. A perfectly ordinary house would suddenly acquire a new dimension when Pelin identified it as the probable home of the journalist in *The Black Book*. As we were looking at the house, some residents were looking back at us, wondering what the fuss was all about. At what point will these residents realize that they live not in their own city, but in Pamuk's own, private Istanbul?

In his introductory essay to the museum's catalogue, Pamuk talks about the history of Cihangir, including its multiethnic and multi-religious past. At times, his project of recovery seems close to Murat Belge's, and it is clear that Pamuk, too, cares about the diverse history of the city he loves and seeks to preserve. But significant differences remain. When the Swedish Academy announced the 2006 Nobel Prize in Literature, some observers considered it a political decision, suggesting that the Academy was honoring Pamuk for criticizing the Turkish denial of the Armenian genocide. But deep down, Pamuk is not a political writer, at least not like Belge. His novels do not teach political lessons about ethnic and religious diversity, and the Istanbul Pamuk really cares about and which he recreates lovingly in his museum is the Istanbul of his own childhood and adolescence. The museum is his homage to this city, but the city as rendered and transformed in his fiction. It is also a new step in what I have come to see as his overarching project: to make this city his own.

When I think of the two types of Istanbul and the two tours that evoke it, Belge's tour and Pamuk's tour, I am struck that both of

them are projects undertaken against the forces that hold the present Istanbul in their thrall. Both are projects of recovery, holding onto something that is being swept away by a new Istanbul that is looking to the future, not the past—an Istanbul ruled by a new party and that is asserting a new political and cultural role. The new regime has made headlines by increasing the role of Islam in public life—long a taboo in modernizing Turkey—by, for example, lifting the ban on head scarves in schools and, more recently, attempting to ban coed living on and off college campuses. But what triggered the vocal protests of last summer was an intervention into the urban texture of the city: the regime's decision to give Taksim Gezi Park—one of the few green spaces in Istanbul—to a developer planning to erect a shopping center. For this new Istanbul, even membership in the EU, long the ultimate goal, no longer seems as attractive as it did before Europe's sovereign debt crisis, and instead Istanbul is positioning itself again as a mediator between East and West. At the same time, international corporations are seeking an ever larger piece of the fast-growing Turkish economy.

How does this economic growth, rising political clout, and new internationalism compare to Belge's multiethnic Istanbul of the Ottoman Empire and to the modernizing Istanbul of Pamuk's museum? The new Istanbul is the unwitting inheritor of both, making Istanbul more modern still and also, once again, more diverse. But it is doubtful that this new Istanbul will have much time for history. For this reason, both Belge and Pamuk must work to keep their versions of Istanbul alive. Perhaps one day they will take each other on their respective tours, seeking out faded remnants of history and everyday houses, confronting the inhabitants of the new Istanbul with the startling recognition that this city is not entirely their own.

“Leap Before You Look” is part of a longer commissioned essay to be published in a forthcoming book by the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage.

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