

Treatment of “Death” in the Poems of Thomas Hardy and Cahit Sitki Taranci

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Abstract Thomas Hardy and Cahit Sitki Taranci are two significant representatives of modern English and Turkish poets. Their poems are marked by an intense preoccupation with death, which is actually in parallelism with the sense of ending and crisis of representation experienced by most intellectuals of their time. Poetry was a means of revealing their uneasiness about the overwhelming idea of death. Therefore, both Hardy and Taranci wrote poems dealing with the passing of time, transience, and aging. Thoughts of coming close to the end made them write poems anticipating their own deaths as well. Some of their poems display a willingness to die because they consider death also as a sort of relief that keeps them away from all their worldly sufferings. However, the possibility of being forgotten after they die was another important concern in their poems because they cling to life with all its pleasing details and traumatic experiences. Thus, death also meant a separation from the beloved ones and familiar things in life to them. Moreover, death is represented as a way of dissolution into nature in Hardy’s and Taranci’s poems but this process has different implications.

Key words Thomas Hardy; Cahit Sitki Taranci; death; Turkish poetry; modern poetry

Death has been a frequently referred phenomenon in both modern Turkish and English literatures as a theme, a source of inspiration, a plot device, a metaphor or symbol, possibly because death as an end bears strong affinities to the sense of ending, in epistemological sense, experienced traumatically at the turn of the nineteenth century or in the first half of the twentieth century. Another reason for the attraction of death as a theme might be the crisis of representation experienced by the intellectuals and their linguistic impotence to capture “meaning.” This paper deals with the treatment of death in the poems of Thomas Hardy and Cahit Sitki Taranci who are both known as “death poets” in English and Turkish literatures. One can see that the lives of

both Hardy (1840-1928) and Taranci (1910-1956) were toughened by the grave idea of death and bereavement, and poetry served, for them, as a device to express their anxiety with this devastating idea. Their poems also represent death as a way of escape from the gloomy life they led into nature, which offered some sort of relief.

“If that most of the aesthetics theorists consider art as a ‘projection’ theory is remembered, the poet has a desire to overcome his/her fear of . . . time and . . . death by turning into eternal reflections by means of art. Thus, the pressure of death that has become an obsession . . . is aimed to be lowered” (Korkmaz 224). As it is mentioned above, the idea of death brings about an anxiety regarding time because of the idea of transience, ageing and coming close to the end. Hardy laments for passing of time for many different reasons as well. In “The New Dawn’s Business,” time is represented as the killer (Bailey 575). In “During Wind and Rain,” continuously repeated expressions, “Ah, no; the years O!”(6) and “Ah, no; the years, the years”(13) remind “the reader both of the ineluctable passing of time and of mortality” (Harvey n.pag.¹). Also, in “A Broken Appointment” the expression “time-torn man” (15) refers to the destructive features of time. In Taranci’s poems, time is represented with similar motives: The lines, “Ah o kadrini bilemediğim günler,” [“Oh! Those days I didn’t appreciate” (9)] in “Gençlik Böyledir İşte” (“Such is Youth”) and “Ve sanmam geri gelsin bu giden günler ölüm.” [“And I don’t think these passing days will come back, death!” (8)] in “Obsession” bear the same feeling as that of Hardy’s.

In Hardy’s “I Look Into My Glass” and Taranci’s “Dar Kalip” (“Tight Fit”) and “Otuz Beş Yaş” (“Poem at Thirty-Five”), the poets express their consternation at passing of time by means of reflecting upon the fact of getting old. In “I Look into My Glass,” upon seeing his image in the mirror, Hardy, aged sixty at that time, laments that “his heart has not shrunk as his features have” (Bailey 111):

I LOOK into my glass,
And view my wasting skin,
And say, ‘Would God it came to pass
My heart had shrunk as thin!’ (1-4)

This first stanza of the poem makes it clear that the poet is agonized at getting physically old while remaining young inside, which is also indicated by the words, “throbbings of noontide” (12) which refer to the fact that the heart of the poet beats as if he was in his youth, in the last line of the poem.

In “Tight Fit,” Taranci uses the same image of looking into a mirror:

My mirror, my mirror shows me my interior and my exterior

As a giant and a dwarf,
 Feeling and reflecting upon this blatant contradiction,
 How shall I hold back my outcry! (5-8)²

Like Hardy, Taranci complains about the discrepancy between his heart as being young and his appearance as looking old. He feels like a giant but he looks like a dwarf and he cannot stand this situation. Similarly, in "Poem at Thirty-Five," the poet cannot believe that the old looking image in the mirror is his own: "Look at my temples, are they snow-clad? / O my God, is this wrinkled face me? / These eyes rimmed with rings purple and sad?" (6-8). These lines show that he cannot accept ageing and he blames the mirrors for this situation: "Why are you now my arch enemy, / Mirrors, the best friends I ever had?" (9-10). He also alludes to his loneliness by calling the mirrors his "best friends." In view of these poems, one cannot help remembering Hynes's ideas on Hardy and Yeats as old poets and apply it to Taranci as well though he was younger when he wrote his poems. He says that "they express more than the decay of the flesh; they also reveal the separation between the outer and the inner self that all old people feel" (110).

The idea of ageing gives way to another common frame in which the macabre thoughts are represented, which is the poets anticipating their own deaths. In "Who's in the Next Room?" Hardy feels that death is nearby. As Bailey suggests, "the poem seems an eerie dialogue between Hardy's feeling of dread and his reason" (399). He thinks that he sees, hears and feels somebody in the next room, which is actually a metaphor, but he is assured that he does not in the last lines of the first three stanzas. Barbara Hardy states that [t]his is the voice of Hardy's irony, solemnly and patiently spelling it all out, not pitying but invoking the sense of mortality in a voice which comes frighteningly from nowhere, unidentified except as a source of knowledge" (B. Hardy 122-123). In the last stanza, he gets his answer and all his intuitions are proved to be true. The person in the next door turns out to be "a figure wan" (17) and this figure connotes death, which becomes more obvious in the following lines: "With a message to one in there of something due? / Shall I know him anon? / 'Yea he; and he brought such; and you'll know him anon." (18-20).

In "Şaşırdım Kaldım" ("I'm at a Loss") written by Taranci, the same image of death being nearby is encountered again. However, it is felt more deeply this time because it is not "a figure wan" in the next door but "a horse nickering at [the poet's] door" (11-12):

No blessings left in the faint and dim
 Light of hope,

And death has become a restless horse
Nickering at my door after all. (9-12) ³

Taranci thinks that there is no way out at that point because there is no hope left anymore. He feels so helpless so he thinks he is going to die. These two poems indicate that the idea of their own death was always present in the lives of the two poets, especially when they got older. They were, in a way, waiting anxiously for the day to come.

They sometimes hope to die as well because they are fed up with all the grief they are stricken with or with the life that is so gloomy all the time. In "To Life," Hardy expresses his pessimistic view of life and calls out to "life with the sad-seared face" (1) and mentions that he is bored of it because it always involves pessimism:

I know what thou would'st tell
Of Death, Time, Destiny –
I have known it long, and know, too, well
What it all means for me. (5-8)

Hardy tells the reader that he has long been familiar with those pessimistic phenomena probably because of his bitter experiences. Taranci mentions his suffering in many poems but two lines in "Bir Lahzam" ("An Instant of Me"), in which he speaks to his reflection, shadow and self, summarize it well: "Aşına değiller çektiklerime; / İçlerinden biri gelse yerime." ["They are not familiar with my woes; / I would rather one of them in my shoes" (3-4)]. As it is mentioned above, due to the intensity of their gloomy feelings and grim thoughts, they sometimes consider death as a relief or a way of escape from their pains. To illustrate, in Hardy's "Regret Not Me," the mood is consoling. It is written as if a dead person were speaking to somebody mourning by the grave. The poetic persona acknowledges the tranquillity of the state of being dead and considers the situation from the positive side: "Beneath the sunny tree / I lie uncaring, slumbering peacefully" (2-3). As Morrel suggests, "The man lying 'Beneath the yellowing tree...uncaring' had not dreamed 'that heydays fade and go'. He is, thus free from the nagging time-sense that inhibits enjoyment of the present" (131). He further points out that "The absence of any regrets, remorse, or hankering after what 'might have been', is obvious enough even if the reader is unfamiliar with those other poems" (131). The same idea appears in Hardy's "The Six Boards" again. The poetic persona thinks about his coffin and dwells on the idea of being in the coffin, under the grave. Then, this idea seems to amuse him:

Yea, hid where none will note,
 The once live tree and man, remote
 From mundane hurt as if on Venus, Mars,
 Or furthest stars. (17-20)

The poet suggests that dead people are relieved from all the worldly sufferings because they are in a place beyond reach.

Likewise, Taranci has some poems in which he tries to find relief in death: "The poet who realizes that he cannot get rid of the idea of death tries to relieve himself by sublimating it. The thing that is feared turns into a hope" (Korkmaz 219). "Her Gece mi Bu Uykusuzluk" ("Every Night's Sleeplessness") illustrates this idea. In the first stanza the desperate situation that the poet is in because of sleeplessness, which is caused mainly by the grim thoughts that eat him up at night, is explained. He likens his bed to hell. In the second stanza, the poet announces that he will welcome "death" if it guarantees a deep sleep:

If you promise a deep sleep,
 Regardless of whether your time is up or not,
 Despite my youth,
 Death! You may come right away.
 The door is open, the light is off. (6-10) ⁴

His suffering is so unbearable that he does not mind the fact that he is still young to die. In this poem, "there is a surrender to death, which is going to come with the promise of a sound sleep, shown by the imagery of 'open door' and 'off light'" (Korkmaz 229). He considers death as an escape. Another example is the poem "Ölüm I" ("Death I") in which the poet cannot find any consolation in the past; is pessimistic about the future; and hopes to die:

Neither any good in the unfaithful past,
 Nor the ones to come succour,
 The boat has long been swamped,
 The hopes have long been pinned on you, death! (9-12) ⁵

In these lines, he uses the metaphor of a swamping boat for his life getting worse day by day. As a result of this process, he considers death as the only way out.

On the other hand, while the poets hope to find relief in death, the idea of being forgotten after death occupies their minds. Though ironically, in "Ah! Are you digging

on my grave?" Hardy deals with this issue and makes his distress obvious. The poetic persona hears somebody by the grave and tries to find who it is. First, she thinks that he is her lover: "My loved one?—planting rue?" (2), but finds out that he married another woman already. Secondly, she thinks that it is a relative: "My nearest dearest kin?"(8) and learns that it is not so. In the third stanza, she learns that she does not worth even her enemy's hatred any more: "She thought you no more worth her hate, / And cares not where you lie..." (17-18). Then, she learns that it is her dog: "O it is I, my mistress dear, / Your little dog, who still lives near," (21-22). However, the first lines of the last stanza, "'Mistress, I dug upon your grave / To bury a bone, in case'" (31-32), make it clear that it is really her dog but it is not there to show its fidelity. It is there for a purely personal reason.

Taranci deals with the same idea of "forgottenness" of dead people but he is not so ironical in his writing. For instance, in "After Death," the poetic persona is dead and informs the reader that the dreamlike idea of death with the connotations of relief and escape is shattered when you experience death: " We died, hoping for something from death / In a great void the charm was broken" (1-2). The reason for this frustration is that nobody cares about the dead people any more. "Now there is no news from that world / Nobody misses us or asks for us" (6-7). Dead people are also disappointed because life is continuing quite well without them as indicated by the last line of the poem: "In the flowing water there is no trace of our reflection"(10). The flowing water is a metaphor for continuing life and they realize that there is nothing left related to themselves in the lives of living people. Actually this poem is "the comprehension and explanation of worldly beauties. Despite all the problems, humans are in the best world to live. Death is a daring raid that puts an end to the 'beauty' in this world" (Korkmaz 227). So, the poetic persona does not want to sever all his ties with life by being forgotten. Similarly, in "Neden Sonra" ("Afterwards") by Taranci, the theme of loneliness in the grave is present. In the first stanza, the poet says that after death, one realizes the loneliness and faces the fact that anyone can be infidel to you if you are dead:

Afterwards, you realize
 The terrifying forlornness around you.
 The beloved one? A friend? What are you looking for?
 The address of infidelity is unknown. (1-4) ⁶

The same mood is continued in the second stanza. The poetic persona underscores the idea of the transience of love and friendship. He likens a dead man to a bare tree because love and friendship, which constitute the falling leaves of the tree, disappear

when people die:

Love, friendship!.. They all are falling leaves.
 Your reflection is a bare tree on the still water.
 So-called loneliness starts in life;
 To continue in the grave. (5-8) ⁷

Both poets reveal their anxiety about being forgotten. However, it is clear that Hardy, unlike Taranci, needs other people to refer to him in their speeches to feel fulfilled after his death and he even express his will to be remembered in his poems:

If I pass during some nocturnal blackness, mothy and warm,
 When the hedgehog travels furtively over the lawn,
 One may say, 'He strove that such innocent creatures should come to no harm,
 But he could do little for them; and now he is gone.' (9-12)

In this poem, "Hardy celebrates the life he will be leaving, but his marginal impact on the world will, he implies, not be as a poet, but as an ordinary observant countryman, alive in his neighbours' memories as one who 'used to notice such things' " (Harvey n.pag.). Contrary to what Taranci does, while expressing his love for life outside, he reveals his expectation to be remembered and thinking that it will be so consoles him. Also in the poem, "A Poet," his consolation seems to be the possibility of being remembered after his death as a man who was loved by two great women in his lifetime:

'Whatever his message - glad or grim-
 Two bright-souled women clave to him;'
 Stand and say that while day decays;
 It will be word enough of praise. (13-16)

Hardy "imagines life after his death not as survival but as other people's memory" (B. Hardy 188). Therefore, Hardy is not after eternity in the phenomenological world.

On the other hand, Taranci tries to achieve immortality through eternalizing the moments he enjoys in his life. As can be seen in these poems, Taranci is "like a dancer hovering between joy and pleasure of life and fear of death. He uses an unsophisticated style as much as possible in order to express his strong tie to life and the reality of living" (Erten 71). His love for life consoles him even against being forgotten after death as suggested in "Ben Aşk Adamıyım" ("I am a Man of Love").

In this poem, he tells the reader that he does not need anyone to remember him to find consolation unlike other people. He says that even if nobody cries after him, prays for him in holly days, or brings flowers to his grave, he would not be down and he would continue loving them as if he was alive:

Still, I wouldn't mind,
 Still, wouldn't be piqued at anybody.
 I am a man of love,
 I am here to love people. (9-12)⁸

The reason for this is that “the looks of a man who yearns for eternity at the world after he was left in a poky grave rather demonstrates that that person longs for the things that he could not get when he was alive, after his death” (Korkmaz 233). Another poem that illustrates this idea is “Dalgin Ölü” (“Absent-minded Dead”). In this poem the poetic persona, who is a dead man, does not want to break away from worldly beauties that he could not experience enough during his lifetime:

Yesterday, a beautiful woman passed
 Near my grave.
 I watched to my heart's content
 Her daylight treasure legs
 That ruined my night. (1-5)⁹

The rest of the poem focuses on the fact that he cannot internalize his new situation as a dead person due to his strong tie with life.

You won't believe if I tell,
 I was just about to get up and give it back
 When she dropped her handkerchief
 I forgot that I had died. (6-9)⁹

Handkerchief is an important symbol in Turkish literature. In this poem, the dropped handkerchief, which will stay by the grave for a long time, symbolizes Taranci's permanent love for life to create contrast with the woman who is just passing by. “The handkerchief which is a symbol of unsatisfied feelings is the sad representation of the effort/will to stay human, lost bliss, unconsummated love, and unsung songs” (Korkmaz 233).

In these poems, one can see that Taranci has a pessimistic view of death as well.

The reason for this is the fact that he loves living more than anything despite his suffering. In fact, most of his sufferings stem from the reality of death, in other words, the idea that everything will come to an end one day: "Realization of the fact that death is inevitable makes Cahit Sitki hold on to life more strongly" (Korkmaz 230). It is clearly seen in his poem, "Ben Ölecek Adam Değilim" ("I am not a Man to Die"). In this poem he speaks to death and orders it not to come because he is a man who clings to life strongly. This idea is expressed in the following lines:

I got accustomed to the sky. It happened!
The clouds have been a constant companion to me.
I get bored
If the birds do not twitter on their twigs. (4-7)¹⁰

Later on in the poem, death is defined as getting separated from the familiar ones (52-53). When these lines are considered, it is figured out that Taranci feared death because he loved life itself. Similar to what Korkmaz says, Aydin points out that Taranci's hovering between life and death resembles the movement of a pendulum. Upon each occurrence of the scary idea of death, Taranci leaps with acceleration to the embrace of life. "In short, he reaches immortality by eternalizing the 'moment's on which all the experiences related to this world are recorded and the 'moment's that he finds in the life circle he leaps at with each of his escapes from death" (Aydin 10).

Another common treatment of death by Hardy and Taranci is that they both consider death as a way of dissolution into nature. They express this idea using nearly the same expressions and similar contexts. In "Voices from Things Growing in a Churchyard," in each stanza a dead person speaks in his/her new form as a plant. For instance, in the following stanza, a girl called Fanny Hurd who is buried in the grave speaks in the voice of the daisies on it: "The humour, the jingling refrain, the insouciance of the voices, and the beauty of the plants and trees emphasise the unthreatening naturalness of the process of dissolution, while again bringing the dead to life in Hardy's imagination" (Harvey n.pag.):

These flowers are I, poor Fanny Hurd,
Sir or Madam,
A little girl here sepultured.
Once I flit-fluttered like a bird
Above the grass, as now I wave
In daisy shapes above my grave, (1-6)

Taranci expresses the same idea in a very similar context in “Bir Ölünün Ağzından” (“Words of a Dead Man”). This time the poetic persona says that he finds it ridiculous when people bring flowers into his grave because he implies that he is not in the grave as he has dissolved into nature and probably has become a flower:

I ridicule people bringing flowers to my grave;
 Unwary are those people, so to say;
 They don't know I have nothing to do with this grave;
 I'm in those flowers, these flowers are me. (1-4) ¹¹

“That the human beings realize their helplessness against this harsh reality [of death] leads them to search some new sources of relief. The idea of communing with the spirit of nature and continuing to live in the form of colour, sound, and scent should be viewed as the attempt of the human mind and soul that wish to overcome death to become eternal” (Korkmaz 218). Taranci supports this idea in some other poems as well. In “Bir de Baktım ki Ölmüşüm” (“The Truth Burst upon Me that I was Dead”) and “Ölmüştüm” (“I was Dead”), Taranci imagines that he died. These poems are “verses that have the characteristics of a greeting from the ‘beyond’ to the world with life on it” (Korkmaz 231). The line “Böcekler gücüm yetmez” [“I can't cope with the insects.” (9)] in the former poem and the lines “Ölmüştüm, kabrinde unutulmuştu ceset; / Zulmette böcekler eczasini yiyordu” [“I was dead, the corpse was left behind in its grave / In the murk, insects were eating its remains” (2-3)] in the latter refer to the idea of a dead body dissolving into nature by the process of being decomposed by insects but not with the implications of regeneration. Although Taranci is brought up in an Islamic society, he harbours a positivist attitude towards death and afterlife. His ways of thinking are rather phenomenological than religious.

All in all, death was a common source of inspiration for both Thomas Hardy and Cahit Sitki Taranci in their poems. That's why the theme in most of their poems was death or was related to death. They had been overwhelmed by the transience of time and coming close to the end or getting old so they anticipated their deaths and sometimes felt that their time was up in life. Due to these anxieties and the gloomy life they were leading, they sometimes considered death as a refuge as well. However, they were so intertwined with life, with all the nice details and bitter experiences that they also feared being forgotten after death. Apart from these, they considered death as a way of returning to nature. All of these points were ideas reflected in their poetry which were marked by the whims of death.

Notes

1. "n. pag." indicates that there were no page numbers in the source cited.
2. Aynam, aynam bana bir devle bir cüce
Halinde gösterir içimle dışımı.
Bu müthiş tezadı duyup düşündükçe.
Nasil zaptedeyim ben haykirişimi! (5-8)
3. Kalmadı ümidin soğuk ve ciliz
Işığında bereket.
Ve ölüm, kapımda kişner, sabirsiz
Bir at oldu nihayet. (9-12)
4. Deliksiz bir uykuya vaadin,
Günün dolmuş veya dolmamış,
Gençliğime filan bakmadan,
Derhal gelebilirsin ölüm;
Kapi açıktır, lamba sönük. (6-10)
5. Ne vefasız geçmişten hayir var,
Ne gelecekler imdada koşar,
Çoktandır tekneyi aldı sular;
Çoktandır ümitler sende ölüm. (9-12)
6. Neden sonra farkına variyorsun
Etrafındaki korkunç issizliğin.
Yar olsun, dost olsun, ne ariyorsun,
Adresi belli mi vefasızlığın? (1-4)
7. Aşk, dostluk!.. Hepsi dökülür yapraklar!
Çıplak bir ağaç durgun suda aksin.
Yalnızlık dediğin hayatta başlar;
Kabir boyunca devam etmek için. (5-8)
8. Yine tasa etmem,
Yine kirlenmem kimseye.
Ben aşk adamiyim,
Sevmeye geldim insanlari, (9-12)
9. Dün güzel bir kadın geçti
Kabrimin yakinından.
Doya doya seyrettim
Gün hazinesi bacaklarını,
Gecemi altüst eden.
Söylesem inanmazsınız,

Kalkip verecek oldum.

Düşürünce mendilini;

Öldüğümü unutmuşum.

10. Aliştim bir kere gökyüzüne;

Bunca yıllık yoldaşımdır bulutlar.

Sikilirim,

Kuşlar civildamasa dallarında, (4-7)

11. Kabrime çiçek getirenlere gülerim;

Gafil kişilermiş şu insanlar vesselam;

Bilmezler ki bu kabirle yoktur alakam;

Ben o çiçeklerdeyim, ben bu çiçeklerim. (1-4)

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