Watching Lives: The Writings of Orhan Pamuk

Istanbul

Memories and the City
ORHAN PAMUK
Translated From the Turkish by MAUREEN FREELY
Knopf, $26.95 cloth, ISBN 1-4000-4095-7;
Vintage, $14.95 paper, ISBN 1-4000-3388-8

Snow

A Novel
ORHAN PAMUK
Translated From the Turkish by MAUREEN FREELY
Knopf, $26.00 cloth, ISBN 0-375-40697-2;
Vintage, $14.95 paper, ISBN 0-375-70686-0

My Name Is Red

A Novel
ORHAN PAMUK
Translated From the Turkish by ERDAG M. GÖKNAR
Knopf, $14.95 paper, ISBN 0-375-70685-2

Orhan Pamuk, who has become famous as the author of seven novels that have been translated into more than 40 languages and is the winner of too many literary prizes to mention (bestowed in his native Turkey and abroad), was earlier this year threatened by a kind of fame he never sought. The author of *My Name Is Red*, *Snow*, and *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, all recipients of glowing praise in the literary pages, was accused in an Istanbul court of a crime against the state ("public denigration of Turkish identity") and menaced with a three-year prison term.

The outspoken novelist stated last year to a Swiss newspaper that "thirty thousand Kurds and one million Armenians were killed in these lands and nobody but me dares to talk about it" (Reuters, 12/8/05). Pamuk's forthrightness on his own country's injustices raised a violent storm of reaction from extreme nationalists, including an egg-pelting of the author, a book-burning episode in the provinces, and numerous personal threats. In January 2006 his case, which brought widespread condemnation of Turkey from the author's Western supporters, was dropped, but the court made no concession on the principle of freedom of speech.

The article under which the novelist was charged still exists, and as Pamuk noted in his "Comment" published earlier in *The New Yorker* (12/19/05), "between the time I began this essay and embarked on the sentence you are now reading five more writers and novelists were charged under Article 301." Pamuk's admirable courage in defending freedom of speech in such circumstances is reason enough to read him: His works, however, make even more important statements about freedom of expression.

To find out who the man is who has been called the "bridge" between East and West, what better way than to go straight to the source: *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, a superb memoir of Pamuk's coming-of-age and choice of profession along with a fascinating cultural history of his native city. Though not a guidebook, *Istanbul* will probably trigger yet another wave of literary tourists to the onetime Byzantine capital.

In this beguiling book, Pamuk mixes two types of materials. One is autobiography, a frank and often uproarious account of Pamuk's wealthy, upper-class family in decline (the huge extended family whose branches fill up an entire apartment building, the absent playboy father, the strict but caring mother); schooling (the usual waste); aborted endeavors as architect and painter; and finally what the whole book leads up to—his decision to write. Another group of chapters, interspliced, deals with the cultural history of Istanbul; here we get rich slices of Istanbul street culture along with literary appreciation of those writers, Turkish and foreign, who have most understood the city's essence.

What ties the book together, besides its beautifully crafted prose, is the lavishly detailed setting of Istanbul—the city where Pamuk has lived most of his life and which, he claims, has "made me what I am." The city is indeed central to his preoccupations not only for its wealth of urban life but also for the melancholy state of mind it exudes. This mood, *hüzün* in Turkish, is a permanent quality of the city made more conspicuous by its postimperial state of decrepitude and decline. Its beautiful gloominess is captured in rich archival photos that amazingly don't compete with the author's description.

Though the whole book is shot through with this substance, Pamuk assures us that hüzün is not so much reactionary nostalgia for the empire as it is an aesthetic or mystical state of mind induced by the very nature of the city of Istanbul and shared by all its inhabitants. In any case, Pamuk and his fellow melancholics are a surprisingly cheerful lot since this outlook seems to inspire their best work. Besides, even the worst case of hüzün can be cured by a trip on the sparkling seaways of the Bosphorus, always nearby.

In this age of culture wars and politically correct anti-Orientalism, this reader was struck by the author's generous evaluations of certain Western artists and writers, for example A. I. Melling, Gérard de Nerval, Théophile Gautier, and Gustave Flaubert—all of whom produced detailed descriptions of Istanbul and things Turkish. Pamuk, far from resenting their intrusion into his territory, finds much to praise in their works, devoting separate chapters to all. They too, he argues, have helped create the city's mood.

Not all foreigners rate so highly, of course (Pamuk dismisses Pierre Loti as a "Turkophile"), but the dominant note is a refreshing one of reconciliation of East and West—something that seems possible only in Turkey, or rather, Istanbul. Why is this the case? "Istanbul," Pamuk explains,

has never been the colony of the Westerners who wrote about it

… and that is why, I am not so perturbed by the use western travelers have made of … my history in their construction of the exotic.

With statements like these, Pamuk seems to be one of the last great cosmopolitans. But he owes it, as we see, to the traditions of Istanbul.

The recent threat of arrest hanging over Pamuk himself throws an odd, ironic light on his most recent novel, *Snow*, published in English to great acclaim in 2004. The situation it portrays, a republicanist mini-coup in a remote mountain town in eastern Turkey, seemed far-fetched to this reader on first reading. Now the vision of sinister collusion between the republic and coup-happy militarists seems altogether more plausible.

Pamuk's sixth novel—and probably his most accessible to date—is a long political-poetic exploration of the recent awakening of militant Islam in a remote province of Turkey, another theme that connects this novel all too painfully to headlines emanating from that country today. Its literary forebears, the epigraphs hint, are Stendhal, Conrad, and Dostoevsky.

Snow comes at the reader from many angles and includes surprising shifts of view; it is at once a political thriller, a quest for poetic truth (over and above religion or politics), a romance with actual sex, and a trenchant analysis of the recent turn toward militant Islam in a country that was once a bastion of secularism. And it is also about snow, the crystal flakes that fall copiously throughout, serving a variety of symbolic purposes.

These various story lines are melded, more or less, through the quest of Ka, the poet-protagonist, whose ambiguous and fascinating persona dominates the novel's action and point of view. An expatriate and ex-leftist based in Frankfurt, Germany, Ka is sent by an Istanbul newspaper to explore a spate of suicides in the city of Kars by girls who, forced to remove their head scarves (the sign of their religious affiliation), have used this act to dramatize their refusal to submit to the secular state.

Ka, however, responding to the snowbound town's mysterious mood and his increasing involvement with the alluring divorcée Ipek, abandons journalism to pursue the reawakening of his poetic vocation, the fervor of which is not unconnected with Ipek's fascinating eyes.

Plots and subplots abound: Ka witnesses the murder of a school director by a frighteningly resolute extremist (who later receives a light jail sentence). Political upheaval gets in the way of the lovers when a local military garrison takes advantage of the snowstorm isolating the area to stage a nationalist mini-coup against the rising Islamic political elements. At a televised broadcast, a "patriotic" play is produced and then a platoon of soldiers is led onstage. When the soldiers fire into the audience and people fall, the audience at first thinks it is seeing some particularly effective theater. But the rounds are real. This is the beginning of the tragicomic reign of terror led by republicanist theatrical hack Sunay Zaim and his wife. It climaxes toward the end of the novel in another coup de théâtre in which one of the head-scarf girls takes off her scarf as the cameras roll but shoots the hack—with real bullets. It's all a bit confusing, and the violence never seems real, a far cry from the truly chilling tape-recorded interrogation and murder of the school director, presented verbatim as a separate chapter.

Distracted by his poems and promising love affair, Ka manages to remain aloof from the political cataclysm around him, a necessity of the poetic vocation, he rationalizes. In nearly every chapter he rushes off to jot down richly described but unseen poems; though he's a secular intellectual, Ka, shaken by the mystic mood of Kars, is tempted into imagining that his rich inspiration just may be a gift from God. He later arranges these works, which he considers his best, into a pattern that fits a snowflake. But this book entitled *Snow*, which would have provided the most profound explanation of the events in Kars, is tragically lost like so many other things of value in the story.

Above all, *Snow* is a brilliantly honest and probing account of the complex cultural and social conflict that has emerged in this country of contrary traditions and powers. Through Ka's discussions with members of factions such as the "head scarf girls," the young religious students, Kurdish separatists, and traditional Kemalists, the reader gets a wide sampling of Turkish sentiment on many key issues: the tormented scarf problem and women's roles, the status of religion in the modern state, Turkey's inferiority complex vis-à-vis the West, along with purely religious and metaphysical questions such as the existence of God.

The buzz engendered by *Istanbul* and *Snow* should bring about a renewal of interest in Pamuk's one undoubted masterpiece, *My Name Is Red*, published in 2001. Of all Pamuk's works, this one is most instructive to the curious outsider of the special character of this country's culture, with its Islam-imbued Turkish and Persian background. And all of this while serving up to the reader a corking murder plot with an epic cast of characters and literary cunning not seen since Eco's *The Name of the Rose*.

The novel deals with a series of murders committed among a group of professional miniaturist painters attached to the Royal Court of the Sultan in 16th-century Istanbul. The sultan has commissioned a secret book to be illustrated in "the European manner" by the finest artists of his time, but none of them is allowed to see the whole picture and understand its real subject. The plot hinges on the Islamist prohibition against portrait painting and representational art in general. As debated by the artists (with trenchant asides from Satan), this stricture is based on the view that such art is heretical because it places humans in the center of the world, usurping God's creation, which is primordial. Hence the only art that could develop is the Persian miniature used to decorate the margins of holy books, a bit like Christian medieval illumination.

A young, talented painter named Black serves as protagonist; his aim is to solve the murders so he can marry the desirable widow Shekure, whose father is the second murder victim. The insidious murderer, who shadows Black, is after the same

woman. There are delightful minor figures as well, such as the Jewess go-between Esther and, believe it or not, Satan himself. In the course of the story's telling, a whole world emerges in vivid detail, the world of classic Turk-ish and Persian culture with its poetry, legends, religion, and above all, iconography. One has the feeling that in this novel, Pamuk, like Boccaccio and his *Decameron* or Chaucer and his *Canterbury Tales*, has tucked in an entire encyclopedia of his country's traditional culture including the rarely admitted erotic side.

The novel's imaginative impudence has by now become legendary. The epic adventures are introduced by a "corpse" who narrates from beyond the grave how he was murdered and by whom, but without mentioning names. "I am nothing but a corpse now, a body at the bottom of a well," he begins, and warns that this deed heralds an

> *appalling conspiracy against our religion, our traditions and the way we see the world.*

The variety of speakers, animate and inanimate (including the color "red," which gives the book its title), and their refusal to obey the ordinary rules of discourse or reality are nothing short of breathtaking. The murderer addresses the reader frequently to describe his crimes in gleeful detail and taunt the reader to guess his identity (I guessed wrong). A dog, a tree, Death, and Satan all give us their unvarnished opinions (the dog's, on bettering the lot of canines under Islam, is the funniest). There is a boy, "Orhan" (the playful author's double), who has a few words.

It is also amusing how a mere inconvenience such as being dead doesn't stop a dead man's narration: "In one smooth motion," relates one damned soul,

> *the sword cut first through my hand and then clear through my neck, lopping off my head. I knew I'd been beheaded from the two odd steps taken by my poor body.*

Entertaining the novel may be, as it takes the reader into a magical, nearly insane world, yet along with the surreal fun is an initiation into a tradition completely counter to that of the West, but one that deserves—no, compels—our attention today. In spite of the quaint charm exuded on every page, the book also manages to be quite topical, if you want to read it that way: The Erzurumi fanatics overrunning Istanbul in the 16th century, wreaking havoc on the sinful coffeehouses and dervish dens, resemble to a tee the fundamentalists spilling out of today's front pages. Even more to the point, the anti-Western fanaticism of the murderous artists speaks volumes about a whole legion of modern Islamic reactionaries intent on closing off their societies to Western "decadence."

From Pamuk's work emerges a complex and ambiguous image of Turkey. Though not the exotic utopia of the Turkophiles, this Turkey seems to have great potential for synthesis and tolerance but also vast areas of desperation and darkness. Indeed, the dark side of Turkey has come dramatically to the forefront in the recent series of deadly bombings, the Kurdish riots that preceded these, and the Islamist assassination of a judge in Ankara. These events and Article 301 may ultimately compromise Turkey's case before the European Union.

Pamuk, for now, may have escaped his enemies, but many other writers, including the new literary star Elif Shafak, are threatened by the same repressive law. Ironically, it seems that it's only in places where dangers are real and protection uncertain that freedom of speech is taken seriously.

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