

# In the privileged streets

and areas of the palimpsest space that is Istanbul, new arrivals stand and listen to a polyglot text, babel of languages, language of the stones, tracing the unwritten history of the city founded twenty seven centuries ago according to the promptings of an oracle: Byzantium-Constantinople which, protected by the gods before devoting itself to the Christian Trinity and raising its slender minarets to the glory of the One and Only, overwhelms us both with the extraordinary setting and splendour of its monuments and the semiotic richness, its subtle interplay of synchrony and diachrony.

## **URBAN WOODS**

Determined to domesticate the space of the big city, a newcomer strives with the help of guides and maps to establish a vision of the whole, scattered with reference points to ensure a quick path through the scabrous contours of its topography. Expert map-readers do not find this a demanding operation and it creates the illusory apprehension of a reality as simple and artful as the emergency supplies chest of the perfect tourist. This first investigative phase, imposed by our instinctive need to span, however superficially, the area of the unknown, yields to one where I believe fertile exploration begins: the overall vision fragments into a series of separate sequences, discontinuous spaces. Gradual acquaintance with objects upsets momentary

certainities, fissures them like an earthquake: out of the city described in guide-books, reproduced on maps, registered step by step by a traveller passing proprietorially through, arise isolated, apparently entirely disconnected territories, charged with a dramatic tension that hypnotises and subjugates.

Only the superficial observer of otherness can allow himself the luxury of the trivial themes of consumerism: the more familiar he becomes with the world he is penetrating the more difficult it will be to construct a plausible, straightforward image. Trawled district by district, street by street in my compulsive, relentless burning of shoe-leather Istanbul today appears on my mental horizon like a collage of postcards or a variegated patchwork whose only subject or linking thread will be the random pull of my meandering. Disoriented, decentred, atypical, I surrender myself to the stereophonic diversity of its codes, the dense foliage nourishing its history and thirst for life. I can't see the wood for the trees! It has been a long, enriching process. 'Wandering off a city's beaten track, like wandering off into a wood,' said Walter Benjamin, 'requires a whole separate education.'

### **RE-READING THE CITY TEXT**

On my first visit to Istanbul, some 20 years ago, what most caught my attention and immediately attracted me was the prodigious impression or air of animal strength: a savage, omnivorous, uncontrollable vitality overwhelming the traveller as soon as he steps foot there; the chaotic frenzy of the ant-hill - ants subject to the enigmatic determinations of destiny - which I have only found in one other metropolis that is both imperial and third-world: the bastard, migrant New York of black and Puerto Rican ghettos which are gradually spilling over and staining the white polity, a gentle contamination.

In Istanbul, as in New York, the fight to survive shows itself by the light of day in all its calm, provocative brutality. The harsh need to earn a living, to survive come-what-may the onslaughts of an apparently insoluble general crisis translates into an excess of energy conferring on the slightest movement or gesture a sense of sudden determination, an internal tension which seem at first sight out of proportion. Instead of resigning themselves to their

fate, the inhabitants react with a healthy impetuosity. The universal application of the law of the fittest often forces them to be spare with feelings and adapt to a competitive, hostile atmosphere which forgives no frailty or error. A foreigner sometimes feels ignored, almost transparent. Looks seem to go through him, to aim at an object situated behind him. This non-existence, beyond the simple exchange of services, nevertheless has numerous advantages. A visitor becomes a camera recording, in the minutest detail, the extraordinary microcosms around him: buses, pedestrians, taxis, carts inventing impossible paths, fight to cut a route through all manner of obstacles, obey a set of improvised rules whose coherence and secret rhythm - like the almost fusional immediacy hidden in the hearts of the throng - he will not lay bare for months if not years.

### **THE PEDESTRIAN MASS**

I am in the Eminönü neighbourhood where I usually linger in order to contemplate the fascinating spectacle of the crowd in motion: a cityscape as familiar to me by now as Turkish, no longer that language which struck the alert ear of Borges as a softer form of German and now a fortress patiently scaled and conquered. I can now speak to taxi drivers or traders in the Grand Bazaar, but the impact of that first impression retains its vigour, intact despite the passage of time. If meanwhile my perception of the city has cracked like a broken mirror and my present haunts sit side by side with no linking theme, isn't the crowd's excess energy the inner magnet pulling my wandering steps through these physical and textual spaces that have irresistibly attracted me since I was a child? As with Tangier's Zoco Chico or Marrakesh's Djemaa el Fna, being there stimulates, bears fruit: life is transformed into a kind of collective writing exercise I discretely engage in without renouncing the delights of leisure.

From the quays of Üsküdar, the Bosphorus and Sea of Marmara hundreds of thousands of commuters daily rush to attack the buses, invade the pedestrian-packed streets, swarm over the draw-bridge joining the two sections of the city: a brusque popular army, hurrying, voraciously consuming maashun and sweetcorn, elbowing, propelling its way forward, as

in metro corridors at rush hour. Leaning back on the rail, at the top of a pedestrian crossing, I eagerly examine the tide of faces climbing up the steps, the torsoes and legs gradually emerging as their owners approach, reach, then leave me behind and walk down the other side, disappear from my field of vision. The expressive face, lively gestures and mannerisms is a continuous source of wonder and solace. The contrast with the dead, lethargic almost bovine visages that abound in the cities of our industrialised North could not be sharper. As in my favourite areas of New York, with an imaginary camera I never-endingly take snapshots of faces, silhouettes, gestures, looks. I only have to walk down to the waterfront or the environs of the New Mosque to be plunged immediately into a universe in perpetual motion: the ceaseless chatter of traders, water-sellers or porters bent double under their loads, versatile dealers in caps, scarves, bread rolls, lottery tickets. Almost everybody chews or masticates while leaping, running the distance to the ferries, buses, shared taxis which will take them to their destinations.

I am in one of the most beautiful places that I know and, rather than describe the panorama from the Karaköy Bridge - the graceful lines of the Ottoman mosques, the golden rays of dusk on the tower of Galata, the boats manoeuvring to moor and depart the quaysides on either shore - my attention focuses on the wild, rustic face of a ferocious devourer of sandwiches swaggering piratically towards me on the arm of a friend. My snapshot has caught his inquisitive grimace and roughly-sketched smile as he looked at me, flattered.

### **SELF-CRITICAL INTERLUDE**

Grasping your *Guide Bleu*, you could describe circumstantially to your readers the labyrinth of rooms structuring the harem of Topkapi Sarayi or wax expansively on the disposition of porticos, domes and minarets of Suleyman the Magnificent's Mosque, a masterpiece, together with the Selemiye of Edirne, the architectural genius of Sinan; you could embark en route with one of the noisy groups of tourists zigzagging between the admirable seascapes of the Bosphorus or visiting the islands of the Princes and their delightful entourage of sleepy Ottoman villas; you could linger to contemplate the Byzantine walls or vestiges of

the old hippodrome and thus enjoy, and help others enjoy, the rich profusion of the city's codes, its intricate polyglot semiology; but maniacal obsessive that you are, as alert as Baudelaire ever was to the urban hum, you prefer to climb the steep slope of Galipdede alone - leaving till later the review of its nearby monuments - and continue along Istiklal Caddesi before emerging on the left into the noisy, vulgar Passage of Flowers.

You instinctively follow the crowd, heading into the most confused, densely-populated areas and are blessed with the discovery, having just set foot in Istanbul, with the teeming district of *genel evler* or flat-roofed houses: you had crossed the bridge for the first time in your life and reaching the crossroads at Karaköy, on the way to Galatha, were swept along by the throng into a side street protected by a frontier barrier, a guardpost and two ascaris; but the somewhat oneiric account of your foray into the brothels doesn't fit here and the eager reader will find it in one of your novels. The price of an entry token at the time was a hundred non-devalued Turkish lira.

### **THE PASSAGE OF FLOWERS**

The Çiçek Pasajı - as they now dub what in its heyday must have been one of the best covered walkways in Constantinople's cosmopolitan quarter - still displays the sign Cité de Pera on the front of one of its doors, the sign anachronistically evoking glories of old. The messages received by the spectator in the middle of a street lined by cheap eateries, vegetable, fruit and flower-stalls, emphasise the impression of exoticism and resigned acceptance of decline. A Frenchified bourgeoisie that once frequented the place vanished 60 years ago and its present clientele recalls the one which populated the calle de Escudillers and Plaza Real in Barcelona when, as a university student, I walked down the Ramblas in search of a different atmosphere - one at any rate more suited to my interest and tastes - than the one I found at home.

L-shaped, its buildings seemed to have suffered the consequences of a cataclysm or the general ruination of their owners before losing the glass canopy that once sheltered it, and exhibiting the present, dirty, down-at-heel state. While the nocturnal bustle mercifully hides the vista of crumbling walls and

guttured rooms, a daytime stroll exposes the melancholy traces of old age. But the passage cheers up at dusk and tarts up by cheap jewellery and make-up, comes into its own like an astute old actress in the glow from the theatre footlights.

The reduced space afforded by the area forces bar and restaurant owners to make the most of every corner, thus favouring chit-chat and enjoyable promiscuity. Solitary or paired off customers are immediately settled into the gaps between happy bands of drinkers with whom it is impossible not to fraternise. A language of signs soon incorporates the foreigner with no knowledge of Turkish into the nuclear cell of some group, invited to share for minutes or hours the cordial, exuberant atmosphere. The hubbub which reigns requires of the foreigner a good ear to distinguish different species of voices and cries: the noisy conversation of friends, solemn toasts, orders shrieked by waiters into kitchens, scratchy tunes from a weary and wan combo, the patter of peanut and croquetted mussel vendors, numbers hawked by lottery-ticket sellers with their caps and Milli Piyango headbands.

Discontinuity, effervescence, immediacy, the coming and going of new customers, quarrelsome drunkards, momentary conniving, festive complicities. Some characters and players, repeated over the years, add a note of stability to the impetuous maelstrom of the throng: the malign, hunchback owner of one eatery, a seller of giant prawns who apparently windscreenwipes the sweat from his face with his handle-bar moustache, a stout, bespectacled, accordion-playing songstress who switches to a lively pasadoble on seeing me. Movements caught in flight: pieces of melon on forks offered to a neighbouring mouth, the mutual affection of two strapping youths feeding each other while continuing to tell their rosary beads. The space gives the impression of expanding to welcome new groups of visitors anxious for hustle and bustle. When the concentration of humanity goes beyond the limits of the unthinkable and one might think a pin wouldn't fit in, boundless Turkish fantasy is quick to give the lie: an acrobat installs his folding table in the very centre of the flux, places a stool on top, airily performs his tricks, a mocking, twin challenge to the physical capacity of the Çiçek Pasajı and the law of universal gravity.

## THE GRAND BAZAAR

There is still time to mend your ways and exact a tardy if disgruntled pardon from your reader! Rather than dragging him along with you ecstatically to contemplate the pedestrian mass on a bridge and the rather cheap, tawdry spectacle of young raki drinkers, you can still take them, directed by the *Guide Bleu*, to places of finer vintage: to the Byzantine apse, narthex and mosaics of Saint Sophia; the imposing Valens aqueduct; the ruins of the Edirne gate through which Mehmet Fatih's infantry burst on 29 May 1453. Your wandering through the alleyways stuffed with wares and artisanry on the way to the Bayaceto tower and Nuorosmaniye Camii raises the hopes of those anxious to get some hard facts on the city's palimpsest history: but here you are, not bothering to draw their attention to the splendid monuments nearby or to reciting guide-like the list of emperors and sultans (it beats Leon's and Castille's), you take the steep slope of Tarakçılar Sokaki and slip cool as a cucumber into the Grand Bazaar!

Like a flash group of Madrid town councillors, will you rush to haggle and then buy incredibly low-priced leather jackets and blousons? Your experienced advice to fellow countrymen fond of travelling to buy on the cheap would be extremely useful if one really deplorable fact didn't intrude, that in like cases you always leaned the other way, outrageously favouring local sellers: using your knowledge of the vernacular to point out from afar, as in Marrakesh, the director of a big bank or an all-powerful ex-minister, indicating to shop assistants that they were well-heeled customers, that the screws should be turned, no discounts allowed. In such an ornery frame of mind, your advice to your readers (whether councillors or not) would be counter-productive and, letting yourself be carried away once more by your liking for crowds, you will for the nth time (the nth time's a winner) promenade down the covered passages and avenues of the world's most varied, attractive bazaar. As you have found out in your haphazard wandering, a prospective customer venturing there will find, according to their fancies, mosques, barber-shops, restaurants, chemists and a very wide range of objects from the common or garden to the unexpected and exquisite. The Grand Bazaar is the reign of the improbable where everything is



possible: I have even bumped into a Sephardic collector of coins bearing effigies of 'our king Juan Carlos' and an advertisement for a Goitisoló cognac displayed in an Armenian's shopwindow next to the crossed flags of the ikurrina and the colour photograph of a Basque football team!

Kapalı Çarşı is a wood where Walter Benjamin would have enjoyed getting lost: the points of reference which, like pebbles scattered in my wake, I had established on previous stays, have finally been erased from my mind and I stroll through the spacious precinct not knowing my destination, or my itinerary. It has been a long process, but I have finished a whole different education.

### **THE BATHS**

The collection of privileged spaces, framed in the area of texts with descriptive detail very similar to those on postcards, should include a few streets of Tophane or Kasımpaşa with their romantic Ottoman façades, local squares with conciliar assemblies of cats, small parks in outlying districts where leather-breeched youths smeared in oil test out their strength, agility and skills on the eve of the Kirkpinar contests.

A last-minute visit to the archaeological or Islamic art museums might be timely, but with two yağlı güreşçiler (greased or oiled wrestlers), both old friends of mine, we selfishly decide to fight off exhaustion from a day's urban trawling and subject ourselves to the ancestral purification ceremonies: the baths where we are heading have not the distinction of the Eskihamam of Bursa or of the great baths of Edirne, attributed to Sinan; nevertheless, they contain the elements and attributes of this national institution to which the citizens of the country have been addicted for years.

With a large towel from midriff to knees, after leaving clothes and belongings in one of the lockers in the hallway, the customer of the Sultan hammam cautiously enters a series of rooms with small cleansing fountains sunk in shadows. The baths properly speaking are covered by domes whose translucent skylights sift the light and surround the bathing rituals in an ineffable aura, in subtle shades of unreality. Stretched out on marble slabs, half a dozen individuals await the energetic intervention of the



masseurs in a passive state of surrender. Sometimes, friends or mere acquaintances embrace and mutually pummel shoulders and backs to prepare muscles and tendons for the consummate labour of the artist. This physical familiarity - the strict opposite of alienation from the body according to jaded Puritanical morality - always surprises western travellers with their uptight, insecure notions of manliness. The play of hands is in no way rough or coarse: the natural innocence of the contact, even the shows of emotional tenderness, simply prove that no-one feels coerced by norms of would-be, inflexible masculinity. Submission to the arts of a skilled, well-proportioned masseur is one of the most refined of Turkish delights: from the soles of his feet to his skull and eyebrows, a foreigner will experience the different stations or degrees of a methodical, enhancing torture, becoming in the space of a daydream a simple object of gentle and harsh, intense and refreshing sensations, till he reaches a state of unimaginable bliss - the happiness of someone trying out a new body as if it were a new suit. Dislocated, shattered, re-shaped, soaped from top to toe, bathed, wrung dry, comforted, head and waist wrapped in different sets of towels, wearing a turban made from fine material, led back to the restfulness of his bunk, plied with cups of hot tea or purest mineral water.

The hammam's employees have accepted the presence of a photographer in that temple dedicated to the glories of the body and in a friendly spirit allow themselves to be photographed after receiving their tip. 'Give Turkey some good publicity' one says as we leave. 'They make out we're the baddies, you know we're not.'

## **POSTCARDS**

Before saying a proper goodbye to the city at a Mawlani session of sama at the seat of the ancient Dervish brotherhood, the professor of Spanish literature at the university presents me with a pretty little book *Eski Istanbul'dan*, 'Kitap Kart' whose aims seem to coincide more than once with the text I am now concluding. The grand panorama of the metropolis, supposedly encompassing an almost infinite range of meaningful codes, has been rejected in favour of a whimsical, subjective, fragmentary collection of images of a Constantinople that no longer exists: murky, yellowing photographs of street-sellers of brooms,

melons, sweet-cakes, coal, toasted chick-peas; water-sellers, itinerant barbers, artisans, porters and even a group of pompiers irréguliers (a detail justifying a dream of their anomalous, undoubtedly exceptional aptitudes in contrast to those of the 'regulars'!)

Photographic or journalistic summaries for readers in a hurry cannot provide them with anything but the information they already possess. Those not satisfied by such redundancy will extend their apprenticeship in partial, successive forays. As Juri Lotman observed, the collisions provoked by superimposed layers of heterogeneous information predisposes the reader of the city conceived as a textual space, to a receptive, open attitude in which the postcard assumes the role of a code of surprising richness and complexity. Istanbul, successively explored, recognised, assimilated, rectified throughout my fertile stays, is no longer for me just a collection or anthology of snapshots: its aggressive, prodigious, fascinating crowd renews and invents itself at each step like Heraclitu's river in a changeable, fluid continuity returning us to a glorious past, a voracious present and an indiscipherable future.

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