

*It was
the early
1960s.
I was nine
years old*

driving with my father from Ankara to Mersin, a small town beside the Mediterranean. I couldn't wait. I'd been told that I would see the Mediterranean for the first time and that I would never forget it. Finally, through a framework of yellow hills, there it was – and I never forgot it. Not the sea, I mean, but the moment of discovery. It had a different blue. It was azure, to use a darling word of western literature whose origin is Arab. I had expected a mirage-like sea, a desert sea perhaps, because the Turkish word for Mediterranean, *Akdeniz*, means The White Sea, as it does in Arabic. Misty or foggy it often is, but the sea I saw was not white at all. It was my first encounter with the problem in Turkish of describing this unfathomable ocean.

Years later, reading Braudel's classic work on the Mediterranean, I realised that my "first encounter" with the sea had itself been an illusion. Braudel's map included the Sea of Marmara, the Bosphorus and even the Black Sea as natural extensions of the Mediterranean. He pointed out that olive groves and fig trees flourish equally along the shores of Marmara, beside the Bosphorus and around the Black Sea. The common denominator of Mediterranean life was climate.

This simple argument both disturbed and confused me. An

Istanbul for decades, had I been a Mediterranean without knowing it? Maybe the best way of really belonging to a place is to be totally ignorant of its boundaries, its image, even its existence. Not so for me. I saw Istanbul as a non-Mediterranean city. The Mediterranean, somewhere far to the south, belonged to people quite different from my own. My mindset had been formed by language and conventional interpretations of history.

The textbooks tell us that, pushing relentlessly west from central Asia, the Turks crossed the Mediterranean during the fourteenth century. During the reign of Mehmet the Conqueror, after the fall of Byzantium, the Mediterranean became a simple channel for further conquest. By the time the Ottoman Empire reached its zenith and embraced the whole Middle East, the Mediterranean was raised to the status of *mare nostrum* or, as my schoolbooks put it, an inner sea of empire, a topographic entity of straits, and routes, and lines. I loved this geometrical approach and fell victim to it.

Yet danger lurked around this inner sea. Pirates, Venetian galleys and Maltese vessels were over every horizon. The weather was itself capricious, and when after a night of storm day dawned soft and gentle you could well be confronted with the guns and flags of "the other", the enemy. Engrossed in the popular Turkish novels of my teenage years, the Mediterranean seemed to me a hunting ground for Barbarosso's Turgut Reis and sundry Ottoman admirals, most of whom were Christian pirates before being drafted into the Sultan's service.

Any mystery associated with this White Sea came from its complex geography. There was no hint of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*. It wasn't a scene of crime and punishment so much as a setting for war and peace. The White Sea's surface was dotted with bizarre, grotesque and comical earthlings rather than wild and wonderful mythological beasts. Those who described them – people like Evliya Celebi, a seventeenth century travel writer whose facts happened to be highly unreliable – used the language of tourism. Forget myth or magic: the Ottomans, who incidentally wrote very little prose, saw the White Sea as a war zone.

So in my historical novel *The White Castle* it's no coincidence that the Italian hero is captured by the Turks on the

Mediterranean. Nor is it a coincidence that in the opening pages of the novel I refer to the Mediterranean simply as “the sea”, not the White Sea or the Mediterranean. It’s as if, in Turkish, the Mediterranean was merely a place where “the others” were confronted.

But in the last 20 years Turkish language and literature has confronted a new challenge, commonly called Mediterranean consciousness (or sensibility). What is it, where does it come from, and why?

Mediterranean identity is a concoction like all so-called identities. Ideas about the unity of the Mediterranean and the identity derived from this unity are false. The flesh and bones for such an “identity” may come from Mediterraneans themselves but the imaginative and intellectual leap was made by others – American, English, German writers, as well as the Northern French. To understand Mediterranean consciousness we must look beyond Homer and Ibru Haldun to Goethe and Stendhal. The literary-erotic framework needed Thomas Mann’s *Gustave von Aeschenbach in Death in Venice*, E.M.Forster’s *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, Tennessee Williams’ *The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone* and Paul Bowles’ *The Sheltering Sky*. Lawrence Durrell contributed to the myth of the Mediterranean as much as Kavafi (and used a Kavafi-like figure in his *Alexandrian Quartet*).

We learnt from these Northern writers that we have a “different” sensibility. Yet it now appears that we were more willing to believe the myth than the myth-makers themselves. That’s the case among today’s generation of Turkish poets. Literature produced unselfconsciously on the Mediterranean by Mediterranean writers is labelled with Mediterranean consciousness. Yahya Kemal’s poems on Andalusia are considered more Mediterranean than Islamic. Cevat Sadir Kabagac, a novelist and essayist who died in the early 1970s, is considered a paradigm of Mediterranean sensibility. His nom de plume was Halikarnas Balıkcısı – the Fisherman of Halicarnassus – but more than the Mediterranean he admired only those parts of classical Greek civilisation which flourished in Asia Minor. Others wrote novels in the manner of Thomas Mann or E.M.Forster involving a troubled hero from the North, from Istanbul, who goes south to the Mediterranean in search of sun, peace of mind and eroticism.

Of course what the hero really discovers, after all sorts of adventures, is the meaning of life.

Most poems written against this backdrop juxtapose characters from Greek mythology, the Homeric wine-dark sea, azure images, olive trees, transient love affairs and sensuality. When the critics say that a certain writer needs to expose himself to Mediterranean sensibility they mean he should relax, enjoy himself, be more convivial, drink a bit, let himself go.

Part of the need for this myth has come from Turkey's not wholly successful attempts at westernisation over the last two hundred years or so. It seems that to aspire to be Mediterranean is to get a second class ticket to the West. The Mediterranean image is neither totally occidental nor oriental: it is a permissible, possible, easy-going midpoint. At its best the new Mediterranean sensibility in Turkey means more and better translation into Turkish of Greek, Italian and Spanish writers and poets. At its worst it promulgates an ill-founded myth.

Some may call it an exercise in sarcasm, but my intention has been to differentiate between life and literature, between Club Mediterran   and the Mediterranean itself, between water and words.

Something in me mistrusts "identity". Apart from its value for tomorrow's students of society, most travel literature is worthless and tasteless, feeding common misconceptions about people and places. Generalised descriptions of national or cultural characteristics are usually false. I once met a Korean novelist at an international writers conference who preached to me about East and West. To her, East represented strong family life, children, marital fidelity and sexual frustration while the West signified adultery, free love and disaster. Generalisations about Mediterranean culture are equally unhelpful.

I try not to teach the poor reader anything at all in my novels. If there comes a point when culture must be discussed I find the best way to deal with theories about "the others" and ourselves is to make a game of it. High-blown lectures on the nature of civilisation destroy the mind but games are harmless. They may even be fun.

THE RULES OF THE GAME

1. A Mediterranean community is a good idea, particularly for those who today need a visa to enter Italy, France and Spain.

2. Any writer who wants to be considered Mediterranean should surrender some of his or her right to belong to another nation or culture. For example, a French writer who aspires to be a Mediterranean writer should give up some of his Frenchness. An Arab writer who counts himself a Mediterranean is not an Arab writer in the fullest sense of the word.

3. A real Mediterranean writer will never use the word to describe the sea, its cultures or people, especially in fiction and poetry.

4. Understand that the Mediterranean is a sea, nothing more. The sea, and its infinite ability to inspire, is all that counts.

Orhan Pamuk (1952), one of the most popular contemporary Turkish novelists, has always identified himself as a "postmodern writer". Pamuk's novels have begun to be translated into Western languages, including French and English.