

Part III

Hüzün and Turkishness

Introduction to Part III

Istanbul's fate is my fate: I am attached to this city because it has made me who I am.¹

– Orhan Pamuk

In 2006, Orhan Pamuk received the Nobel Prize for Literature. In announcing the award, the Nobel Foundation gushed that, 'in the quest for the melancholic soul of his native city [Pamuk] has discovered new symbols for the clash and interlacing of cultures'.² The committee had clearly been impressed by a book of Pamuk's that had just been published in English, a memoir/biography entitled *Istanbul: Memories and the City*.³ In it, Pamuk developed a concept he named 'hüzün', the 'melancholy of Istanbul', as well as themes of Turkish identity and his country's (at times) prickly relationship with the West.⁴ The latter were themes he had also explored in his timely and hugely successful novel *Snow* (2004), which although set primarily in the eastern city of Kars, was also characterised by a mournful sensibility.⁵ The Nobel committee's fascination with Pamuk's melancholy conceptualisation has, to some degree, been echoed in Western reviews and commentary, for these too often comment on *hüzün* as its dominant theme.

It is certainly an intriguing notion, this melancholic mood that dominates and defines Istanbul. But are its inhabitants really so melancholy? And what of Pamuk's claims that the pall of *hüzün* that hangs over them is connected to the loss of the Ottoman Empire, and to feelings of inadequacy and inferiority towards Europeans proper? Doesn't *hüzün's* reception recall that of Kundera's *Litost*, which also found a Western readership in the thrall of a literary cause célèbre who, struggling for freedom of expression against unenlightened authorities, found himself

at the forefront of an earnest discussion about the ‘clash of civilisations’? This part of the book aims to brush away some of the mystique that has attached to Pamuk’s *hüzün* to examine it in its correct personal, historical and social contexts.

‘This book is about fate’, Pamuk announces in the first few pages of *Istanbul*. A catalogue of the sadnesses, losses and alienation experienced both by himself and his fellow *İstanbullus* follows. Though he names *hüzün* as the mood which permeates the book only about a quarter of the way in, its melancholy focus is immediately apparent, and Pamuk’s naming of the mysterious phenomenon that binds them together finally renders complete the conceptual synthesis of his personal history and that of his city. *Hüzün*, he explains, is a word that derives from the Arabic, and which, in its origins, describes ‘a feeling of deep spiritual loss’; it is linked to Islamic and, more specifically, Sufi ideals of closeness to Allah.⁶ Pamuk then embarks on a deeper reading of *hüzün* – one which puts the word at the centre of Turkish culture and experience, and by extension, of his own identity:

To convey the spiritual importance of *hüzün* in the music of Istanbul over the last hundred years, to understand why *hüzün* dominates not just the mood of modern Turkish poetry but its symbolism, and why, like the great symbols of Divan poetry, it has suffered from overuse and even abuse; to understand the central importance of *hüzün* as a cultural concept conveying worldly failure, listlessness and spiritual suffering, it is not enough to grasp the history of the word and the honour we attach to it. 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. The *hüzün* of Istanbul is not just the mood evoked by its music and its poetry, it is a way of looking at life that implicates us all, not only a spiritual state, but a state of mind that is ultimately as life affirming as it is negating.⁷

Later, Pamuk complicates his definition further, by describing how the mood called *hüzün* has recently been tempered by Western influences, namely the ‘rationalism of Montaigne’ and the ‘emotional solitude of Thoreau’.⁸ His *hüzün* is not monolithic, he suggests, but subject to the influence of differing cultural traditions.

Pamuk’s identification of these traditions, in a culture that has so many from which it might draw, is one of the matters under investigation here.

Turkey's history of conquests and regime changes, ideologies and demagogues, religious and identity politics is one thing. But the difficulty of straightforward categorisation means that Turkey is frequently described in terms of being 'a land of contradictions' that is caught between 'East and West' and 'tradition and modernity'. Yet it is tempting to revert to such clichés because the fact of its hybridity *does* dominate social and political discourse, and because its dichotomies are *not* altogether fictional: Turkey can make a contemporary claim to being a literal and metaphorical bridge between the East and West. Pamuk's concept of *hüzün*, while exaggerated, nevertheless draws from the consciousness of this actual and ambivalent position.

But then few places lend themselves to easy definition. Moreover, to refer to one's nation as a bridge between the Occident and the Orient is far from uncommon: Czechs, Bulgarians, Hungarians and Macedonians – even Russians – have at one time or another employed such metaphors to suggest a privileged centrality or unique perspective.⁹ In modern geopolitical terms, however, Turkey undeniably *is* this bridge. This is not only because it does straddle both Europe and Asia (Istanbul is the only city in the world on two continents, having a 'European side' and an 'Asian side') but also because the city is increasingly positioning itself as a regional mediator, maintaining its association with Europe and its EU negotiations, whilst extending a hand – and investment opportunities – to the Middle East and elsewhere.¹⁰ The ruling AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – Justice and Development Party), in power since 2002, is behind this expansion in foreign policy. The combination of these new diplomatic and commercial friendships with Turkey's ever-simmering local and regional tensions indicate that the chances of the country abandoning its ongoing issues with self-definition in the near future are very slim indeed. It is worth keeping in mind, however, that the ease of labelling Turkey a 'land of contradictions' and focusing on its polarities belies its dynamic nature – within each of these contradictions exists a perennial conflict, and these conflicts and disagreements tend to nest with each other to produce a rather prickly and conceptually untidy whole. One of the objects of this section is to tease these contradictions out a little.

Pamuk recognises and writes about these problems, and has even been their victim, as his prosecution for 'insulting Turkishness', which we will discuss later, illustrates. One might even say that being the chronicler of the Turkish dilemma (i.e., ever 'caught between East and West') has, since the publication of *Snow*, become his trademark. Few would argue, at least, that this engagement with the literary and political *Zeitgeist* has not to some extent contributed to his success both within and outside

of Turkey. On the other hand, in seeking to explain why his people are the way they are, Pamuk, as with Kundera and Pascoaes, has embellished his observations with an emotional rationale. Like our Czech and Portuguese prophets of national *mentalité* – but, as we will see, to a greater degree than them both – Pamuk views his personal experience through the lenses of city and nation. All the while, however, he encourages his readers to do the reverse: to understand Turkishness in overwhelmingly Pamukian terms.

As with *saudade* and *lítost*, *hüzün* has some cultural pedigree – it was not born of Pamuk's febrile introspection alone. This section explores both those links that Pamuk makes explicitly and those he does not. In *Istanbul*, for example, he writes at length about Turkish and *İstanbullu* self-consciousness under the gaze of Europeans (the French, in particular) and the endless humiliations and soul-searching that this engendered: he refers also to the Kemalist project that sought to homogenise the nation but which arguably created more cracks than it succeeded in plastering over.

What follows is a critical expansion upon these observations to include a discussion of Turkey's current positioning within Europe, its political, cultural and ideological influences, and some prevalent outlooks. Since many of Pamuk's points intersect in their relevance to Istanbul and the nation as a whole, it is important to view his concept both in terms of tropes of national identity and the urbanisation and changing character of the city itself, and in terms of the geographical centring of *hüzün* in Istanbul, as opposed to the capital Ankara or elsewhere in the country. Turkey's semiperipherality vis-à-vis Europe and the way in which it conceives itself in historical terms are themes that reoccur throughout this study.

In arguing that *hüzün* represents the displacement of personal loss and alienation onto the collective, and the fusing of nostalgia for childhood with nostalgia for Empire, I look at the changing nature of Istanbul's urban and social environments and the problems these have generated. Tied to Pamuk's nostalgic recall is his discussion of *hüzün* as an aesthetic as well as emotional quality, and his association of it with iconic and atmospheric black and white photos of Istanbul. My contention is that Pamuk's 'visualisation' of *hüzün* is not only influenced by descriptions of other Turkish writers of a previous generation and foreign visitors but also by images that became prominent as part of Istanbul's self-promoting 'nostalgia industry' of the 1990s.

In this sense, a discussion of the infantilising nature of nostalgic melancholy, both on the personal and collective level, seems apposite.

Accordingly, I examine some negative conceptions of Turkishness as well as theories of Turkish optimism and joy that challenge *hüzün's* gloomy outlook. From here, I look at Pamuk's reference to the religious nature of *hüzün*, and touch upon the current 'fashion' for Sufism amongst Turkey's middle classes and the longing for authenticity from which these derive.

Finally, I engage with the politics of self-definition in Turkey, addressing wider questions of how the country, under the AKP, conceptualises itself in the twenty-first century – Turks are finding their place in the world and it does not necessarily adhere to the old dialectic of East and West. Fundamentally, this part explores whether Pamuk's use of *hüzün* as an explanatory tool is either valid or useful in analysing modes of Turkish and *İstanbullu* identity.