

THE 13th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF



ISSEI

International Society for the Study of European Ideas

in cooperation with the University of Cyprus



When Testicles cannot Testify: An Antinomy in Ethics of Mourning

Banu Helvacioğlu, Adjunct Senior Lecturer,

Department of Political Science, Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey.

Is it because one engages with aesthetic pursuits within an already wounded present inherited from human history that experience at limits is conceptualized at the threshold of human mortality and the unimaginable in death itself? If the answer to this question is affirmative, then limit experience can be viewed at the intersection between aesthetics and ethics where there is a divide between death and the inability to comprehend human experience in terms of death. More specifically, we are dealing with two inter-related paradoxes. First, if mortality is accepted as the characterizing feature of being human, within this generic understanding of human is the impossibility of relating to one's own death. Human beings are mortal. I am mortal but I cannot comprehend my own death.

The second paradox is between being human, being part of a species and at the same time each death within this species is presumed to be singular, under a specific name, in a given date and perhaps with an explicable cause. In this context, limit experience in being human is to go beyond the inevitable end of life, by means of images, sounds and words to aesthetically create a meaning, value to human mortality.

This first problematization of limit experience is premised upon an uneventful death, otherwise known as natural, which is conceived within a lifetime, defined by a beginning and an end. What lies in between the beginning and the end is presumed to be infinite within a given physical constitution, otherwise known as corporeality. If this premise holds true, then as human beings we not only have a life time to mourn for the future death that awaits, but also in mourning or in refusal to mourn, we have infinite possibilities to transcend our and other's death in physical and metaphysical ways.ⁱ In this broad understanding the specificity of the aesthetic realm is that an aesthetic production becomes conducive not only to mourning, but also to experience the antinomy of being human at the limit. The limit experience in this context is to produce works of art as an expression of the acceptance of one's own death and at the same time to search for ways of going beyond death. Hypothetically speaking, there is nothing stopping me to paint my own death every single day or write stories about my end or compose music to mark my mortality. Likewise there is nothing stopping me to develop a specific taste for a particular painter, writer or composer all in vain of my own death.

The second context for limit experience is death as event. In this paper by death as an event I refer to a particular type of interruption of time. Where and when that interruption occurs, one's own temporality as well as one's location in historical time, in the time of

being human is questioned. The vast repertoire of tragedy, drama, war cinema and literature on historically marked atrocities become conducive to the antinomy of human experience in aesthetics. To simply scratch the surface of the infinite possibilities within the already existing aesthetic repertoire, a particular piece by Beethoven (already as a product of a historical atrocity) might merge the impossibility of mourning my own death and the feel for being human in listening to music.

My working premise is, certain historically specific atrocities of the past wound the present in different ways. One's capacity to mourn for the singularity of the event is curtailed and enhanced by the given repartition in aesthetics and politics. This is the main antinomy in limit experience. The moralizing tone of history and the language of political legislations impose a collective memory on death as a totality by a given collective name. Jews and Armenians are such reminders of collectively experienced death as event. The death of an Armenian during what the legislative language refers to, as Armenian genocide becomes a synonym for all Armenians killed in a historically marked atrocity. The curtailment is defined by the confined language, history and collective memory. As has been the case with the Holocaust literature, in Armenian literature too, the incomplete character of mourning inflicts the present with a tone of melancholy. Yet, simultaneously with this curtailment, one's human capacity to experience loss is creatively enhanced due to the vast reservoir of imagination provided not only by philosophical questioning of certain names and historical events but also by representations in concentrationary imagery.ⁱⁱ

The limit experience in this specific context denotes the simultaneous presence of the melancholic present as a reminder of a collective past wounded by an atrocity and the

creative tendency to imagine infinite possibilities to experience the present physically and metaphysically. Here the limit is between the defined curtailments of history, politically and morally loaded language and the desire to go beyond all this melancholic present to mark a singular death. If as a human, I cannot comprehend but try to transcend my own death, an aesthetic expression of a collectively defined other's death becomes a creative way of going beyond the collectively defined names as others by making it look like my own. What marks the antinomy of being human in aesthetic terms of limit experience is, while I engage in transcending my own mortality by means of an other name curtailed by a historically defined atrocity, the position of being at the limit denotes a series of impossibilities: between being human and not human, between being me and being in the place of the other, between me as a human trying to transcend the melancholic present and creating a different present to mourn for the other's death. To explore this further see the following Delacroix's painting of Massacre in Chios (1824).



Let's just simply suppose: in order to mark the incomprehensible nature of my own singular death, I identify myself with the figure of the woman about to be crushed by the horse belonging to the Ottoman Empire. Let's suppose further and imagine I turn this into a public exhibition of the impossibility of human's liberation from death. If I had actually done that, it would have been a limit experience in aesthetic terms. I would have not only surpassed my own subjective mortality, but have done so by marking a historical animosity (in 1822 in Chios), which gave me a name as the other of a Greek. This other is not simply any feminine representation of death. It is the metaphysical instance of death in the fight for independence, which gave my melancholic present in relation to the Ottoman history.

For all this to at least have the potential to create a different present for me, for the other dead Greek woman and for representing death in the historically, politically, religiously confined territory, however, the antinomy of being human in aesthetic experience would have required an impossible presence. In this experience to mark the impossibility of limit: between human and not human and between me as the human (in relation to the other's death) and me in the temporality of human, the metaphysical center (of present absence) is reserved for the testimony of a horse. It is not just any horse but the horse of the Ottoman army about to crush my corporeality (and hence crush the fight for independence, and dying in the name of independence to be explored later in this paper).iii

I intentionally choose a well-known imaginary by Delacroix of this ‘massacre’, which curtails and enhances aesthetic experiences of limits. In contrast to Delacroix’s perspective in painting where the horse is on the margin of the scene of the massacre, in my narration, the center position of the horse about to crush a woman is to note a singular ethical space of narrating a story which has already been in circulation in various culturally, nationally, gendered forms. The notion of “about to crush” “about to demolish” is to note a passing moment in the universal temporality of human existence whose outcome remains undetermined.

The main objective behind such problematization of the antinomy of being human in aesthetic limit experience is to explore for an aesthetic/ethical attitude amidst politically charged, melancholic manifestations of coming to terms with the so-called Armenian Genocide. In what follows is a limited reading of a story by a lesser-known author Kirkor Ceyhan (originally Cihanyan).^{iv} There are two notable attributes in his stories. First, the political is kept in the margin as if it is a causal element of the routine everyday life, in terms of his parents’ loss during the years, which he refers to as ‘being at war’ (seferberlik) and at times as ‘expulsion’ (tehcir which is also translated as relocation). The second attribute is Ceyhan’s narration of loss is expressed in black humor. The question is what to do with this black humor.

Ceyhan interchangeably uses both a singular and a collective voice in narrating his parents and other Armenian adults’ stories. In so many ways this semi-autobiography together with his other books are works of mourning^v. Ceyhan returns back to the same momentous incidents in his parents’ lives. In the first account of the same story, his parents initially managed to escape the forceful expulsion of Armenians. In this first

round of expulsion, Ceyhan's father Simon a schoolteacher was doing his military service. His superior in the army, Yahya bey, helped him and his wife to stay at Zara. But then Simon was caught hiding Armenians in their homes. He and eight members of his family were sent to exile to Der-Zor, the deserts of Syria, as part of the ongoing death marches in Anatolia. Only three survived and managed to return back to Zara (1996: 68 - 72). Upon return, they found out that the routine of every day life associated with the school Simon worked, the church they attended, and their homes were all demolished. Simon lost his job as a schoolteacher and picked up seasonal work as construction worker. In Ceyhan's stories his father is an absentee. The work he could find in different towns as a construction worker is only the surface reason for his absence. His testimony of what actually happened is forsaken.

The repetition in the same story of loss is particular. In Derrida's framework the mother is the remainder. The memory of his mother weeping, cautioning his son to be tight lipped about his family history, and her relentlessly angry, unforgiving, incriminating attitude toward her husband places her in the metaphysical space of alluding to some terrible event without actually telling what had happened. Her emotional testimony is immersed with that of her mother-in law, but the story always remains incomplete because she is overwhelmed by unspeakable pain or fear and anger.

In narrating the routine everyday life of his childhood, between his mother's momentary emotional outbursts and his father's frequent absences, Ceyhan forsakes one story about manhood, only to return to it causally, sarcastically in a different story in one of his other books. **Fate Shoed its Horse to Chase us** (Atını Nalladı Felek Düştü Peşimize, 1999) is collection of short stories which can be read autobiographically, historically, and/or

ethnographically. Since at the outset I considered Ceyhan's works as incomplete works of mourning, black humor in this particular story is fused with a particular man's experience of emasculation.

Upon reading the story, '*Küpçü Hoca*', many times, I still remain undecided about the main character and the main plot in the story. There are three distinct possibilities. First, it can be a continuation of an autobiographical style of telling his father's story. Second it can be a complete fictitious character in the name of Simon who was forced to change his name to Ibrahim. Third, the story can also be a testimony of a father who was conscripted into the army ten, twelve months prior to "being at war".

As the narrator puts in the present tense: "the event (*hadise*) is this: in accordance with Ottoman state's law of expulsion (*tehcir kanunu*) the whole Armenian community will be moved from their homes due to security reasons and will be relocated to the south, Aljazeera (Elcezire) and Syria" (1999b: 25). The virtuous officer, Yahya bey from the province of Syria, collects the soldiers whom he considers as a legitimate, cognizant group and therefore assumes they will know and understand what he is about to tell.

"We are at a war. Why? What is the reason? No one knows" (1999b: 26). In this situation Yahya bey offers a deal to soldiers: in order to receive exemption from the expulsion (relocation) law, each will sign a petition requesting from the Sultan stating "we the son of et cetera would like to be embraced by and admitted to Islam" (1999 b: 26).

At this point it is important to recall my previous argument about the present being wounded as a result of a historical atrocity. In present Turkey, in spite of the seemingly more relaxed attitude to non-muslim minorities, the common sense held by majority of

self identified Turks of different political persuasion is identical to officer Yahya bey's 'enlightened' attitude which can be summarized as follows: once the country was in war. Things happen during war. Permitting Armenians to convert to Islam was the most compassionate thing to do for their sake. Yet, the folkloric tale of war that has been conveyed by four generations of Turks since the beginning of the twentieth century unquestionably assumes there was a war of independence from the foreign occupiers and the Ottoman Empire. While preserving the heritage of Islam from the past, the folkloric tale of war refuses to admit any wrongdoing.

Ceyhan intentionally assumes this no fault line in this narration, but in another work of his, he makes the following historical remark: Ibrahim is given official documentation as a proselyte, *Muhtedi*, a word, a trademark which, strikes officials as a sign of Satan.

Ceyhan also collectivizes the past experience of conversion to Islam in an indeterminate present: "Back then it would not suffice to say proselyte. Our birth certificate would also indicate son of Ibrahim. (1999 a: 34). This name change implies agreeing to convert into a collective entity of no known descent .

To return to the story, soon after officer Yahya bey's speech, soldiers realize that changing their names was one of the inscriptions of salvation from expulsion and lethal marches. Reluctantly and remorsefully like the rest of the members in his family Simon too takes an Islamic name: Ibrahim, while praying and apologizing from their savior Jesus Christ (*Hisus Kristof efendi*). In this part of the story it is Simon's mother, *Manuş Hatun* ,who remains as the voice of resilience but reluctantly accepts the name change as well. In accordance with the ritual of conversion, a few days later Yahya bey, announces all men will be circumcised by a veterinarian of Albanian descent, an expert in castrating

horses (1999b: 29), and they have to learn certain Islamic rituals and memorize certain prayers in Arabic. To acknowledge the vivid descriptions of numerous instances of emasculation, I simply refer to it as an episode of testicles unable to testify what they witnessed. There are too many instants in this story, which resist a totalizing narrative about the event that I intentionally leave it for prospective readers to decipher.

The antinomy of the ethics of mourning in this story is the same in principle as the antinomy I explored earlier. In a specific historical atrocity which interrupts one's own temporality and sense of mortality and questions the collective name inherited as a result of this atrocity, the ethical attitude at the limit takes place in a passing moment, like the imaginary I tried to create on the Delacroix's painting of the horse about to crush a female corporeality. There is plenty of guilt, condemnation, incriminating discourses in politics and religion. To break free from all these confined rituals, which I consider as marks of the wounded present we live in, it is important to also remain at the limit of any essential value given to aesthetics and ethics as the ground for creating new "meaning" to mourning. If I were to make a difference for the present I am living, I need to hold on to both aesthetic expressions and ethical gestures as ephemeral instances.

In Ceyhan's satirical narration of the agonizing, humiliating process of circumcision by a veterinarian specialized in castrating horses, the romantic element of the horse in Delacroix's painting and hence my earlier readiness to take the place of a Greek woman about to be crushed is replaced by the suspense of waiting in line along with a collectivity of adult men. There is no aesthetic or ethical instant for me to select in this agonizing scene to re-create a scene of anxiety felt by an adult man about the future of his manhood. This voluntary surrender to the testimony of testicles, which I cannot possibly

comprehend, is to keep Ceyhan's humorous spirit alive in acknowledgement of the unspeakable loss he, his family, his neighbors had to endure for four generations in Turkey. At the limit, in this instance, is also to recall Levinas's particular understanding of subjectivity. "Other's command calls forth a subjectivity for-the other, that is to say, a subjectivity which 'fears murder more than death', which recognizes oneself as murderous and the Other as vulnerable or destitute, the object of the subject's actual or potential violence, the object of irresponsibility and injustice" (Levinas, 1987, p. 17)

Amidst the political, religious, moral pressures, if Ceyhan had the audacity to tell the story of Simon/Ibrahim's of foreskin in the most impudent way, I read it as the emasculation of political discourses on war, on liberation, on independence. The present is wounded and there is no magical healing of one's own location in historical time. That is the reason why the antinomy of being human at the aesthetic limit experience is to acknowledge the impossibility of putting one self in the place of the other. In order to note this impossibility, one needs aesthetic forms of imagery and expression accompanied by an ethical attitude. If mourning over one's own death interdicts the present both in melancholic manifestations and as infinite ways of creating a different present and if one's future death as an event is laden with too much anxiety, then try imagine what it means to accept forced name change from Simon to Ibrahim then back to being an Armenian man in a predominantly Muslim country with piles of pending court cases on confiscated property from the so called years of war, with ever present parental anxiety over choosing children's names which ought to sound familiar to ears that do not hear. In such a place where posters of churches are used to promote tourism industry, where the folkloric common sense does not consider it embarrassing to have segregated

graveyards for non-muslims, the question of aesthetic expressions of mourning remains a question of an antinomy of being in the present absence of incompleteness.

ⁱ Here what I have in mind are commodified cosmetic means of ‘fighting’ against aging, sport packages ranging from staying fit to defying physical limits of human corporeality, mourning the death of celebrities most notably Princess Diana and Michael Jackson, fascination with cartoon characters with super human powers like Superman, in sequential movies I, II, III, as well as what most humans do in the privacy of their homes after a funeral procession.

ⁱⁱ Among innumerable works of such questioning see H el ene Cixous, **Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint**, Trans. Beverley Bie Brahic, NY: Clombia University, 2004; Emmanuel Levinas, **Time and the Other**, Trans. Richard A Cohen, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University, 1987; Jacques Derrida, **Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas**, Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, California: Stanford University, 1999; Maurice Blanchot “The Instant of my Death” in Derrida **Demeure: Fiction and Testimony**, Trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg, California: Stanford University, 2000. For concentrationary imaginary see Andrew Benjamin, “Anonymity and Fear: Threatening within Universality. Notes after Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*” in conference proceedings of Concentrationary Imaginaries, **Imaginations of Violence in Contemporary Cultures and Cultural Forms, University of Leeds, April 2011.**

ⁱⁱⁱ The inspiration for this problematization of the antinomy of being human in aesthetic experience initially came from Simone de Beauvoir’s criticism of Kant in her

conceptualization of the antinomies of action in **The Ethics of Ambiguity**, Trans. Bernard Frechtman, NY: Citadel Press, 1976, pp. 96 – 115. The limit between human and not human has been inspired by Primo Levi, **The Drowned and the Saved**, Trans. Raymond Rosenthal, London: Abacus, 1988; also see Giorgio Agamben **Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive**, Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, NY: Zone, 2002 and **Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life**, Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen California: Stanford, 1998.

^{iv} Ceyhan was born in 1926 in Zara, a small town of Sivas/Sebastia in Turkey. Given the taxonomies in Armenian and Turkish Literature, he is rarely mentioned as an Armenian author. In Turkey, among the unsystematic colloquial categorization of Turkish-Armenian literature, Ceyhan is acknowledged along with Migirdic Margosyan, Zaven Biberyan, Hagop Mintzuri, Vahan Totvents and Agop Arslanyan.

^v See Kirkor Ceyhan, **Kapıyı Kimler Çalıyor** (Who is at the Door), (Istanbul: Belge, 1999 a); and **Atını Nalladı Felek Düştü Peşimize** (Fate Shoed its Horse to Chase Us), (Istanbul: Aras, 1999 b). For the originally Freudian distinction between melancholy and mourning I am relying on my previous work on the melancholy in Orhan Pamuk's writing.