

# **Reflection Statement**

Istanbul is a city of many cultures and ethnicities. It is divided by the Bosphorous Strait into an east and west side. The West side (commonly referenced as the “European side”) is characterised by towering castles and grandiose architecture. This side is juxtaposed with the East side (also known as the “Asian side”) that boasts an array of contemporary establishments and modern dwellers. The city has been many things throughout its history: the centre of the Eastern Roman Empire; the last refuge of Ancient Greek culture; a staging point for the crusades (and even the object of one of the crusades) and the centre of the Ottoman Empire. The city is a heaving hub of cultures and personalities; its turbulent history and its location on the edge of Europe, the Middle East and Asia means that it is a vibrant, diverse and often chaotic place. *The Golden Bough* is a suite of fifteen poems inspired by my recent travels to this amazing place. These poems attempt to express the sheer diversity of humanity in Istanbul. Each poem is representative of a defining element of a different section of the city. The suite as a whole aims to capture the identity of a chaotic, multi-faceted city and in doing so attempts to chart a ‘metaphorical map’ of the human psyche.

Initially my major work was to be a short story that examined the concept of “Big Brother” in society (derived from my study of Orwell’s 1984 in Advanced English). I then intended to compose a suite of poetry that examined the vague concept of ‘brain waves’. As much as these initial ideas aroused my intellectual interest, they did not engage me emotionally; they did not originate from a personal passion. *The Golden Bough*, however, was inspired primarily by a very personal experience. In the summer

holiday period at the end of Year 11, my family and I travelled to Istanbul. The experience was awe-inspiring, I was immersed in an exotic culture and crowd I had never experienced before. Derived from these encounters, I felt compelled to describe these characters and experiences through poetry. Further inspiration was drawn by my study of People and Landscapes in module C of the HSC English course, as I learnt about Alain De Botton's perspective on the wonders of travel and the desires to record one's travels, "*a dominant impulse on encountering beauty is to wish to hold on to it, to possess it and give it weight in one's life*"<sup>21</sup>. Thus, the major work was created with the intention of preserving the experiences of my travels and to inspire others to also embark on a similar journey.

The primary intended audience for *The Golden Bough* is University students between the age of 18–25 who are still discovering the world and seeking a sense of self. While many University students are known to have little wealth and stuck in a basin of debt, this demographic is just beginning to experience adulthood and are most likely to explore different countries and hence be interested in this work. Sociologists such as John Storey and Tony Bennett suggest that poetry has been traditionally viewed as an 'elite' text; that is, in the 19th and 20th Centuries it has been read largely by educated members of the middle classes<sup>22</sup>. As a consequence, this demographic would obviously constitute part of the audience. Hence one of the challenges facing *The Golden Bough* is to appeal to an educated audience while avoiding cultural snobbery.

<sup>21</sup> A. De botton, "*The Art of Travel*", Vintage Books, 2004

<sup>22</sup> J. Storey, T. Bennet, "*Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*", Pearson Education, 1998

The suite of poetry contains various elements of poetic structure, including both conventional Western forms such as blank verse, the sonnet, ode and ballad styles of poetry as well as Turkish and Eastern types of verse. I drew on these diverse forms of poetry in order not only to appeal to a culturally and ethnically diverse University audience, but also to convey the cultural diversity and hybridity of Istanbul. At one point I used a compressed form of Divan (Diwan) poetry. Divan poetry was often composed and collected in Imperial courts and known for its ability to inspire readers. This form of poetry includes prevalent symbols of Turkey, such as the nightingale, whirling dervishes and rosegarden, evident at the conclusion of my suite through my comparison of Istanbul and Sydney:

*“I remember Istanbul in the white sails of the Opera House,  
the lulling, monotonous circulation of whirling dervishes,  
tilted heads and outstretched arms that called,  
the swirls of muted bases melting into sharp crescendos.”*

Another feature of verse I used was a Cinquain which originates from America and is inspired by the Japanese Haiku and Tanka. This is a brief poem I titled “Human” consisting of five lines without a rhyme scheme. I pursued this form as I believed a short, succinct poem would be best in capturing the exotic and brief nature of the Ezan (muslim daily prayers). The almost detached form of writing was used to highlight the

foreign, ethereal atmosphere of Istanbul when it was prayer time. As can be seen below:

*“Azan,  
resounding voices,  
fleeting thoughts, gone  
in the heavenly breeze,  
souls”.*

I have also used Turkish phrases in some poems, as seen in the line, *“hoş Geldiniz ev<sup>23</sup>, she said”*, to further perpetuate the cultural hybridity of Istanbul.

The contemporary Western convention of free verse is most dominant in my poetry, and this was a deliberate effort to fully grasp the spontaneity and idiosyncrasies of Istanbul, evident in the lines:

*“Caps on their head and leather on their feet,  
they clinked their small coffee cups, telling fables  
of their long lost youth and stolen years”.*

<sup>23</sup> Meaning “Welcome Home”

A number of poems and poets influenced the more “Western” components of my suite of poetry. Perhaps the most obvious of these is Shakespeare, whose sonnet “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” is appropriated in “Shall I compare thee to an apple tea?”. This playful appropriation of the most renowned writer in the Western Canon is intended to represent what the city of Istanbul does with any cultural form it encounters: it reinvents it in its own vibrant and unique way. Poems by other canonical writers such as D. H. Lawrence also influenced my work because the understated way they employ imagery. Lines from Lawrence’s poem “Piano”<sup>24</sup>: “*Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me*” are echoed in my own lines: “*In the distance there was a women singing to me, / a symphony that beckoned the eons of years / left behind the insidious oceans of deceit*”. The gentle sadness of Lawrence’s work compelled me to feel a potent sense of empathy and it is my wish to convey this same sense to my audience.

Another important influence on *The Golden Bough* was the poetry of T.S Eliot, which I studied in the Module B component of the HSC English course. This influence is most obvious when considering that cats are a central motif in a number of the poems. Moreover, “*Athena’s Book of Turkish Cats*” is an appropriation of Eliot’s *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*. I found this appropriate as not only is Istanbul commonly described as the “city of cats”, but also in ancient mythology cats were regarded as sacred creatures, with several mythological deities taking feline form. This provides another example of the melding of the new and ancient in the city of Istanbul. Glass and

<sup>24</sup> D. H. Lawrence, “The Piano”, 1918

eyes are also important motifs in Eliot's poetry, as seen lines from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"<sup>25</sup> (*"And I have known the eyes already"*) and "The Hollow Men"<sup>26</sup> (*"...and rat's feet on broken glass"*). In my poems, glass is symbolic of confinement. The concept that glass is found in exhibits and shop windows, with the aim to safeguard a precious item, not to be touched or experienced, only seen, I found was a fascinating concept to write about. I hope to align this concept with my major work to perpetuate the division between modern and classic. Whereas, the motif of eyes intends to connote the phrase, *"eyes are the windows to the soul"*. In addition, I use eyes to explore the theme of perspectivism in such lines as, *"the furnace of eyes crowning the dark, twisted ghosts, lurking deep within her mind"*.

The ideas in *The Golden Bough* were also influenced by academic writers. The most prominent of these influences was the work of Homi K Bhabha on hybridity and cultural appropriation<sup>27</sup>, whilst Edward Said's *Orientalism*<sup>28</sup> provided an important conceptual influence on my work. It focuses on the way in which Europe has portrayed the Middle East, 'the orient' as 'the other'. He argues that,

*"...It is the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West)."*

<sup>25</sup> T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock", 1915

<sup>26</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Hollow men", 1925

<sup>27</sup> H. K. Bhabha, "The Location of Culture", Routledge Classic, 1991

<sup>28</sup> E. Said, "Orientalism", Vintage Books, 1979

I hope through my suite of poetry I am able to deal with Istanbul not simply as an impossibly exotic “other”, but rather as dynamic and contradictory; a place that symbolises in many ways the diverse, conflicting and often paradoxical nature of humanity itself.

The title of my work, *The Golden Bough*, was taken from Yeats’ famous poem “Sailing to Byzantium”<sup>29</sup>. In this poem, Yeats envisions Istanbul as a “holy” city existing outside of the constraints of time and space, a city embodying the lasting and atemporal nature of great art. In many ways my work reacts against Yeats’ vision; from my spot upon the bough I have wished to represent Istanbul not as static and unchanging, but rather as full of life. It is my hope that this work has not only captured the vibrancy and excitement of the city of Istanbul, but that it compels its readers to reflect on the dynamism and diversity of their own city and the immense value of those whose lives and dreams they share.

<sup>29</sup> W. B. Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium” from *The Poems of W. B. Yeats: A New Edition*, Macmillan Publishing, 1933