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Urban Gothic and the Invisible Men

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Abstract

The paper attempts a critical approach of Orhan Pamuk's *Black Book* from the perspective of a Western literary mode – the urban gothic –, and meanwhile a comparison with Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* based on several literary motifs: the metropolis, the underground experience, the invisibility.

This comparative study focuses on Orhan Pamuk's *Kara Kitab (The Black Book)* from the perspective of a literary mode that has made a career in Western literatures: the urban gothic. The critical orthodoxy of such an approach was a matter of preoccupation to us from the first. The question was whether a Western literary criterion could be safely applied in the critical judgment of an Eastern novel, so that it might both seize the spirit of the text and not pervert itself by doing so. Part of the comparative literary theory urges to such critical “eccentricities”, but – how to put it? – the experience of the artists in *Benim Adım Kırmızı (My Name Is Red)* showed clearly that betrayal of the aesthetic dogma can be very dangerous; so must be then its misunderstanding... But the *Black Book* chapter mottoes taken from Western writers such as Gérard de Nerval or E.A. Poe, as well as the book title itself seem to support us in our critical enterprise.

The urban gothic is generally defined as a variety of the *fin-de-siècle* (19-th!) literary gothic. To be more accurate, much of the *fin-de-siècle* gothic tended to be urban, but literary authors have never ceased, since the end of the 19-th century, to deal with the most diverse issues of urban gothic. As our common world (beyond Eastern and Western traditions and cultural cleavages) has become increasingly industrialized and urbanized, the hidden, often perverse aspects of city life have recommended themselves to the artist as a resourceful inspiration reservoir. There is, however, an important difference between the late 19-th century gothic writer – be him E.A. Poe, R.L. Stevenson or Arthur Machen – and the more recent literary author: the former is interested in the secret life of the city, while the latter is actually *concerned* with it. The city is no longer the setting, it is the story. Such is, we think, the case of Orhan Pamuk's *Black Book*. Istanbul, it is true, is a constant, persistent presence in his novels, culminating with the 2003 *İstanbul – Hatıralar ve Şehir (Istanbul – Memories and the City)*, but what we are trying to prove is that the *Black Book* shares with us much of an archaeological experience.

Significantly, Martin Stokes remarks the “schizophrenic placelessness (‘between Europe and Asia’)” of “beloved Istanbul”¹ when he refers to its both

¹ “Beloved Istanbul”, Realism and the Transnational Imaginary in Turkish Popular Culture, in Walter Armbrust (ed.), *Mass Mediations New Approaches to Popular Culture in the*

geographical and cultural positions. In the *Black Book*, however, Istanbul seems to develop more vertically than horizontally. It covers indeed the border of two continents, nesting peculiar cultural intricacies, but it tends to stretch more underground than above ground, more under the sea than along the seashore. The horizontal criterion in space organization is not only secondary, but also entirely subordinated to the vertical one. Unlike New York in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, for instance, or Chicago in Saul Bellow's *Augie March*, the *Black Book* Istanbul does not spread and does not rise; heavy with history, it seems to sink. What the reader is eventually offered is the full glimpse of the imaginary cross-section through the *tell*, unveiling from inside the Chinese box, medieval Istanbul, Constantinople and ancient Byzantium, strata upon strata.

Two chapters of the *Black Book* are revelatory from this point of view: the second chapter (in the First Part), devoted to the undersea, and the seventeenth (in the First Part), devoted to the underground. The former experience is generated by a meditation on global warming and its consequences upon the Black Sea level. The reader (who is simultaneously Pamuk's and Celâl's reader) is invited to join into the contemplation of the fantastic panorama left by the cataclysmic withdrawal of the Bosphorus waters – architectural ruins of past civilizations, artifacts and organic remains thronging a Bosch-like picture. The seventeenth chapter describes Galip as part of a company visiting the basements of a dummy-maker's residence that shelter a weird dummy collection. In search of Celâl – his cousin and *alter ego* – Galip gets down, into the mouldy underground world, where he finds neither the black cat, nor the cask of Amontillado, in the good gothic tradition of the old house, but himself, by the slow and methodic rediscovery of the city past. This Madam Tussaud's *à la turque* proves to be a gallery of Ottoman types and profiles that make up, bit by bit, the Turkish history and identity. Challenged by new ways of life, new clothing fashions, new tastes and new vices, the past century sinks slowly under the street level, from the daylight into the darkness, and piled in disorder, layer upon layer, the dummies – obviously dumb witnesses of the past – are going to be crushed into the compact mass of geological strata.

The losses of memory that affect Celâl, whose daily articles in the “Milliyet” make up together a spectacular chronicle of the city, are symptomatic of the generalized amnesia that threatens to swallow the deliberately neglected relics of a traditional past. By abandoning himself to his political passions, Celâl (“god's wrath” in Turkish) turns into a prisoner of the national history; consumed by the idea of a different future, he is absorbed by the past. Significantly, he becomes himself a dummy in the Istanbul underground gallery and a chronicle page in the “Milliyet”, while his cousin, Galip (“victorious” in Turkish)¹, will take over his column in the newspaper.

The comparison above between *The Invisible Man* and *The Black Book* was not made at random. Ellison's book is a 20-th century picaresque novel, and the

Middle East and Beyond, Univ. of California Press, Berkeley. Los Angeles. London, 2000, p. 225.

¹ Cf. Martin Stokes, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

picaresque in all times, like the gothic in its *fin-de-siècle* variety have been closely associated to the urban background. Some analogies between Pamuk's and Ellison's protagonists are worth giving further attention. New York for the Western world beyond the ocean and Constantinople for Eastern Europe are embodiments of the same archetype: the *metropolis*. Life in the metropolis is the urban experience *par excellence* and urban experience is almost exclusively cultural. As it is, the inhabitants of large, crowded, cosmopolitan cities – Istanbul and New York included – experience a first, elementary level of alienation. Galip is no exception to this rule. His personal drama, like that of the nameless protagonist in Ralph Ellison's novel, has as a source his being excessively culturalized, in the anthropological sense, of utter and final surrender to one's culture. Race (in *The Invisible Man*) and traditional cousin ties¹, including cousin marriage (in *The Black Book*) are cultural constructs that weigh much in the making of the characters' respective identities. Cultivated, articulate and self-aware most of the time, Galip and the "invisible man" are engaged in the same kind of quest: for identity and self-assertion.

Actually, Galip is much of a rambler himself. It is utterly puzzling to see this quiet, home-focused Istanbul lawyer engage on a twin quest – for his cousin and wife, Rüya, and for his cousin, Celâl – and affecting, to that double purpose, the offhandedness and chaotic existence of a quasi-pícaro. He neglects his job, his family ties, his home; he gives up regular meals, his own pyjamas, and sometimes even shaving. His "journey" is marked, however, by a strong peculiarity. His roaming is paralleled, and even guided by clues picked during a symbolic time trip, carried through the (re-)reading of Celâl's more or less carefully dated drafts and journal articles. Travel through time and space allows the character to be the contemporary of both the past and the present city and that is why his story is, from a certain point of view, the city itself – which is getting rid of its dummies and looking forth for a new identity.

The experience of the underground is actually common to Pamuk's and Ellison's protagonists. In the first pages of the *Invisible Man* the reader is acquainted with the unusual interior of the protagonist's "house", an underground refuge in fact, where everything, including the light, is artificial – like the dummies in the underground Istanbul gallery. In both cases, the underground experience represents an escape: *from* the past, for Ellison's protagonist, *through* the past, for Pamuk's; nevertheless, in both novels, space seems to be conceived in such a way as to easily turn into a metaphor of time.

A salient feature shared by Galip and Ellison's main character, due to their respective confinement within the geographical, historical and cultural limits of the city, is their invisibility. Ellison's protagonist considers himself invisible, because the others refuse to see him. For Galip, invisibility is a choice: he chooses not to be seen, met or found by the others. In both cases, however, it is the metropolis that

¹ Cf. Goneli Gun, "Commentaries: The Turks Are Coming: Deciphering Orhan Pamuk's *Black Book*", in "World Literature Today", Vol. 66, 1992, pp. 59-60.

makes the invisibility exercise possible. It is the only social climate that can safely preserve a man's anonymity, creating and maintaining, meanwhile, the illusion of freedom and of possible success.

But Galip's initial quest, through the street maze of the old city, up and down the staircase that leads to Celâl's attic (that is also a time bubble isolating the family memories from the decaying influence of the world outside) – the gothic "ghost house" as the title of the first chapter of the Second Part calls it –, is doomed to failure from the very beginning. He is chasing a dream (*rüya*), after all.

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