

## Orhan Pamuk, *The Museum of Innocence* (Allen & Unwin, 2009)

Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk's latest novel, *The Museum of Innocence*, is the story of an obsession that marks the life of protagonist Kemal Basmacı. The wealthy thirty-year old, about to get engaged to his long time girlfriend Sibel, meets the young and beautiful Füsün, a poor distant relative, in April 1975 and is instantly besotted by her. The steamy affair which ensues will forever sink Kemal, and us readers with him, into the labyrinth of infatuation that follows the more than 500 pages of the book. Unable to end his relationship with Sibel, who trusted him enough to have sex before their marriage – a taboo which only 'European women' and 'legendary women who were said to wander the streets of Istanbul' dared to break (51) – Kemal loses Füsün when she disappears from his life after the engagement party. The desolation and madness which follows is narrated from the vantage point of the future in which the middle-aged Kemal reflects upon his love for Füsün and his desperate attempts to find happiness next to her: 'Years later, as I struggled to understand why she was so dear to me, I would try to evoke not just our lovemaking but the room in which we made love, and our surroundings, and ordinary objects' (53).

In the apartment where the affair took place, he begins collecting ordinary objects which remind him of her: 'Sitting shirtless on the edge of the bed where I had made love to Füsün forty-four times, and surrounded by all those memory-laden things (three of which I display herewith), I spent a happy hour caressing them lovingly' (202). Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the reader is transformed into a visitor to the museum envisioning the numerous objects which are displayed for public view – restaurant menus, matchbooks, napkins, teacups, fruit soda bottles, pens, handkerchiefs – and vicariously sharing Kemal's delirium. Then, 339 painful days later, he meets Füsün again only to discover that she has married a young struggling film maker whose career Kemal will finance in order to be near her and because her wish is to become a movie actress. For the next eight years, Kemal will dine at her parents' home, where she lives with her husband, on average 4 nights a week for a total of 1,593 suppers. Through the narrator/collector's fondness for quantifying and cataloguing, not just objects, but also moments and events, we get a sense of the bitter protraction of the love story. During his visits to the Keskin household in Çukurcuma, Kemal will continue his collection by pilfering objects connected to Füsün: saltshakers from the dining table; her hairpins; pits of the olives she has eaten; more than 50 stubs of films seen with her; the china dogs which sit atop the television; her half eaten ice-cream cone; the tombala set used for the eight consecutive New Years Kemal spent at her house. He has even collected 4,213 of her cigarette butts for display at the museum, each with the inscription date of retrieval.

Once Füsün leaves her husband and we, the readers/visitors, whom even the narrator admits must by now be sick and tired of his heartache (180), start to believe there might be a happy ending to this hopeless story, Kemal warns us 'a love story that ends happily scarcely deserves more than a few sentences' (469). Eventually, Kemal is left with an assortment of objects and after travelling all over the world visiting museums, not the big crowded 'ostentatious ones', but the 'empty museums',

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'the collections no one ever visits' (495), he decides to buy the Çukurcuma home to house his fetishistic collection and to live with it: 'I may not have "won" the woman I loved so obsessively, but it cheered me to have broken off a piece of her' (372).

Anthropologist of his own experience (30), Kemal creates the Museum of Innocence as the repository of that experience with each display conveying not just memories but also moods: 'Because so many languages describe the condition I was in as "heartbreak," let the broken porcelain heart I display here suffice to convey my plight at the moment to all who visit my museum' (53); 'Here I display Füsün's white panties with her childish white socks and her dirty white sneakers, without comment, to evoke our spells of sad silence' (100). White panties, white socks and dirty sneakers, the pieces he has 'broken off' of her, reveal an objectified Füsün who never appears as a subject in the book, except when she manoeuvres her unhappy ending. Instead, she is the constant object of desire not just for Kemal but for all the men who lurked in Istanbul's streets, bridges, hills, and squares stalking and sexually harassing her since she was a child.

The city is yet another obsession for Kemal who also memorialises it in the museum documenting a way of life specific to the Istanbul of the decade in which the story transpires. The reader/visitor is immersed in an archaeology of memory and of place. From that perspective he/she can observe Kemal's wealthy class, educated abroad, and struggling with traditional values and the encroaching lifestyle of Western modernity. In neighbourhoods like Beyoğlu, Şişli and Nişantaşı – in 'European-style' restaurants, bars, discos, and hotels – the films, music, advertisements, objects and food are evoked by the protagonist who, in his fruitless search for happiness with Füsün, will become estranged from his world choosing instead to prowl the streets of poor neighbourhoods like Vefa, Seyrek, Fatih, and Kocamustafapaşa: 'I felt as if I could see the very essence of life in these poor neighbourhoods, with their empty lots, their muddy cobblestone streets, their cars, rubbish bins, and sidewalks, and the children playing with a half-inflated football under the streetlamps' (212). Though a pariah in both worlds, the narrator will guide the reader/visitor through the complexities of a 'poor and troubled country like Turkey with young leftists and rightist busy killing each other' (33) and will bring to life on the pages of the book a culturally rich city intoxicated with the ever-present *raki* and the cool waters of the Bosphorus.

In the same way that the reader of *My Name is Red* gets a view of the Istanbul of the sixteenth century, spun in a tale of miniaturist painters, of mystery and romance, in *The Museum of Innocence*, more than the stale love story, the true craftsmanship is displayed in the portrayal of the city. Caught in the relentless cliché of denoting a bridge between East and West, Istanbul comes masterfully alive in the hands of Orhan Pamuk who resists also being called a bridge: 'before being a bridge, you have to understand the humanity of the culture, its shadows, dark places, unreasonable sights, its aspirations, its hopes for the future, its daily moments, its weaknesses, its misery'.<sup>1</sup> With *The Museum of Innocence* we can get closer to the

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<sup>1</sup> Rainer Traube, 'Orhan Pamuk: Winning the Nobel Prize Made Everything Political,' Interview in *Deutsche Welle*, 23 March 2010, <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,3621369,00.html>

humanity of Istanbul and of Kemal who, after all, insists on claiming the value and happiness of his life.

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