

A Journey of Erasing the Self

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After three years of leaving it aside, I came back to Thomas Disch's "The Asian Shore" as a result of homesickness and nostalgia that accompanied me with the Coronavirus outbreak. Disch wrote this novella after his three-month-long trip to Istanbul in 1967. He depicts some interesting details about this ancient city in a very close proximity to where I was born and have spent several years of my life. My first encounter with Disch's work was in 2017 in New York City. While working on this mysterious story, I developed a weird empathy for the protagonist, John Benedict Harris, who is a New Yorker becoming a Turk in Istanbul. Centering around the theme of identity loss, "The Asian Shore" provides an intriguing discussion around the relevant-to-our-time notions of the self, the other, and the arbitrariness of identity.

The novella shapes around John, an architect who works on a project called Homo Arbitrus. The main thesis of his study considers arbitrariness as the essence of architecture. According to that, the artifacts of a city have been placed arbitrarily. John wants to apply his theory on architecture to human nature; hence, he plans a six month trip to Istanbul to be an alien in an unfamiliar environment. His physical and spiritual journey constructs an attempt at proving his thesis: identity is arbitrarily constructed. Before he "logically" proves or demonstrates his thesis, his loss of identity entails a breakdown in logic itself. John strangely becomes the first and only test subject of his own studies.

Identity has plenty of definitions that agree on one particular phenomenon, in which it is defined as the relationship of the self with the other. According to Francis M. Deng, for example, "[i]dentity is used...to describe the way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture" (Deng, 1995, p. 1) In "The Asian Shore," the dichotomy of the self and the other is established around the binaries of the East and the West. John passes from a Westerner to an Easterner through a chain of physical and men-

tal alterations in his body and mind once he arrives in Istanbul. The different stages that John's identity goes through in the narrative remind me of Samuel Delany's¹ description of building a coherent narrative. According to Delany, in a written text everything starts with a letter. A letter becomes a word. The text is constructed by adding new words to the first one to create a whole and an understandable meaning. (Delany, 2009, 2-5) "The Asian Shore" awakens similar feelings in me, given that John's passing for a new identity requires him to achieve similar milestones.

The first obvious identity shift occurs in the protagonist's name. John's name never comes forward in the first page of the novella, and the narrator refers to him only with the pronoun "he." The reader learns John's full name when he is called "Yavuz"—an ordinary Turkish name—by a mysterious woman who chases John through the novella. After this incident, every time the woman calls him "Yavuz," John reminds himself of his full name and his nationality, as he gets suspicious of his true identity: "His name was John. John Benedict Harris. He was an American" (Disch, p. 27) This quote implies that the national identity is strongly attached to someone's proper name, which sets a boundary between the self and the other, the West and the East, and John and Yavuz.

The second sign of the protagonist's transformation is his moustache. One day, John goes to a hamam and realizes he is growing a moustache, particularly the "pala moustache." (Disch, p. 31) John regards this stereotyped moustache as a feature specific to Turkish people. His reflection with the new moustache in the mirror brings out certain ideas and emotions about the artifact of his own face: "It is this, the baroque moustache, not a face, that he sees when he looks in the mirror" (Disch, p. 48) Subsequently, the moustache, which is an arbitrary and transitory facial decoration, alone determines his cultural belonging to Turkishness.

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Clothing occurs as another fundamental component of John's identity shift. He finds a Turkish tailor to have a new suit made. The suit the tailor makes for John fits much better than all his old suits; therefore, the new suit also initiates his distancing from the American identity: "it seems so different from other suits he had worn, so much...smaller. And yet it fitted his figure with the exactness one expects of a tailored suit. (...) When he wore it, he became, to all appearances, a Turk" (Disch, p. 36) This situation also leads the reader to question whether John's body changes, or his memory is false.

John Harris's transformation is completed with a territorial passing. A day before his flight from Istanbul to New York, John decides to visit the islands of Istanbul. His tragedy, or maybe salvation, takes place on the way back to Istanbul when he takes the wrong ferry, which goes to Yalova. Routing to Yalova instead of Istanbul, he physically passes an Asian territory outside Istanbul—a territory that is not in the borders of John's psychological limits of the West. This coincidence or subliminal choice finalizes John's passing for a different identity. Consequently, John loses all his titles and becomes only "a man" out of this chain of incidents. By losing the names both John and Yavuz, or by his realization of the arbitrariness of these names, he becomes someone else; but not someone specific, not someone special—only "a man."

It is not a coincidence that Istanbul is the central location in the novella. John struggles with his hybridizing identity in a hybrid city. As a center, Istanbul has witnessed many encounters and contradictions of the self and the other. Geographically and culturally, the city has been a connection point between the East and the West. Istanbul, once again, emerges as territorial and also psychological border of the West. The emphasis on this border comes forward when John cannot travel to any other city in Turkey further east than Istanbul, even though his initial plan involves moving toward other Asian countries. The in-betweenness of Istanbul is terrifying enough for John, so moving deeper into the East becomes

something to avoid. Technically, when John passes the Bosphorus of Istanbul that divides European and Asian continents to visit Uskudar—a neighborhood in the Asian side of Istanbul—he steps on the Asian continent. However, the cultural identity of the city seems more important than its geographical location, leading John to identify the whole city as more of a Westerner. Eventually, John's fears of assimilation turn into reality, and he gets fully blended into this alien and hybrid entity. John fails to resist embracing the patterns of Turkishness.

One final anecdote that is worth to mention is Thomas Disch's special interest in Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. Ataturk is the founder of the Turkish nation-state as well as the national hero of Turkish people. He is particularly famous for his reforms of language, clothing, and religion for the sake of building Turkish national identity. Disch mentions Ataturk's name three times in "The Asian Shore" (pp. 26, 30, 41) First, John reads Ataturk's biography and describes it as long and dull. After that, some more negatively sided criticism of Ataturk's reforms comes forward. I could not stop myself from speculating about whether Disch was referring to Ataturk to demonstrate an accurate example of the arbitrariness of a (national) identity by focusing on the aspects of being a "real Turk." Turkishness was constructed almost a hundred years ago by the ideas, ideologies, and guidance of a single man. Even though before then this ethnic group existed in the Ottoman Empire, they did not have a nation-state or a national unity. When the Republic of Turkey was established, the main national and ethnic components of Turkishness had been determined and processed. In the sense of creating patterns and turning them into a true identity for a newly invented nation, John's transformation reminds me of Ataturk's reforms—that sometimes led to quite oppressive regulations for many people—to create a national identity in almost perfect uniformity.

All in all, initially it seems easy to identify with this mundane character, John, trying to adjust to a new physical and cultural environment. Further into the

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story, however, the plot takes us to an uncanny climate where the limits of our world are reconstructed, and some occurrences that are impossible in our world become possible. Apart from its genre-bending skills, “The Asian Shore” is a fascinating reading experience for highlighting the representation of Turkey and Turkish identity with all irony from the lens of an American character and with the words of an American writer. More fascinating than that is my very personal experience of writing this paper in New York as someone from Turkey—although, I am not sure if I have integrated into New York as completely as John Benedict Harris blends into Istanbul.

Notes

¹An American author and literary critic. He has a special interest in Thomas Disch’s literature.

References

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