



Alman Dili ve Kültürü Araştırmaları Dergisi

Zeitschrift für Forschungen zur deutschen Sprache und Kultur
The Journal of German Language and Culture Studies

Cilt 7 Sayı 1 Haziran 2025/ Volume 7 Issue 1 June 2025

Geliş Tarihi: 16.02.2025- Kabul Tarihi: 26.05.2025 /Submitted: 16.02.2025- Accepted: 26.05.2025

Doi: 10.55143/alkad.1641058

Confronting the Repressed in the Modern Metropolis in Patrick Süskind's *The Pigeon*

Patrick Süskind'in Güvercin Romanında Modern Metropolde Bastırılanla Karşılaşma

Merve GÜNDAY*

Abstract

Patrick Süskind's novella *The Pigeon* (1987) portrays the unforeseen encounter of an emotionally detached human subject, Jonathan Noel, with a pigeon at the corridor of a lodge where he stays. One day, Jonathan wakes up as usual to go to work without knowing that nothing will be the same for him from this moment on. He comes across at the door to his room a pigeon that captures him with a sense of menace for no reason made explicit. While shaking him for a moment, the intrusion of the pigeon into his monotonous life announces also a series of transformations in him regarding how he positions himself in life as a subject. This book review essay takes Jonathan's encounter with his nonhuman other, the ambivalent pigeon, as a drama of an egocentric subject's encounter with the non-logocentric or the repressed. So, taking the pigeon that resurfaces all of a sudden in the symbolic surrounding of a hotel corridor as a symptom of Jonathan's repressed psychic material—also as a force enabling him to question the validity of his established beliefs—this review essay states that it is only when coming to terms with what remains repressed that the first steps for re-accessing subjective dynamism are taken.

Keywords: Patrick Süskind, *The Pigeon*, The Repressed, The Traumatizing, Symptom

Öz

Patrick Süskind'in *Güvercin* (1987) adlı romanı, Jonathan Noel adında duygusal açıdan kopuk bir insan öznesinin, kaldığı pansiyonun koridorunda bir güvercinle beklenmedik karşılaşmasını anlatır. Jonathan artık hiçbir şeyin kendisi için eskisi gibi olmayacağını bilmeyerek, bir gün işe gitmek için her zamanki gibi uyanır. Odasının kapısında, nedeni açıklanmayan bir şekilde onu tehdit duygusuyla sarsan sessiz bir güvercine rastlar. Güvercinin monoton hayatına girmesi onu bir an için sarsarken, bir özne olarak hayatta kendini nasıl konumlandığına dair geçireceği bir dizi dönüşümün de habercisi olur. Bu kitap inceleme yazısı,

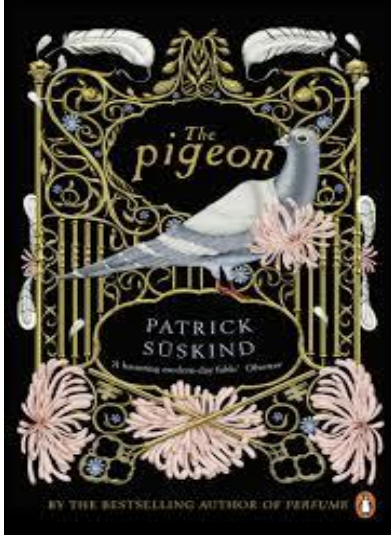
* Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Ankara Üniversitesi, Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi, Batı Dilleri ve Edebiyatları Bölümü, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Anabilim Dalı, e posta: mervegndy@hotmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-7345-9870



Jonathan'ın onun insan olmayan ötekisi, müphem güvercinle bu karşılaşmasını, benmerkezci bir öznenin logosantrik olmayan, bastırılmış olanla karşılaşmasının bir draması olarak ele alır. Bu bağlamda, bir otel koridorunun sembolik ortamında aniden ortaya çıkan güvercini, Jonathan'ın bastırılmış bilinçaltında yer alan bir semptomu—aynı zamanda ona yerleşik inançlarının geçerliliğini sorgulatan bir güç—olarak ele alan bu inceleme yazısı, öznel dinamizme yeniden erişmek için ilk adımların ancak bastırılmış olanla yüzleşildiğinde atılabileceğini ifade eder.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Patrick Süskind, Güvercin, Bastırılan, Travmatize eden, Semptom

Introduction



Opening the door of his hotel room on one Friday morning to visit the shared toilet, how could Jonathan Noel know that he was also opening a door to an unexpected visitor that would invade the monotony of his whole life? Ensuring that the other hotel residents are still asleep, Jonathan turns as usual the knob of his door's security lock to go to the toilet and while he is just on the verge of stepping out of his "beloved room," what he sees, to his surprise, becomes a silent pigeon "sitting before his door, not eight inches from the threshold, in the pale reflection of dawn" (Süskind, 2010, pp. 7; 9). Upon his encounter with the pigeon standing there in a crouching position "with red, taloned feet on the oxblood tiles of the hall and in sleek, blue-grey plumage," he experiences an inexplicable sense of fear and anxiety: after a few seconds of astonishment, he leaps back into his room and turning the security lock, sits down "trembling, his heart pounding wildly" (Süskind, 2010, 9;10). Later, he sets out to find a way to get out of this mess. To this end, the first thing that comes to his mind becomes the idea of

killing the pigeon to get rid of it; however, he changes his mind for fear of losing his job and going to jail. So, he thinks of asking for the help of a fire brigade, but his utmost care to keep up public appearance forces him to give up this idea, as well: "you'll be the laughing-stock of the building, the laughing-stock of the whole neighbourhood, 'look, Monsieur Noel!' they'll shout, and point their fingers at you, 'look Monsieur Noel has to be rescued from a pigeon!'" (Süskind, 2010, p. 12). Finally, he makes up his mind to spend the night and the following days in a boarding-house. With this in mind, he opens the door again and trying to overlook the pigeon, gets out of the hotel. The way Jonathan reacts when he encounters the pigeon sounds to be exaggerated to common ears at first glance and one cannot help thinking how a silent pigeon can instil such a great fear in a human subject.

In this novella, the pigeon appears as a symptom of Jonathan's repressed psychic material rather than simply signifying a bird in the material sense. Resurfacing in the symbolic in the form of a pigeon—an ambivalent figure standing at the intersection of the familiar-unfamiliar, the known-unknown, the visible-invisible—Jonathan's repressed psychic material intrudes barefoot into his detached life of solipsism and leads to his de/re-structuration, by simultaneously destroying and recreating him. No sooner does Jonathan begin to dissolve from the chains of his repressed traumatizing fears than the pigeon departs all of a sudden, as if a vision, which no wonder reflects the loss of his symptom, and hence his coming to terms with his repressed psychic material. So, linking the way that Jonathan feels afraid of the pigeon to his anxiety about the collapse of his self-absorbed life, this review essay elucidates what the pigeon or the repressed signifies for such a traumatized subject as Jonathan and how it triggers the dissolution of his ego boundaries.

Before the Pigeon Affair

Coinciding with the tense years of the World War period, Jonathan Noel's life is shaped by a number of traumas that leave an ineradicable mark on him, distorting the melodies of his songs of innocence or the smells of soap from Sunday baths and honeysuckles from the back garden. In July 1942, when he returns home from fishing on a summer afternoon, he runs into the kitchen with the expectation of finding his mother there cooking; however, he cannot see anything but her mother's "apron, hanging back over the chair" (Süskind, 2010, p. 2). Left in the middle of unanswered questions, he can understand not even a word when his father and the neighbours explain to him the reason behind her absence:

His mother was gone, his father said, she had had to go away for a long trip. They had taken her away, said the neighbours, they had taken her first to the Vélodrome d'Hiver and then out to the camp at Drancy, from there it was off to the east, and no one ever came back from there. (Süskind, 2010, p. 2)

Before recovering from the traumatic loss of his mother, he experiences also the loss of his father. Then, he and his sister are brought to a farm near the village of Puget in the valley of the Durance by an uncle who after hiding them there till the war ends, employs them as workers in his vegetable fields. Upon the demand of the uncle, in the early fifties, Jonathan signs up for military service for three years and spends most of the third year in the hospital to recover from "a shot in the foot and one in the leg and from amoebic dysentery" (Süskind, 2010, p. 3). When he returns to Puget in 1954, he experiences the loss of his sister who emigrates to Canada. He later marries a girl named Marie Baccouche who, after giving birth to a boy within four months, escapes with a Tunisian fruit merchant from Marseilla. In the face of all these traumatic experiences, Jonathan Noel finds the solution to detach himself from the outer world: "Drawing on all these episodes, Jonathan Noel came to the conclusion that you cannot depend on people, and that you can live in peace only if you keep them at arm's length" (Süskind, 2010, p. 3). So, with the aim of leaving everything behind, he goes to Paris where he is employed as a bank guard in the rue de Sèvres and starts to stay in a room on the seventh floor of a building in the rue de la Planche, reached by "a back courtyard, the narrow stairway, and a cramped hallway sparsely lit by one window" (Süskind, 2010, p. 4), as if portraying his unconscious mind's repression by the cold walls of reason.

The Pigeon's Intrusion into the Space of the Hotel Room and the Early Steps of Jonathan's Transformation

Retiring into the solitude of his room, Jonathan wants to break himself free from the outer world and hence cuts himself off from human relations: "it [his room] was and would remain Jonathan's island of security in a world of insecurity, his refuge, his beloved—yes, for she received him with a tender embrace each evening when he returned home, she offered warmth and protection" (Süskind, 2010, p. 7). Feeling disgusted by the betrayal of his trust by those to whom he had attributed so much meaning in life, Jonathan tries to escape the tyrannical gaze of the Other, "not looking for comfort, but for secure lodgings" "belong[ing] to him and him alone" and "protect[ing] him against life's unpleasant surprises," as evidenced in his attachment to this room which speaks to his unconscious as a womblike environment (Süskind, 2010, p. 4). Moreover, he evades making friendship with others, acting most of the time in the inventory as a "décor, not as a person" (Süskind, 2010, p. 24). But, as mentioned earlier, his encounter with the pigeon signals the beginning of a series of transformations in him. Before elaborating on how he takes the very first steps on the way of transformation through the intrusion of the pigeon into his life sterilized from all emotional contact, his first reaction when faced with the pigeon's all of a sudden appearance should be mentioned. It is undeniable that the first sight of the pigeon fills him with an ambivalent sense of disgust,

fear, and anxiety. Coming from the semiotic chora in Kristeva's words, the pigeon dazzles Jonathan with its disturbing gaze:

It has its head to one side and was glaring at Jonathan with its left eye. This eye, a small, circular disc, brown with a black centre, was dreadful to behold. It was like a button sewn on to the feathers of the head, lashless, browless, quite naked, turned quite shamelessly to the world and monstrously open; at the same time, however, there was something guarded and devious in that eye; and yet likewise it seemed to be neither open nor guarded, but rather quite simply lifeless, like the lens of a camera that swallows all external light and allows nothing to shine back out of its interior. No lustre, no shimmer lay in that eye, not a sparkle of anything alive. It was an eye without sight. And it glared at Jonathan. (Süskind, 2010, p. 9)

As an amalgam of the familiar-unfamiliar, the pigeon shatters the unspeakably lonely and monotonous world of Jonathan, who is obsessed with formulations, due to its resistance to depiction: "a pigeon is the epitome of chaos and anarchy, a pigeon that whizzes around unpredictably, that sets its claws in you, picks at your eyes, a pigeon that never stops soiling and spreading the filth and havoc of bacteria" (Süskind, 2010, p. 12). What disgusts Jonathan, keeping everyone at arm's length, in this encounter becomes especially the thought of having a physical contact with the pigeon. So, he wears his winter coat, "button[s] it up from top to bottom, wrap[s] a wool scarf around his neck and up over his chin, and protect[s] his hands with lined leather gloves" (Süskind, 2010, p. 18) Yet, though being filled with a sense of disquietude by the "lashless, browless, [and] quite naked" gaze of the pigeon, he begins to question the validity of his life with its appearance because it reminds him of what he represses—the fact that there is another dimension of life (a life that is corporeal, irrational, imaginary, non-logocentric, or beyond binaries).

88

Jonathan pisses into the basin as his first reaction to the gaze of the pigeon. Later, he achieves a connection with Madame Rocard and goes beyond such routinary expressions as "Good day, madame," "Good evening, madame," or "Thank you, madame" (Süskind, 2010, p. 23) in his relationship with her. Or, he throws into doubt the taken-for-granted status of established authority figures: "[a]nd yet they were alike, so Jonathan thought, the sphinx and the guard, for the power of both was not instrumental, it was symbolic" (Süskind, 2010, p. 33). Reflecting his dissolution from the bonds of pure rationality and self-containedness, or the destabilization of the formulas of fixity, he further wants to rebel against his reduction to the state of a statue by Monsieur Roedel. Though always awakening from his sleep when sensing the arrival of his limousine, after his confrontation with the pigeon, he, for the first time in his life, misses the approach of his limousine and finds it difficult to stand at attention: "he let himself fall gently back, against his own hands and against the column, and leaned, for the first time in his thirty-year career of service" (Süskind, 2010, p. 38). This scene implies the dissolution of statue-like Jonathan's egotistical fixity. As part of his corporeal awakening, he shows empathy towards a clochard who arouses a sense of envy in him, as a subject having no duty to carry out and fully enjoying his share in the world:

While Jonathan fell in for duty every day at nine on the dot, the clochard would come along at ten or eleven; and while Jonathan had to stand at attention, the fellow would lounge comfortably on a cardboard box and have a smoke; while Jonathan guarded the bank hour after hour, day after day, and year after year, at the risk of his life and as a way of painfully earning his keep the fellow did nothing but trust in the sympathy and assistance of his fellow men, who tossed their cash into his cap. And he never seemed to be in a bad mood, not even when his cap remained empty, never seemed to suffer or to be afraid or even bored. He always exuded an infuriating self-assurance and self-

satisfaction, an exasperating, publicly displayed aura of freedom. (Süskind, 2010, pp. 39-40)

Envy the lifestyle of this outcast, Jonathan questions his life and tries to find an answer to the question whether there is any meaning in "spending one-third of his life standing at the entrance of a bank, while occasionally opening a grille and saluting for the president's limousine...with minimal holiday and minimal pay," a great deal of which "disappear[s] in the form of taxes, rent, and social security payments" or not (Süskind, 2010, p. 41). Moreover, he thinks that while this "irresponsible man" gives "the impression of a firmly grounded personality in finest harmony with the world and enjoying life," he, "who his whole life long had been a well-behaved and orderly fellow, unpretentious, almost ascetic, clean, always punctual and obedient, reliable, respectable" (Süskind, 2010, p. 45) does not enjoy life. Later, in stark contrast to his position as a perfect (!) citizen, as a subject who can be likened to "[t]he [u]nknown [c]itizen"¹ of W. H. Auden, and though previously hating those leaving their rubbish on benches instead of using litter baskets, he leaves an empty milk carton on a park bench. Then, he becomes more sensitive towards the outside world: though once seeming to be happy in his hotel room, away from all the troubles of the outside world, he now thinks himself as nothing beyond a huge disappointment due to his selfishness and cowardly detachment from empirical realities: "...you're a child, you only dreamed that you had grown up to be a disgusting old guard in Paris, but you're a child and you're sitting in the cellar of your parents' house, and outside is war" (Süskind, 2010, pp. 73-74). Later, he awakens to any detail in his surroundings:

He looked back. His gaze followed the spiraling oval twists of the railing into the depths of the stairwell, and at every floor he saw the rays of light falling in from the sides. The morning light had lost its blue and grown yellow and warmer, he thought. From the elegant apartments he could hear the first sounds of the awakening house: the tinkle of cups, the muted slam of a refrigerator door, soft radio music. And then suddenly a familiar aroma rushed into his nose, the aroma of Madame Lassalle's coffee, and he sucked in several breathfuls of it, he felt as if he were drinking that coffee. (Süskind, 2010, p. 77)

Taking the very first steps on the way of his transformation into a sensitive self through the pigeon, Jonathan no longer retires into his own shell but rather begins to hear "the tinkle of cups, the muted slam of a refrigerator door, [or] soft radio music" from the apartments around. Thus, he feels such a great sense of elation that he wants to "take off his shoes," as if expressing his thirst for getting rid of the chains of social codes. Furthermore, as if pointing to the non-linear nature of subjectivity, he begins to walk "in a zigzag from puddle to puddle" without any fear of getting dirty:

He had a great urge to take off his shoes and socks and walk the rest of the way barefoot, and if he didn't do it, it was only out of laziness and not because he would have found it improper. But he splashed diligently through the puddles, he splashed tight through the middle of them, walked in a zigzag from puddle to puddle, sometimes even crossed the street because he saw an especially lovely, wide puddle on the far pavement, and stomped through it with flat, splashing soles, sending spray up onto display windows on one side and parked cars on the other and his own trouser legs; it was delightful, he loved making this little childish mess, it was like some great freedom that had been restored to him. And he was still travelling on the wings of bliss when he reached the rue de la Planche, entered the building, scurried past Madame Rocard's

¹ This is the title of Auden's poem. See Auden, W.H. "The Unknown Citizen." *Creative Delights*. Ed. Shreedhar Lohani and Rameshwar Adhikary, Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 2007, pp. 86-87.

locked lodge, crossed the back courtyard, and climbed the narrow service stairs.
(Süskind, 2010, p. 76)

For the first time in his life, Jonathan takes off his mask as a self-contained subject sterilized from any touch with nature and returns to his childhood self. For instance, though being an epitome of order and duty or to put it more precisely, though sheltering himself behind the mask of perfectibility, he does not feel afraid of becoming himself, away from all the titles assigned to him in the symbolic world. So, he takes great pleasure in stomping in the “wide puddle on the far pavement” “with flat, splashing soles, sending spray up onto display windows on one side and parked cars on the other.”

After questioning how meaningful he is in his relation to the Other as a perfect citizen (!), paying his taxes regularly and standing upright like a statue every day on the marble stairs as a bank guard, Jonathan returns to his hotel room “as if travelling on the wings of bliss” and realizes that the pigeon no longer exists:

He walked ahead, more or less fearlessly, stepped through the light, entered the shadows behind it. The hall was completely empty. The pigeon had vanished. The splotches on the floor had been wiped away. Not a feather, not a wisp of down was left trembling on the red tiles. (Süskind, 2020, p. 77)

The sudden departure of the pigeon expresses Jonathan’s coming to terms with his repressed—his corporeal dimension of life, the traces of which can be found in the years before his family’s disintegration or before his renunciation of object-relations. The silent pigeon shatters Jonathan’s life of monotony and leads to his transformation into a sensitive subject by reminding him on the unconscious level what remains repressed in him. In this way of destabilizing Jonathan’s taken-for-granted assumptions about life and authority figures and recreating him as a subject of enjoying life and even envying the carefree state of a clochard, the pigeon takes on the role of a de/re-structuring force for Jonathan. So, its departure resembles the loss of a symptom when it is no longer repressed, which also explains the reason why by the end of the novella, the pigeon or the idea about the very presence of the pigeon no longer arouses a sense of threat in Jonathan—because he re-makes friendship with what would once speak to him as the menacing (a life beyond repressive dualities, codes, or still uncontaminated by the traumatizing memories).

References

- Auden, W.H. (2007). “The Unknown Citizen.” *Creative Delights*: pp. 86-87, eds. Shreedhar Lohani and Rameshwar Adhikary, Ratna Pustak Bhandar.
- Süskind, P. (2010). *The Pigeon*, trans. John E. Woods. London: Penguin Books.