

ARCHAIC STRUCTURES AS IMAGINATIVE COUNTER-DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

In Chuck Palahniuk's *Rant: An Oral Biography of Buster Casey*, a picaresque eccentric Buster "Rant" Casey appears in the spotlight in the "stories" mythologically told in a postmodern manner. Rant reminds of Patrick Süskind's antihero, Jean-Baptiste Grenouille flamboyantly, attributable to his fantastic features. Within the scope of "literature as cultural ecology," transgressive Rant becomes the flesh and blood form of "mythical" dialectics of enlightenment, which is reinforced through his connoting archaic structures. His intrusion to the "healthy" American society appears as a reminiscent of Dionysus' entrance to Pentheus' city, Theben, in Euripides' *The Bacchae*. Comparing the biographies of Rant and Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, this article attempts to demonstrate how the archaic and prerational "mythemes" in both novels become the very representation of the imaginative counter-discourse in Hubert Zapf's triadic function model.

Keywords: Transgression, Hubert Zapf, cultural ecology, imaginative counter-discourse, *Rant: An Oral Biography of Buster Casey*, *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*.

ÖZET

Chuck Palahniuk'in *Çarpışma Partisi* olarak Türkçe'ye çevrilmiş olan *Rant: An Oral Biography of Buster Casey* adlı romanındaki postmodern üslupla mitolojik olarak anlatılmış olan hikayelerde pikaresk eksantrik kahraman Buster Rant Casey baş rolde yer almaktadır. Rant, fantastik özellikleri açısından Patrick Süskind'in *Koku* başlıklı romanındaki anti-kahraman Jean-Baptiste Grenouille'i çarpıcı bir şekilde yansıtmaktadır. "Kültürel Ekoloji Olarak Edebiyat" kuramının çerçevesi içerisinde transgresif bir karakter olan Rant, arkaik yapıları okuyucunun zihnine çağırması itibarıyla aydınlanmanın mitik diyalektiğinin "etten kemikten" bir biçimi olarak karşımıza çıkmakta. Rant'ın "sağlıklı" Amerikan toplumuna tecavüz ederek girmesi, Euripides'in *Bakhalar*'ında Dionysos'un Pentheus'a

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ait Tebai kentine gelişini hatırlatır. Bu makale, Rant ve Jean-Baptiste Grenouille'in biyografilerini karşılaştırarak arkaik ve rasyonalite öncesi mitlerin Hubert Zapf'ın üçlü işlev modelindeki kurmaca karşıt söylemi nasıl yansıttığını göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Transgresyon, Hubert Zapf, Kültürel Ekoloji, kurmaca karşıt söylem, Çarpışma Partisi, *Koku*.

The reason why the theory of “literature as cultural ecology” coined by Hubert Zapf is placed at the very beginning of the 21st century is actually neither a matter of coincidence, nor an inevitable outcome of its creator’s scholarly biography.¹ “Literature as cultural ecology” basically taking its roots from the dichotomy of nature / culture, attempts to ponder the function of literature within cultural history. Hubert Zapf’s standpoint in borrowing the terminology of ecocriticism lies in the very fact that an ecological perspective not only provides the possible grounds for a thorough interpretation of culture while assuming that culture and consciousness – thus cultural memory – cannot ever come into existence independently from one another, but also enhances an interdisciplinary outlook towards literature. In this respect, Zapf claims that “literature acts like an ecological force within the larger cultural system,” where he steers clear of reducing literature to a medium demonstrating the ecological issues such as the recent environmental crisis from an anthropocentric outlook (Zapf 85). Instead, he intends to take literature as a means to recommunicate nature/culture dichotomy in order to abolish the common principle that handles nature and culture as mere binary oppositions: literature forms a sphere where this essentialism is overcome. In this article my object is to explain Hubert Zapf’s theory of “literature as cultural ecology” with a special emphasis on the demonstration of the “imaginative counter-discourse” in Chuck Palahniuk’s *Rant: An Oral Biography of Buster Casey* in relation with Patrick Süskind’s *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*.

Zapf’s explication of literature’s function as cultural ecology comprises a triadic function model displaying three main procedures. According to this

¹ This article is an extended and revised version of my presentation in the conference entitled *Transcultural Spaces: Challenges of Urbanity, Ecology, and the Environment in the New Millennium* organised by John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies, Freie Universität in Berlin, Germany, in 2008.

model, literature internalises a cultural-critical metadiscourse representing the description of the deficits and controversies of the prevailing civilisatory powers, which highlights the single-dimensional aspect of culture; an imaginative counter-discourse positing a critical stance towards the repressive aspects of culture while reverberating the neglected, marginalised or the “other” of culture; a reintegrative inter-discourse that forms a relationship between the repressed and systemic realities, through which the harmonisation of nature and culture is provided so as to preserve the dynamism of culture (Zapf 93). Through the function of cultural-critical metadiscourse and imaginative counter-discourse, literature, in fact, demonstrates the dichotomic alternatives in life which cannot exist without the other. Though Zapf never explicitly mentions three major works of Western cultural history are embedded in the theory of “literature as cultural ecology”: Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, Adorno and Horkheimer’s *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*. Within the framework of this article, these three texts not only form the theoretical basis of “literature as cultural ecology” but also accentuate the creative potential of transgression that is inherent in imaginative literature.

The triadic function model of “literature as cultural ecology,” neatly circumscribes the attributes of transgressional fiction, a label under which almost all of Chuck Palahniuk’s novels can be subsumed. However, rather than contemplating on the devices of transgressional fiction, I will focus on how the character(s)’ experiences of transgression contribute to the emergence of an imaginative counter-discourse through the enunciation of archaic structures in Chuck Palahniuk’s, *Rant: An Oral Biography of Buster Casey* with respect to Patrick Süskind’s *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*. In almost all the novels of Palahniuk, antiheroes dominate the literary scenery; in *Rant*, for instance, picaresque, eccentric Buster “Rant” Casey appears in the spotlight of “stories” told mythologically but in a postmodern manner.

Transgression can simply be explained as “the exceeding of due bounds or limits”²; however, in the literary sense, it refers to the transformation of a character following a certain process. Jurij Lotman explains the term in the following terms:

² “transgression.” *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. 24 Oct. 2008. <Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/transgression>>.

Once the agent has crossed a border, he enters another semantic field, an 'anti-field' vis-a-vis the initial one, if movement is to cease, he has to merge with the field, to be transformed from a mobile into an immobile persona. (Lotman 241)

What is significant about transgression is that it denotes a phase where it is impossible to attain the previous state, which points to a kind of "rite of passage" in Arnold Van Gennep's terms (Van Gennep 66). Transgression, as a motif, already appears in the Bible, the fall of Adam and Eve, directing humankind towards a completely different fate. Likewise, the case of the Tower of Babel marks a transgression in the sense that human beings have experienced the ultimate confusion through the creation of different languages (Booker 1-3).

Friedrich Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy* meditates on transgression through comparing Sophocles' tragic hero Oedipus with Aeschylus' Prometheus, in his terms, "the glory of passivity with the glory of activity" (Nietzsche 31). Oedipus remains passive in the sense that he does not commit "sin" deliberately, whereas Prometheus has the courage to steal fire from the gods so that man will have the opportunity to control his own destiny. Nietzsche associates the functions of the Prometheus myth for Aryan people with the Fall for the Semitics and considers the two myths "as brother and sister" (32). Prometheus' ability to control fire is the reflection of man's eternal endeavour to control nature, as Nietzsche considers as "robbery of the divine nature" (32). Nietzsche tends to sublimate this "active sin" and calls it a Promethean virtue, which can be interpreted as the moment of transgression experienced by the "sinner." That is to say, once the individual gains awareness through knowledge he crosses the line and does not belong to his/her previous sphere anymore, which can be recapitulated as transgression. To put it differently, Nietzsche's definition of transgression points to the separate spheres of Apollo and Dionysus: while Apollo is drawing borders and cultivate the earth, Dionysus constantly attempts to get beyond the borders and forms the imaginative counter-discourse in Zapfian terms.

Just as transgression implies a process of change, the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century marks a point of intersection in the sense that it is a period of not only rise, but also decline. Traditional values are subject to radical and rather rapid alterations, the "old" and the "new" have become interchangeable notions, which is essentially summed up in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* where they reiterate this two-fold facade of the Enlightenment. One of the central issues they focus on is the 'mythi-

cal' nature of the Enlightenment, which actually forms a potential for "archaic structures" to come into existence in a (post)modern world. Man's attempts to eradicate myths results in his failure to recognize the fact that enlightenment is a myth itself. In other words, the more man endeavours to flee from myths through his reason and the apparatuses of "culture", the more intensely he falls back into it. In this sense, the Enlightenment appears as both a benefit and a threat to the Western world. As Adorno and Horkheimer claim:

[Enlightenment] still recognizes itself even in myths. Whatever myths the resistance may appeal to, by virtue of the very fact that they become arguments in the process of opposition, they acknowledge the principle of dissolvent rationality for which they reproach the Enlightenment. Enlightenment is totalitarian. (Adorno & Horkheimer 6)

The sublimation of the enlightenment project provides the possible grounds for almost a mythical reception of anthropomorphism, which inevitably causes man to ignore the discrepancies of the enlightenment movement. However, no matter how the Enlightenment project endeavours to promote rationality while eliminating irrationality, the result turns out to be that society is very naturally and indeed inevitably dragged into a "new" form of irrationality out of regression. This state of irrationality becomes the articulation of transgression in the sense that so-called process of enlightenment suggests a crossing of the boundaries; the enlightened individual has "achieved" an awareness that makes it impossible to return to his/her previous state, and thus causes a state of frenzy as far as culture is concerned. In other words, irrationality has only worn a different outfit, but the essence is even more repressive than before, a problem which is also discussed in *Rant: An Oral Biography of Buster Casey* by Phoebe Truffeau, the epidemiologist: "Our greatest civilizations have always been destroyed by epidemic disease," beginning in ancient Egypt and Greece (Palahniuk 186). Phoebe Truffeau's statement can also be considered as a reminiscence of Professor Van Helsing's lecture on blood diseases in Francis Ford Coppola's film *Bram Stoker's Dracula* where he states

"Venereal diseases [the diseases of Venus, F.C.] imputes to them divine origin. They involve the sex problem about which ethics and ideals of Christianity are concerned. Civilisation and 'syphilisation' have advanced together." (DVD *Bram Stoker's Dracula*).

Palahniuk's novel is an illustration of the defeat, or transformation of the so-called "healthy" American society by rabies spread by the protagonist,

Rant. In other words, a society in which the constituents of enlightenment rule can very easily come under the authority of epidemic disease, an indication of primitiveness, and remain defenceless.

Mikhail Bakhtin in his *Rabelais and His World* also deals with transgression with regard to his differentiation between the official and unofficial speeches. His elaboration of the official speech corresponds to the restrictions of the ideological and systemic realities. On the other hand, the unofficial speech, predominantly foregrounded in the concept of carnival, in which the scenes of the grotesque play the utmost role, functions as a means to communicate the issues that are marginalised and left implicit. Bakhtin's carnival appears as a social event that involves rituals, means of entertainment, laughter and excess, which forms an alternative and yet free space for man to express himself differently as opposing his appearance within the borders of official space. In other words, carnival, embodying the devices of the unofficial speech, becomes the enunciation of Dionysian intrusion into the Apollonian world order. In this sense, in accordance with cultural ecology, the state of carnival can be regarded as merging several clashing incidents including the cycles of death and birth, regeneration, and the indefinite aspects of the cosmos in the unity of the "indissoluble grotesque whole," and thus represents constant transgression (Bakhtin 223).

In *Rant*, the protagonist not only experiences transgression himself, but also drags the society he lives in to another stage of existence. The novel depicts the story of the eccentric Buster "Rant" Casey, the "superspreeder," the leader of Party Crashers, and the legendary "nighttimer," whose primary devices of transgression are epidemic disease and time. Rant is an expert in rabies and poisonous animals and he finds "rest" in night-time car accidents performed in a ritual. Through his behaviour towards epidemic disease, he gives others a new dimension of existence, and with the Party Crashers he challenges time, the primary instrument of culture. In this sense, Rant's transgression very much evokes the one that Count Dracula experiences; as the intruder coming from a small town, he almost colonizes the city and thus reiterates man's regression from culture to nature. Palahniuk also reconstructs the archaic figure of Dionysus' epidemic intrusion to Pentheus' city Thebes. Rant has a literary kinship with Euripides' Dionysus in that he is the stranger coming from a small town and conquering the city, like Dionysus coming from the east and wanting his religion to be introduced and cults to be performed. Furthermore, in the course of the novel, the reader witnesses the process of Rant's discovering his "true nature," the fact that Chester Casey is not his real father. As Chet points out, "Soon as you discover your true nature, (...) you hightail it back to Middleton,"

which is an indication that what Rant experiences in the city corresponds to his self-quest as well (Palahniuk 112).

The elements of regression are evident in Rant even in terms of its narration. The novel is written in the form of an oral history; that is, it comprises the testimonies of different people after the death of the protagonist Buster “Rant” Casey, which invites the reader into a non-linear, and from time to time inconsistent, timeline. This inconsistent timeline in fact, not only signifies a path away from logocentrism, but also perfectly accords with the multiple identities Rant possesses and can be observed on three levels throughout the novel. Firstly, in terms of narration: the reader gets to know him merely through other people’s accounts. Secondly, he has different names within his nuclear family: his mother calls him Buddy, his father calls him Buster. And thirdly, he has almost innumerable identities in his outside life. As the car salesman, Wallace Boyer reports:

My dilemma is: Do I ask for his autograph? Slowing my breath, pacing my chest to his, I ask: Is he related to that guy . . . Rant Casey? “Werewolf Casey” – the worst Patient Zero in the history of disease? The “superspreader” who’s infected half the country? America’s “Kissing Killer”? Rant “Mad Dog” Casey? (5)

Or he is the “Tooth Fairy” for the kids in Middletown, and arranges the most interesting Halloween party that turns into a bloodbath to which Rant owes his name. Buster “Rant” Casey himself becomes a myth through the characters he breathes life into and preserves his vitality (tooth) and immortality within the society in which he lives. As Rant’s story is composed from interviews made with his acquaintances, it can be argued that Rant’s character is also formed by them. That is to say, Rant is first himself – the mythical figure, then almost a potpourri of all the people talking about him, as well as the blend of these in the eyes of the reader. One of the Party Crashers, Shot Dunnyun, accounts, “It’s comforting to know, after all the Party Crash I’ve survived, that, the day I finally meet Death, the two of us will be old, long lost friends. Me and Death, separated at birth.” Here Dunnyun, in fact, is giving voice to Rant, restating his vitality (198).

Rant corresponds to the character of the freak in the sense that he is in search of diverse tastes in life: he is fond of getting bitten by rabid animals and poisonous snakes and spiders, his sense of smell is so strong that he can distinguish between the secretion of people – especially women – and garbage waste, which reminds one of the antihero Jean-Baptiste Grenouille in Patrick Süskind’s *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*. Grenouille, having an extraordinary sense of smell, but lacking a personal scent – the primary attribute of identity – creates perfumes out of the pheromones of young virgin girls, for which he kills them

without spilling a drop of their blood. Rant, just like Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, becomes not only a manipulator, but also a serial killer in using his talent. The sense of smell and the nose as an organ are indeed significant here in the sense that they evoke the Dionysian phenomena with the grotesquery they suggest, and therefore they belong to the sphere where the imaginative counter-discourse comes into existence – especially when compared with the eye and seeing. Hence, both novels, in a way, depict postmodern versions of Dionysian orgy and ecstasy. Jean-Baptiste Grenouille is born into eighteenth-century Paris where

The streets stank of manure, the courtyards of urine, the stairwells stank of moldering wood and rat droppings, the kitchens of spoiled cabbage and mutton fat; the unaired parlors stank of stale dust, the bedrooms of greasy sheets, damp featherbeds, and the pungently sweet aroma of chamber pots. (...) People stank of sweat and unwashed clothes; from their mouths came the stench of rotting teeth, from their bellies that of onions, and from their bodies, if they were no longer very young, came the stench of rancid cheese and sour milk and tumorous disease. (...) The peasant stank as did the priest, the apprentice as did his master's wife, the whole of the aristocracy stank, even the king himself stank, stank like a rank lion, and the queen like an old goat, summer and winter. (Süskind 3-4)

Eighteenth-century Paris as the urban setting of Süskind's novel is particularly significant in that it represents the age of Enlightenment. Süskind juxtaposes the era's excessive preoccupation with rationality with the genius of his protagonist which overrides the mechanisms of the Enlightenment. To be precise, the consequences of Jean-Baptiste Grenouille's innate talent for experimenting with scents appear as a metaphorical predestination of the potential deconstruction of Enlightenment ideals. Nevzat Kaya, in his book *Der Gott des Grotesken. Eine literaturanthropologische Studie* (The God of the Grotesque. A Literary-Anthropological Study) builds a correlation between the Enlightenment-Age-France and Jean-Baptiste Grenouille's counter-position with his extraordinary nose and faculty of smell as follows:

The nose, "most primitive organ of smelling," implies in Grenouille's case his grotesque declaration of autonomy from the "rest" of his body: Jean-Baptiste is a nose and exists only through his nose; he represents his age, as Pater Terrier comments; therefore he, unable to smell, is a "non-individual." However, the nose, which also stands for the phallus, represents the material creative power of the "toad": if Jean-Baptiste is "only" nose, he is at the same time "nothing but" phallus. The grotesque acquires a hyperbolic nuance if we assume, in this logic, that Grenouille is basically nothing but a phallus in the shape of a human! That is also why he lacks an individual smell: after all, he embodies the phallic principle; he is not anybody's phallus, he is only phallus.

He lacks the location of ratio: the brain, which is the prerequisite for any kind of individuation. He appears as an “anachronism”: the Apollonian age of the Eye does not even perceive him, the phallus of the Dionysian cult, anymore. It is significant that the Apollonian eye-people of the eighteenth century (the age of *Enlightenment*) are not only unable to smell him but also, and for this very reason, to perceive him at all—they do not see him either. (Kaya 68)³

Under these circumstances, Grenouille becomes the flesh and blood form of the imaginative counter-discourse in the sense that he survives in the Age of Enlightenment only through his congeni(t)al gift. Towards the end of the novel, he creates a scent that mesmerises everyone, regardless of their social status, wealth, belief, or age; consequently, they are dragged into a massive orgy, the point where not only the borders are transcended by Dionysian ecstasy, but also nature triumphs over culture:

They all regarded the man in the blue frock coat as the most handsome, attractive, and perfect creature they could imagine: to the nuns he appeared to be the Savior in person, to the satanists as the shining Lord of Darkness, to those who were citizens of the Enlightenment as the Highest Principle, to young maidens as a fairy-tale prince, to men as their ideal image of themselves. And they all felt as if he had seen through them at their most vulnerable point, grasped them, touched their erotic core. It was as if the man had ten thousand invisible hands and had laid a hand on the genitals of the ten thousand people surrounding him and fondled them in just the way that each of them, whether man or woman, desired in his or her most secret fantasies. (276-277)

Rant’s intrusion into “healthy” American society, starting in the town and gaining impetus in the city, can be likened to Jean-Baptiste Grenouille’s appearance in eighteenth century France. At the outset, Palahniuk’s oral history develops into a representation of a dystopian society with Rant’s arrival in the city and participation with the “nighttimers.” In the city, society is divided into daytimers and nighttimers: people living during the day and those living during the night. Moreover, Rant becomes the leader of a group called Party Crashers. Nighttimes and daytimers stand for the Nature / Culture dichotomy in terms of the representation of archaic structures. While, daytimers are the civilised and normative face of city life, nighttimers symbolise the breaking of the rules, oppression and the point where the portrayal of a dystopian future comes into sight. The cultural-critical metadiscourse and the imaginative counter-discourse of Hubert Zapf’s triadic function model manifest themselves in the daytimers

³ Translated by Assist. Prof. Timo Müller from Augsburg University, Department of American Studies.

and the nighttimers as well. In this sense, Rant, through his eccentricity, forms the imaginative counter-discourse himself. Furthermore, from the ethnological perspective, in the light of Klaus E. Müller's remarks in his work *Die bessere und die schlechtere Hälfte. Die Ethnologie des Geschlechterkonflikts*, Buster "Rant" Casey depicts the transgressive intrusion of exosphere into endosphere; that is, "daytimers" live in the endosphere in Apollonian Thebes, and "nighttimers" are the inhabitants of the exosphere in Dionysus' post-Pentheus Thebes. Endosphere and exosphere indicate a spatial difference from an ethnological perspective and become a temporal duality in Palahniuk's novel. However, according to Müller, this temporal duality builds a gender-related duality in the sense that exosphere corresponds to the area pertaining to men; to be precise, it is beyond the ecumenical and in the centre there is the "home village." Men, transgressively, tend to annihilate the anonymity of this area through their rational minds. Exosphere, at the mythological level, matches up with not only the realm of the unknown and the "mythical," but also that of the feminine. Therefore, exosphere remains closer to the mythical space of Dionysus. In addition, Dionysus is referred to as the god of women; as Johann Jacob Bachofen points out, "Dionysos ist vorzugsweise der Frauen Gott. Alle Seiten der weiblichen Natur finden in ihm ihre Befriedigung" (Bachofen 585).⁴ The genderizing of the topography stems from these relationships; the time-related duality finds expression in this a topographical duality which can be explicated with the fact that in the night the city transforms into an exospherical and thus irrational scenery (Müller 141-154).

The image of Euripides' *Bacchae* is repeated in the context of Süskind's *Perfume*, as well. Dionysus' entrance to Thebes undoubtedly resembles Grenouille's getting free from the sentence of death through the smell of Laure he wears, paving the way for a massive orgy in the town. However, at the end, both characters are ruined after performing their task of dragging people into a state of overwhelming ecstasy reminiscent of the primary drives of a human being. To put it differently, the incidents become an articulation of the fact that it is impossible for a human being to get rid of his primitive side, which is closer to nature.

Within the context of "literature as cultural ecology," Rant and Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, having experienced transgression in a most vigorous manner, become not only the flesh and blood form of "mythical" dialectics of enlightenment reinforced through the archaic structures they connote, but also the point where the

⁴ Dionysus is far and foremost the god of women. Nature of women finds its fulfilment in him.

mythical dialectics of enlightenment intersect with the carnivalesque. Having a literary kinship with Jean-Baptiste Grenouille's, Rant's "biography," entwined with archaic and prerational "mythemes," becomes the representation of the imaginative counter-discourse as described in Zapf's triadic function model.

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