

# THE POETRY OF CITIES

## *On Discovering Poems in Istanbul, Sarajevo, and Bratislava*

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### Abstract

This article discusses how poetry allowed a first-time traveler to three different cities to explore each place and his identity as a traveler. Focusing on Istanbul, Sarajevo, and Bratislava, the article describes the experience of using a poem the traveler finds in each city to serve as a guide to its spirit. By referring to issues related to anthropology, post-colonialism, politics, history, the social sciences, and cultural studies, this article discusses the transformation experienced by the traveler as a result of both a physical and inner journey.

**Keywords:** Bratislava, city, identity, Istanbul, mobility, poetry, Sarajevo, travel

It seems typical of high-speed, long-distance travel that the individual is forced to experience stretches of seemingly dead time between one tiny point on the map and another one thousands of miles away. The speed with which the distance between these two points is traversed leads to the disorienting effects of jet lag as soon as the traveler steps out of the aircraft into another culture and another time zone. According to Anderson, “The act of mobility not only changes the world around us, but also affects the individual undertaking movement” (forthcoming: 1). This seems to suggest that when we travel our perception of the places we visit is influenced by the very act of traveling. When we arrive at our destination we are bound to sample a tiny fraction of what the place has to offer. This is mediated through our own particular sensibility and hence how we experience the

place is bound to be in a subjective manner. This is probably not only in the case of long-distance travel but also applies whenever travelers land in any city about which they know very little and whose culture is different from what they are commonly familiar with.

My intention in writing this article was to describe how as a traveler I attempted to discover something valuable in three of the cities I had visited recently to deliver talks at conferences, something valuable that I would be able to take away with me and remember with fondness. Some people do this by means of photographs and souvenirs, others rely solely on memory, while there are people who travel and refuse to be affected in any way. On my part I was in search of something authentic. This was in a way prompted by my desire to see myself as a traveler rather than a tourist. However, as Shepherd explains, “Authenticity is only authentic in its multiplicity” and the “distinction between tourists and anti-tourist travelers is hence largely illusory, except in one crucial sense: tourists intuitively grasp the fact that they are not travelers, while travelers imagine they are not tourists” (2003: 141–142). Impelled by this delusion, I traveled to each city hoping to bring back something with me that distilled the spirit of each place, perhaps not fully admitting that this would be subject to the process of transliteration engaged in by my own perception.

In line with Theroux’s idea that “the most passionate travelers have always also been passionate readers and writers” (2011: ix), I wanted to combine my love for poetry and travel by considering how poems could serve as a means of discovering cities. However, when I first started preparing an outline of this article on a twelve-hour flight from Tokyo to London, I immediately realized how right Livingstone was when he said that “It is far easier to travel than to write about it” ([1857] 2010: 9). One of the challenges I faced was the inescapable necessity for reflexivity. In writing this article I sought to keep in mind Bowles’s advice about travel writing: “The subject matter of the best travel books is the conflict between writer and place. It is not important which of them carries the day, so long as the struggle is faithfully recorded” (2010: 240). The poems I found in these cities were my means of reflecting on this “conflict.” In this sense the article is not meant to be an ethnography of the cities I visited but a reflection on how the poems I found in these cities served as a tiny manifestation of the spirit of each place as glimpsed by a clueless first-time visitor. For Theroux, “Travel is a state of mind. It has nothing to do with distance or the exotic. It is almost entirely an inner experience” (2000:

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78). In this he is in agreement with Iyer (2000), for whom “every trip to a foreign country can be a love affair, where you’re left puzzling over who you are and whom you’ve fallen in love with.” For these reasons this article is not merely a description of poems and cities but most significantly a meditation on the connections forged between the two by the person writing about them.

The reflective nature of this article is meant to illustrate how the act of traveling to a new city is not only a physical journey but most important an inner one. This is typical of contemporary travel writing given that in a post-modern world travelers embarking on a journey are highly aware of their nostalgia for a time when extending geographical boundaries was still possible by means of travel. According to Hulme, “As the earth’s wildernesses get paved over, travel writing increasingly emphasizes the inner journey, often merging imperceptibly into memoir” (2002: 94). The transformation I experienced as a result of my journey to Istanbul, Sarajevo, and Bratislava allowed me to transcend the prejudices and misconceptions I held before setting foot in each city. My discussion of this transformation is informed by ideas derived from a range of disciplines, including anthropology, post-colonialism, politics, history, the social sciences, and cultural studies. However, the guide to my transformation as a traveler was made possible largely by the poetry I discovered in each one of the three cities.

## Poetry and Cities

Every city is a home to poetry and poets live in every city. Sometimes this might not be so obvious to a traveler visiting a city for the first time. At other times the presence of poetry makes itself known even if one is not intentionally looking for it. Anyone who has ever used the subway in cities like London and New York must have surely rested their eyes on a poster with a brief poem somewhere among the ads for musicals and insurance. These poems might not always be lucky enough to warrant more than a cursory glance by the commuter, but on rare occasions they might be read and enjoyed by those who might be immune to the brash appeal of the ads. It is on such occasions that a connection between the poem and the individual is forged and despite the short-lived nature of the reading the hope is that travelers would find something in those painstakingly crafted lines that resonates with their experiences, thoughts, and desires.

Sometimes cities try to make poetry more popular with residents and visitors and public transport is usually seen as the main means of bringing poetry to a large number of people. Schemes like “Poetry on the Underground” in London or “Poetry in Motion” in New York are quite renowned. In Canada, “Poetry in Transit” is meant to enable commuters to come in contact with poetry while riding buses in cities all over the country. For a few years Glasgow had a subway poet-in-residence who not only created a variety of poetry posters to be displayed on the trains and in the stations but also engaged children in creative writing activities (Xerri 2012). However, poetry is also found in cities that are much smaller and that have not gone to any great lengths to publicize it. Irrespective of its size, most probably every city in the world has a corner (or more) devoted to poetry. However, for the traveler who might happen to sojourn there for a while finding such places is not always easy; it usually requires a conscious effort on the part of the traveler even though most often one finds things when one is not looking.

As a first-time traveler to three different cities I sought to discover the connection between poetry and cities by exploring a place in each city that had some connection with one particular poet or poem. I wanted to travel to Istanbul, Sarajevo, and Bratislava and find poetry somewhere or other without doing a lot of research in advance. I did not want to stifle the sense of discovery, the sheer pleasure of finding something while actually walking the streets of a city for the first time rather than finding it because the guide book says it is there. My decision to explore each city on foot was prompted by an awareness of how much more enriching walking is for those who want to experience what a city has to offer in terms of architecture and people’s customs and differences. For example, in walking the streets of Mumbai, the Indian poet Arun Kolatkar is said to have engaged in a “walking documentation of city spaces [that] provides a resistant alternative to privileged viewpoints of spaces and people” (Nerlekar 2013: 609). I visited each city to attend a conference and even though two of my talks were specifically about poetry in education, the purpose of each trip was not that of looking for poetry. However, in a way it was; the idea of exploring the connection between cities and poetry through the eyes of a traveler had long ago germinated in my mind. Perhaps the fact that I was intentionally alert to the likely presence of poetry facilitated my task but in each one of my trips I sought to find poetry by accident and not by actively searching for it. This is probably paradoxical given the fact that one cannot stumble upon

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something purely by chance if one is aware that it might cross one's path. However, the way I discovered each one of the three poems is almost a case of serendipity.

All three poems reproduced in this article were translated into English from the mother tongue of their respective poets—Turkish, Bosnian, and Maltese. The fact that they feature in an article that talks about poetry as much as it talks about my trips to the cities in which they were composed is indicative of the similitude that exists between travel writing and translation. According to Bassnett, the two “are parallel processes of textual manipulation, forms of rewriting that each in different ways contain inherently the idea of a journey, whether actual or linguistic” (2004: 75). The success of a piece of travel writing as that of a translated text is dependent on “a kind of collusion between readers and writer” (Bassnett 2004: 75). In both cases this collusion is meant to ensure “an illusion of authenticity” (Bassnett 2004: 66). It is this kind of configuration that I hoped to achieve by means of my description of how three poems were discovered in three cities and vice versa. In this article the collusion extends itself to the reflection on my inner journey, especially on how the act of discovery had a bearing on my identity as a traveler given that it underwent a process of transformation thanks to the cities and poems I discovered.

## Istanbul

My first trip took me to Istanbul where I was meant to run a workshop for teachers of English on the use of poetry for language teaching purposes. A few days before catching my flight I read Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul*, a masterful evocation of the city mingled with the writer's memoirs. As I glimpsed the city from the aircraft window I wondered about its idiosyncratic form of melancholy, the *hüzün* that Pamuk describes at length in his book: “The *hüzün* of Istanbul is not just the mood evoked by its music and its poetry, it is a way of looking at life that implicates us all, not only a spiritual state, but a state of mind that is ultimately as life affirming as it is negating” (2005: 82). For Pamuk, *hüzün* is synonymous with Istanbul and is shared by all its residents but “is not a feeling that belongs to the outside observer” (2005: 93). Travelers are bound to fail to experience it as the city's sounds and colors bombard their senses. Hence before having landed I was already aware of

how much I would miss out on during my stay in this city. However, I was still determined to savor the sensory onslaught.

My first impression of Istanbul was that a strong sense of national pride was woven into its very fabric. The huge red flags with a white crescent and a star at their center were omnipresent and during the conference opening ceremony a number of foreign delegates and myself felt somewhat awkward when we were invited to stand up and sing the national anthem. This was a manifestation of the enduring struggle for the spirit of the city, which started with attempts “to transform Istanbul from a cosmopolitan multi-ethnic city into an international one with a predominantly Turkish character” (Duben 2012: 595). Later I was to see how other claims to Istanbul’s spirit were endangering its beauty, a beauty that I had always associated with Istanbul and which I had naively considered to be an ineradicable quality.

The day prior to the workshop, I was passing by the Blue Mosque and I stopped when I heard the muezzin starting to call the faithful to midday prayers. The sound was one of the most enchanting things I had ever heard. I had to stop and listen to it, briefly closing my eyes to focus exclusively on it. There was a sad lyrical quality to it that overwhelmed me with emotion. It combined with the sound of the large fountain right opposite the mosque’s entrance and drowned the hum of tourists milling around in the large open space between the Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia. I recorded a portion of it on my phone and later, while having a coffee in Taksim Square, I thought of a way in which I could exploit it at next day’s poetry workshop.

Perhaps my perception of the city was as fanciful as that of Gérard de Nerval but for me the sound of the call to prayers was part of Istanbul’s character. It was an intrinsic part of what this bustling city of constant traffic jams sounded like. I wanted the teachers attending my workshop to reflect on what Istanbul sounded like for them, irrespective of whether they were locals or foreigners like me. How was I to know that a few weeks later the sound of water cannon and exploding teargas canisters would silence the traffic in Taksim Square? The struggle to save Gezi Park was the culmination of a groundswell of opposition to the destructive development of the city’s historic districts. Aksoy reports how the current drive to globalize Istanbul and make its tourism industry as profitable as possible is having a deleterious effect: “Historic neighborhoods, with their architectural heritage, their multilayered meanings, their cultural and historic references, and their present-day social functions, are all made readily available for erasure” (2012:

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106). Development risks destroying an intrinsic part of the city's identity and if left uncurbed the sense of nostalgia that seems to haunt people like Pamuk will become even more pronounced.

Back at my hotel I googled the words "listen Istanbul" and after many references to radio stations I found a poem titled "I Am Listening to Istanbul" by Orhan Veli Kanik. The poem featured on the website of a hotel in the Sultanahmet district. Each one of its sixteen rooms was dedicated to a particular poem forming part of the Turkish literary canon. The first line could not have been more adventitious; it described perfectly what I had done earlier that day: "I am listening to Istanbul, intent, my eyes closed" (Kanik 2006: 62). Reading the rest of Kanik's (1989: 99–100) poem as translated by Murat Nemet-Nejat, I realized that this Turkish poet, who had collapsed in an Istanbul street more than sixty years before and died shortly afterward, was describing what it feels like to stop and listen to a city. The poem talks about the sounds the speaker hears when giving primacy to the city's aural language, sounds that to some extent can still be heard by the contemporary traveler to Istanbul.

### "I Am Listening to Istanbul"

I am listening to Istanbul with my eyes closed  
First a breeze is blowing  
And leaves swaying  
Slowly on the trees;  
Far, far away the bells of the  
Water carriers ringing,  
I am listening to Istanbul with my eyes closed.

I am listening to Istanbul with my eyes closed  
A bird is passing by,  
Birds are passing by, screaming, screaming,  
Fish nets being withdrawn in fishing weirs,  
A woman's toe dabbling in water,  
I am listening to Istanbul with my eyes closed.

I am listening,  
The cool Grand Bazaar,

Mahmutpasha twittering  
Full of pigeons,  
Its vast courtyard,  
Sounds of hammering from the docks,  
In the summer breeze far, far away the odor of sweat,  
I am listening.

I am listening to Istanbul with my eyes closed  
The drunkenness of old times  
In the wooden seaside villa with its deserted boat house  
The roaring southwestern wind is trapped,  
My thoughts are trapped  
Listening to Istanbul with my eyes closed.

I am listening to Istanbul with my eyes closed  
A coquette is passing by on the sidewalk,  
Curses, sings, sings, passes;  
Something is falling from your hand  
To the ground,  
It must be a rose.  
I am listening to Istanbul with my eyes closed.

I am listening to Istanbul with my eyes closed  
A bird is flying round your skirt;  
I know if your forehead is hot or cold  
Or your lips are wet and dry;  
Or if a white moon is rising above the pistachio tree  
My heart's fluttering tells me ...  
I am listening to Istanbul with my eyes closed.

Kanık's words constitute a love poem dedicated to Istanbul but in a way what he describes is something that anyone can experience if they had to stop and listen to any city. The sounds might be different but the act of listening to a city allows the particular nuances of its voice to be heard, nuances that are most often ignored by a city's residents. The philosopher Alain de Botton explains how "It seems inconceivable that there could be anything new to find in a place which we have been living in for a decade



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or more. We have become habituated and therefore blind” (2002: 247). Perhaps travelers are fortunate in this sense because they might not be suffering from the effects of habituation that afflict all those who spend more time in a city and thus allow it to lose its sense of novelty.

On the following day toward the end of the workshop I played the brief recording of the muezzin’s call to prayers and asked the teachers to tell me what they thought about it. Despite the fact that those from Istanbul listened to something similar every single day, everyone concurred that it was “beautiful.” Perhaps supplanting a sound they heard every day from the context of their daily routines allowed them to appreciate even more strongly how typical of their city it was. Then I showed them the first line from Kanik’s poem and asked them to write one or two lines of their own describing a sound they associated with Istanbul. My decision to use Kanik’s poem with these teachers was prompted by the fact that it had served to transform my own perception as a traveler by broadening my narrow mental representation of Istanbul. The poem had made me listen to the city and perceive both the beauty I had fancifully anticipated to find there as well as the political and commercial expediency rearing its ugly head and threatening Istanbul’s historical and cultural identity. Some of the teachers chose to focus on the honking traffic, others turned their attention to the Bosphorus, but all of them felt they had to pause and think of the city’s sounds and how to capture them in the language of poetry. This was their favorite workshop activity. It was perhaps the one closest to home and thus they realized that poetry could be relevant to them too. Kanik’s poem did not just enhance my experience of Istanbul as someone visiting it for the first time but also enabled these teachers to contemplate the sounds of a city they heard all too well but perhaps had stopped listening to.

## Sarajevo

Before embarking for Sarajevo I knew very little about the city and its people apart from what I had learned as a child watching TV news reports about the Bosnian conflict in the early 1990s. However, having hosted the Winter Olympics in 1984 meant that Sarajevo was already internationally prominent a few years before the start of the conflict. Today the Olympic facilities are one of the most dilapidated aspects of the city. As Walker shows in her photo-essay, “The lack of governmental and economic functionality in

Bosnia and Herzegovina today means that these facilities are effectively left to rot, unable to be maintained or rebuilt, but too significant to the city's history to be removed" (2012: 174). The friends I made in Sarajevo were proud they lived in an Olympic city and talked about how radiant their city looked back in 1984 before the eruption of ethnic tensions.

Before I arrived in Sarajevo I imagined the city to be a shabby rundown place in which the residents had a perpetual sullen look on their faces. Given that thousands of people directly affected by the war were still carrying the scars of lives torn apart by the bloody events that they had experienced, I assumed that this must necessarily impinge on the general character of the city. On my way from the airport I could see that some buildings were still pockmarked by shrapnel and bullets. The city seemed to be slowly awakening from a general state of dilapidation and the newer buildings were in stark contrast to those constructed during Tito's regime. However, I resolved to see beyond the shabbiness. The mosques, synagogues, Catholic, and Orthodox churches I saw on the way immediately acted as a reminder of how ethnically diverse this city was and that perhaps this was where its beauty was to be found.

Although this time my talk was not about poetry, a young woman came up to me afterward and told me that she had read one of my papers on poetry. Her name was Nejla Kalajdzisalihovic and as we continued talking it transpired that she was a Bosnian Muslim who was teaching English at the University of Sarajevo. An indication of the suffering that the population of Sarajevo had to undergo during the war was highlighted by many of the stories she told me about her family and friends. At the time she was only nine years old but she could vividly remember having to run to school scared of being hit by a sniper's bullet. She also told me of classmates whose desks remained empty in the morning because they had been killed the day before.

Writing more than a decade ago about his experience as a US army officer involved in the reconstruction and development efforts, Eyre claimed that "Although much damage remains, remarkable progress has been made in economic reconstruction since the war's end. But appearances oversimplify. In Bosnia today peace is, in part, the continuation of war by other means" (2000: 112). Bollens, too, visited Sarajevo at the end of the conflict and in his opinion "There is 'peace' now in Sarajevo, but it is the peace of the cemetery, not people" (2001: 170). Seemingly in tune with these senti-

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ments, Nejla and other Bosnian friends affirmed that the ethnic tension was still a palpable reality and it was unlikely to dissipate anytime soon. My intention in writing about this city was not to accurately portray these tensions and their effect on the people I met. I was fully aware of how taxing such a task would be thanks to Markowitz, who—while conducting extended fieldwork in Sarajevo—faced “the challenge of writing ethnography that captures the dynamism of time and varied, yet overlapping, reactions to and interpretations of recent events, including one’s own” (2011: 66). Just as I had done in Istanbul, I wanted to walk the streets of Sarajevo and find a poem that would allow me to better understand this city. Incidentally, much later I learned that the evening walk down the city’s main pedestrianized street reifies the Sarajevo identity (Markowitz 2010).

Nejla offered to give me a tour of the city and thanks to her I discovered places in Sarajevo I would not have been able to find on my own. On one of our walks through the city’s streets she stopped in front of a flight of stairs leading up Kaptol Street. The stairway was meant to celebrate the work of seven contemporary Bosnian poets. Every few stairs there was a poem printed on a black background, framed in shiny metal and covered with glass, and illuminated by fluorescent tubes. Each poem was flanked by a brief biography of the poet and his or her name in block letters and in vertical orientation. As we climbed the stairs we stopped in front of each poem so that she could translate it for me. She said that her favorite one was “A Street That Could Be Named after Me” by Izet Sarajlić. After she had translated it, I could immediately understand why and it became my favorite too.

### “A Street That Could Be Named after Me”

Strolling down the city of our youth  
Looking for a street that could be named after me.

The long and noisy streets—I leave them to masters of history.  
While history was unfolding, what was I doing?  
Simply loving you.

I’m looking for an ordinary, small street,  
A street down which our spirits may stroll unnoticed,

Even after we die.  
It need not have any flowers, trees

Or birds at first.  
Essential though is that it would hide both man and dog  
Escaping the hunt.  
It would be nice if it were paved though, but  
Most importantly

Whether it had a bird or tree,  
May misfortune befall no man  
In the street named after me.

Later, while having a drink at Zlatna Ribica (literally “goldfish”), a quirky bar decorated in fin-de-siècle style, I reflected on the speaker’s yearning for a quiet street that could be named after him. The speaker longs to be remembered by his city, to leave a mark on the city he loves. It seems as if having a street named after oneself will allow that individual to transcend the anonymity that shrouds all city dwellers. Walking along the streets of Sarajevo, I was constantly judging which one the speaker in Sarajlić’s poem would choose. I saw the mortar craters filled with red resin and wondered whether these “roses” in the ground could symbolize the slow transformation of a city that might give travelers the impression of being stuck in the past. People who returned to the city after an absence of a few years have described it as being “timeless, almost immutable” (Demick 2012). Hemon (2011) claims that upon revisiting the city “Everything was fantastically different from what I’d known and everything was fantastically the same as before.” There are many unpretentious little streets in this city and by means of the poem I became more aware of their existence. Most often visitors to a city flock to the best-known streets, these streets being tourist attractions in themselves. However, in every city there are streets that are unknown to the crowds and if passed through probably considered unworthy of a photograph. These are the streets that the speaker in the poem is looking for, but paradoxically it is such a plain, little street that is seen as ensuring immortality.

Thinking about Sarajlić’s poem I walked through streets that had experienced name changing due to the fact that the different ethnic groups resid-

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ing in the area vied to have their own heroes commemorated. I even saw houses with two street name plaques affixed to them. For example, Sagrdžije Street was renamed Remzije Omanovi Street in 1959 but then its name was changed back to Sagrdžije at the end of the conflict in 1995. Nejla informed me that *sagrdžije* is actually a term that blends two similar crafts related to the processing of leather. The fact that the two plaques co-exist seems to indicate that this street is blending two different historical eras, suggestive once more of the idea that while in Sarajevo the traveler gets the strange sensation of being stuck in the past. The website [radiosarajevo.ba](http://radiosarajevo.ba) has published a number of articles about this phenomenon, describing how streets named after certain personalities ended up being named after new ones, not necessarily as famous or worthy as the figures whose names they had defaced. This website also indicates how some Bosnian personalities have been deprived of a street bearing their name. The end result is that Sarajevo has a number of “heroes without streets,” one of whom is apparently Sarajlić himself (“Junaci bez ulica—Izet Sarajlić” 2011). Roaming these streets I realized how culturally and politically significant is the act of naming a street in most societies. I was also reminded of the song U2 performed in Sarajevo in 1997—“Where the Streets Have No Name.” Bono (as cited in “The Joshua Tree” 1987) wrote the lyrics after hearing a story about how in Belfast people used to be able to guess your religion and how wealthy you were merely by knowing which part of a street you lived on. This idea found its resonance in Sarajevo where the name of a street could indicate a kind of ethnic ownership. Such an act generates division and this is probably why it is almost preferable for streets not to have a name. Sarajlić’s speaker, too, wants to own one of Sarajevo’s streets and despite the vanity that is usually associated with such a desire, the poem alludes to the love the speaker has for the city and for the welfare of the people who may live on this street or pass through it.

Sarajlić’s poem encouraged me to go beyond the well-known places in search of Sarajevo’s hidden facets where in accordance with the speaker’s hope no misfortune befell me. On the contrary, my prejudices about the city were shown to be hasty and despite the incontrovertible tension that still runs between the different ethnic groups that constitute Sarajevo’s population, I learned to find beauty in the kind of streets sought by Sarajlić’s speaker. The lessons I learned by visiting Sarajevo enabled me to transform myself further as a traveler and be open to discovering the little wonders

that might lie hidden from the view of a traveler blinkered by misconceptions formed prior to the journey itself.

## Bratislava

A few weeks after my stay in Sarajevo, I boarded a bus from Vienna and headed to Bratislava for yet another conference. I initially planned to give the same workshop I had done in Istanbul but given the success I had had with Kanik's poem I wanted to find something similar to use with teachers of English in Bratislava. I enlisted the help of a university student volunteering for the teachers' association responsible for organizing the conference. She sent me a comprehensive list of places in Bratislava that had some connection to poetry. These ranged from restaurants to libraries nestled inside tearooms, but after reading about each one I could not find anything suitable for my project.

I was on the verge of giving up when I remembered that one of my colleagues back in Malta was married to a Slovakian woman. I had read Immanuel Mifsud's short stories, upon which most of his fame rests in Malta, but I had never known he also wrote poetry. I was pleasantly surprised when on his website I came across a series of poems called *Poems from Slovakia* (Mifsud 2005b). "A Handful of Leaves from Bratislava" is constituted of five short poems in which Mifsud describes his perspective of the city and its people. His outlook is tinged with his yearning for the woman who would later become his wife. It is probably this sense of desperate longing that makes Mifsud (2005a: 86) perceive the city as a dark and sad place:

### "At the Café Central"

Here people walk by as grey as the streets;  
well shrouded in jackets of sadness,  
hooded in scarves of monotony.  
They walk under umbrellas of sorrow.

I wait for a message, for a smile  
at the Café Central in Obchodná Street.

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My own impression of Bratislava could not be as dark as that of Mifsud, but my own problems back home in Malta meant that I could not enjoy my stay here as much as I had enjoyed visiting the previous two cities.

I arrived in Bratislava just a few days after the Danube had flooded its banks and though the view from midway across the old, rusty bridge was impressive the city failed to leave upon me a sense of awe. I found it small and somewhat stifling. The old town was picturesque but the hordes of British tourists who had flown over on budget airlines to celebrate stag and hen parties left a bad taste in my mouth. The statue of the poet Pavol Országh Hviezdoslav in the square bearing his name was monumental but for me it did not epitomize the city's poetry. According to Bartetzky, despite the changes in political iconography that the city experienced after the Revolutions of 1989, Bratislava's "centre still presents a comparatively intact historic structure, with no room for extensive rearrangements" (2006: 453). However, while walking its streets, I accidentally witnessed how parts of the city's historic center were being raped by unscrupulous developers. It was this sense of loss that molded my impressions of this city.

On my last day in Bratislava, while I was touring the old town with a group of friends, we stepped into a street lined with one crumbling house after another. The majority of the houses in Kapitulská Street were once grand and imposing but after being bought by construction magnates they were left to fall apart so that their new owners could bypass the legal protection afforded to such buildings and replace them with new properties. This is a tragedy that has already seen the city's historic Jewish quarter and its remarkable twin-towered, Moorish style synagogue being razed to the ground in the late 1960s to make way for the New Bridge with its flying saucer-shaped structure. Coincidentally reminding me of home, in Kapitulská Street I also saw the embassy of the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of Saint John. This street evoked sorrow in me and I could empathize with Mifsud even more strongly. I felt that here was something that was being irretrievably lost; I felt I had journeyed to a city hoping to find beauty only to find sadness. However, just like Mifsud (2005a: 89) in his poem "Tomorrow, Jana," I expressed the hope that

Tomorrow I may flower and look at this city  
changing into the one  
I dreamt of but never saw.

Mifsud's poem helped me realize that a traveler's view of a city is not neutral but imbued with the coloration of one's current and past experiences. Acknowledging this fact was crucial because by being aware of and perhaps resisting my biases on future journeys I could continue transforming myself as a traveler. Spencer argues that "Travel can narrow as well as broaden the mind ... Many travellers, in pursuit of leisure, adventure, fame or treasure, do not stray very far beyond their expectations and prejudices" (2012: 454). My own state of mind prior to coming to Bratislava discouraged me from seeking beauty in this city and when I happened upon Kapitulská Street I felt it was the embodiment of the entire city. Just like the desperate lover in Mifsud's poem, I felt impatient for fulfilment and when my expectations failed to be met straightaway I condemned an entire city.

## Conclusion

In Cavafy's poem "The City," the speaker's longing to flee from the city leads to a grim warning: "You won't find a new country, won't find another shore. / This city will always pursue you" (1995: 22). It seems as if the connection forged with the city of one's birth becomes an intrinsic part of one's identity. However, the act of traveling to other cities leaves an imprint that is equally indelible if the traveler is open to the possibility of transformation. My visits to Istanbul, Sarajevo, and Bratislava and the process of writing about them and the poems I found there affected me in different ways. I became aware of the beauty and ugliness of cities that I had not been familiar with and I learned about my prejudices and misguided expectations. Carey shows how early modern commentators on travel expressed the fear that "The mere process of departure from the home country invoked the possibility that one might become *other* by travelling—that is, one's identity might be transformed in a fundamental way" (2003: 110). This kind of transformation in one's identity is probably what led Mark Twain to famously quip that "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts" (1869: 650). My trips to these three cities opened my eyes to the intrinsically subjective nature of impressions formed by the first-time traveler. The poems I found in these cities helped color my views and enriched



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my experience of each place. They allowed me to reflect on the cities themselves but also on the effect each city had on me as a traveler. As diminutive guides to the cities of their origin, the poems instigated a development in my sensibility that would serve me well in future journeys.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Nejlja Kalajdzisalihovic and Martina Bednáriková for assisting me with the research for this article. Murat Nemet-Nejat's translation of "I Am Listening to Istanbul" is reprinted with permission of Hanging Loose Press (*I Orhan Veli: Poems by Orhan Veli* 1989). Nejlja Kalajdzisalihovic's translation of "A Street That Could Be Named after Me" by Izet Sarajlić is used with permission of the translator and Tamara Sarajlić Slavnic. "At the Café Central" is reprinted with permission of Immanuel Mifsud.

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