

The Competing Claims of Crime versus Heritage in *A Memento for Istanbul*, Ahmed Ümit.

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One might almost argue that Ahmed Ümit's 2010 *A Memento for Istanbul* has a split personality: it cannot seem to make up its mind whether it is a celebration of the history of Istanbul or a crime narrative. As a novel it has certainly been successful, a national bestseller (as its cover proclaims), translated into English a year later and a second edition by 2014. This analysis of the novel does not question the narrative's popular success but rather its generic successfulness. Do the two narrative trajectories, coalesce or pull apart in opposite directions?

At the outset, I should acknowledge my belief that crime fiction is a wonderfully elastic and expansive genre, from Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories through to Alexander McCall Smith's African No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency series. The genre contains both conservative and transgressive narratives and has given a voice to a whole variety of previously marginalised positions in relation to gender, race, ethnicity and sexualities as witnessed by the growth of feminist crime in the eighties and nineties, and the postcolonial and transnational crime in the twenty-first century. The starting point for this discussion of *A Memento for Istanbul* is therefore not a retrograde insistence on a 'Decalogue' purity of the Detection Club rules,<sup>1</sup> against what is positioned as extraneous material. Barbara Wilson's subversive transgender *Gaudi Afternoon* remains one of my favourite texts precisely because it pushes the crime genre's expectations to its limits, without quite breaking them. The question is not therefore *should* Ümit's *A Memento for Istanbul* contain quite so much

detail of Istanbul's iconic architecture, but rather, is the narrative trajectory of the text asking different things of the readers' interest in the city's past history to their generic excitement at the uncovering of the crimes and perpetrators? Do the two narrative foci compete for attention in an expansive layering that adds to the experience of reading the novel; or do they detract from each other, pulling in different directions so that the reader either skips the history to get to the crime thread or forgets the urgency of discovery, to enjoy the instructive historical explanations that pause the tension?

In one sense the answer will always be both, since readers are always plural in their reasons for reading. Both the city's contemporary inhabitants and the numerous tourists (the active and the armchair varieties) who flock to Istanbul will find multiple fascinations in the novel.<sup>2</sup> Mine is a more technical question, arising from a previous exploration of the tensions between radical ideologies, like feminism, appropriating potentially conservative detective genres.<sup>3</sup> Here, in Ümit's text, the tension under investigation is between a desire to elaborate with pride and love on Istanbul's history as exemplified through its iconic buildings, as a paean to the extraordinary riches of the city, alongside the need for a taut police procedural urgently trying to unravel the motives behind the seven sacrificial murders in seven days and apprehend the killers.

Nevzat Akman, the middle-aged Chief Inspector, is a lover of history from boyhood. His two side-kicks, the young detectives Ali and Zeynep are less familiar with the history of their city. Zeynep, the resourceful and intelligent female officer becomes interested in the history as a potential for discovering clues to the crime while the hot-headed Ali, variously described as the 'young pitbull' (p. 228) and 'little Doberman' (p. 295) initially refuses to engage with what he sees as irrelevant

education. Akman chastises both of them for not appreciating their city in a trope that also implicates the reader. The murder victims are each left at the site of an iconic monument, clutching an ancient coin that links the building to a specific era in Istanbul's history, with their arms extended in an apparent clue to the site of the next body. The first, an architect, is found at the site of a previous temple to Poseidon, clutching a coin from the reign on King Byzas, thus locating the murder site to the Greek originators and the city's first incarnation as Byzantium. The second murder is of a town planner lying at the feet of Constantine's Column and clutching a coin from the Roman's reign, linking him to the city's evolution into Constantinople. The third body, a journalist, is found at the main gate of the walls built by Theodius II and the coin too indicates this Roman emperor. The fourth, an architect, is found at Hagia Sophia linking it to the emperor Justinian's rebuilding of Constantinople. The fifth murder, a deputy-Mayor left at Fatih Mosque with a coin from Sultan Mehmed's reign, shifts the city from its identity as Constantinople to that of Kostantiniyye, and from Roman to Ottoman rule. 'Another coin, another ruler, and another landmark from that ruler's reign' (p. 427) sums up the Chief Inspector.

In the space of a mere four days, the killers had taken us on a two-thousand year journey from King Byzas' Byzantium all the way to Sultan Mehmed's imperial capital Konstantiniyye, with five killings in four days. There was no telling what their next move would be... (p. 435)

The sixth, a lawyer, is found at the tomb of Mimar Sinan the architect of the Süleymaniye mosque, with a Süleyman coin and the final victim, the city developer, is left at the foot of the statue to Kemal Atatürk, commemorating the beginning of the Turkish Republic and the city of Istanbul. The two main suspects are a group wanting to turn the major site on the peninsula around the Süleymaniye mosque, Sultanahmet,

into a profitable tourist development and offices, and a left-wing activist group trying to preserve the city's heritage. Alongside these is a third group of possible Islamic terrorists trained in Afghanistan but they are soon discounted, so that the majority of the focus is on the tussle for the future of the city between these two oppositional groups. In trying to anticipate the next site, and so catch the serial killers, the police engage the director of the Topkapi Museum as an expert to help them decipher the clues and inform them in detail of the history of Istanbul. Clearly history is going to be key to the detection trail, and there is much discussion of Istanbul itself as a victim and needing protection, a view which Akman, with his fascination with the city's rich past, supports. History and monuments necessarily become the central focus as the police try to decipher whether it is rulers or buildings that exercise the killers, thus eliciting further descriptions on both.

The major theme of the novel echoes the city's successful 'evolution' from one incarnation to another, and its adaptation to different empires and religious beliefs. Developing from Byzantium, through Constantinople and Konstantiniyye to the present Istanbul, the text notes how the buildings continue to have viable lives by changing to accommodate the needs of their subsequent inhabitants. The Little Hagia Mosque, originally built by Justinian as the Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus, 'was later converted into a mosque by the Ottomans and its name changed' (p. 30); the Obelisk of Theodosius 'was originally made to commemorate Pharaoh Tutmoses III, not the Roman emperors' (p. 173); the marvellous Medusa heads on the columns of the Basilica Cistern were looted from a pagan temple (p. 314); the Hagia Sophia, 'has been a church for nigh on a thousand years and then a mosque for five hundred years before Atatürk had it designated a museum' (p. 342).

Holding on to the past is an important part of this theme of evolution.

“Everyone in this city should be fascinated by it... Otherwise we’ll never be able to truly appreciate Istanbul’s true splendour” ( p. 313), Chief Inspector Akman exclaims, and his friend, the poet and architect, Yekta, is even more forthright:

‘This city is losing its grasp of the past, and cities as you know, are just like people – if they forget their history and lose their sense of the past, then they also lose their sense of self. Nothing remains, no character, no distinctiveness.’  
( p. 95)

The developer’s attempts to destroy the past for present profit, diminish the historical treasure of the Sultanahmet to ‘a mere plot of land rendered worthless by the bundles of money he’d poured into it’ (p. 479) stands as the binary opposite to Yekta’s view, but both extremes are wrong. Ignoring the past damages the self and prevents a true appreciation, but living in the past is equally dangerous. Yekta, obsessed by the loss of his wife and young son, lives in a morbid stasis, ‘he never forgives and never forgets’ (p. 498). Yevzet Akman’s personal life continues this theme of evolving as he too, like Yekta, has lost a wife and child but, in contrast, having mourned them he is beginning to move forward with a new relationship. The life-affirming Evgenia manages Akman’s guilt at loving again. Overwhelmed by the past and his grief, Akman finds it hard seeing her at his family table, but her tact insists they acknowledge the presence of his memories and toast his dead wife and daughter.

‘They are still a part of your life; a part of you and everything that makes you who you are ... I’ve never viewed you independently from them. I’d never dream of doing such a thing. They’ve always been there, and they are here with us now... The four of us can be together. They’ve been a part of my love for you from the very beginning.’ (p. 82)

Like Istanbul itself, Evgenia accommodates the past while savouring the present, valuing both appropriately and guides Akman to a new and joyful relationship. The public and the personal in this novel initially complement each other thematically, before they collide more concretely in the final pages of the plot.

Another element in the theme of evolving from the past comes in the discourse around policing in Turkey. This police procedural acknowledges that the institution has not always been a force for good during its recent history. Akman recalls his early career when martial law was declared and the police were drafted into the Political Crimes Unit. ‘The whole of Istanbul had been turned into a hunting ground for the generals and we were the lapdogs doing their dirty work’ (p.136). The novel admits that some elements of police brutality still exist,

I was a copper after all and so he naturally waited for an outburst, for a violent explosion of rage and abuse which was so frequent and so commonplace in Turkish policemen but when he realised no such outburst was imminent, he relaxed. (p.107)

The Chief Inspector is himself a force for change in the policing of the city, and there is a sub-plot to his education of Ali, restraining his young colleague’s ‘loutishness’ and fostering his ‘principles’. This political history of policing arises in relation to the suspect Namik Karaman, initially a fighter against the generals with a criminal record for wounding a policeman who has renounced violence to become a surgeon and leader of the pacifist IDL (Istanbul Defence League). Recalling his previous treatment at the hands of the police, he is surprised at Akman’s procedures when in custody, eliciting the response “‘The world is changing, Mr Karaman , which means we’ve also had to evolve’” (p. 448). Similarly a sub-plot around another suspect, the devout Muslim Ömer, recruited to fight for the Taliban in Afghanistan through a biased mis-

reading of the Koran, explores the Turkish police's Anti-Terror Squad's liaisons with their American counterparts, and has Ömer effusively recant violence once he has been supported through a proper understanding of the Koran by his girlfriend Efsun, a Sufist intellectual. Just as Evgenia gently guides Nevzet's emotional evolution, Efsun guides Ömer's religious evolution. Both sub-plots exhort the same message, that no-one has the right to kill for their beliefs, to accompany the mounting pile of bodies with their throats brutally cut and an antique coin in their hands.

The personal relationships also extend to the city, working to flesh out Akman's character. Tied up with the detective's pride in and awe of his capital's historic monuments, his fascination with history that leaves him in a 'trancelike state' (p. 313), is his present engagement with the environs, coloured by his personal recollections. As we are reminded, by the activist IDL 'It is people who create cities and histories' (p. 64) and the city is also defined as the locale that holds the personal memories of its citizens. Nevzet Akman, moving from one location to another, at times gives rather undigested travelogues of the separate localities: Samyata, an historic district of old stone houses, 'old mosques, ancient churches, narrow streets with cosy old inns' (p. 16). Çarsamba's strict Islamic dress, with the women in burqas and Ali's "'This place looks more like Iran than Turkey'" (p. 147), elicits a page long exposition from Akman on the way different religions have always been influential in this area. 'I drove onto Şehzadebaşı, an area which used to be an entertainment district for the middle-classes...' (p. 461). But alongside these thumbnail sketches for the tourist, the city comes to life when he recalls his own family and childhood connections. The part the city plays in his personal past, with his mother taking him to the various museums enforces that Istanbul is also a part of him, and he is of it.

Driving to interview a victim's ex-wife, he finds she lives on the same street as one of his own family.

My aunt Şadihye used to live in an old wooden house on the same street years ago. I used to go there during religious festivals to pay my respects. The house had three outstanding memories for me: the view of Little Hagia Sophia's dome from the window, the smell of vanilla which infused into the furniture and the best tapioca pudding on the face of the earth. (p.28)

His knowledge of the dilapidated district of Eğrikapi, comes from playing football there as a child, and 'I'll never forget the time Demir got lost in the winding passageways of the Dungeons of Anemas' (p. 242). His love for the city stems from its connections to his own personal history and family, the bricks and mortar a repository of his memories and hence his identity as a citizen.

I live in Balat, by the shores of the Golden Horn, and my elders and loved ones are all buried there. My best friends all live in this city, I work here, my fondest memories are all from, in and of this city, and hopefully I'll spend my final days here. (p. 448)

The title, a memento for Istanbul, works on a number of different levels and none are more successful than this theme that cities are built by people, for people, and their significance comes from the intangible meanings people invest in them. Tied to the big public history of Istanbul and the monuments that mark it, is this recognition of the personal histories of its inhabitants. The closure of the novel indicts the developers for also destroying this personal connection: "' They ruined this city, Nevzat!...Our city, Nevzat! They ruined our childhood and they soiled our cherished memories'" (p. 561).

However, the majority of the pages in this novel are dedicated to the big public monuments and rulers of Istanbul, a memento to the city's past, not to give resonance to a characterisation, but to educate the reader as to Istanbul's extraordinary heritage. The motive for the murders, and coincidentally the detective novel, is this desire to teach the reader about the city, "the killers are instructing us in our own history" (p. 418). And here we come to the crux of the tension within the variant narratives; how much can the vehicle of a crime novel, teasing out the perpetrators while setting a series of red herrings to pleasurably ensnare the reader, also carry the weight of erudition and instruction? Many a crime novel brings some forms of enlightenment in its setting or its intellectual detective, but it is the extent of it that is problematic in this novel. Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse series tells us about the colleges of Oxford and the operas of Wagner, but Morse doesn't usually pause to hear about the detail of the architecture as he passes through. Chief Inspector Akman does. Entering the Topkapi Palace to interview the director, on page 387, they park the car and head to her office, on page 390 they move into the Regimental Courtyard amongst the excited tourists of many nations, on page 392 they are directed towards the Gate of Felicity for the second, Enderun Courtyard. On the next page, having entered the courtyard, we are given an explanation of the various parts of the building, the privy stables with the Harem and the Imperial Council above, the kitchens and the halls that now display collections of porcelain, silver, carriages. Even the four page memory of his mother bringing him here as a child and trying to instil her love of history, does not leaven the information overload. Moving towards the third gate, Akman explains the different styles of architecture for the three gates, Persian, Frankish and Turkish before moving into the Audience Chamber. On p. 399, having gained the central building, Akman decides,

However, guiding Ali through the history and etiquette of the chamber was not my main priority. We were there on business. Topkapi Palace may have been the seat of a dynasty which ruled half the known world centuries ago but we were on the hunt for a killer.

And the museum director was our prime suspect. (p. 399)

The text here betrays its own discomfort with the bifurcating foci, vocalising its attempt to wrest the heritage tour guide back towards the detective's pursuit. But having reminded the reader of Akman's main business, the next chapter begins with a description of the director's office as in a former kitchen, and lights on a painting of the second courtyard and from there, develop a two page exegesis on the Sultan who built the palace and his reasons for choosing this spot. They then get down to business in identifying the most recent coin, which elicit three more pages of the history of the buildings and rulers as they try to guess where the next body will be found. To reiterate, it has taken the detective nine pages to leave his car and get to the director's office and another nine pages before the entry of the parcel, containing the next victim's head. From page 387 to 409, the focus has been on Topkapi Palace itself. This narrative process is not isolated. While the five page history lesson on Byzantium is textually linked to their investigation,

[...] here we were, police officers working on an unsolved murder case, and instead of [...] our normal course of action, we were more like archaeologists , probing the dark and ancient mysteries of the city. It's not that I wasn't enjoying it but there was an unsolved homicide case that needed to be closed.  
(p. 52)

At other points, there is no clear link to the case. Agreeing to meet the museum director at the Obelisk, which has no direct relevance with the case apart from being a

convenient meeting place, results in another four pages of architectural description and a history lesson before Akman decides, ‘We were wandering into topics [...] which were irrelevant for my needs; I’d always had a fondness for history but not in the middle of a murder investigation’ (p. 176). No wonder that the opening suggestion of this essay was that the novel’s narrative is in two minds, since the text itself betrays an anxiety about the discrepancy and calls our attention to its own dichotomy. In a different generic format, the three page detailed explanation of the history and architecture of the Süleymaniye Mosque, the significance of its minarets and its şerefe and the theorisation of the Ottoman aesthetic of introspection which informs the building (pp. 468-70), would be (and is) fascinating. And clearly at play here is a transnational wresting of the crime genre to encompass the pride in the location and an attempt to effect the validity of this by making certain locales part of the teasing out of the motives, the ‘M.O.’ of the criminals. But as it stands, these historical and architectural disquisitions pause the conventional urgency of the detective’s desperate attempt to prevent the killers striking again. The reader, alongside the detective, wonders which is the priority. ‘I suppose it could be argued that at least one good thing to come out of the investigation was that we were learning things about Istanbul’ (p. 441). Is sweeping the reader through the various red-herrings to discover the perpetrators the main aim of the book, or a travel guide celebrating the city’s riches? And, if the former, what is the reader to do with the stand alone passages that open each section of the novel? These are set aside from the main story, both by space and by a separate italicised typeface, and are an imagined historical rendition of each ruler offering their monument’s completion to their appropriate deity. These passages are the most opaque and resistant to the crime genre. At first the puzzled reader interrogates them to see if they contain a vital internal clue to the investigation. But

what happens when it transpires that there is no such clue and yet the subsequent passages still demand to be read? It is only in the final pages that it is revealed that they are the compositions of one of the murderers, imaginatively rendering the importance of the chosen building, and by then it is too late to accommodate the readers' confusion (unless of course they re-read the novel).

Perhaps this is the point to introduce the suggestion that Ahmed Ümit's *A Memento for Istanbul*, might be read as a hybrid format? Not historical crime fiction in the usual sense of the term such as *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco, since Ümit's is set in the contemporary present and the history is not the quiet setting or background to the story but a central plank of the narrative alongside the whodunit - but rather a hybrid of history and crime as a 'cross over' novel incorporating two separate generic expectations where neither is secondary to the other.

Ümit's *A Memento for Istanbul* is a complex and multitudinous text that contains a wealth of interest for different readers, as evidenced by its popular success, and if the two contrasting narrative compendiums do not quite tie up in the thin and un-reconciled denouement, this does not detract from the pleasures in the process of reading its 577 pages. What other detective closure has the Inspector ignoring the bloody bodies of the seven murder victims, their throats brutally cut, to agree with the perpetrators that they are the real 'victims' of the experience and, rather than reminding them of the appropriate recourse to law, berates them for not involving him in their vicious crimes, upset that he has been excluded? It is the ending where the real rupturing of the narrative becomes impossible to resolve and the text's choice of the personal and the architectural over law and order borders on the generically ludicrous. But it needs to be said that the ludicrous is lexically close to the ludic, the

playful calling into question of the rules and ideology of a narrative. This ludic ending of the cross-over text obviously raises the question of postmodernism. Postmodern readings, as Connor and Gibson amongst others argue, embrace transgressive mixing of different genres and discourses while arguing that no denouement can ever bring an appropriate closure to the richness and length of a novel. Postmodern writing calls into question the myth of a unified and coherent text as an ideal or even a possibility. This cross-over text, with its variant generic expectations and competing narrative disciplines and conventions,<sup>4</sup> is a melange of discourses and therefore could potentially be described as a postmodern crime text equal to Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*, despite its lack of a knowing textual self-reflexivity. But then, perhaps for some, the uncomfortable acknowledgement of the disparate splitting of the narratives in Ümit's text, the betrayal of a textual disquiet, is itself the self-conscious alerting of the reader to the very different discourses in play? Textual discomfort or arch knowingness – readers will need to make up their own minds when reading this intriguing novel, since both positions are plausible.

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<sup>1</sup> In the 1920's Ronald Knox published The Decalogue, the 10 rules that detective fiction should abide by, for the Detection Club.

<sup>2</sup> I include myself here, generously given the book by Professor Ahmet Saglamer after my talk on Agatha Christie at the Pera Palace Hotel in 2014, as the Chief Inspector becomes a detective because of *The Death of Roger Ackroyd*.

<sup>3</sup> *Feminist Popular Fiction* 2001.

<sup>4</sup> This is a detective novel that sports the footnotes of a history book.