

AN INTERVIEW

with Ibrahim Beyazoglu & Hakan Karahasan
of CYPRUS TODAY

Q: You have travelled to Cyprus as a child. What does Cyprus mean to you? What were and are central issues in the Cyprus problem from your point of view? What do you think about the recent bookshop arson which took place in North Nicosia of the island?

A: I visited Cyprus as a small child. My only memories of the visit are the sun, the white-washed houses, and a bookshop in whose window I saw the first *Noddy* books: not perhaps the greatest of literature, but one of my favorite readings at the age of four or five. I know too little of what you call “the Cyprus problem” to comment, and, as to the burning of the bookshop, of course I condemn it. Like torture, censorship or capital punishment, book-burning is something no society that considers itself civilised can tolerate. Acceptance of any of these acts, under any circumstances whatsoever, is, for a society, a confession of failure.

Q: On various occasions we observe that the symbol of fire is associated with education and enlightenment. Do you think there is a dialectical relationship between book burning and enlightening people? Can modern enlightenment and education

eventually lead to an anti-thesis that questions the basis of the status quo? It is interesting that the bookshop's name "Işık" literally and ironically means light.

A: Fire is a symbol which, like all symbols, has a double and seemingly contradictory connotation. Fire illuminates and fire burns; that is to say, sheds light and destroys what it has lit. But I think it is dangerous to associate, even symbolically, enlightenment with destruction. Fear of enlightenment can lead to voluntary destruction; that is to say, the fear of getting to know something may lead someone to want to destroy whatever it is before getting to know it, because knowing something, knowing it deeply, can prevent us from blindly hating it. (Most book-burners don't read the books they want to burn.) And yes, it is ironic that a bookstore called "Light" should be set on fire.

Q: Adorno who was critical of the powers of reason which stripped an individual of both humanity and emotion, (especially affection) said that "to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric." How do you interpret the existential bond between book burning, Auschwitz and reason? Is it possible for book lovers to talk about books in our context after the latest acts of arson on this island of Cyprus?

A: We must be careful not to confuse particulars with generalities. Adorno's comment was made at a time of utter

collective despair, when it seemed impossible to resort to words in order to express an abyss of grief and horror. But, as we always learn, words end up naming the unnamable. That is to say, there always comes a moment after the horror in which someone is able to put the horror into words, however inadequate (Adorno's dictum itself is an example of this.) Book-burning is done under the illusion that ideas and words and the printed page (or the electronic screen) are the same thing. Burning a volume of the Odyssey does not destroy the Odyssey nor does it destroy the thousands of readings of the Odyssey. Book-burning is a symbolic act that is based on a false assumption, and is therefore never effective. And of course book lovers must talk about books in the context of the Nicosia book-burning – or in any other context. Under the most horrific conditions (awaiting death or torture, famished or beaten) book-lovers have talked about books, and will continue to do so.

Q: After the book burning incident, some of the politicians here repeatedly related the issue to Nazi Germany and “dark” medieval times. How is it that we can address the fascists burning books in Nazi Germany and the rigid attitudes of the medieval church with the book reading culture and thinking of today?

A: We must be careful with easy historical comparisons: they strip current events of real meaning. The book-burning in Cyprus

relates to the social and political conditions of Cyprus. To speak of it in terms of Nazi Germany or the Middle Ages is to avoid confronting the real issues of Cyprus today.

Q: Here is a personal question that I have always wanted to ask you. I would like to remind you of Jorge, the main baddie in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. Destroying books is so problematic to him that he chooses to eat them instead. The paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould called Jorge's actions "gorgeous". He goes on to claim that Jorge was not a book enemy but sought to imbibe the books' knowledge. Do you agree with the Mr Gould? What is the distinctive context of Jorge's book destroying when compared with typical episodes of book burning or destroying?

A: But Jorge de Burgos doesn't eat the forbidden book: he sets fire to the library, if I remember correctly. In fact, he first poisons the pages of the book so that whoever reads it will die after licking his fingers to turn the pages....

Q: Italo Calvino, in his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* suggests that the most significant function of writing is to make possible the seemingly impossible. You, as the writer of *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places*, along with Gianni Guadalupi, how do you view the potential of writing in terms of artistic creation? Where do you think that writing and literacy will take

us in future? What sort of possibilities does writing point to in terms of the impossible?

A: Writing is a tool of the imagination. And the best definition of imagination is given by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene*. For Dawkins, imagination is our method of recreating the world so as to have an experience of it before we encounter that experience in the flesh. We imagine stories about, for instance, a man meeting a tiger, so that if we meet a tiger we will know what will happen. That is why we are, as species, story-telling creatures: to know death, love, fear and everything else in the world before we encounter it. In that sense Calvino's definition is perfectly accurate.

Q: Considering the march of technology and communication, how will reading fit in to tomorrow's society? Does the march of technology concern you? What are the biggest threats to reading and book lovers? In *A History of Reading*, you say that readers will become extinct and added that readers must figure out what reading is. What is at stake if reading ends and how can readers survive?

A: In *A History of Reading* I don't say that readers will become extinct: I say that is one of the possibilities, but I don't think it will happen. Of course the "arch of technology" concerns me, as it does all of us. We are technological animals. But technology

depends on our will to use it, when and why and how. The electronic technology allows for certain kinds of reading that can co-exist, perfectly well, with the more traditional ones. This has always been the case: film did not do away with theatre, nor video with film. Each technology borrows from the preceding one its vocabulary and announces its death, but the previous technology seldom dies: it merely feeds on the new one and both serve us together. The question is not what is at stake if reading ends, but what is the end of reading? That is what we must ask ourselves at a time when economic concerns override (or try to override) intellectual ones.

Q: Please correct me if I am wrong but in your book *The Library at Night*, you sometimes tend to perceive the library as the space of memory. What is the kind of power in your view that maintains official history and memory? Given the fact that we are in a Post-Marxist period, so to say, we don't take the theory of false consciousness very seriously anymore. How come we make the distinction between official (historic) memories on the one hand and the "true" memory of the unconscious on the other hand?

A: Libraries are indeed the repositories of our collective memories – at least in societies of the written word (in oral societies this function is fulfilled by the shamans or elders.) Libraries hold both our "official" memories and those of our

collective unconscious. And in the post-Communist world (not post-Marxist' Marx's ideas are as valid as ever today, if not more,) libraries function as a ballast against Capitalism gone mad. Whether they will be able to resist is another question, especially at a time when the sacred institution in our societies is neither the church nor the library, but the bank. (See the millions poured into financial institutions to save them after their own self-made crisis, while library budgets are cut everywhere).

Q: Humanity fears of its (self-) destruction. For instance, for most people, the incident of burning of books considered as 'an act against peace, dialogue, and democracy in Cyprus.' In *The City of Words*, you argue that one way of avoiding intolerance in the world that we live in is literature. In *The City of Words*, you state that classic texts and narratives are key to peace. Can writers, poets and story-telling still change the world?

A: Yes and no. Literature has the power to change us and teach us, but only if we choose to do so. The effects of literature depend on us.

Q: What do you think about the function(s) of a bookshop in such a small country like Cyprus? Literally translating, the word *kitabevi* can be translated as bookhouse which we think gives some significant information in terms of how bookshops are perceived in the culture in Turkish language, although it is not

possible to argue that reading is very important in Cypriot culture. Even, taking the word *kitabevi* as a departing point, what would like to say about the role(s) of a bookshop in small countries?

A: Bookshops, like schools and libraries, are essential in any literate society, in any society of the written word. The mercantile mentality that tries to turn our societies in a self-serving economic machine, tends to destroy bookstores by turning them into supermarket-like institutions where only “saleable” and “profitable” products are displayed. This has devastating effects on the nature of society. England, for instance, has been turned into a society of illiterate consumers in which there are no bookstores any more, only chain outlets that sell bestsellers.

Q: If ‘readers create writers and writers create readers,’ what is the relationship between readers, writers, and bookshops, regarding the re-creation of culture?

A: Bookshops, in ancient times, used to be the places where literature was copied (published) and made available to the readers. The bookseller was what the French call a “*porteur*”, that is to say, someone who passes on the cultural creation. This still exist in many places, but in others publishers have become suppliers of pap for booksellers who pass on the pap to readers:

in this way real writers are by-passed and real readers prevented from having access to real literature. The internet may prove to be one solution, since many writers are now resorting to blogs and on-line publication to reach their public. But the situation in the book world in general is catastrophic, and only the collapse of the publishing-bookselling empires will eventually allow for a solution. Today, only the small publishers and some of the university presses are keeping literature alive. The “good” literature published by the international corporations is merely the left-over of a better time.

Q: What is the message you would like to give to booklovers in North Cyprus and the *Işık Bookshop* which recently suffered an arson attack? Does book burning remain a real concern around the world? And what message would you like to give to the alleged arsonists?

A: No message: writers and readers should not concern themselves with “messages”. Instead, I would like to remind my fellow-readers in Cyprus that reading never comes to an end, and that the last page is never reached. As long as we remain alive as a species (and that, perhaps, will not be very long) we will continue to read. To the *Işık Bookshop* I would like to convey all my sympathy and ask if there is anything practical I can do to help them. As to the arsonists, there is nothing I can say to them because they are not readers; otherwise they would know that

their miserable act is doomed to failure.