

Iskender Savaşir: Talking to Asli Erdogan

Among other things, the novel »The City in Crimson Cloak« is a book about writing. One of the aspects of the book that makes it so unique is that it is not only a »novel within a novel«, but that the novel itself and the story of the novel that it relates are so finely intertwined ... The protagonist in the novel is Özgür - but then the protagonist of the novel that she is writing is »Ö.« Moreover, both novels share the same title. Let's start right there if you'd like. Who is writing what and why? What does writing look like in »The City in Crimson Cloak«?

It seems like writing or the act of writing are the only threads available for us to grasp onto in this - to use Özgür's words - »labyrinth established upon the planes of both time and space, full of blind spots, frightening echoes, vague predictions«. Throughout the book it's as if all of the questions that could be posed to writing, or all of the questions that writing could pose to life, are all there, one right after the other. There's the issue of the relationship between the inner and the outer world, an issue that may be considered »outdated«, but which really just becomes engulfed in more darkness the more light you shed upon it. Is Özgür trying to establish a bridge between her inner world and the living city of Rio, which we assume is real? Or, as she comes to realize rather quickly, does it act as a citadel in which she can take shelter, from which she can make her observations? There is a long, winding road leading from the question: »How much reality can I stand?« to the moment when she senses that the book is finished, at which point she describes her writing as »lies that lick my wounds«. But it is also precisely at this point that the writing begins to pull back the curtain of lies that it has woven for itself, and its Rio begins to overlap with the real Rio. While Rio acts as the image of life, in fact even life itself, both Özgür and Ö. are melting inside Rio, dying. And this brings us to the question posed in the book, a question much more difficult to trace, the question of writing-life-death. I think that what disturbs a lot of readers is that when they ask where the writing stands within this triangle, they can't get a straight answer.

So in what sense would you say that writing sides with life?

First of all, for the time being it is uncertain as to who it is who dies or whose death is being written at the end of the novel, but we'll come back to this point. From the moment she says, »Mother, this city is killing me, that's why I have to write it«, Özgür views writing as an endeavour to survive, to be cleansed, become free. She believes that if she can only write the process of her own destruction, if she can only trace this destruction back to the moment when it began, back to its »point zero«, then she can stop the disintegration of her inner world. But of course, we're talking about a duel here.

A duel with life?

Let's take it step-by-step. We need to look at how the Rio metaphor is laid out and how it transforms within Özgür's and the narrator's writing. »In a word, chaos.« This is the mutual description that they share: writing—creating—is a war taken up in opposition to this chaos. But in the place described as »Rio«, it is Özgür's room that first appears: her slovenly room, with its dead flies and an Orpheus poster hung on the blood-stain striped walls. Then the streets of Rio, the sound of guns firing. The favela's which she calls the »Land of the Dead«, hunger, sexuality, crazy people, murderers ... And the jungle, always consumed by a horrible thirst for light. Let me draw your attention to the point in the novel at which Özgür's thirst was alleviated. Özgür was most certainly calling for a duel when she tried to besiege outer reality with writing. Believing that she could oppose the world, but still remain at its side ... Step by step she loses her belief, as her own face appears everywhere that she looks, as everything that she passes rings in her own ears ... Rio is the image of life, perhaps life itself – perhaps it was always that way, perhaps it became life at the very last moment. Özgür's first confession: »Life and writing are like two ventriloquists standing face to face, speaking to one another from their bellies. Now I'm not sure which voice it is that I hear.«

Now you're talking about more than just writing replacing life ...

Let's take a look at the letter »Ö.« It is undoubtedly the first letter of Özgür and Öridiçe (Eurydice). But it could also be »ölüm« (death), »öteki« (the other), »özne« (subject) as well ... »The City in Crimson Cloak« is a book in which every »thing« turns into another »thing«: while Özgür turns into Ö., the narrator becomes Özgür; while Özgür turns into Rio, Rio becomes Özgür ... It's as if writing, which makes these transformations possible, is constantly offering up death to life, and life to death. The time of »The City in Crimson Cloak« resembles that of myths more so than it does linear time. I don't necessarily want to say cyclic, rather more like a web. Writing, which captures the past like »a fly buried alive in amber«, also propels the same past into the future. But when it's put into prophesy, the relationship between life and writing resembles a race to death. What most frightens Özgür, however, is that writing could replace the present. Not only writing, but language itself is based upon the cancellation of the present. Even when we use the word »I« twice in a row, we are denying the time that has passed in between. But common sense, too, is based upon this same denial, while the opposite, not denying, means going insane. In your book we are twice confronted with insane people; moreover, on both accounts they play important roles ... Becoming insane, writing, dying ... they're like links in the same chain, loops in the same net of Özgür's fate ... In the book there are two different monologues with two different crazy people ... In the first case we hear the first meaningful question that Özgür, who is quiet »to death« and almost never talks throughout the book, poses to people: »If you were going to shut up, why were you ever talking to begin with?« In the second monologue, though, it is Özgür who remains silent; she quietly returns the emptiness, the silence that is offered to her. If we look at the different meanings of the name »Eli« throughout the book, this silence is the silence of God or the world. Or whomever is referred to when calling out, »Eli, Eli, lama sabakhati«.

These are Jesus' final words that he says while being crucified on the cross: »Father, why hast thou forsaken me!« You indicated the figure of Jesus by using Easter. But it is the myth of Orpheus which is frequently mentioned in the novel. In the novel, what is the equivalent of Orpheus' turning and looking back? Why do you think Orpheus stopped to look back?

I think this is a timeless question and answers to timeless questions are bound to be temporary. I can point to the moment at which »The City in Crimson Cloak's« Orpheus did not believe in his own lute. The section in which Özgür describes a man eating his own vomit in order not to die of hunger is the section written in the first person singular – the only section written in first person singular. Özgür exes out what she has written and seems to have accepted the helplessness of writing in the face of both life and death. Then she writes just a single sentence: »I write to show myself larger than I am because ... I'm so very, very small.« But Özgür doesn't stop there, she goes on to write her »Point Zero«, the Easter day upon which she runs into the corpse of a woman and that makes her confront the corpse inside herself, the day that triggers the beginning of her own destruction. And this is precisely the moment when Orpheus looks back: Writing the »Point Zero«. The way I interpret it, when Orpheus turned back, what he saw was his own mortality.

Do you mean to say that Özgür should have turned around to look at death, her own mortality? That writing can't bear the weight of a person's own death?

If he wanted Eurydice, he shouldn't have turned around and looked back, but if Orpheus hadn't looked back, then there wouldn't be writing, or art, or Orpheus' music. Isn't literature born out of a simultaneous – side-by-side, face-to-face – consciousness and forgetting or denial of mortality? That's why writing always has to wear a mask. Because the contradictions in the triangle of life–writing–death are timeless, what's presented throughout the book are transient moments of reconciliation that are taken back only a few pages later, that become one another ... Masks put on and taken off. Just look at Özgür's final sentences: »The formula of chaos is simple actually. Life = life. Death = death.« But just as life takes its revenge out on everything that reduces it, it takes it out on Özgür as well, it exes out both the sentences and the author.

So, who is Özgür? The mask of an author, or just anybody? Or who?

For a long time, almost until I'd finished the book, I searched for the name »Özgür«. I thought that only with a subject that was fractured would I be able to take up the problems of writing, but in order to correctly establish the relationship between Özgür and Ö., I needed a unisex name. That is, a name that temporarily suspends that »coincidental« side of existence. Özgür is of course the mask of an author insofar as she attempts to realize her fate by writing it, and that mask speaks for everyone as it writes itself. Perhaps that's what makes the reader of »The City in Crimson Cloak« feel so ill at ease. The moment that Özgür begins to completely master her own fate she falls prisoner to it, and while declaring her freedom, she falls in defeat to a legend much older than herself. A direct line from Greek mythology to existentialism reconciles the consciousness of mortality

with being an »individual«. I think the myth that best describes this is the myth of Persephone. This myth explains that death makes existence a one-time-only-ness, a uniqueness with no return and that therefore beauty can only be momentary. Philosophy isn't my field, but I do believe that according to Heidegger, a person reaches freedom by coming to terms with his or her own mortality, or in fact dying, that she then consists entirely of the coincidences that makes her who she is, and she is then unalterably that. Looking at it from this perspective, death is something that makes a person an individual in the full sense of the word, the thing that completes him with all of his coincidentalness, with everything of his that is particular to him. But death in »The City in Crimson Cloak« can be read not only as the last link in an individual's fate, but his return to wholeness, to the entirety of existence. While the march to death gives us the opportunity to be ourselves, it also delivers us to the deepest past, to the most mythical expressions of the species. I think of Özgür as a tragic figure who leaves the Dionysian choir in order to write and play her own tragedy, and who is then entranced again by that same call. I'm not very good at conceptualizing things. But then myths existed long before concepts and they cannot be reduced to concepts. Fireworks is the metaphor I use to explain life, death, uniqueness, and freedom: A bright and temporary light, the mark which it leaves behind as it propels itself with ultimate speed to a moment of explosion lasts as long as life, and then it disintegrates in the darkness.

That's why Dionysus always has to die and come back to life again. Just as he sometimes has to look like a woman, sometimes like a man. That is, at least to us ...

I have to admit that, as I was writing this book, I had forgotten that Dionysus was a hermaphrodite- and I was trying to point out the Dionysian wave rising at the very depths as I tried to make Özgür's language as »violent« as possible. This language, which some find to be much too intense, some much too poetic -but I think the best definition was Necmi Zeka's, he said it was »physiological« - is actually the language of ritual. It is the language of the Candoble rituals, which I myself took part in and which you might recall from the film »Black Orpheus«. The Candoble gods are also hermaphroditic, in a way. Dionysus always appears masked to us, and Japanese theater is masked, too. A »coincidence« that I used in the novel: »Hanabi« means fireworks in Japanese, it means »FireFlower« or »DeathLife«.

Let's talk about the last sentence of the novel, the sentence that really reveals what's absurd about life: »She had died just as she had wanted.« The reader can't help but wonder: Who exactly is it who died?

I remind you that it is Özgür who writes this sentence. Of course nobody. To be or die just as you want. This isn't possible, neither in writing nor in life. No work of art is ever complete, just as no life ever is either. Perhaps what you refer to as »absurd« is the »nonsense« that is the essence of tragedy.

Seeing as we've moved beyond the boundaries of the book, let's talk about another piece of yours in which the writing-death relationship appears, the final story in »The Miraculous Mandarin«. The story, »A Guest from the Land of the Past« is also based upon

up without referring to the empty vacuum in which writing swings about! But it's meaningless for people to talk about what they've written or what they are going to write. Especially one who has taken part in rituals! People have a tendency to ridicule that which they don't know, but if I've learned anything from rituals, it's that there's something much »bigger« than me out there, something that appears to me only during the ritual. Outside of ritual, before and after it, for example at the moment that I try to answer these questions, I am just an empty shell from out which words flow, that's it. Only during moments of ritual, that is, while writing, can I hope that life might flow out of that empty shell.

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