

REGAN TREEWATER-LIPES**JERUSALEM AND ISTANBUL: JUXTAPOSING AND PERSONIFYING ANCIENT CITIES FOR A 21ST CENTURY READERSHIP**

Thinking about cities requires thinking about what is or has been built in relation to what has been imagined. (McClung, 1988, p. 35)

For writers that have earned status as cultural legends like Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000) and Orhan Pamuk (1952-) the respective cities where they themselves resided serve as both setting and muse. In the writings of Amichai the holy city Jerusalem assumes the role of both a backdrop for his poetry as well as an all encompassing symbol of Israel and its people. In the autobiographical and semi-autobiographical prose of Pamuk it is Istanbul, the geographical and cultural crossroads of Europe and Asia that simultaneously inspires and dictates the nature of his narrative. Both authors have been celebrated for their integration of the city as a silent, verbally if not literally, character within their works – a multifaceted player shaping and influencing at every turn. Amichai, a name long associated with Israeli nationalism, and national criticism as well as unorthodox depictions of Judaic culture is always firmly rooted in the Middle East despite his childhood in Germany. Amichai never returned to live in the west for any significant time, and would spend his final days in the city that had inspired and frustrated, motivated and vexed him. Pamuk, a controversial name in his country has relocated to America continuing to focus on the narrative of Turkey. The Turkey of Pamuk's prose finds its core in the diversity and transience of post-Ottoman Istanbul. Unlike Amichai, Pamuk embraces the non-fixity of cultural definition. With one foot in Europe and the other in Asia Istanbul lends itself ideally to themes of multiculturalism and metamorphosis. This analysis will analyze urban personification to look at the many roles of Istanbul and Jerusalem comparatively.

The use of urban personification is entirely dependant on the reader's perception and comprehension of what the city as a non-stationary reality signifies. "Literary texts sometimes state, but more often merely imply, a set of values grounded in one or the other models" (McClung, 1988, p. 35). In William McClung's article "Dialectics of Literary Cities" he discusses the characteristic phenomena evoked by the mention of specific cities and how they relate to the reading of a literary work. McClung gives examples of several North American cities, listing the images associated with them. McClung does not mention local mythology, traditions, cultural components, legends, folklore, history etc. For the North American reader McClung's approach becomes infinitely more complicated when dealing with foreign authors read in translation. Certainly the reader's previous understanding of the mythology of foreign cities is not as intimate as the readership of those within the country of origin. That being said, this makes the role played by the city as literary catalyst all the more essential.

"A history of the imagination of the city, including though not limited to literature, might begin by describing the divided sensibility that, in western thought at least, has produced the dialectic so prominent in cities of fiction: on the one hand,

ideal, objective apprehended forms, and on the other, compromised, experiential, subjective systems. The meeting of the narrative and plastic imaginations in both kinds of literary architecture – verbal cities and specialized language – is a point of departure” (McClung, 1988, p. 37).

McClung states that “literary architecture” bares the burden of formulating and sustaining the multi-layered “imagination of the city” which in a broad sense can also be seen as one component of the city’s mythology.

Amichai’s own personal love for the holy city is evident in all his Jerusalem poetry, but the messages he sends are often enigmatic and contradictory. To understand Jerusalem through the eyes of Yehuda Amichai is to understand the passion, confusion and disconnect that isolate this city as uniquely conflicted and sacred. “The air over Jerusalem is saturated with prayers and dreams/ like the air over industrial cities./ It’s hard to breathe” (Amichai, “Ecology of Jerusalem”).

Amichai’s sentiments are often polarized, both reverent and blasphemous, something for which he has been criticized by Yoseph Milman among others. His evocation of Jerusalem more strongly resembles the appearance of an esteemed recurring protagonist – both virtuous and flawed.

“Amichai crafted some of his most wounded and wounding poems about what would remain his most unwavering of subjects, Jerusalem” (Omer-Sherman, 2006, p. 215). In his poem “Jerusalem is Full of Used Jews”, a title that sets up the work as inflammatory, Amichai very critically condemns the endless loss of what he sees as anonymous masses sacrificed in the name of maintaining the Jewish state. This criticism should not be seen as anti-nationalist as Amichai himself fought in numerous conflicts for the land of Israel. However, his sharp tone is less focused on the condemnation of war and more centered on exactly how so many lives were lost – not why. The first stanza reads:

“Jerusalem is full of used Jews, worn out by history/ Jews second-hand, slightly damaged, at bargain prices./ And *the eye yearns toward Zion* all the time. And all the eyes/ of the living and the dead are cracked like eggs/ on the rim of the bowl, to make the city/ puff up rich and fat” (Amichai).

The “history” that Amichai refers represents the countless conflicts intertwined with Israel. When he writes that these Jews are “slightly damaged” the reader is to understand that these are the veterans of any number of wars Israel participated in – and that they have lost value as they are no longer useful to the cause. These two first lines build upon one another in intensity and culminate in the line “And *the eye yearns toward Zion* all the time” which is a quote from *Ha Tikvah* (the Hope) the national anthem of Israel. Amichai’s uses this portion of the anthem in order to draw the reader’s attention from the symbolic abstraction of “used Jews”, and connect this image directly to a concrete representation of Israel. The reader understands that it is from this fixation with “Zion” that these nameless masses have been brought to ruin. The dramatic heightening of intensity continues to build with the final two lines of the stanza. Both the living and dead are being sacrificed for the exaltation and glory of the Jewish homeland, Jerusalem in particular.

Such provocative statements are characteristic of Amichai’s style – but have not gone without harsh criticism. In “Sacrilegious Imagery in Yehuda Amichai’s

Poetry” Yosheph Milman is quick to point out to *Akhshav bara’ash* saying “fleshy visions more common of pornography and the very mention of God in such a context is a form of blasphemy” (Milman, 1995, p. 112). Certainly religious references with a modern twist have the benefit of added shock value – both positively and negatively. Milman tries to make no such value judgement and does draw the reader’s attention to the significance and impact of Amichai’s work within the sphere of Modern Hebrew poetry, blasphemer or not: “Most critics recognize, at least in regard to the scope of traditional materials he uses, that Yehuda Amichai is one of the most outstanding of Israel’s post-independence poets” (Milman, 1995, p. 102).

Amichai’s use of Judaic components is intentional and designed to elicit strong responses specifically in order to highlight what he regards as particularly poignant. The sacrilegious tones have the purpose of accentuating these points not of any true “blasphemy”. Omer-Sherman claims: “To the poet’s lasting credit, he consistently manages this irreverent reduction without a hint of contempt for faith itself” (Omer-Sherman, 2006, p. 228). This directly contrasts the argument made by Milman.

In Amichai’s “And That is Your Glory” Omer-Sherman does reiterate Milman’s stressing of religious inversions saying: “In the earliest lyrics we already encounter evidence of the poet’s volatile conversation with the city: this is apparent in “And That is Your Glory” with its rueful nod to the liturgy of the Days of Awe” (Omer-Sherman, 2006, p. 217). The nature of the Days of Awe, a sober and introspective time in the Jewish calendar, is anything but “rueful”. As Omer-Sherman shows this tongue-in-cheek narrative voice is intentionally provocative as the author weaves in images of Rome and Mecca alongside his great muse.

In actuality it is less spiritual and more humanitarian themes that motivate the Amichai Jerusalem works. Despite his Orthodox upbringing Amichai’s sentiments are rooted in the secular, as supported by Milman. Amichai, despite his secularism and the seemingly religious criticisms of Jerusalem, maintains a constant dialog with the city.

“Jerusalem remains the poet’s template of both enmity and prophecies revelations about the human condition; in his relentless staging of each, Amichai performs an eloquent deconstruction of the contemporary abasement of Jerusalem by those who strive to control her” (Omer-Sherman, 2006, p. 228).

In the poem “Jerusalem” an undefined narrator describes his surroundings in the Old City from a rooftop. He makes distinctions between himself and the many people and things around him. The narrator evokes images of white hanging laundry, a wall, and nondescript flags from both sides. Amichai’s underlying theme within the image of Jerusalem – is conflict. “On a roof in the Old City/ laundry hanging in the late afternoon/ sunlight:/ the white sheet of a woman who is my/ enemy” (Amichai, “Jerusalem”).

It is left to the reader to assume that the woman he calls “enemy” is Palestinian, and that her “white sheet” is an allusion to the white flag of peace. The wall then, is not a literal one, but a figurative divide between the sides of the conflict, and thus the narrator cannot see the faces of those on the other side. The idea of “enemy” carries with it an intangible quality; the people on the other side remain faceless and anonymous. Although Omer-Sherman states that “the definitive Jerusalem poem

would never be written” (Omer-Sherman, 2006, p. 217), Amichai’s simply titled “Jerusalem” would seem to encompass the physical dividedness along with psycho-emotional turmoil of the iconic city. In “Ecology of Jerusalem” Amichai deals with introverted reactions to Jerusalem and deviates from the immediate visual responses as demonstrated in “Jerusalem”.

“And from time to time a new shipment of history arrives/ and the houses and towers are its packing materials./ Later these are discarded and piled up in dumps” (Amichai, “Ecology of Jerusalem”).

Unlike the rooftops in “Jerusalem” the “towers and houses” in this work are intangible. Amichai’s urban personification takes on the abstraction of passing time. The “new shipments of history” refers to the timeline of Israel’s occupation.

“Jerusalem was the great stage where the traumas and celebrations of the Israeli psyche were enacted. In this regard, it should be emphasized that, when it came to the gushing utterances of those who claimed Jerusalem from afar or who or stayed for a brief sojourn, Amichai had little patience” (Omer-Sherman, 2006, p. 216).

Amichai’s cynicism towards “history” is a rejection of foreign occupation. The “houses and towers were its packing materials” indicates what is first imposed and later falls to ruin “piled up in dumps”. Amichai speaks here not of actual structures but alludes to the nature of what lies in the layered soil beneath Jerusalem. The poem ends with the stanza:

“And in enclosed gardens heavy with Jasmine/ foreign consulate/ like wicked brides that have been rejected/ lie in wait for their moment” (Amichai, “Ecology of Jerusalem”).

These are not literal images but symbolic ones meant to stir the reader’s contemplative intrigue through the construction of individual descriptions. The “foreign consulates” are exactly that – but this is where the literal ends. The “enclosed gardens” refer to the partitioning and dividing, while the “garden” metaphor is intended to evoke the beauty of the land. The “jasmine” although seemingly innocuous is rather the opposite – a strong smell being utilized to mask the stench of controversy, this sensual aroma is alluded to in the same way in other works as well. Finally, in an antagonistic manner, Amichai writes of the foreign bodies of government awaiting their “moment” – meaning that they too aspire to possess Jerusalem, and add yet one more layer to the history that has been “discarded and piled up in dumps”.

Amichai once wrote that “In Jerusalem, everything is a symbol” (Amichai, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Why Jerusalem”). The multifaceted roles taken on by the city as subject and theme speak to Amichai’s profound love and frustration with his muse. For Amichai the holy city was everything – both good and bad. Omer-Sherman, in the final lines of his insightful analysis says that Amichai was a: “poet who always saw Jerusalem as distinctly less than a geographic setting and more a sentiment and at times capricious participant in the disappointed but perpetually expectant humanity caught up in its story” (Omer-Sherman, 2006, p. 234).

Farther north – at the geographical and symbolic intersection of west and east – 2006 Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk had begun to immortalize Istanbul from his secular Muslim perspective. “Wandering the streets of Istanbul the first-person

narrator of Orhan Pamuk's autobiography, *Istanbul: Memories and the City* explores the city's darkest corners to get a sense of himself. During his last nocturnal excursion the young flaneur find his vocation as a writer, a fortunate discovery" (Laschinger, 2006, p. 102). Pamuk has been celebrated for his depictions of multiculturalism and the various eastern and western influences that have shaped modern Istanbul.

"By bringing different elements – visual, textual, literary, historical, and personal – echoes the structure of Istanbul as Orham had experienced it, thus offering the reader yet another distorting mirror. In the distorting mirror of the narrative, both Orham and Istanbul are presented as displaced identities that explore the possibilities offered by the perpetual reinvention" (Gurses, 2012, p. 59). The author admits openly how experiential his writing is – drawing from his own life in *Istanbul: Memories and the City*.

"Just as in dreams, when we read novels we are sometimes so powerfully struck by the extraordinary nature of the things we encounter that we forget where we are and envision ourselves in the midst of the imaginary events and people we are witnessing. At such times we feel that the fictional world we encounter and enjoy, is more real than the real world itself" (Pamuk, *The Naïve and the Sentimental Novelist*, p. 3).

Pamuk's fictional world, the representation of Istanbul, is intended to mirror the real Istanbul. The reader is less conscious of the line Pamuk draws between fiction and reality. Gurses is correct in regarding Pamuk's work as a mirror being held up to the city. The distortions the critic refers to indicates Pamuk's role as the perceiver, interpreter and subsequent mirrorer of Istanbul.

"In its different neighbourhoods, in the predominant tones of gray, the city not only obstructs an ultimate rendering but also prevents its inhabitants from experiencing the security of such an absolute definition. Orham as well as other inhabitants of the city witness the constant displacement by seeing themselves reflected in the permanent move that the city is subject to" (Gurses, 2012, p. 59).

Pamuk brings Istanbul to life, not only in a metaphorical sense, but literally – with people, energy and change coursing through its streets like blood through arteries. The depiction is less concentrated on what the city is – but who and what it is transforming into.

"But what I am trying to describe now is not the melancholy of Istanbul but the *hüzün* in which we see ourselves reflected, the *hüzün* we absorb with pride and share as a community. To feel this *hüzün* is to see the scene, evoke the memories, in which the city itself becomes the very illustration, the very essence of *hüzün*" (Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, p. 94).

Pamuk indirectly refers to shared group experience – essentially the culture of those who intimately know Istanbul. He uses the word "melancholy" repeatedly in order to highlight what he clearly regards as a crucial feature of the perceived Istanbul experience shared by other long time inhabitants. It should be noted that the use of the Turkish word for melancholy, *hüzün* is a stylistic choice made by the translator, presumably in order to distinguish this abstract phenomena as something innately Turkish. But it is not an authentic *hüzün* but a reflected facsimile that is

presented to outsiders, feeding their conceptualization of Istanbul. In the subsequent pages Pamuk lists the occurrences which he relates to his muse.

“I am speaking of the evening when the sun sets early, of the fathers under the streetlamps in the back street returning home carrying plastic bags. Of the old Bosphorus ferries moored to deserted stations in the middle of winter, where sleepy sailors scrub the decks pail in hand and one eye on the black-and-white television in the distance...” (Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, p. 94). The examples Pamuk provides cover all spectrums of society: museums, pornography theatres, street vendors, the intelligentsia. The list continues for another two pages, filled with vivid images, sensual description and countless purposeful contradictions creating the mythology of Istanbul. Unlike Amichai who engages in a dialog with his urban personification, Pamuk creates an ongoing dialog with his Istanbul readership.

Turkish identity, as he presents it, is both European and Asian. Istanbul in Pamuk’s consciousness is a collision of cultural influences resulting in something truly unique. His works are saturated with the turbulent history of his country, and at all stages Pamuk regards Istanbul as having a specific cultural blend.

In his novel *Snow*, the protagonist Ka travels to the city of Kars, situated in the far eastern part of Turkey. The text deals with issues of secularism, devotion and the national Islamic narrative. Despite being set on the opposite end of Turkey, far from Istanbul, one excerpt exemplifies perfectly the collision of European values within the historically Islamic narrative of a secular country.

“According to statistics released by the American Black Muslim professor Marvin King the incidence of rape in Islamic countries where women cover themselves is so low as to be nonexistent and harassment is virtually unheard of. This is because a woman who has covered herself is making a statement. Through her choice of clothing she is saying, Don’t harass me” (Pamuk, *Snow*, p. 45).

Ka makes this declaration shortly after arriving in Kars to unearth the secrets of women who have ended their lives. This highly traditional perspective is seldom present in this autobiographical and semi-autobiographical works illustrating the disagreement of societal and cultural values. “Still another possibility was the basic difference lay between East and West lay in the fact that Easterners are fatalists, resigned to what they view as ‘God’s will’ whereas Westerners struggle relentlessly to stave off the inevitability of death” (McGaha, 2008, p. 96). McGaha takes a secular, more western approach, to resolving a clash between traditional eastern values and western aestheticism. Pamuk, in reflections on his childhood and devoutly Muslim housekeeper comments:

“To me it seemed as if it was because they were poor that God’s name was always on their lips. It’s entirely reasonable that I reached this false conclusion by watching the disbelief and mockery with which my family viewed anyone religious enough to pray five times a day” (Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, p. 179).

The contrast of perspectives is stark: most notable is the difference in tone between Kars, a city situated far in the east, and the unique multicultural secular sphere Pamuk relates to Istanbul. “My first trip to a mosque helped confirm my prejudice about religion in general, and Islam in particular” (Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, p. 181). The juxtaposition of rich and poor, secular and

devout is enhanced by Pamuk's following description of his initial encounter with Islamic tradition: "At Teşvikiye Mosque we found a crowd of twenty or thirty people – mostly owners of small shops in the back streets or maids, cooks or janitors who worked for rich families Nişantaşı" (Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, pp. 181-182). Ultimately it is the narrative of Istanbul's inhabitants that concerns Pamuk – his observations and confessions are as wickedly honest as they are enchanting. This class based evaluation of devotion is an example of the juxtapositions of the city's mythology as depicted by Pamuk. The reader, Turkish or not, comes inevitably to the conclusion that understanding Orhan Pamuk is understanding Istanbul – the ultimate narrative of contrasts.

For their openness to criticize religion, and secular approaches Amichai and Pamuk lend well to a comparative analysis. Both poet and novelist regard the religious components of their writing as cultural, not spiritual. Amichai saw Jerusalem as both virtuous and hateful, Pamuk regards Istanbul with appreciation and contradiction – but neither writer's name will ever be written or spoken without evoking images of their respective muses.

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