Capitalizing Istanbul: reading Orhan Pamuk’s literary cityscape
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Introduction

Contemporary Istanbul is a dynamic city; its long history includes two empires and a republic. Extending over the European and Asian sides of the Bosphorus, the 2010 European cultural capital boasts of a culture that also bridges the two sides. With a booming population of more than 15 million, a changing skyline, a wide array of international companies, five-star hotels, as well as art events, Istanbul disorients its visitors and inhabitants alike with its contrasts and constant changes. Turkey’s largest city is also one of the largest in the world, representing the country’s global aspirations as well as its heritage. To take one example, of tourist-oriented discourse, Lonely Planet refers to it as a “hot” city, and “the world’s hippest,” “The City of The World’s Desire” (“Introducing”). This popular image of the city, a recurring one in the mass media and in guidebooks, staging Istanbul as a tourist attraction and placing it in the network of global cities, is not an entirely reliable representation and raises questions on its validity.

Something of Istanbul’s global image resonates in the work and career of the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk. An established international writer, Pamuk has been in the limelight with his political and politicized views, especially on Turkish cultural identity and politics.\footnote{The first decade of the 2000s witnessed Pamuk’s transformation into a peculiar sort of a superstar novelist. In 2003, he won the International IMPAC award and was making headlines in literary reviews as a postmodernist novelist from the Middle East. The turning point came in 2005, following his indictment by the Turkish state for his views on the Armenian atrocities. Following the award of the Nobel Prize, he began to participate in literary festivals around the world, and was a member of the jury at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival. Pamuk regularly teaches at Columbia University.} The pinnacle of his career was the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2006. As the Nobel citation made clear, Pamuk’s work is intensely focused on Istanbul, notably more so than on the politics of Turkey. The press release, one of the first to pay specific attention to Pamuk's literary cityscape, refers to Pamuk as a writer “who in the quest for the melancholic soul of
his native city has discovered new symbols for the clash and interlacing of cultures” (Nobel). The Citation posits a twofold relationship between Pamuk and Istanbul, where the city and the writer feed each other.

That the city is a compelling narrative resource for Pamuk is also the main theme of this thesis: Istanbul is Pamuk's literary capital. Moreover, his imagery of the city has served to justify his relevance within the international literary scene. The city is a resource and an asset; its imagery at the crossroads serves as the basis for his reputation and status. This thesis examines Pamuk’s relevance for cultural debates around urbanization and for literary studies. It uses the Nobel citation as a springboard to explore the themes that are central to his cityscape and his renown. To approach my material critically and coherently, I have selected six terms that serve as six lenses to explore Pamuk’s work and unpack his introduction of new symbols relating to Istanbul. These are: (1) the clash and ‘the bridge,’ (2) the labyrinth / quest, (3) exile / home—as it implicates the idea of ‘native city’ and autobiography, (4) melancholy, (5) the mist—as an image to describe the ‘soul’ of the city, and (6) Pamuk’s ‘masterpiece.’ These six lenses provide a means to approach the various themes that converge to make Pamuk’s Istanbul a literary capital. Of those themes, the following are the most significant.

Within recent discussions of urbanization, the city has emerged as a site for new cultural claims and struggles. A relevant question, based on the emergence of different networks and binaries, concerns the struggle for identity and identification in a world conceived through metropoles. The image of the world as an entity constituted by major cities encourages different sets of connections. Wrapped in a global network, today’s cities tend to have more in common with their counterparts than with smaller towns and rural settlements within the nation. The ensuing denationalization of urban space suggests a new geography of the centre and the periphery, and an urban imaginary to contest that of the nation. This emphasis on urbanization and urban space raises questions of ownership: instead
of simply asking ‘Who’s speaking?’ a question that marks literary studies, the recent prioritization of urban space forces an important new question: ‘whose city is it?’ (Sassen, “Whose”).

**Literary Capital**

Istanbul is a part of the world system of literary capitals: in Pamuk’s work, it is both central city and an asset he ‘capitalizes on.’ The Nobel presentation speech addresses Pamuk as the writer who metamorphosed Istanbul into “an indispensable literary territory, equal to Dostoyevsky’s St. Petersburg, Joyce’s Dublin or Proust’s Paris—a place where readers from all corners of the world can live another life, just as credible as their own, filled by an alien feeling that they immediately recognize as their own” (“Presentation”). Pamuk is here foregrounded as the writer of Istanbul. Through his work the city emerges as a literary territory, as well as a capital of literature, like St. Petersburg, Paris and Dublin. In this sense, Pamuk is seen to provide a conduit through which the global status of the city is proclaimed.

Istanbul’s urban imaginary appears as part of the new cultural preoccupation with global cities.

Literary capital in literary studies is associated with Pascale Casanova’s work on the distribution of power in the international scene of literature. Drawing from the conception of culture as a capital, Casanova defines capital as “a place where literary prestige and belief converge in the highest degree” (*World Republic* 24), and argues that Europe’s long tradition in literature allows the continent to define literary values. Casanova locates the centre as Paris, exposing the city as a capital in both senses of the word, putting Europe and France at the centre. My approach draws from this dual meaning of ‘the capital.’ I have established connections between Pamuk's Istanbul, and notably Paris and London, to point at the constellation of literary capitals. In doing so, I have identified a curious feature relating to
Pamuk: his work refers us to literary cityscapes of the nineteenth century as much as it does to our understanding of modern and modernist cities. Literary capital also denotes a literary tradition. Here we find the Paris of Baudelaire and Benjamin, running through this study as a counterpoint that enhances Pamuk’s cityscape, linking it to the global imaginary of cityscapes: alienation, sprawl, and labyrinth.

As Casanova’s remarks and the presentation speech suggest, literary capital is Eurocentric, and a cultural legacy of nineteenth-century urbanization. Paris and London feature foremost among the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century urban centers, with occasional cities from the peripheries, such as Dublin, introduced to the discourse by an exceptional work set in the city. Within this network, one can indeed talk about being ‘at home’ in these cities through novels set in them. However, this also points to a literary tradition, the accumulation of literary capital exclusive to those conversant with it. To adapt the question with which I started this section, the tradition of literary cityscape begs the question: whose literary capital is Istanbul?

World Literature

Istanbul’s status within the discipline of comparative literature underlines the enduring significance of the city for literary studies. Long before Pamuk, Istanbul was a peculiar, if relatively unknown literary capital. In recent discussions of world literature, Istanbul is regularly viewed as the ‘birthplace’ of comparative literature, as it was later institutionalized in the US (Apter, Mufti, Damrosch). Erich Auerbach’s acceptance of a teaching post at Istanbul University in 1936 (fleeing Nazi persecution and joining his mentor, the humanist Leo Spitzer) culminated in the 1946 publication of Mimesis, a history of representation in Western literature. In the epilogue, Auerbach refers to the time and place of writing, Istanbul, as a sort of apology for the scope of the work. In other words, absence creates presence, with
Istanbul helping Auerbach bridge the canonical texts of Western Literature. In the context of comparative literature then, Istanbul appears as a nondescript city. Auerbach’s remark about Istanbul is notable not only because it contextualizes his work, but also because of the place Edward Said assigned to him. Said emphasizes Istanbul's location as one that complicates Auerbach’s position as a humanist and scholar of European culture who, exiled by a product of that culture, now attempts to rescue it in the very city that has been for centuries represented as Europe’s greatest enemy.

This discursive thread running between Said, Auerbach, and Istanbul has become one of the major themes in recent discussions of literary studies. Istanbul, Emily Apter contends, has shaped the discipline with its significance as “a place where East-West boundaries were culturally blurry” (56). Apter’s remark is also blurry, pointing to the popular image of Istanbul as a locus of the east-west divide. Nevertheless, the cultural blur, or the mist as I will refer to it in the following sections, is a component of the city and its imagery, one of the themes that mark Pamuk’s Istanbul. The blur, characteristic of Istanbul, connotes a productive lack of precision. It thus resonates with the practice of world literature, a "detached engagement with a world beyond our own” (Damrosch, What is 297).

World literature is based on an acknowledgement of the cultural distance between 'our' world and our object, the core and the periphery, rather than the old east-west or north-south binaries. It is “a system that permanently accords the work of European authors a central position while relegating to the periphery everything that comes from other parts of the world” (World Republic 151). In other words, the old systems of binaries and cultural power or saying this is still the case in conceptions of ‘world literature.’ Pamuk himself is a writer within that system. With Pamuk, the concept ‘European’ is in question, inadequate to place his work. Considered a representative of the ambiguity of Turkish cultural identity, he is positioned as a writer who relates to the core and the periphery, East and West, Europe and Turkey, and to clashes and conflicts between. Pamuk positions himself within the space of
world literature “the brotherhood of readers and literatures all around the world!” (Öteki 203). At the same time, he acknowledges the inequality it entails, “with a centre that imposes its taste to the periphery, and the provinces which are heard to the extent that they use the same language with the core” (204).

Translation

One concern that relates to the east-west and core-periphery binaries is the issue of translation, a concern that also relates to the theme and the structure of this thesis in different ways. First, Pamuk is a writer whose work gained prominence in translation, especially into English. Because Pamuk’s literary capital has emerged in translation, I have deliberately used the English translations of the novels. Yet at times, these translations do not convey the subtleties of meaning that are crucial to my argument. Where this occurs, I have provided my own translations. In other cases, where translations of the original text posed problems and where I felt a closer reading of the Turkish text was necessary to my argument, I have inserted my own italicized translations.

That said, this thesis does not deal with the problem of literary translation, except as an issue that inevitably runs through the study of culture and literature. In other words, where the problem raises its head in relation to Pamuk’s work, I have addressed it. This understanding also resonates with Emily Apter’s contention that translation is “a means of repositioning the subject in the world and in history; a means of rendering self-knowledge foreign to itself, a way of denaturalizing citizens, taking them out of the comfort zone of natural space, daily ritual, and pre-given domestic arrangements” (Translation 6). In this context, the texts that I analyze emerge as mediators between cultures, critically questioning the concept of a source, and by extension, the distinction between native and foreign culture. Pamuk does not only make local stories more accessible; he also translates the forms of the
center. Here I refer mainly to the center-periphery dynamic. Within this dynamic, Pamuk is a writer who innovatively borrows literary forms and transmutes the literary space, urban and textual. This view is inspired by Casanova’s conception of literature as a space of domination, “as a value common to an entire space [...] not only part of the legacy of political domination but also an instrument that, once reappropriated, permits writers from literally deprived territories to gain recognition” (116). Pamuk’s Istanbul, as I aim to show in the following pages, concentrates literary capital, gaining recognition for the writer and the city.

**East-West**

Pamuk’s status stems from his role as an intermediary between East and West, a point often repeated by literary critics. Orientalism is a recurring theme in discussions of Pamuk’s work. “The east is a career”: Edward Said uses this line from Disraeli’s 1847 novel, *Tancred*, as an epigraph to his Orientalism. The statement is also relevant to Pamuk’s international standing. With Pamuk, if not the East, then the east-west divide and Istanbul’s position in it have become part of his career. Such a position evokes Said’s dilemma in *Orientalism*, as Bruce Robbins contends: “The duplication by the critic of an object strenuously criticized” (158). The problem is that speaking for the other—in this case the Orient—means also to silence, and to build a work, if not a career, on representing that which is silenced. This paradox extends to the present argument; by writing about a conflict, Pamuk repeats it, and I do the same.

The paradox also informs the scope of this study. The questions I have pursued are as follows: how can we read the use of Orientalism and binaries within Pamuk’s work, and what are the stakes involved in being an international writer? Pamuk’s complex understanding of the east-west rift calls for a reading as prescribed by Said: “not to accept the politics of identity as given, but to show how all representations are constructed, for what purpose, by
whom, and with what components” (1993: 380). This dissertation, in other words, intervenes in the cultural and political processes addressed by Said, by providing multiple perspectives. It is my contention that the repeated performance of these processes also carries within it points of resistance that resist simple binary oppositions. Accordingly, the following pages chart the paradoxical, conflictual space Pamuk creates in his writing.

**Politics**

Politics is an inescapable component of Pamuk's renown, as well as an unavoidable topic in discussions of his work. In this study motivated by power issues, I take a slightly different route in reading the politics of his work on Istanbul. My perspective here follows Jacques Rancière’s take on aesthetic experience as “a specific sphere […], which invalidates the ordinary hierarchies incorporated in everyday sensory experience.” (2004:1). Here the definition of aesthetics, emphasizing its revolutionary and unsettling aspects, loads the concept with a power that is usually ascribed to politics, which, for Rancière is also about unsettling 'ordinary hierarchies'. He contends: "Politics is first of all a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of existence" (10). Politics, like literature and aesthetics, is concerned with the reconfiguration of space. In the same vein, literature is political not because of its content, but because of its aesthetics. Rancière, accordingly, views literature as a way of “framing the relation between the sayable and the visible, of enabling words with the power of framing a common world” (13). The political work of my study is primarily aesthetic, related not to ideology and culture wars, but to their reconfiguration. My read of Pamuk's politics is based on his use of the space of the novel, and on a more general recognition of the transformative aspect of literature as its definitive characteristic. The politics I trace in this study lies in the unusual or new viewpoints the novels introduce.
In sum, with Pamuk’s literary cityscape as its focus, this thesis deals with a number of issues that arise by virtue of Istanbul’s location on the periphery. Having introduced the themes that mark Istanbul as a literary capital, I now return to my six terms, my selected conceptual ‘lenses’ through which I show Pamuk's positioning within international literary space. My approach here is inspired by Mieke Bal’s definition of cultural analysis in *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* (2002). Bal posits concepts not simply as a tool of analysis, but as "embodiments of the cultural practices we seek to understand through them" (21). Since I trace how each concept-lens is practised in the novel, my lenses become the objects of my inquiry. In other words, Pamuk's construction of Istanbul, and my construction of both mark the back and forth movement that forms this thesis. As such, my findings are also my objects, the cultural, and especially literary relevance of which I aim to articulate in this study. Furthemore, as Pamuk's persona as a master-writer is one of the objects that runs through this study, I make use of his views on his books (and on his role) as additional objects of analysis which contribute to the reception and positioning of his work, rather than as markers of authorial or authorative intention. There are many Istanbuls in this work and this is how I map them on to my six keywords.

**Chapters**

The first chapter traces the parallels between global views of Istanbul and Pamuk through the image and the practice of bridges. I propose to critique the stereotypical image of the bridge associated with Istanbul, and with Pamuk as its foremost writer. This juncture between Pamuk’s and Istanbul’s imagery accentuates different markers of change and points of contact. Accordingly, I examine the bridge as a monument, a cultural site, and an epistemological tool. Just as bridges come in many forms, so do my uses of the term in this chapter. It alternates between a symbol of a city, a metaphor to define a writer, a vantage
point and hence an epistemological tool, and the ‘real’ bridges that straddle the stretches of water that define Istanbul.

The second chapter traces Pamuk’s narration of the cityscape. Pamuk has long claimed to be the novelist of Istanbul. His breakthrough (in Turkey) came with *Kara Kitap* (*The Black Book*) (1990, 1996), a “personal encyclopaedia of Istanbul” (Pamuk 1999: 138), which tells the story of Galip, a young lawyer, searching for his missing wife. The city is not a mere backdrop to the search, but an entity that reflects the chaos Galip experiences within and without, as well as the aesthetic principle of the novel. Linking Pamuk’s status as the novelist of the city to his encyclopaedia of Istanbul, this chapter sets out to delineate how Pamuk’s vision is achieved in the narrative. In other words, it traces Pamuk’s gaze through his transcription of the city into writing, in order to argue that the cityscape that emerges from the novel is one which challenges viewing, writing, and reading as acts of cognition.

Chapter three captures the cityscape in Pamuk’s memoir *İstanbul: Şehir ve Hatıralar* (*İstanbul: Memories and the City*) (2003, 2005). Istanbul is the means through which Orhan Pamuk defines himself, or so he suggests in his memoir with visual and verbal representations of the city and of himself. Pamuk identifies himself with the city and offers it as his autobiography: the city emerges as an entity that moulds the self that inhabits it, whereas the self, in turn, shapes the city by writing it. The chapter traces the sense of space that Pamuk’s memoir conveys. It begins with the visible space of writing, the language, then moves on to Istanbul's literary cityscape on an east-west axis, and concludes in the identification of the self with the city. In Pamuk’s work, I argue, the city emerges as a locus of exile for reasons that relate to Istanbul’s cultural history, is remade into a new home. The notion of exile has also impacted on the understanding of the development of a Republican Turkish literature, and notably for the purposes of this thesis, of Pamuk. Pamuk’s role emerges from the need to fill the void associated with the advent of the Turkish Republic; the
space that the memoir describes is not only a place of residence, but a locus of both individual and cultural identity.

Pamuk’s memoir is also a recent addition to the literature on melancholy, which I address in Chapter four. In the memoir, Pamuk identifies with the city, only to diagnose the predominant mood of the city as the melancholy of a city in a state of decrepitude (6). Pamuk’s Istanbul is a humanized city suffering from chronic, even pathological sadness, which transmits its mood to its inhabitants. This chapter pursues a simple question in the context of Pamuk’s personalized 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 evolution of the concept. The term melancholy signals a certain sensibility and aesthetics, and as melancholia, or melancholy pathologized, it resides at the core of identity formation. In other words, melancholy is complex in its meanings and imagery, all of which find expression in Pamuk’s work, and particularly in the memoir.

Chapter five traces the meteorology of Istanbul’s melancholy in the early morning mists and crepuscular haze of the city. As a city of hills and waterways, its views and vantage points are strongly prone to the dimming effects of sun and sea. Meteorological and topographical, mist is part of the everyday of the city and its inhabitants. Pamuk’s imagery carries this theme further; images of haze, steam, and smoke give substance to the melancholy of the city. This chapter follows this melancholic imagery of the Bosphorus and its mists to locate Pamuk’s work through a comparison of its urban landscape with London, the literary and artistic capital of fog. It theorizes Pamuk’s literary cityscape to illustrate how it reconfigures Istanbul and situates it in relation to the foggy literary cityscapes of nineteenth-century London and to the modernist conception of the fog.

The thesis concludes by situating Pamuk as a master-writer, with a discussion of his most acclaimed work, *Benim Adım Kırmızı (My Name is Red)* (1998, 2001), in Chapter six.
With the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2003, the literary value of this novel was internationally acknowledged. Set in the Istanbul of the 1590s, the novel is a kaleidoscopic account of murder and love that revolves around a secret book of miniatures, commissioned by the Sultan, which incorporates heretical Western methods. Interwoven with Islamic legends and Koranic parables as well as with discussions of style, time, and perspective, *My Name is Red* is also a treatise on masterpieces, a historical novel that investigates sixteenth-century Istanbul, and a text that aims to represent the now forgotten art of the miniature. The notion of ‘the masterpiece’ is not only an external fact or added value in relation to this novel, but a constitutive part of the work itself. Therefore, this chapter interrogates the role of the masterpiece inside and outside the novel, in order to explore how notions of ‘masterpiece’ and master-writer frame our reading, and how the novel negotiates the complex meanings of masterpiece.

On a final note, my own experience of Istanbul is in part what inspired me to undertake this research, and in many instances Pamuk's cityscape blended with my impressions of the city. The charms of the Bosphorus and its melancholy mists, the sprawl of the city, the presence of the Ottoman past, all as well as the city's metamorphosis into a tourist destination all form my experience of Istanbul. Inspired by recent discussions of urbanization and world literature, the following pages situate Pamuk’s literary cityscape within the framework informed by the contestation of urban space and urban imaginaries, analyzing how Pamuk's narrative establishes Istanbul as a global city within the network of literary cities, as well as a city of dreams.