

No Friends but The Mountains

Language and Literature as a Mechanism of Self-Continuity of the Kurdish Nation

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'I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope,
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.

Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:

So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.
Whisper of running streams, and winter lightning.

The wild thyme unseen and the wild strawberry,
The laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy
Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony
Of death and birth.'

T.S. Eliot - Four Quartets, 1943.¹

¹Eliot, 1943.

Starting to write this reflection, I intensely feel like Danny Vinyard in the movie *American History X*, in the night that he starts to type the difficult story of his older brother – and is murdered the morning after at school – about his experiences in the neo-Nazi movement – and - the tragedy that befell the family consequently.² You may rightly wonder why I’m starting my reflection upon a language & diversity course with an excerpt of a movie which tells the story about racism and two brothers in the neo-Nazi movement. Well for many reasons, of which I’ll try to articulate a few thoughts in the following paragraphs. Frankly speaking, considering the developments in my homeland in the past months and weeks, I am to exhausted and emotional to read and write ‘dry academic material’ and to meticulously work on references and bibliographies, but I choose to at least write down some letters, how strange, incoherent and volatile they may seem. Therefore, I will rather try to give some reflections based upon the course material that we have covered, through a narrative of my own Kurdish background and difficult history of my people.

In other words, well aware I am that I’m surpassing the official ‘essay guidelines’ and individual – and group project- readings which we have already extensively covered in class, and which, I have reflected upon to my best ability at the time of conduct. I should admit that I feel sad about the fact that I could not fully immerse myself into this course and cultivate my understanding in a more holistic manner, especially when considering that I find this course extremely interesting and for the fact that I want to dedicate my life-long research to the history, development and preservation of Kurdish, French and English literature and other cultural- artistic expressions. In the end, perhaps, as Plato said, ‘Nothing Human should be taken to seriously, nevertheless...’³

The first thought that comes into my mind is a message from Hannah Arendt which I find encapsulating, powerful, and most importantly, a crucial reminder for the future of humanity – which includes the mosaic of languages (with indeed, different grammatical gender systems, although I must admit, less exciting at this moment..) that are spoken and exchanged in the course of human history.

“Antisemitism, (not merely the hatred of Jews), imperialism (not merely conquest), totalitarianism (not merely dictatorship) – one after the other, one more than brutally than the other, have demonstrated that human dignity needs a new guarantee which can be found only in a new political principle, in a new law on earth, whose validity this time must comprehend the whole of humanity while its power must remain strictly limited, rooted in and controlled by newly defined territorial entities.”⁴

Why this quote? Well, besides the self-evident implications, I believe that – indeed – certain things that happened in history may never happen again,

² American history X, 1999.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Aphorisms on Love and Hate*, 1984. (Penguin Classics)

⁴ Arendt, 1951.

and more importantly, that literature can play a role in the prevention of other genocides and atrocity-crimes, against any people. Making a bridge to literature as a mechanism of self-continuity in a wide spectrum that it encapsulates.

Svetlana Boym argues the following in *Nostalgia and Its Discontents*:

‘Diasporic intimacy is not opposed to up-rootedness and defamiliarization but is constituted by it. So much has been made of the happy homecoming that it is time to do justice to the stories of non-return and the and the reluctant praise of exile. Non-return home in the case of some exiled writers and artists turns into a central artistic drive, a homemaking in the text and artwork, as well as a **strategy of survival**. Ordinary exiles often become artists in life who remake themselves and their second homes with great ingenuity. **Inability to return home is both a personal tragedy and an enabling force**. That does not mean that there is no nostalgia there, only that this kind of nostalgia precludes the restoration of the past. Diasporic intimacy does not promise an unmediated emotional fusion, but only a precarious affection – no less deep, yet aware of its transience.’

‘Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship. A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images – of home and abroad, of past and present, of dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface.’⁵

Proceeding with this thought, Arndt et al. suggest in *Nostalgia as an Enabler of Self-Continuity*, that indeed, nostalgia is an important mechanism that enables self-continuity through two fundamental sources of identity; the individual and collective selves⁶.

Consequently, I understand better how the complex and volatile dynamics of restorative and reflective nostalgia are intertwined within my individual memory and reference-framework (as part of the larger collective Kurdish memory), but more importantly – with an eye towards the future – I have a more holistic understanding on how memory, trauma and nostalgia can function as a (positive and harmonizing) mechanism of self-continuity, both for the Kurdish nation as well as other diaspora (chased and persecuted) peoples, i.e. the Jewish people after the Holocaust, i.e. symbolized by Mr. Spiegelman’s decisive work – *Maus*.

‘If my mother tongue is shaking the foundations of your state, it probably means that you built your state on my land,’ said Musa Anter - a Kurdish writer who was assassinated by the Turkish government (JITEM) in 1992. Making a bridge to the Kurdish case here, it also makes me realize and value the importance of literature in general, as a means of preservation and

⁵ Boym, S. (2001). *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic.

⁶ Arndt, et. al. (2008). *Nostalgia as Enabler of Self Continuity*.

sustenance of a people's heritage, identity and history. Some speaking poems that linger in my mind are from a legendary Kurdish poet, Sherko Bekas.

We were millions

An old tree

A young tree

We were seeds

The helmet of Ankara

In a bloody night came

To uproot us

They did,

They took us away long away!

On the way many old trees bent

In the cold many young trees died

They froze

Many seeds were trampled

They were lost and forgotten

Like a river in the summer we had little water

Like birds in the autumn, we became fewer

We ended up in thousands of homes

There were still seeds among us, the wind took them

The wind returned them

They reached the thirsty mountains

They hid among the rocks

The first rain

The second rain

The third rain

They grew again

We are now a forest again

We are millions

--

“My name is a dream, I am from the land of magic, my father is the mountain, and my mother the mist, I was born in a year whose month was murdered, a month whose week was murdered, a day whose hours were murdered.

Sherko Bekas⁷

But also my aunt, Nazand Begikhani, has written some work – of which, the more I grow older (with the wishes to have children and grand-children of my own) the more and more I understand it’s value and underpinned messages.

DREAMS

I’d like to follow in the footsteps of my dreams
to frame my present from my dreams
to plant my words
in their soil
to wear a necklace of dream-stars
to link up with the moon
and to fly blue in space

The past with its clawed fists
the present with its idiotic grimness
the future with its doubts and secrets
where do they take me?
A time of rust!

Lifetime, Desire, Stone

⁷ *The Cross, the Snake, the Diary of a Poet,*

Everything has its own defined space
everything has its own colour and dullness
everything but dreams
indefinite, mysterious, timeless
Do you not hear the footsteps of your dreams?
Do you not hear the murmur of their breath?
They walk beside you,
lie next to you,
are always conceived within you
with seeds of unforeseen joy
I'd like to follow in the footsteps of my dreams

in dreams I map out a space
in dreams I eat an apple from the garden of Eden
I turn into an angel
I reconcile God and the snake
in my dreams
I cleanse Eve's sins
and return Adam to Paradise

In my dreams I become a mirage
hold the hand of the rain
and release it over the desert
in dreams
I become morning dew glinting on the eyelashes of the sand

In dreams I approach my soul
become a cataract of light
cross all the remote distances
and engrave the words of a poem on the rocks of Judaea

I'd like to follow in the footsteps of my dreams

transform myself into words
steal myself into poetry
Look, I am wearing my necklace of words

In dreams I steal back from words to myself.

Your picture in the greenness of the tobacco leaves
reflecting the light of the Orient
you bend among the endless lines
of the staring tobacco plants
like doubt after conviction
you pick up the leaves
lay them in the Charoga
hanging at your neck
and carry them to the Ber Heywan

Piles of sad leaves
Piles of silence
hidden under the Nur of the Orient

Your wrinkled hands
talk to me
tell the story of a stolen childhood
the loneliness of women in my homeland

I look at your fingers
you place the leaves one by one on the tobacco shish
threading them like long beads into a necklace
then you kneel before the heap of tobacco necklaces
place them on your back,
climb the hill to reach the Chardagh
and hang them in precise lines

to dry

Infinite lines of tobacco necklaces

Infinite scars on your heart

I can feel your body drying up

like the tobacco plant in the midsummer heat

and your life

your life similar to the tobacco leaves

has been picked and burnt away

like a cigarette

between a man's fingers

--

AN ORDINARY DAY

The security officer

got up early

put on his white shirt

had honey toast with nuts

kissed his three children

hugged his wife passionately

and left for work

At his desk

sat ten files

of ten men to be shot

He signed them

while drinking mint tea

At ten o'clock

he ordered the shooting

got angry over a gunman who missed his target

Taking out his pistol

he fired at the missed target ten times

Before the end of his shift

he visited the mothers of the ten shot men

ordered each to pay 100 dinars

for the cost of the bullets that killed their sons

In the evening
he celebrated his brother's birthday

At night
on the surface of a mirror
he saw a drop of blood trickling down to his feet
he tried to wash it
the trickle rose to his chest

Where does the difference lie between the killer and killed?⁸

Moreover, Wendy (Wendelmoet) Hamelink (from Leiden University), has also written an interesting paper about the 'Sung Home' of the Kurdish people, i.e. in which Hamelink suggests that: 'The dengbêjs and their songs create a Kurdish home set within the landscape of Turkey and the surrounding (nation-)states.'⁹

Coming to an end of my reflection, I think that we indeed, also have a responsibility on what and how we use our language, i.e. taking into account the implications of all and everything we do, say and write. Some thoughts from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* also linger in my mind, i.e. "[T]he more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into a dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side."¹⁰

I'd like to finish with a quote from Arendt's book *The Human Condition*, in which she makes an every important suggestion about the fundamental change in human nature – and – what (detrimental) implications that may have – if not – be consciously and judiciously dealt with through serious reflection and the act of 'thinking' itself.

'the earth is the very quitenessence of the human condition, and earthly nature, for all we know, may be unique in the universe in providing human beings with a habitat in which they can move and breathe without artifice.

⁸ © 2006, Nazand Begikhani, *Bells of Speech*, Ambit Books, London, 2006.

⁹ Hamelink, *The Sung home : narrative, morality, and the Kurdish nation*, 2014.

¹⁰ Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, 1970.

The human artifice of the world separates human existence from all mere animal environment, but life itself is outside this artificial worlds, and through life man remains related to all other living organisms. For some time now, a great many scientific endeavours have been directed toward making life also “artificial”, toward **cutting the last tie through which even man belongs among the children of nature”**

And she proceeds: “It is the same desire to escape from imprisonment to the earth that is manifest in the attempt to create life in the test tube, in the desire to mix “frozen germ plasm from people of demonstrated ability under the microscope to produce superior human beings” and to “alter [their] seize, shape and function”; and the wish to escape the human condition, I suspect, also underlies the hope to extend man’s life span far beyond the hundred-year limit.”

“This future man, whom the scientists tell us they will produce in no more than a hundred years, seems to be possessed by a rebellion against human existence as it has been given, a free gift from nowhere, (secularly) speaking, which he wishes to exchange, as it were, for something he has made himself. There is no reason to doubt our abilities to accomplish such an exchange, just as there is no reason to doubt our present ability to destroy all organic life on earth. The question is only whether we wish to use our new scientific and technical knowledge in this direction, and this question cannot be decided by scientific means; it is a political question of the first order and therefore can hardly be left to the decision of professional scientists or professional politicians.”¹¹

And, as the ‘future lasts a long time’ I hope that one day, I’ll be able to express – among which the things learned in this class – in a book or two.

La Liberté éclairant le monde.

In God We Trust.

¹¹ Arendt, *the Human Condition*, 1958.

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