



**E. Efe Çakmak**

## Oh balmy breath...

*A tribute to Hrant Dink*

In the case of Hrant Dink, there was something that troubled the popular imagination other than that an outspoken Armenian journalist had become a prime-time figure, says E. Efe Çakmak. It was his contamination of the pure categories of Armenian and Turk, Christian and Muslim. But how are we to make sense of Dink's murder without falling prey to an instrumental reasoning that claims that Turkish democracy has also been shot dead?

... that dost almost persuade  
Justice to break her sword! One more, one more.  
Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,  
And love thee after.  
*Othello*, 5.2.16–19.<sup>1</sup>

Now, when the torrent of eulogies for Hrant Dink, the late editor-in-chief of Istanbul's Turkish-Armenian weekly newspaper *Agos*, has almost subsided, the barbarity of Turkish nationalism has become even more horrifying. Fronts have formed in Turkey after Dink's funeral, attended by over a hundred thousand mourners carrying identical black and white signs proclaiming "We are all Armenians". Immediately, surveys were conducted testing public feeling about the slogan.<sup>2</sup> Then, images were released of Ogun Samast, the 17-year-old who confessed to Dink's murder, posing proudly with a Turkish flag between security officials; behind them could be seen a poster bearing the words of Atatürk: "The nation's land is sacred, it cannot be left to fate". These images followed fast on news of crazed masses chanting in football stadiums: "We are all Ogun Samast".



In the midst of the uproar, Turkey searches for reasons for the journalist's murder, and presumably will keep on doing so for years to come. Regarding his fight against state censorship and his struggle for freedom of expression in Turkey, it turns out that Dink's murder was only a near-defeat, since millions have joined him since the assassination. As for growing Turkish ultra-nationalism, his murder was not even a near-success, since it becomes ever clearer that Dink's views on Turkey or Turkish-Armenian relations were not of the kind that could have put him at the frontline of this confrontation.<sup>3</sup> All things considered, it's all-too-human that for the citizens of his hometown, his murder is hard to digest and even harder to make sense of.

As one commentator put it, in these times there is a "risk of becoming a parasite attempting to capitalize in some grotesque way from the death of a

truly brave man".<sup>4</sup> While the caution needs to be taken seriously, this is also the time to translate the dead — his deeds and his departure, "his passing" — into the jargon of the living; the time to write and re-write what he stood for, under what circumstances he accomplished this and that, and what the significance of his intellectual endeavours was: the time to make his passing intelligible. And yes, as if his were not an unfinished story, his death not a rupture thoroughly unforeseen. Unforeseen above all by himself: "I may see myself as frightened as a pigeon, but I know that in this country people don't touch pigeons. [...] Pigeons can live in cities, even in crowds. A little scared, perhaps, but free."<sup>5</sup>

To prevent parasitic interferences, we could begin by rendering unto Caesar what are Caesar's and unto God what are God's — by denying that it was Turkish democracy or the Turkish people, Turkish–European or Turkish–Armenian relations that were shot dead. It was our fellow journalist Hrant Dink. Millions of Turks around the world have spent the last few weeks following the news about Dink's assassination, reading article after article every day, along with the numerous eulogies written by those close to Dink (the funeral and the huge protests were broadcasted live on almost every Turkish television channel). Even on the day of the funeral, almost every account of the murder, in Turkey and Armenia, in Europe and the US, associated it with some aspect of Turkish–Armenian political strategy. For Armenians, it was the end of Turkey's hopes for European Union candidacy; for Turks, it was a blow to the future of Turkish prosperity and the work of "external powers"; for most Europeans and Americans, it was a sign of the weakness of Turkish democracy or a mark of Turkish underachievement in ensuring freedom of expression. Arus Yumul, a Turkish–Armenian professor of sociology at Istanbul Bilgi University, was the first to point out that behind these interpretations lies a rabid instrumental reason, a vice that has become prevalent in our times as we, the citizens of the world, grow more and more exhausted by violence, by witnessing all kinds of calamity each and every day, over and over again.<sup>6</sup>

As Yumul says, as a Turkish–Armenian intellectual, Dink was marginalized by both Armenians and Turks, for reasons that are not complicated at all. Like many of his fellow Armenians, he lived as a pariah in Turkey. Now that the greatest injustice has been done, does it make sense to speak about all the other injustices suffered by him, including being denied a Turkish passport for years? In Turkey, his political views and intellectual endeavours were so neglected that even when he became the first intellectual found guilty of insulting Turkishness (many were tried but only he received a six-month prison sentence, a conviction suspended due to good behaviour), what was at stake was not his ideas. Even his murderer has confessed that it was only after watching the news about the assassination that he understood the importance of the man he had killed.

The discourses Dink employed were impotent above all because of his commitment to a reconciliatory view of Turkish–Armenian relations and his emphasis on the intertwined histories of the two cultures, which left him, as Yumul has pointed out, on the *a'raf*, unable to satisfy either side. Although Hrant befriended almost everyone in Istanbul publishing circles, for years his reputation hardly extended beyond the Turkish Armenian community. The main reason for the shock felt by the Turkish public upon his death is that, until recently, even he felt himself utterly powerless. He confessed this some time ago in Trabzon, the hometown of his murderer, saying: "Whatever I say has no significance; you don't even get angry. Even if I start swearing I won't

manage to make you feel anything..."<sup>7</sup> His name became prominent in Turkish mainstream media only a few years ago with the notorious conference, "Ottoman Armenians during the decline of the empire: Issues of scientific responsibility and democracy", held at Istanbul Bilgi University in 2005.<sup>8</sup> Attempts to hold the conference at the Bosphorus University had twice been blocked by the Turkish government, and in a speech given to parliament, the Turkish minister of justice accused the conference organizers of treason.

At the conference, Dink told an anecdote that summed up his approach to the subject matter. It went as follows:

An old Turkish man called me from a village in the region of Sivas and said: 'Son, we've been looking everywhere, and now we have come to you. There's an old woman here, I guess she's one of your people, who has passed away. Can you find a relative of her? Otherwise we will bury her with a Muslim service.' He told me her name: Beatrice, a 70-year-old woman who had been visiting from France. 'Okay, uncle, I'll ask around', I said. Within minutes I had found a close relative: we know each other because we are so few. I went to the family shop. 'Do you know this person?' I asked. 'She is my mother', said the middle-aged woman there. Her mother, she told me, lives in France and comes to Turkey three or four times a year. 'After spending a very short time in Istanbul, she prefers to go directly to the village she left many years earlier.' I told her the sad news about her mother and she immediately travelled to the village. The next day she phoned me: she had found her mother. Suddenly she began to cry. I begged her to stop and asked her whether she would bring her mother's body back to Istanbul for burial. 'Brother', she said, 'I want to bring her back but there is an uncle here saying something'. Still crying, she passed the phone to him. I was angry with the man. 'Why are you making her cry?' I said. 'Son', he said, 'I didn't say anything... only: "Daughter, it is your mother, your blood. But if you ask me, let her stay here. Let her be buried here... The water has found its crack."' I was thrown off balance at that moment. I had lost and found myself in this traditional Anatolian saying. Indeed, the water had found its crack... Yes, it is true that Armenians long for this soil... We Armenians do desire this territory because our root is here. But don't worry. We don't want to take this territory away, but to come and be buried under it.<sup>9</sup>

After this conference, television channels regularly began to invite Dink to discuss the "Armenian issue" live on prime time. On one of those programmes, as he and Murat Belge were discussing questions surrounding the genocide with Yusuf Halacoglu, president of the Turkish Historical Society,<sup>10</sup> Halacoglu insinuated that "there are all kinds of people in the streets". Dink and Belge protested, arguing that this was pointing them out as targets for nationalists. But even then, no one, Dink and Belge included, took such threats seriously. After all, Belge was an established academic, and no one would touch Dink, the Armenian, whom "no one took seriously" but who could always be asked to reaffirm his loyalty to the Turkish state, which he voluntarily did from time to time.

The conference and its aftermath were a time of hope for those inclined to take a responsible view of aspects of Ottoman history as dark as any in twentieth-century Europe. Even long afterwards, when Dink was charged with slandering Turkishness, no one expected him to be found guilty, especially since the offending article in no way denigrated, or even criticized, Turkishness. Although Dink was now a prime-time public figure, his views were still far from being considered, as was demonstrated by the court's complete misreading of his arguments with the Armenian diaspora.<sup>11</sup>

But his status as a public figure, if not his views, seemed hostile to the Turkish authorities and mainstream media; meanwhile, the diaspora was still questioning his Armenianness.<sup>12</sup> He summarized his position on the genocide with the following words (which were too much for Turkey and not enough for the diaspora): "If this axe to the root dominates the psychological condition of generations of this people, you cannot simply act as if the rupture does not exist. The experience is already internalized, recorded on its people's memory, its genetic code. What is its name? The discipline of law can be preoccupied with this question, but whatever it decides, we know exactly what we have lived through. It can be understood, even if I should not use the word genocide, as being a tearing up of the roots. There is nothing to do at this point, but this should be understood very well."<sup>13</sup>

He had grown up as a "good leftist" and a "good Armenian" — as he put it, "in Turkey both meant he was in trouble" — but the rise of Islam in Turkey never seemed a threat to him. This put him in an awkward position with regard to hard-line Kemalism: "No authoritarian pressure has been able to suppress religious movements in this country. [...] In this country, Islam will renew and reform itself, without harming either the republic or secularism; and when this happens, it will set an incredible example for Europe and the world. It will show the world that the east can renew and reform itself — without the intervention of outsiders like Bush with his bombs in Iraq. The transformation that will result from Turkey's own internal dynamics will set a great example of the interaction, reconciliation, and harmony of the east and the west."<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Dink was one of the most enthusiastic supporters of Turkey's membership in the European Union, and one of the few who was happy with Orhan Pamuk's Nobel Prize: "Oh, ye people of these lands. Today you have one Orhan Pamuk. Tomorrow you will have many Orhan Pamuks. Merry Nobel to you!"<sup>15</sup>

There was something about Dink that troubled the Turkish popular imagination other than that, as an outspoken Armenian journalist, he had become a prime-time figure. There was one more thing, one more trait of his awkward personality, that was disturbing to the Turk. Etyen Mahcupyan, a fellow Turkish-Armenian journalist, writes: "They say the murderer is not major. Hrant would have said: 'This is it; this is what I'm talking about. Are Turks major?'"<sup>16</sup> It turns out that Dink, who embraces the minor Turk even after his death, was *almost* like a father to many influential Turkish citizens. Many of the contributors in a special issue of *Agos* edited by Mahcupyan in the days after Dink's murder, from Mujde Ar, the famous Turkish actress, to the singer Sezen Aksu and novelist Elif Shafak, spoke of Dink as a father. Yes, even his straightforwardness was something that could easily be associated with his Turkishness; and with all his gestures and his masculine embrace of honour (he once said that it was a question of honour for Armenians to testify to the genocide, since this proved their high esteem for their ancestors, and that just as honourable was the Turks' denial of the genocide, since this proved their respect for *theirs*), he had finally become just as masculine as "the Turk". In

the public imagination, he had unexpectedly turned into a Turk — a real Armenian and at the same time a real Turk (shame on you my fellow minor Turks, you had an Armenian father amongst you!). How strange it is now to remember that Dink was harshly criticized when he claimed that Sabiha Gokcen, the foster-daughter of Ataturk ("father of Turks"), was an Armenian, found by Ataturk in an orphanage? How ironic, or maybe significant, it is that in all the protests and on almost every television channel since the day of the assassination, the song *Sari Gelin* ("Blonde Bride"), which tells the story of a Turkish boy's love for an Armenian girl, has been sung! Who is the Armenian bride? Who is the Turkish boy? Who is the father of Turks, and who are his children?

When asked about the reasons for the assassination, Arus Yumul says Hrant Dink was an Antigone. All the reasons for his marginalization — his desistance from using the term "genocide" and his insistence on Armenian cultural heritage, his leftist background and his tolerance of Islamism, his love of Turkey and his Armenian identity — led to his death. He stood on the *a'raf*, like all the Armenians and Greeks of Istanbul, belonging to neither side, almost breaking the sword, manipulating the just disjunction. He was one of those figures who, in Yumul's words, contaminated the pure categories of Armenian and Turk, Christian and Muslim; who blurred the boundaries, making visible the ultimate power of an explosive proximity. The sheer visibility of Armenian turning Turk, Turk turning Christian, Muslim turning European, of the Armenian-Turk or the Turkish-Armenian, resisted effacement and could only be repressed. This is what happened for many long years in Istanbul. That is why he felt so powerless, so impotent a father.

But why was Dink murdered if he was that impotent, that neglected? Of course, there will be a political moment for our understanding of this disaster: a moment well beyond Turkish or Armenian, international or domestic strategies, escaping any parasitic intervention. Of course, we will translate "his passing" into the jargon of the living, of politics. Can we even do this without clipping his wings?

Is this murder not proof of the utter visibility of this explosive proximity of Armenian and Turk, of Muslim, Jew, and Christian? Does it not mean that it is no longer possible to repress this image of Antigone, let alone in Istanbul, in this city of all cities? Yes, Dink's death comes with a promise: the *a'raf* on which he stood now ignites into a promise of a justice to come, as was demonstrated by hundreds of thousands of Turks chanting: "We are all Armenians!" Now it is time for Dink's fatherly ghost to dance: see the Armenian-Turks, the Turkish-Armenians, growing in number each day since the murder. Elif Shafak was right to point out that this sickness could be contagious!<sup>17</sup>

And the seismic turbulences follow: apart from the crazed masses crying the murderer's name in football stadiums, a dummy bomb was placed outside Turkey's Parliament in Ankara, carrying a note calling for the release of Ogun Samast and Yasin Hayal, two key suspects in the Dink case; and a ferryboat was hijacked and a church vandalized. Now Orhan Pamuk, threatened publicly by Hayal and other nationalists, has had to flee the country. Mahcupyan speaks of two Turks in his article (now comes a double disjunction): "In fact, this opinion that Turks are 'unchangeable' was not new [...] Hrant and I would never pay heed to these assertions. Now that I think about it, I see that we were simply too young to know what our fathers had learned a long time ago [...] When I see people protesting Hrant's murder, I can't help but ask if there is

another 'Turk' different from these people. How can I ignore that the people I call 'Turks' are my comrades that I share my life with, my day, my inner feelings, and my opinions? But how too can I ignore that the other 'Turk' always steps in eventually to make his mark? This is no longer about the 'Armenian question' or the 'genocide'. What we are seeing is the standoff between these two Turks. As Armenians, we are curious which Turk will shape the future. And in our hearts, skittish as pigeons, we wish that our comrades in life win over."<sup>18</sup>

One Turk murdered Dink, but the other is chanting. So let the ghosts dance. Now Hrant Dink has joined his fellow Armenians as the last victim of the first genocide of the last century,<sup>19</sup> let one million five hundred thousand and *one* ghosts (yes, one more I say, one more) dance now. And we will see what blessings or whatever will follow.

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<sup>1</sup> I borrow the title from Gil Anidjar's introduction to Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion* (New York & London: Routledge, 2002), 1–39.

<sup>2</sup> Results can be found at:

[www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/5836552.asp?m=1&gid=112&srid=3428&oid=1](http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/5836552.asp?m=1&gid=112&srid=3428&oid=1) The majority of respondents were against the slogan.

<sup>3</sup> "Any time (Dink) was asked if genocide took place or not, he always cracked a smile [...] He didn't place a lot of importance on the term. He would always say, 'I know what happened to my people.' [...] He hesitated to use it in Turkish context, because he told me, 'When I use this term, it creates a certain tension, animosity, and my message cannot get through. That's why I don't use [it] and, because for me, the important thing is that my message gets through.'" Kathryn Nelson, Conrad Wilson, "Turks Investigate U Prof", available at: [www.mndaily.com/article.php?id=70539](http://www.mndaily.com/article.php?id=70539).

<sup>4</sup> George Aghjayan, "We are all not Hrant Dink", <http://hrant-dink-news.newslib.com/story/9710-210/>.

<sup>5</sup> Hrant Dink, "Ruhumun Guvercin Tedirginligi", in *Agos*, 10 January 2007. English translation is available online at: [www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-turkey/pigeon\\_4271.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-turkey/pigeon_4271.jsp).

<sup>6</sup> Arus Yumul, Derya Sazak, "Bagimsiz Durusu Tehlikeli Bulundu", *Milliyet* 23 January 2007. Available in Turkish at: [www.milliyet.com.tr/2007/01/22/siyaset/asiy.html](http://www.milliyet.com.tr/2007/01/22/siyaset/asiy.html). And those of us who remember the opening speech by Orhan Pamuk — also a target of the recent nationalist fury, and another potential victim of the infamous article 301 of Turkish penal code — at the 18th European Meeting of Cultural Journals in Istanbul in 2005, can see how important his words were: "What do I then expect as a reader? To me, cultural journals constitute a space where culture resists. Or should resist [...] Cultural journals should reject the issues brought up by the big media and instead insist on [...] their own concerns." It seems it is our responsibility, as readers and editors of cultural journals, to block this rabid instrumental reasoning. Orhan Pamuk, "Neighbourhoods", available at: [www.eurozine.com/articles/2006-10-13-pamuk-en.html](http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2006-10-13-pamuk-en.html).

<sup>7</sup> The speech Dink gave in Trabzon is available in Turkish at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6tK-vjr1yM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6tK-vjr1yM).

<sup>8</sup> More information about this famous conference is available at: [www.armeniapedia.org/index.php?title=Conference:\\_Ottoman\\_Armenians\\_During\\_the\\_Decline\\_of\\_the\\_Empire](http://www.armeniapedia.org/index.php?title=Conference:_Ottoman_Armenians_During_the_Decline_of_the_Empire).

<sup>9</sup> Hrant Dink, "Su Catlagini Buldu".

<sup>10</sup> The official webpage of the Society is: [www.ttk.org.tr/index.php?Page=Anasayfa&Lisan=en](http://www.ttk.org.tr/index.php?Page=Anasayfa&Lisan=en).

<sup>11</sup> The court misinterpreted one of Dink's articles in which he argued against diaspora Armenians' obsession with the "evil Turk", urging them to rid themselves of the blood-poisoning obsession. Üstün Bilgen-Reinart gives an account of Dink's sentence as follows: "It is ironic that Dink got into trouble for suggesting to diaspora Armenians that it was time to rid themselves of their rage against the Turks. 'Armenians, especially of the diaspora, tend to have a problem associated with the role of the other that the Turk has played in forming the Armenian identity', Dink says. 'There is a certain history. A trauma. The Turk has become such a source of pain that it "poisons the Armenian blood", as the Anatolian saying goes. In my article, I was addressing the Armenian world and saying: "There are two ways of getting rid of this poison. One way is for the Turks to empathize with you, and take action to reduce your trauma. At the moment, this seems unlikely. The

second way is for you to rid yourself of it. Turn your attention towards the state of Armenia and replace the poisoned blood associated with the Turk, with fresh blood associated with Armenia." It was the reference to 'poisoned blood associated with the Turk' that got Dink in court." [www.opendemocracy.net/articles/ViewPopUpArticle.jsp?id=1&articleId=3246](http://www.opendemocracy.net/articles/ViewPopUpArticle.jsp?id=1&articleId=3246)

- 12 Arus Yumul, Derya Sazak, "Bagimsiz Durusu Tehlikeli Bulundu".
- 13 Hrant Dink, "Su Catlagini Buldu", paper presented at the conference *Ottoman Armenians During the Decline of the Empire: Issues of Scientific Responsibility and Democracy*, 24–25 September 2005, at Istanbul Bilgi University. English translation is available at: [www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-turkey/europe\\_turkey\\_armenia\\_3118.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-turkey/europe_turkey_armenia_3118.jsp).
- 14 Üstün Bilgen-Reinart, "Hrant Dink: forging an Armenian identity in Turkey", available at: [www.opendemocracy.net/articles/ViewPopUpArticle.jsp?id=1&articleId=3246](http://www.opendemocracy.net/articles/ViewPopUpArticle.jsp?id=1&articleId=3246).
- 15 Hrant Dink, "Orhan Pamuk's Epic Journey", trans. by Murat Belge, available at: [www.opendemocracy.net/arts-turkey/pamuk\\_journey\\_3998.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-turkey/pamuk_journey_3998.jsp).
- 16 Etyen Mahcupyan, "Turkler", *Zaman*, 22 January 2007; available in Turkish at [www.zaman.com.tr/webapp-tr/yazar.do?yazino=490871](http://www.zaman.com.tr/webapp-tr/yazar.do?yazino=490871). An abridged English version is available at: [www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?enewsid=64543](http://www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?enewsid=64543).
- 17 Elif Shafak, "Hrant Dink's Funeral", available at: [www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-turkey/funeral\\_4281.jsp#one](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-turkey/funeral_4281.jsp#one).
- 18 Etyen Mahcupyan, "Turkler".
- 19 See Robert Fisk, "Award-winning writer shot by assassin in Istanbul street", *The Independent*, 20 January 2007. "Hrant Dink became the 1 500 001st victim of the Armenian genocide yesterday."

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