ŠTÚDIE / ARTICLES

After Babel: Identities in Search of a Name

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Although the concept of identity is a strategic and positional concept, common sense tends to think of national identities as unproblematic categories, pointing to essential qualities in much the same way that natural objects do. Identities, however, are constructed by highly divergent discourses and practices. This situation calls for a contextual approach to identity building that will trace the historical contingency and the plurality of the symbolic processes that are cloaked in such constructions.

Identity, maintains Stuart Hall, is constituted by the reiterative power of discourse to produce that which also names and regulates. It is a strategic and a positional category, 'never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions'. (Hall, 4) At the very core of identity there is always an essential level that we might call 'narrative identity' (Randall, 54-56), consisting of the stories we tell to ourselves about ourselves and the stories we or others tell to others, or stories that are told to others about ourselves – that is, all the stories in which we are included.

In the following pages I shall focus on several aspects of identity building, seen as a discursive and an historical instance: the narrative devices that foster a range of both top-down and bottom-up processes of symbolic projection; the basic interaction between stimulus data and stored background knowledge in identity building; the relationships between self-identifications and stereotype representations of the Other; the crisscrossing of inside and outside literary projections, triggered off by identification.

Focussing on the ways that communities represent identities in areas of cultural overlapping, hybridity, and confusion, my analysis departs from two contemporary novels that call into question the very logic of identification: *Birds without Wings*, by the British novelist, Louis de Bernières, and *Middlesex*, by the American writer, Jeffrey Eugenides, novels that together trace the construction of Turkish and Greek identities in a process of mutual mirroring.

These two novels revolve around the Byzantine and the Ottoman empires in whose confused ashes glow the embers of burning national conflict, national self-invention and, above all, national (Hi)stories. According to at least one of the many conflicting viewpoints represented in both novels, the Ottoman empire was the cradle of a cultural arch-identity, as one of the Greek characters maintains.

In de Bernières's novel, the paradigm of this Edenic tolerance is Eskibahce, a village on the Anatolian coast, south of Smyrna. In Eskibahce, a Christian girl, Philothei, and a Muslim boy, Ibrahim, have been betrothed since childhood; the Greek Mehmetich and the Turkish Karatavouk have always been seen by the community as twin brothers; Father Kristoforos and the Imam, Abdulamid Hodjea, embody the community's Janus-faces of moral authority. Moreover, Muslim mothers occasionally ask their Christian neighbors to obtain for them the blessing of the Panagia, represented by an old icon in the local church of St. Nicholas local church, whilst, likewise, in the same church Christians light their candles and place them in the sand-box, but then go on to kneel and pray in the manner of Muslims.

In *Middlesex*, the luxurious city of Smyrna, 'the most cosmopolitan community in the Middle East', represents a purported Paradise prior to the national fall from grace, as depicted by Eugenides. The novelist draws a clear metaphorical parallel between the mixture of the particular quarters of the city (Greek, Jewish, Armenian, Muslim, French, British, and so forth), on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the harmony of the variety of occidental and oriental stringed instruments in local orchestras, or of the honey and the rose petals in local sweets.

Seeds of national difference are present in both novels. In Eskibahce they are emphatically epitomized by Dascalos Leonidas, the Greek schoolmaster who obsessively preaches about Greater Greece and the 'Megale Idea'. In *Middlesex*, the village Bythnios, located on the slopes of Mount Olympus, seems to be inhabited by clones of Dascalos Leonidas. The so-called 'Megale Idea', frequently mentioned in both novels but extensively depicted in all its aspects and consequences by Eugenides, is clearly an utopian project: 'It was all about reconstructing Byzantium and turning Haghia Sophia back into a cathedral, and bringing about "Greater Greece", and having a King Constantine back on the throne, and the whole caboodle was known as "The Big Idea".' (de Bernières, 258)

Significantly, the father of Dascalos Leonidas, a rich Greek merchant, has a more pragmatic vision of the late Ottoman Empire and of its pros and cons. He has sound reasons to fear his own son's dreams of turning it into a netherworld: 'Here in Smyrna we have the most pleasant and delightful city in the world. We are all prosperous. We are in Paradise, and you and your friends want to mess it up with your stupid Big Idea, for God's sake!' (de Bernières, 259)

If, in Eskibahce, Dascalos Leonidas is perceived as excessive and ridiculous, in Bythinios, the slowly dying Anatolian village of Eugenides, the Big Idea has been the norm for centuries. Like the other members of their shrinking community, the Stephanides, the novel's protagonists, are a consanguine tribe, fiercely resisting any external influence. In Eugenides' novel, radical ethnic closure has been pushed to its extreme, absurd outcome: to incest that eventually produces a hermaphroditic baby.

Having crossed the Atlantic, the Stephanides clan joyfully supports the building of a church in Detroit by the Ford highway that is to be named Haghia Sophia and is to resuscitate the splendour of old Byzantium. The very last lines of the novel insist on the Byzantine profile of the Hermaphrodite Cal(liope). 'The Monster', a label occasionally appended to Cal by a schoolmate, metaphorically accounts for the cultural pathology that had, step-by-step, contaminated the Stephanides: ethnic introversion and isolation.

The moment when, through the door opened by the successive wars of the early twentieth century, History brutally steps onto the main stage of the empire, marks a salient threshold in both novels. In its wake follow tragic deaths, collective traumas, cold-blooded atrocities, cities aflame, madness and degeneration, physical or spiritual wounding that spread over the formerly idyllic scenery.

There is an 'on duty' Armenian in both novels: a Philobosian medical doctor in Smyrna who had cured Mustafa Kemal of a serious illness a few years earlier, and a Levonian apothecary in Eskibahce. The two of them not only lose their homes and their homeland, but also their whole families are murdered. The shrewd Greek narrator, Giorgio Theodorou, is drowned in the great fire of Smyrna, trying to get aboard a British ship. The two brothers, Lefty and Desdemona, manage to board a French ship and get hastily married whilst they cross the Atlantic, trying to escape the collective nightmare that engulfs everything around them. The teenagers in love, Philotei and Ibrahim, also become the victims of the turmoil of identity: the Greek Juliet tragically dies and the Muslim Romeo goes mad forever. Although surviving a series of successive wars, Ibrahim's friend, Karatavouk, eventually becomes 'his own ghost'. As the backdrop to these individual dramas, huge crowds of the uprooted wander continental and insular Greece, European Turkey, coastal and inland Anatolia, in search of new homelands and new names.

Distinct national identities, that are able to replace the generic communities of the empire that is in its death-throes, need to be swiftly engineered. Turkey, on the one hand, is being brought to geo-political life, as the narrator, Karatavouk, concludes. Giving up the utopian Big Idea, on the other hand, Greece has to assume a more realistic role on the new historical stage. Although, today, ethnic labels such as 'Turkish' and 'Greek' have long been mere national names, in the early twentieth century such labels were not so easy to coin and to appropriate. To ordinary post-Ottoman citizens, such labels didn't seem 'natural' at all. In order to appeal to possible 'consumers', they had to be plainly explained and suitably justified: 'An interesting thing happens, however; whereas the word "Turkey" has been in common usage for centuries in countries outside the Ottoman Empire, it is now used for the first time in an official document in Istanbul. The use of the word [Turk] signifies that the Turks are beginning to see themselves as the inhabitants of the Anatolian heartland. When "Turkey" becomes a word used by Turks, it really means the end of the pan-Islamic dream of Muslim idealists, a fantasy as fantastic as the Greek dream of Greater Greece.' (de Bernières, 473)

Images of alterity usually arise by the calling of attention to daily routines, public customs, food habits, costume, and so forth, and end up in the ready-made linguistic formulas of 'stereotypes'. Stereotypes emerge in particular areas of group identities, as ideological products articulated through collective representation. Coining stereotype representations of Self and Other is a complex process that involves a range of both top-down and bottom-up symbolic projections. In both novels, to be simply 'Turk' or 'Greek' is not an easy job. As a military commander-in-chief, Mustafa Kemal is the first one to instruct his army in this respect. Later on, his former soldiers are obliged to disseminate his teachings to perplexed local communities. Kemal's messenger along the post-Ottoman, Anatolian coast is a 'Sergeant Osman', a living em-

blem of new Turkish authority. Whilst in charge of the collection of the local Christian population and their deportation to Telmessos, the sergeant has a difficult task instructing those he encounters ('From now on you are Greeks, not Ottomans. And we are not Ottomans any more either, we are Turks'), and is forced to answer difficult questions such as 'where is Greece?' or 'are the Greeks Ottomans like us?'. (de Bernières, 527)

A long and painful period of despondent conversion must precede the process of nationality building: 'Certainly, it was to Greece that they had been deported,' we are told in reference to Anatolian Christians, 'and they become Greeks, whether they wanted it or not, even if their new compatriots often deprecated them as Turks.' (de Bernières, 607) In this era of accommodation, various types of identity-brands emerge. Amongst these transitory cultural trademarks is 'Cretan', meaning the Turkish population displaced from Crete and relocated in Asia Minor. Mixed rumors about these people circulate through the former empire. From a letter sent by a native Turk to his Greek deported friend, we learn that they long for their old homes, preserve Christian customs of cooking, dancing and celebrating, and also that 'they have learned Turkish, especially the children, but sometimes they still use Greek language.' (de Bernières, 607) 'Filthy Turk' (occasionally 'dirty Turk') is another form of 'identity currency' valid in continental Greece, Rhodes or Cephalonia, where deported Greeks move to in search of their ethnic roots: 'Of course the irony is that the [Greek relatives] Drapanitikos family thought we were just dirty Turks.' (de Bernières, 541)

'Byzantine' is used similarly. In *Middlesex*, this deprecatory label is used by the British congregation in Smyrna to gratify both sides of an ethnic feud in which they do not wish to be trapped. A long time after the post-Ottoman ethnic clashes, this is also the name that some of the more established Greek immigrants use to 'welcome' the Stephanides on their arrival across the Atlantic. Lefty Stephanides is more than once identified as Byzantine, even by his own children, as a way to typify his look or his behaviour. Some of these emerging 'identity labels' are plainly oxymoronic, although only apparently paradoxical, such as the polar couple, 'Greek Turks' and 'Turkish Greeks': 'Eskibahce was dying on its feet because not enough Greek Turks came to fill the empty houses of the Turkish Greeks [...]', wisely concludes an inhabitant of the area. (de Bernières, 607)

It is widely accepted that stereotypes are highly selective systems of shared explanations and also that they coalesce in order to enable action. (McGarthy, Yzerbyt and Spears, 13) In the light of this, it must be noted that the identity stereotypes that circulate in the two novels neither explain, nor do they enable action. On the contrary, they successfully generate confusion and block any desire to be or to act. We may say that post-Ottoman History has (re)converted them into disabled categorizing instruments: forms of 'counter-stereotypes'.

When one discusses the articulation of identities in literature, it is important to consider such articulation in terms of narrative point-of-view and narrative voice. In this respect, there appears to be a major discrepancy between the two novels under discussion. *Middlesex* is a novel ascribed to a single-string voice that dispatches information and assumes full narrative responsibility from the novel's first, to its last sentence. By way of contrast, de Bernieres's narrative relies on multiple, ill-assorted

voices and points-of-view. However, on closer examination, the narrative picture of both texts significantly changes.

In *Birds Without Wings*, there is an all-embracing focalization that belongs to Mustafa Kemal, the engineer of the post-Ottoman Turkish identity and the main geo-political strategist of the area. He constantly formulates identity options, decides on the name, 'Turkish', for his newborn nation and on the limited part to be played by religion in it. Nonetheless, a real narrative voice is not allotted to Mustafa Kemal. His values, his point of view and his decisions are borne by an impersonal, third-person discourse, very close to the voice of a practiced historian. Put differently: History itself seems to be the official speaker for Mustafa Kemal.

Manifold interplays occur between this topmost level and lower levels that are entrusted narratively to Ibrahim, the potter of Eskibahce, to the Greek Juliet, named Philotei, to her friend, Drousula, to the Greek tradesman, Giorgio Theodorou, and, most frequently, to the Muslim boy named Karatavouk, the potter's son. As Kara-tavouk starts writing letters from various imperial battlefields, and as he shares his views with a miscellaneous audience, including the reader, his perspective changes, slowly but steadily. The more extensive and skilled his craft of oral or written story-telling becomes, the more substantial and tangled the history of the region appears in his telling of it. By the end of the novel, Karatavouk seems to be the only character aware of who he is, who he has become, and how this has happened, and ready to get to terms with the consequences of this awareness.

We should also notice that, in de Bernieres's novel, Mustafa Kemal embodies a top-down narrative perspective insofar as his perspective is more or less successfully passed on to others by agents such as Sergeant Osman. By way of contrast, Karata-vouk's narrative craft illustrates a bottom-up dynamics, getting progressively closer to (although never identical with) that of Mustafa Kemal.

In Eugenides' fictitious universe, the monopoly of History-telling belongs formal-ly to Cal, the hermaphrodite offspring of the Stephanides. However, the reader is con-stantly presented with indubitable evidence that Cal represents a generic homonymy, dressing up a polyphony of interpretations and narrative devices, indeed, a whole range of distinct identities. The novel maps out Cal's biographical and cultural route from a shy and irresolute teenager, trapped in an ethnically encapsulated post-Ot-toman clan, to a fully-fledged, outspoken individual with the all-encompassing and rich perspective of a 'self-reflecting Homer'. (In the novel, the references to Homer are explicit and accompanied by well-known quotations.)

Astutely self-referential, Eugenides' novel focuses on the very process of crafting identity through intermingled, top-down and bottom-up, story-telling and eventually story-writing strategies. Changing ages, locations, jobs, social status and even sexes, the official narrator of his novel successively assesses various writing options: first a simple pen to bring about a medical confession; later on, a Smith Corona typewriter to forge a series of auto-biographies, drawing closer and closer to self-invention; and eventually, a modern copy-editing device to help concoct a manuscript called... Mid-dlesex.

'Crafting a sense of Self takes place not only with reference to a set of defining questions and moral aspirations, but also with reference to Others, as a "defining

community'". This is why, according to Ulrike Meinhoff, 'identity is fundamentally re-lational'. (Meinhoff, 18) The manifold identity projections related to the vast stage of the post-imperial Balkans have been the object of a number of insightful approaches (Goldsworthy, 1998; Wolff, 1994; Todorova, 1997, amongst others). However, the common denominator of such scholarly work is the perception and the cultural pro-jection of generic identity. The two novelists under discussion draw attention to a different dimension of the process of identity construction following the collapse of the Ottoman empire: the inner and sometimes 'innocent' perspective of the victims caught up in this process and their yearning to make sense of this process in oral or written accounts. The two novelists seem to endorse Charles Taylor's assertion that in order to reach a 'sense of who we are' we need 'to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going: we grasp a sense of our lives and of our identity in a narrative'. (Taylor, 47) Identity is never merely 'packaged' but decisively crafted by narrative discourse.

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PO BABYLONE: IDENTITY HĽADAJÚ SVOJE OZNAČENIE

Národné identity. Konštrukcia identity. Naratívny diskurz. Naratívny hlas. Stereotyp. Ja a iný. Generická identita. Top-down a bottom-up postupy. Stratégie rozprávania a písania príbehu.

Štúdia sleduje viaceré aspekty vzniku a budovania identít v ich diskurzívnych a historických podobách. Skúma naratívne nástroje, ktoré umožňujú vzostupné a zostupné symbolické priemety, základné súvzťažnosti medzi podnetom a uchovávanými poznatkami, týkajúcimi sa tvorby identít, vzťahy medzi sebaidentifikáciou a stereotypom v zobrazovaní iného, križovanie vonkajších a vnútorných literárnych projekcií, vyvolané identifikáciou. Analýza vychádza z dvoch súčasných románov, spochybňujúcich identifikačnú logiku: *Birds without Wings* britského románopisca Louisa de Bernièresa a *Middlesex* Američana Jeffreyho Eugenidesa, ktoré sledujú formovanie a vzájomné zrkadlenie tureckej a gréckej identity v moci dvoch veľkých predstáv – turecká sníva o panislamskom svete a grécka o Veľkom Grécku.

20. storočie prinieslo rozpad ríš, zmenu národných stereotypov a emblémov a zasiahlo aj do osobných životov. Tento proces možno v literárnych dielach skúmať z hľadiska narácií alebo naratívnych hlasov. Spoločným menovateľom ich vedeckého skúmania je jav generickej identity, oba uvedené romány však upozorňujú na odlišné rozmery tvorby identity. Sledujú proces z vnútornej a „nevinnej" perspektívy obetí, ktoré sa dostali do jeho víru a zanechali písomné alebo ústne záznamy. Tým ukazujú spôsob, akým naratívny diskurz identity doslova remeselne vyrába.

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