

The Underworld of the Lost Turkmen in Orhan Pamuk's *The Black Book*

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Orhan Pamuk was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 2006, on the strength of his novels and his descriptive memoir *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (2003; trans. Maureen Freely, 2005). As Charles Dickens is to London, Victor Hugo to Paris, Feodor Dostoyevsky to St. Petersburg, James Joyce to Dublin, Orhan Pamuk is the literary champion of Istanbul, a city, like these others, with many layers of history, many cultural legacies, and yet a distinct character of its own. *The Black Book* (1990; trans. Maureen Freely, 2006), among his several novels, is the one most intimately dedicated to Istanbul, where all the action takes place. Indeed, it is possible to regard the city itself as a spectral world in the story, a living presence and archeological embodiment of the many-faceted Turkish past and present. Here, in this historic pile, the Turkish character is enshrined in the alleys, byways, buildings, mosques, waterways, and earthen layers of time that constitute the Underworld of Turkishness, accessible to all but noticed only by those who have the opportunity and the inclination or compulsion to do so.

The book focuses on two such curious protagonists, of the same family. Celâl Salik, aged 55, is a newspaper columnist whose eccentric feature articles have run for about 30 years in *Milliyet*, the leading newspaper of Istanbul; he is controversial, mysterious (since no one ever knows his whereabouts), and provocative in his sometimes metaphysical commentaries, which probe and dissect the city and its people historically and psychologically. Galip Bey, aged 33 or so, is a lawyer, an ordinary man frayed by the stresses of modern life and especially distraught by the disappearance of his wife Rüya, for whom he searches frantically during the whole narrative, wandering in desperation from one place to another in Istanbul, mostly by night. Rüya has left him, and without her he is lost in a maze of uncertainty and emotional paralysis. All the odd numbered chapters in the first part of the novel are episodes involving Galip's quest to find and recover Rüya, hence he is the archetypal hero on a quest in the Underworld; all the even numbered chapters are *Milliyet* columns written by the evasive Celâl over time, hence he is the genius of that Underworld, the archetypal guide, an ironically secretive and elusive Vergil to Galip's Dante as he quests after Rüya, his lost Beatrice. It is even suspected, and eventually proven, that Rüya has gone away, has perhaps eloped, with Celâl. In the second part of the novel, the chapter order is reversed, with Galip's misadventures featured in the even chapters and Celâl's columns

in the odd ones. Via the wide-ranging ruminations of Celâl's arcane *Milliyet* articles, which sometimes delve into the Medieval literature and lore of the Middle East, Galip hunts for clues that might lead him to Rüya and Celâl, or to destinations in Istanbul and its history that bear upon the central question whether it is possible for a man to be himself—"nor woman neither," as Hamlet might have observed, since Turkish pronouns are not, in fact, gendered.¹

The Quest

Galip's futile search for Rüya begins in Part One of the novel with a visit to the apartment of his extended family, where he lies about Rüya's disappearance, telling family members that she is at home recovering from an illness. At Celâl's newspaper headquarters he meets an old journalist who treats him dismissively; here he begins to suspect that he himself is being followed by an "all seeing eye" (105) that Celâl had also described in a *Milliyet* article (Chapter 10). From there he goes to visit Rüya's ex-husband, Mehmet Yılmaz, a former radical pamphleteer now settled into complacent middle age. Yılmaz has not seen Rüya, but they discuss movies, false identities, and the problem of being oneself. Thence to a brothel, where the prostitute he meets fancifully impersonates the hallmark Turkish actress Türkan Şoray, re-enacting a famous seduction scene; she also remarks, as if by way of a secret message, upon the impending arrival of a mysterious savior, "Him," who might restore Turkish identity and lift the modern veil of non-being (149-150). Galip's nocturnal quest takes him next to a bar where seven characters tell stories, his being the last story, about a writer who was so obsessed with Marcel Proust that he in fact became Marcel Proust. Departing the bar he joins a group of evening sightseers who visit the little known underground museum of Turkish mannequins, which he had read about in Celâl's article (Chapter 6), figures modeled on real Turkish people of generations past by an artist named Bedii Usta, who had intended them for use in Turkish department stores, failing to foresee that they would be rejected in favor of European mannequins.

At the museum, where Galip notices the mannequin of Celâl himself, he meets a former female schoolmate, Belkis, with whom he treks to the sliding mosque, which is creeping towards the Golden Horn inch by inch, ominously (197); they repair to Belkis's apartment, where she confesses that she always wanted to be Rüya, to belong to Galip, and alleges enviously that Rüya could read the letters in faces (199). Awakening in Belkis's apartment (she is now Ava Gardner) Galip walks to the iconic Galata Bridge looking for signs and for letters in the faces of the crowd; he is, it seems, almost assimilated into the world of hidden identity when he spies the image of an owl on a plastic bag that is identical to the owl on the cover of one of Rüya's mystery novels (215); but the spell dissolves, and Galip returns, full circle, to Celâl's old apartment in the City of Hearts.² There, in Celâl's deserted lodgings, he dons the absent journalist's pajamas and virtually assumes Celâl's identity. Through Part Two of the novel, Galip impersonates Celâl on the phone, investigates various arcane literary works that belonged to the journalist, and finally begins to write columns in Celâl's name, which he actually delivers to *Milliyet* for publication in the attempt to coax Celâl and Rüya out of hiding.

The Turkish Underworld

The very first Celâl article that Galip examines after Rûya's disappearance introduces a distinct underworld vision that is also a metaphor of historical collective memory: the vision of the seabed left "when the Bosphorus dries up" (which is Celâl's article's title, Chapter 2, pp. 16-20):

I am speaking now of the new neighborhoods that will take root on the muddy wasteland that we once knew as the Bosphorus, even as city councilors rush here and there waving penalty notices: I speak of shantytowns and shacks, bars, nightclubs, and amusement arcades, of rusty horsedrawn Lunaparks, of brothels, mosques, and dervish lodges, of nests where Marxist splinter groups go to hatch their young and rogue plastics factories turn out nylon stockings for the black market. Amid the doomsday chaos, among toppled wrecks of old City Line ferries, will stretch vast fields of bottle caps and seaweed. Adorning the mossy masts of American transatlantic liners that ran aground when the last of the water receded overnight, we shall find skeletons of Celts and Ligurians, their mouths gaping open in deference to the unknown gods of prehistory. (17)

Celâl's vision of the dried-up Bosphorus is a metaphor for the collective unconscious of Istanbul, though it differs in one important respect from the famous Freudian model, introduced in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, of the unconscious mind as a multi-layered affair, like the layers of Rome, from the present back to antiquity (*Civilization*, 16-19).³ Celâl's vision is not of an orderly, stratified memory but one that is a jumble of images from all ages and cultures absorbed by Istanbul from the present back to prehistory, mixed and juxtaposed in absurd and surprising combinations. At the heart of this smorgasbord of memory, however, lies an object that is central to Celâl's interest and subsequently emblematic for Galip in his quest to recover Rûya: the Black Cadillac of Death. The Cadillac, surrounded by a host of skeletal Medieval knights, still armored and mounted on skeleton steeds, holds the bare-boned forms of its driver, a gangster of Istanbul in the mid-1950's, and his mistress, with whom he drove over a cliff into the sea whilst engaged in a final passionate kiss: "Not only are their jaws conjoined, their very skulls are locked in an eternal embrace" (20). The article concludes with Celâl's impassioned entreaty to a distant unknown but destined love, to come to him, "wherever you happen to be at this moment" (20). For Galip, who has already begun to identify with Celâl, this woman is Rûya, and he is the would-be Paolo to her Francesca, via association with the gangster and his lady in the Cadillac of Death. However, it is not Galip but Celâl who is destined to die and be enshrined in the Underworld of blissful memory with Rûya; Galip will eventually appropriate Celâl's name, his place in society as a writer, and even his lodgings in the City of Hearts apartment building, but he will never join Rûya in the immortal kiss of eternal death and love that is witnessed in the Cadillac of Death.⁴ The reason is that he, Galip, cannot read the letters in faces.

The next principal locus of the Turkish Underworld is the fabulous museum of Turkish mannequins, which he visits on his quest to find Rûya but which he had already known about from Celâl's article on the subject (Chapter 6). The Turkish figures, located in a labyrinth of tunnels, began as an exhibit for a naval museum, presumably of mariners, but soon became a larger project for Bedii Usta, no less than a gallery of all the types of Turkish people, conceptually similar to the French characters in the novels of Balzac and Zola; except that Usta's figures, made "from wood, plaster, wax, the skins of does, camels, and sheep, and hair plucked from human heads and beards" (60), are astonishingly, corporeally real. Not only are they visually real, but also they

eerily mimic the motions, tasks, and habits of Turkmen with classical fidelity.⁵ As Usta's son, now curator of the underground museum, remarks, "My father always said we should pay close attention to the gestures that make us who we are" (62). Yet there is something wrong about them, something that changed over the years as Usta produced more and more of them; they began to reflect the corrupting influence of Western films: "Yes, it was because of those damn films—brought in from the West canister by canister to play in our theaters for hours on end—that the gestures our people used in the street began to lose their innocence" (63).

Later, when Galip visits the underground museum, the son of Usta tells him, "My father quickly realized that our history could only survive underground, that life underground was itself a sign of the imminent collapse above, that these passageways leading to our house, these underground roads strewn with skeletons, provided us with a historical opportunity, a chance to create citizens who carried their histories, their meanings, on their faces" (191). But when Galip witnesses the uncanny portraits of the Turkish shades, even those with authentic faces and gestures, he is helpless before them: "He had no idea what the mannequins signified and no idea what business he had here; he did not know the meanings written in the letters on these faces, and neither did he know the secret of his own existence" (194).

The third and last manifestation of the Underworld in the novel is the so-called "dark air shaft," a chasm and virtual hell-gate that Celâl describes in another of his *Milliyet* articles (Chapter 18). This black hole, created when another building was erected next to the City of Hearts, became the bottomless pit into which all the odds and ends of life, the detritus of everyday use, fell to oblivion, never to be retrieved by hook or crook or, in psychological terms, by any mechanism of the conscious or unconscious mind. The dark air shaft is the embodiment of non-being, like Judaic Sheol, the ultimate bag of nothingness which lies in wait for all things devoid of purpose and for all human beings who (obviously) fail to become themselves. At the end of Part One of the book, Galip is a prime candidate for descent into the dark shaft, by virtue of his failure to find Rüya and his awareness that he is unable to read the letters in faces. But he is a persistent quester, and he does not concede, give up, wait for Godot, or take the plunge into the pit. Instead, he turns to the ever-enlightening resort of the enquiring mind: research.

The Mystery of the Letters in Faces

In Part Two of the novel, Galip ensconces himself in Celâl's apartment to study the journalist's articles and his arcane research on the mystery of the letters in faces. It is understood, at this point, based on Celâl's articles and Galip's various interviews, that the secret of identity is hidden in the Arabic letters that abide in the structure of human faces, and that if one could read the letters in faces it would be possible to know who everyone really is, essentially and authentically, and also possible to become oneself by finding and communing with one's spiritual double, the destined Other in whose countenance we see reflected our own true self. For Galip, this Other can only be his beloved Rüya.

Celâl, it seems, was a collector of ancient maps and texts and was infatuated with the 12th century poet Rumi.⁶ Rumi, in turn, had been infatuated with Shams, a dervish who was his confidante and perhaps his secret lover (255). According to legend, Rumi's jealous disciples killed Shams and threw his body into a spider-infested well, and Rumi searched for Shams all over Damascus, like Galip searching for Rüya, only to discover that he, Rumi, was "in Mount Kaf," the mythic sacred mountain, actually

in search of himself (261). Celâl went on to prove, by deduction, that “the man who wanted Shams of Tabriz murdered and thrown into the well was none other than Rumi himself” (261). Celâl had mapped Rumi’s search of Damascus, then superimposed upon it maps of Cairo and Istanbul to discover the outline of, guess what, a FACE; but Galip is unable, re-enacting Celâl’s map trick, to read the letters in this face!

As his exploration of Celâl’s notes and letters continues, Galip comes across a scholarly tome by one F. M. Üçüncü, entitled *The Mystery of the Letters, and the Loss of Mystery*. This tome is a biography of another Medieval philosopher, Fazlallah, founder of the Hurufî sect in Istanbul, emphasizing the opposition of the mystic East and the rationalist West and asserting that ascendancy depends upon having a mystery, “seeing the world as a mysterious place awash with secrets and double meanings” (304). Üçüncü’s text reveals Eastern essentialism in its most absolute form: “Following the same line of argument that Fazlallah set out in *The Book of Eternal Life*, he explained that God, though his own face was hidden, manifested himself in human faces; after subjecting the lines common to all faces to detailed analysis, he demonstrated the ways in which these were reflected in the Arabic alphabet” (305). In the golden age of the ancient Turkmen, everyone could read the letters in faces:

No one ever asked if a story was real, because stories were as real as the lives they described. They lived their dreams and interpreted their lives. Those were the days when faces, like everything else in the world, were so laden with meaning that even the illiterate—even the man who could not tell an alpha from a piece of fruit, an *a* from a hat, or an *alif* from a stick—could read them with ease. (301)

However, Üçüncü observes, the art of reading the letters in faces has been lost, especially where the East has been colonized, conquered, or debased itself to the heroic materialism and rationalism of the West—as in Istanbul—and there are, he stipulates, but two ways to recover the mystery: to commit the perfect murder, as Rumi killed Shams and had him thrown into the well, or to vanish without a trace, like the 12th Imam, or like Rüya, and Celâl (305).⁷

The Turkish Book of the Dead

When Rüya left Galip, she wrote him a cursory farewell note of 19 words; her leaving occurred 19 years, 19 weeks, and 19 days after their first meeting, and it was written with a green ink pen originally purchased by Celâl in Alâaddin’s shop, close to the City of Hearts; this fatal green pen is seen close to the Black Cadillac of Death in Celâl’s column on the drying up of the Bosphorus, and Galip carries it on his person as a talisman, but to no avail. Galip is a quester in the Underworld of the Turkish collective unconscious, bereft of his guide, unable to decipher its crucial signs and symbols, frustrated by its shadowy inhabitants, driven at last to assuming the identity of the man he idolized, Celâl Bey, whose imagination had unlocked the mystery of the letters in faces and who was, who must have been, the eternal Other of Galip’s beloved Rüya.

Galip’s final transformation into the ghost writer of Celâl’s columns marks his return from the Underworld. He writes, in the first of three columns, an impassioned appeal to Rüya to return to him, reminiscent of Celâl’s brief but potent appeal in the article on the Bosphorus; he goes out, following a mysterious phone call, hoping to find Celâl and Rüya at Alâaddin’s shop, only to arrive just after they are fatally shot to death, Celâl on the street and Rüya inside the curious shop of Turkish memorabilia; finally, he returns to Celâl’s apartment, his own apartment, to sublimate his grief over months of regret and reminiscence by imagining a black book, a book of lost dreams

and misplaced memories:

It would be best, I think, if I asked the printer to submerge all the words on the pages that follow with a blanket of printer's ink. This would allow you to use your own imaginations to create that which my prose can never hope to achieve. This would do justice to the black dream that descends upon us at this point in the story—to the silence in my mind, as I wander like a sleepwalker through its hidden world. For the pages that follow—the black pages that follow—are the memoirs of a sleepwalker, nothing more and nothing less. (443)

This black book, *The Black Book*, is a book of the dead, of the remembrance of times lost, a history of life now relegated to the Underworld.⁸

Exhausted, drained of hope, alone, Galip returns from the Underworld like Gilgamesh, to rebuild the walls of his city by writing, by storytelling, by collecting the objects and mementos of his life with Rüya and secreting them in the flat-black, ink-soaked pages of *The Black Book*. The murders of Celâl and Rüya are never solved, nor is there any revelation of the key to the reading of the letters in faces. It remains an unlikely, perhaps impossible, and certainly implausible matter for a Turkmen, or for any person in the modern world, to become himself; and yet the faces of the lost Turkmen are still there, underground in the museum of Bedii Usta, the Bosphorus has not yet dried up, the sliding mosque is still sliding, and the pages of *The Black Book*, though unreadable, beckon the curious, the solvers of puzzles, the readers of mysteries, to enter the Underworld in search of the true Other that is the key to the true Self. And in this darkness, we hear the echo of Celâl's heroic mantra as if from the depths of the dark air shaft in the City of Hearts: "*I must be myself, I must be myself, I must be myself*" (180).⁹

Endnotes

1. Walter Andrews, in his article on *The Black Book*, contextualizes the Turkish identity crisis thusly: "In Turkey, 'being oneself' is not just a private anxiety or a topic for the psychiatrist's couch, it lives very much on the surface of public dialogue. For Turkey to be 'modern' and 'secular' it had to cease—abruptly—being something else; and Turks of more conservative political persuasions have long struggled with the feeling that the dislocations and discontents of their modernity may be bound to the loss of that something which might well have been the 'true Turkish self.'" Kemalist modernizers, however, believed that their reforms were a means of recovering this "true Turkish self" following the Ottoman imperial era. Thus, there is open debate over what, if anything, constitutes authentic Turkish identity (126-127).

2. Maureen Freely translates the name of the Salik family apartment building as "City of Hearts," which connotes that Istanbul is a city of real people with genuine lives and feelings; but the original translator, Güneli Gün, translates the phrase "Heart-of-the-City," which would suggest something else, namely the centrality of the Salik family as the heart and soul, or identity, of the Turkish people. A charming and typically postmodern duality, the more so as both propositions are true.

3. Galip recalls that Celâl "had once written that the subconscious, the 'dark spot' lurking in the depths of our minds, did not really exist, at least not in Turkey—it was a Western invention that we'd borrowed from those pompous Western novels, those affected film heroes we tried so hard and failed so miserably to imitate" (*The Black Book*, 33). From the perspective of the narrator, then, the Freudian notion of a subconscious is a Western device applied, or perhaps miss-applied, to the Eastern psyche. But the psyche is universal, not merely cultural; Galip and Celâl are not just Turks, they are Everyman.

4. Names are of essence here: Rüyâ means “Dream” and Celâl means “Enlightenment” (Andrews, 111); hence, Galip pursues both his lost dream and his lost understanding of life. That these two cling to each other in death, like the gangster and his mistress, like Paolo and Francesca, certifies their destiny as tragic.

5. The gallery of Turkish people resembles a wax museum, but I think the actual source of the figures Pamuk describes is the photographic *oeuvre* of Ara Guler, who spent half a century photographing people and places in Istanbul and whose street portraits constitute just such a menagerie of Turkish faces and gestures. Pamuk uses Guler’s photos extensively in his book *Istanbul: Memories and the City*.

6. Celâl shares the name Celalettin, or Jelaladdin, with Rumi; hence they are linked across centuries as a dual identity, the more so as it is later asserted that Celâl stole all his stories and ideas from Rumi, as Galip will soon steal them from Celâl (*The Black Book*, 258)

7. Üçüncü’s solutions, whether they are gleaned from Medieval sources or of his own invention, seem to be sensational and arbitrary. But what do they have in common? Both are instances of self-effacement, negation, and abdication of identity: the murderer negates himself along with his victim, for as Galip observes, no one wants to be called a murderer (245); and disappearance without a trace speaks for itself. Ironically, the key to the understanding of identity is the total surrender of identity.

8. That *The Black Book* is unreadable, hence a negation of itself, corresponds to the negation implied in the solution to the problem of the lost mystery of the letters in faces, and also to the idea of the Underworld as the negation of the Living World. In all these cases the mystery and the solution are exclusive of each other and cannot be reconciled under any conditions.

9. Is Celâl’s mantra really heroic, as it appears to be in its context, or is it borne of desperation, the invocation of an impossible categorical imperative, the necessity of being oneself in a world where no one may in fact become himself because there are no selves? This is the conclusion of Ian Almond in his article on the melancholy of Orhan Pamuk’s novels, particularly *The Black Book*, wherein three sadnesses prevail: the sadness of loss of mystery (79), the sadness of loss of identity (81), and the sadness of human weakness (84). However, I find Galip and Celal at once heroic and desperate, and melancholy, but not hopeless.

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