Writing of Death

Ethics and Politics of the Death Fast in Turkey

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Abstract

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This dissertation is an ethnographic study of the seven-year-long mass hunger strike undertaken by prisoners affiliated with outlawed Marxist-Leninist organizations in Turkey to protest their transfer from traditional ward-type facilities to new cellular institutions modeled after maximum security prisons, and it scrutinizes as well as radicalizes the ontological and political structure of hunger striking to construe otherwise the contestatory relationship between the individual right to death and political sovereignty by insisting on the irreducible excess of death over the totalizing closure of the performative acts of political foundation.

Anchored in participant observation and in-depth interviews with surviving hunger strikers, ex-political prisoners, their families, medical and forensic doctors, and enriched by the textual and visual analysis of prison memoirs, diaries, correspondence, testaments, and last speeches, the dissertation focuses on the ambiguity of the very right to die—an ambiguity that has been ignored by performance theories of sovereignty—in order to figure death at one and the same time as both radical possibility and impossibility.

Accounting for the extraordinarily long duration of the prison movement (7 years) and self-starvation period before death (up to 558 days) by examining its temporal and organizational logics, the dissertation argues that hunger striking draws an enormous political power from keeping the possibility of death in suspense unlike the power of negation which dissipates itself irreversibly in a paroxysmal moment of actual death. In
distinguishing the anticipatory relation to death on the hunger strike from its counterparts in suicide attacks and self-immolations, the dissertation seeks to reveal an inescapable anachrony between two deaths—the passage of time that separates and draws together death as possibility from death as an anonymous event which comes either too early or late. It claims that it is precisely in this interim state between two deaths that death withdraws from the realm of possibility only to fold in on life, creating a reserve in both senses of the term, one where state power and political organizations vie with each other for hegemony over the ideological representations of life and death. The dissertation narrates how the hyper-rationalized political instrumentation of the suspended state between life and death produces its own everyday socialities by organizing the affective relations of hunger strikers to the futurity of death, to their individual bodies, and others on the hunger strike in a destructive rivalry with the contradictory discourses and practices of state officials, families, doctors and mass media. It argues that “death” thereby yields itself to a movement of self-differentiation and proliferation, oscillating uncontrollably between sacrificial sublation and waste. The result is a growing division within the prison movement which propels it towards its eventual dissolution, leaving in its ruins a crippled political subject without futurity. The dissertation figures the surviving fasters afflicted with the Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome, a severe type of amnesia characterized by the inability to retain memories after an indefinite lapse of time, as an allegory for the ruination of the power to die in the performance of death itself. As such, it seeks to bring about a transformation in the very language of sacrificial politics by interrupting the economy of appropriation which functions in view of a future community founded upon the continuity of deaths towards an ever-receding presence.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgments</th>
<th>ii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Introduction 1

Chapter I 14
Temporalities of Dying

Chapter II 52
The Political Machinery of Death Fasting

Chapter III 72
Labor of Living, Invisibility of Dying

Chapter IV 139
Burning: The Temptation of Death

Chapter V 179
Feda: The Sacrificial Knot

Chapter VI 235
The Sovereign Lapse

Conclusion 284
Who or What Survives?

Bibliography 297
Acknowledgements

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For Münevver and Gündüz Serin

The double name of Light and Day, they have given me the world
Preface

The question of this dissertation was born, it seems in retrospect, in my very first interlocutor’s sharing of a secret with me, a secret which could not be divulged to his death-bed attendants and companions.

R. was a survivor of the 1996 Death Fast and he was introduced to me as one of the heroes of the prison resistance in spite of his ongoing, tumultuous separation from the organization at the time of our first encounter in the summer of 2003. The following conversation, however, occurred after my return in 2005 and I retained a clear memory of this meeting on a cold December morning at 7 o’clock before the arrival of others in his workplace, a legal bureau where he was answering phones by day and sleeping in a back room at nights.

He had passed into a different “mode” after his thirty-seventh day on the hunger strike and he could tell that his comrades had not noticed this transformation in him. He admitted that he himself kept secret this transformation which could only be “named,” he said, as a “place of madness.”

He was lying in bed with his arms and legs immobilized. His eyes were closed with pads because they were blinded by light; his ears were plugged with cotton pieces because every sound, though not loud, exploded in his ears. He was removing the pads only when his comrades came to visit him at his bedside.

It was just at that time that he had a very peculiar experience. He was listening to Shostakovich’s Leningrad Symphony. As the symphony played inside his head, and he said he had some knowledge of Shostakovich’s life story, he had become a firefighter
brigade during the siege of Leningrad by Nazi Germany: “Bombs were exploding in my head, fire engines were going right and left. I began to think that I was going crazy.”

This peculiar experience underwent a further inflection when he began to “live” everything that was recounted to him with extraordinary conscientiousness by his comrades though his comrades thought that he was only “hearing their words.”

The textile workers in Ünaltı, Gaziantep were on strike during the course of the Death Fast in 1996, and his secret and yet sustained relation to the strike allowed him to survive the Death Fast: “I didn’t know Ünaltı, but I happened to have gone there (gitmiş olyordum) when they were telling me about it. Really, I was no longer lying in a bed in one of the cells of the Ward C-3 on the second floor of Bayrampaşa Prison. I was in Antep and there were factories and workshops around me. The workers were mostly young people and I was on the struggle with them. We were fighting against the gendarmes and it was as if the bludgeons were really landing on me.”

R. rejoiced in his new resource, before which all difficulties and hindrances to movement had fallen away and, after picturing himself in different libraries, R.’s consciousness outside himself sought for itself the openness of squares which, in their very emptiness, called forth crowds of people, and somewhere in the thick of the crowd stood R. possessed by their event: “I saw myself at Plaza del Mayo, Concord, Trafalgar, Central Park, Tiananmen, and Taksim, Kızılay and Konak. At first, there was no one but me and I was walking around and then I was merging with thousands of people. I had the sensation that I was capable of doing anything.”

On the verge of losing his sensibility, not in spite of, but because of the extreme receptivity of his senses, what R. “lived” was his opening—himself becoming no one or
anyone, in opening to his own “death,” an opening which allowed him to traverse across time and space despite his confinement to a bed within prison. In R.’s narrative, “death,” which can only be experienced as this exposure, is transformed into the experience of an anywhere else and anyone else. This death is not an individual death, therefore, nor does it concern itself with the fate of the individual. It opens onto a teeming array of events and people which overflow the life and the death of the proper name R., and to that extent, it may perhaps best be described as an impersonal event. But inasmuch as death in this narrative is impersonal, it is also irreducibly singular, and it is the very anonymity of R.’s death which is akin to a writer’s anonymity that endows it with a singular force. For R.’s refusal to cleave to his dying self—an ambiguous refusal to the extent that it is more an effraction than a deliberate and voluntary distraction—has the effect of doubling him both as the impersonal event and an integral part of it, as the writer of the event and a character in it.

In this sense, R.’s narrative is an exemplary account of the necessity of distance, since it is the detour through writing that alone allows him to affirm the event, which puts itself at a distance not only from all immediacy but from all mediation too, in order to make of his own death an event.¹ This law of double separation that requires R. to forget himself is inescapable; for it is the condition of the possibility of relation to death. In the secrecy of his madness, R. impersonates the very figure of the death faster for whom the art of survival lies in the realization that the impossibility of relation to death may be transmuted into a relation of possibility, and this dual relation depends on the

¹ I use writing here in its Derridian sense—a movement of effacement and re-inscription that embraces acts of all kinds.
prolongation of the interval that separates his own death from death as an anonymous event and challenges their contemporaneousness.

For this reason, R.’s unmentionable secret repudiates silently but obstinately the ideological overcoding of the event which entombs the anonymity of the death faster in the shrine of the autonomous, self-identical, first-person singular/plural (“I” as a mirror image of the “We”) whereby the death faster figures as the transcendental agent of the event, the sovereign as the “cut of the sword”. ² For the dual relation of the death faster to death is obscured here by a self-relation and by that token the radical indeterminacy of the event is subordinated to the unity and totality of a single act, as though the death of the death faster gathered the entirety of the responses to the Death Fast into a relation to itself as inescapable, with the result that the openness of the event turns into something more resembling an impervious foundation with the value of transcendence. For the event is unknowable only because it is radically open, and the eventfulness of the event consists in the very multiplicity of the response to its event, but by a fetishistic reversal, the infinite reserve of the event (both its inexhaustible multiplicity and exteriority) shadows forth in the first-person singular corporealization of death, and the performative act of foundation is confounded here with the event which always comes (back) from somewhere else and someone else, like death. But if the dead body of the death faster

² The more one reads Michel Foucault’s (2003:240-241) eleventh lecture in Society Must be Defended, the more one notices how little, in fact remains, despite the appearances to the contrary, of the personal agency of sovereign power. At the outset, Foucault makes the claim that sovereign power is caught in a practical imbalance in which the sovereign right of life and death essentially veers into the right of death. In the end, however, Foucault, for his part, tacitly cautions against the danger of trivializing the right of death into the absolute power of a sovereign subject with his insistent use of the infinitive to the point of doing away with the agent and the patient in order to accentuate the verbal trait of the act itself—“the right of the sword”: “It is not the right to put people to death or to grant them life. Nor is the right to allow people to live or to leave them to die. It is the right to take life or let live. And this obviously introduces a startling dissymmetry.” The language of Foucault in this passage strains to refrain from ascribing a personal agent to the event of death by figuring the sovereign as death, or, even beyond figurality, by implying that sovereign is death, and yet death here, like the cut of the sword, is an event, “a startling dissymmetry,” which occasions a breach of difference in time, rending apart the present.
becomes, as it were, the event, it is not because it can more, but because it can less; not because it interrupts the juridical and political order and offer itself as the foundation and beginning of a new order, but because it contests the possibility of all such acts of political foundation as an ineludible question mark.

Though death withdraws the death faster from the world with an imperceptible persistence and alters him or her into a mark of its anonymity, and though it severs the relationship of the death faster with the space of politics, the question of the death faster still remains, and it remains as an absolute question that can no longer be relegated as it were to subsidiary status by the question of sovereignty: Who is this “I” without “I” and without a name?

*Writing of Death* accompanies the death faster through the various twists and turns of the space of dying in order then to pry apart the ideological forms of dying by confronting them with the limits of their own concept of sovereignty. For it is only when the question of the Death Fast is not reducible to the question of sovereignty, I maintain, that the question of ethics and politics can be asked at all.
Introduction

On January 23, 2007, the Death Fast of prisoners affiliated with outlawed Marxist-Leninist organizations in Turkey came to an end after one hundred and twenty two deaths. This mass hunger strike—two thousand two hundred and eighty six consecutive days long, which its organizers had extended over seven years, by launching new teams ever more, almost endlessly—had begun as a prison resistance against the introduction of high security penal institutions known as the F-type prisons.

Though the new prison project had found its legal basis in Article 16 of the Anti-Terror Law (1991) and though the punitive rigor of the penalty had found itself mirrored in the juridical classification of the criminal act, the goal of the new prison project was not simply the application of a penitentiary technique, isolation, to a special category of “dangerous prisoners”, but the general implementation of a disciplinary apparatus. The “F-type” was both an architectural model for the entirety of carceral institutions in the country and a model of disciplinary apparatus.¹ The construction of the new F-type prisons, along with the alteration of the remaining seventy-five prisons into a similar cellular plan, provided the state with the infrastructural and technological capacity to abolish any structure of relation which was not overseen by the prison administration and thus re-establish punitive sovereignty over the prisoners, in order to regulate, control, and govern prison life in the service of a coercive individualization. The felicitous takeover of the government of life in prison, however, required first the destruction of the prison commune of the political prisoners as an economic and political entity which had

¹ Ceza ve Tevkifevleri Genel Müdürlüğü, F Tipi Kapalı Cezaevi (F Type Prison) [http://www.adalet.gov.tr/cte/cezaevleri/ftipi_ozellik.htm].
organized everyday life in prison since the early 1990s, and second the dissolution of the political subject who was brought into being by the corporeal disciplines at the very heart of the functioning of the prison commune.² The new prison project, despite the statements of the authorities to the contrary, was precisely not a project of restoring rule and order in the over-crowded ward-system but of nullifying the counter-disciplinary regime of the political organizations already existent and intact in prisons, and this was in part what gave the new prison project its undoubted necessity and unprecedented impetus.

In this regard, it was no accident that the authorities attempted something more than simply mobilizing yet another discourse of “state security” to criminalize the political organizations and justify the new carceral regime of isolation by recourse to the definition of terrorism in the Anti-Terror Law. In contrast with criminal law, the Anti-Terror Law focused on aim in order to assign guilt, and it was markedly less concerned with the effect of the crime and the motive of the agent. As a result, the penology of the Anti-Terror law prescribed a sentence execution that did not seek to transform but to sequester the agent from the source of terrorism. For the threat came less from the violent character of the agent, and most of the detainees and convicts under this law had not committed a violent act, than his or her vulnerability to possession by external forces. Thus, the objective of isolation was directed towards the separation of the agent from the source of the act by interrupting the communication between them: “Terrorists should not communicate with each other because the terrorist becomes a fish out of water when he

² See Arda Ibikoğlu, “Disciplinary Evolution of Turkish Prisons, 1980s-1990s” in Studies in Law, Politics, and Society, 2010, vol. 51, pp. 67-94. These everyday disciplines consisted of five hours of collective education and training (reading of communist and socialist classics, party bulletins and other publications), two hours of personal education and training, and one hour of collective physical exercise which was tantamount to guerilla training in the communes of DHKP-C and PKK.
cannot communicate. In other words, when the mental and intellectual source which
nourishes the terrorist is desiccated, his revolutionary, destructive character dies out.”\(^3\)
According to this penology, the terrorists were not masters of their thought and action
and thus they were, as it were, machines operated by others.

This misidentification of ideological interpellation with mere control acquired a
new, more radical inflection in the discourse of the authorities whereby the charismatic
figure of authority at the source of speech and actions of the militants was displaced by a
mere despot who was apparently no different from a mafia leader. This despotic figure
restricted the communication of his subjects with the prison administration, lawyers,
doctors, and family to the point of severing all their ties with the outside world, and in a
rhetorical reversal, the prison commune itself became synonymous with isolation under
the personal command of the leader. In identifying the mafia leader with the political
leadership of the organizations, the authorities conflated the mafia with the party but also
tyranny with discipline. Conflating them in this way, the authorities were then able to
introduce a distinction between the members of the organizations and their military and
political leaders. In the discourse of the authorities, the economic and political power of
the prison commune gave way to the personal sovereignty of the leader who arrogated to
himself the sovereign right of life and death, and the single most important political
question for the authorities, as for the public, came to be the security of life in the prison
and the threat posed to it by the arbitrary power of the leaders. Thus, the new prison
project was not premised upon the necessity to preserve the indivisible sovereignty of the
Turkish state against terrorism, but on a culpable admission of the state’s inability to

\(^3\) Sulhi Dönmezer, “Teröristlerin Rehabilitasyonu” (Rehabilitation of Terrorists) in Hukuk Fakültesi
protect the lives of its prisoners, and it became incumbent upon the state to secure the survival of its own prison population by saving them from the violence of the organizational command. The main task of the prison project was, as it were, less the carceral transformation of the individual than the production of the individual as such.

The political prisoners were unyielding in their total and unconditional refusal of the new prison project, and their refusal was based on a double contention. First, there seemed little chance the threat of violence and death from the prison administration could ever be contained or avoided in the new prisons, and isolation would not lift the threat of violence and death, therefore, but in fact make it more likely by exposing them to the arbitrary power of the administration for this total exposure to power could not be contained without the necessary protection of the commune. Second, beyond such considerations of personal safety and well-being, the destruction of the prison commune would act as the prior condition of a slow and yet definite dissolution that would undo not only the political subject but ruin the very possibility of subjectivity. In the view of the prisoners, the F-type prison entombed the prisoner in the cell and by naming the cell-type prison *tabutluk* (coffin), they insisted that isolation was no different than being buried alive. For isolation killed the subject without killing; it annihilated the subject but conserved life.

Such life, they argued, was at best only a hollow parody of life, a brutal and oppressive attempt to extend the condition of alienation and abstraction under capitalism by destroying their communal life in prison. For if life was a right, as the state authorities maintained, it was in the first instance essentially always a right to refuse a certain kind of life, stripped of meaning and purpose, sliding ever towards its nothingness. The life in
the prison cell was a materialization of this absolute immanence where naked existence referred only to itself and took on the character of the absolute: the impossibility of not living. Instead of appealing to the fundamental and inalienable right to life, and thus necessarily to life as a (legal) value in and of itself that had disquieting similarities with the very discourse of the state authorities it sought to challenge, the Death Fast reaffirmed each participant’s right to death, a right that was absolute to the extent that each death faster took their own sovereign decision. Indeed, one could contend that the right to death remains perhaps the only right when life is formulated as an obligation, since right refers only to itself, to the exercise of that freedom of which it is the expression.

A total of eight hundred sixteen political prisoners, affiliated with three outlawed organizations DHKP-C (Revolutionary People’s Liberation Party-Front), MKP (Maoist Communist Party), TKIP (Turkish Communist Workers Party), began the hunger strike on October 20, 2000, a hunger strike that was converted, after a precipitous month, into a death fast on November 19, 2000.

The hunger strikers had nine demands, and their demands pertaining to the carceral, despite the government’s efforts to make it seem otherwise, outweighed those pertaining to the juridical and judiciary. The first and the only irrevocable demand of the hunger strike as such—precisely because it affirmed its own necessity as an always prior demand for the restoration of their communal life—was the immediate abolition of the F-type prison project. The second set of demands made public the excesses of the arbitrary power of the prison administration and wanted legal and medical reparations for the injuries suffered in the past and guarantees for a constant and assiduous legal and civil control over the carceral regime in the future. The hunger strikers asked for the trial and
punishment of the perpetrators of torture and violence in the carceral regime; for medical treatment of prisoners who became seriously ill or disabled after prison operations; and for regular inspection of prisons by auxiliary committees. The third set of demands repudiated the juridical and judiciary ground of the carceral regime and insisted on the abolition of the whole apparatus. They called for the annulment of the protocol between the Ministries of Justice, Interior, and Health which denied their rights of access to lawyers, medical examinations and family visitations; for the abrogation of the Anti-Terror Law; and for the dissolution of the State Security Courts.

The legal and political authorities chose to focus their attention on the implications of the third set of demands and contended that the demands of the prisoners could not be confined to the amelioration of prison conditions. Had the hunger strike sought to rescind some intolerable measure pertaining to prison conditions, it was only proper that this or that demand found a sympathetic hearing in the prison administration and the upper echelons of the state and received, if necessary, juridical recognition, but the real aim of the hunger strike, despite appearances to the contrary, was to erode and paralyze the government of prisons, and by extension the politico-juridical sovereignty of the state. In the view of the legal and political authorities, the hunger strike was a form of expression of the “terrorism”, in the guise of the victim, of the Marxist-Leninist organizations which did not hesitate to use violence, force, and coercion to influence and change the political regime of the country. The presentation of the hunger strike as a form of terrorism was in fact the official recognition of the political violence of the hunger strike. For the hunger strike did not simply extort concessions from the prison administration, nor change this or that law a contrario by forcing the state to make new
laws, but challenged politico-juridical sovereignty as such. The hunger strikers did not see themselves in the defensive position of escaping from the violence of the state with the modest means at their disposal, but in the active position of repudiating the politico-juridical order in order to perform and invent the future and thereby (re)constitute a new politics, one that, before being established, had to pass through the stage of being a violent refusal of politics, an anti-politics and a non-politics, since it summoned the future by invoking the very right to death.

For this reason, the state authorities were clearly aware that it was not merely enough to impose life as an obligation, it was equally important, if not indeed more so, to refuse the hunger strikers the sovereign decision, which would always risk reinforcing their claims to repudiate the politico-juridical regime. This is why, in the arguments of the authorities, death also became a duty on the part of the hunger strikers who sacrificed themselves for the preservation of the political organization at the command of their leaders. The hunger strike came to be conflated with the execution of orders, or even more extremely with the execution of expendable members for the survival of the Leader.

During the brief period between November 19 and December 19, 2000, some discussion had taken place between the Ministry of Justice and the Central Coordination of Prisons, through a group of intermediaries composed of prominent intellectuals, writers and human rights activists, concerning a plan for the remodeling of the F-type prisons under the supervision of professional associations. Had the Minister complied with the requirement of the Central Coordination of Prisons for a common living unit with a minimum number of eighteen inmates and set the final seal on the plan with a public avowal, the Death Fast would have come to an end. However, despite the support
of the democratic movement, the negotiations failed, and the armed forces, instead, forced their way into twenty prisons across the country in the early morning of December 19, 2000 to end the hunger strike on its sixty-first day.

There is some evidence that the Minister of Justice, while paying lip service to the group of intermediaries, seems to have attempted to gain enough time for the military to prepare for the operation. For a fortnight before the operation, the Minister who had formerly taken an uncompromising stance, had delivered the government’s considered verdict with some enthusiasm: in giving heed to the public discontent with the prison project, “the transition to the new prisons,” he pronounced before a group of journalists, “was suspended until further notice.” This shift was no doubt not a chance event but the result of much criticism and scrutiny on the part of the democratic movement which had contested, apart from their humanistic objection to the physical and psychic effects of isolation, the legality of the augmentation of the penalty of the political prisoners over and beyond the mere privation of their liberty. The prison operation which resulted with the immediate and brutal transfer of the prisoners to various F-type prisons, constituted an essential turning point in the Death Fast, a turning point that, as the hunger strikers were wont to remark, turned the hunger strike of the three organizations into a general hunger strike with the participation of the rest of the prison organizations.

The prison operation “Return to Life” was staged as a veritable war to save the hunger strikers from the hands of the organizations that were consuming the lives of the hunger strikers for their own survival. Armed forces attacked with bulldozers, drills, and bombs as if their objective was the retaking of the prisons and the prisoners beyond the walls, lost since the hunger strike to the enemy. The videotapes of the invasion were

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4 Radikal, December 5, 2000
broadcast on television at the behest of the military, and cell phone conversations between commune principals and political leaders ordering the hunger strikers to set themselves on fire were voiced over the images of self-immolation. The destruction of the ward-type prisons was a spectacle bringing into being a new form of sovereignty that based its legitimacy on its capacity to guarantee the security and well-being of its population even if that meant the self-destruction of the state’s own ideological apparatuses. In this way, the prison emerged as a site of biopolitical struggle between rival ways of governing life, and it unavoidably became a theatrical stage upon which both the state authorities and outlawed Marxist-Leninist organizations performed their violent conflict over the politics and ethics of life for the Turkish national public.

By the time I appeared to conduct my fieldwork (late 2005, early 2006), the ending of the Death Fast had in a sense already taken place. The prison movement had cast itself down into a state of suspension overwriting its demands with a stumbling rhythm of perseverance and paralysis. On May 28, 2002, two-and-a-half years later, all the participating prison organizations had withdrawn from the Death Fast with the exception of DHKP-C (Revolutionary People’s Liberation Party-Front) and TKEP/L (Communist Labor Party of Turkey/Leninist). Throughout this period, the state authorities had followed a dual strategy of amending Article 16 of the Anti-Terror Law to maintain some kind of image of legitimate power for themselves within the national and international public sphere by recognizing the right of the prisoners to have access to cultural, social, vocational, and educational programs and sports activities, on the one hand, while extinguishing the prison resistance, as much as possible, by employing forced feeding after the first death on March 21, 2001, on the other.
The leading organization of the Death Fast, DHKP-C, was still launching new teams though with fewer death fasters, and at greater intervals. The second organization, TKEP/L had run out of its entire reserve of prisoners because the state authorities had begun to discharge, starting in May 2001, a large number of hunger strikers on the grounds of their debilitating health conditions. The readiness of the authorities, temporarily, to postpone the execution of the sentences of the detainees and grant presidential pardon for the convicts in their maneuver to prevent the escalation of deaths inside prison since the series of deaths in April had, at the very least, the effect of destabilizing the prison resistance and hastening its demise. The Revolutionary People’s Liberation Party-Front and the Maoist Communist Party had tried to overcome the division of the prison resistance by continuing to fast, after their discharge, in “resistance houses” located in the shantytowns Küçükarmutlu and Alibeyköy. These resistance houses were also dismantled by a series of police raids in early September 2001. Six hundred and sixty prisoners were discharged by October 2004, and this counter-tactic of the state authorities had as its paradoxical outcome the expansion of the communication between prisoners and society at large. The more the prison resistance lost its public visibility, the more the hunger strikers became accessible outside carceral surveillance, giving rise to the possibility of my fieldwork but also overdetermining its central problematic.

I was beginning, so to speak, with the end, and the state of my interlocutors made me inordinately sensitive to the inarticulate disjuncture between the sacredness of the dead and the accursedness of the living; the stability of the dead and the insecurities of the living; the decisiveness of the past and unavowed undecidability of the present. The
present was dividing the past from itself and dismantling its identity from within by an alterity that the prison movement could not quite internalize: the survivors. Each survivor was struggling with a greater or lesser degree of impairment due to the effects of the extended period of starvation on their nervous system and some of them were entirely invalid. These ones could not stand up or walk on their own and they had to carry crutches or canes to be able to continue their everyday life. A few among them were stuttering in their speech so notably that it was possible to separate words from unintelligible sounds only after a few rounds of repetition. As far as the survivors were concerned, however, their amnesic state, or as they preferred to call it “the problem of registration” was the one impairment that disturbed them the most. For at the very moment they appeared to be anchoring themselves in the present by projecting the future, the future, inevitably, was destined in its turn to be lost. The inability to register events in the present took away both the past and the future or more accurately futurity, the possibility of retrieving the past from the future to be able to fulfill one’s promise to the other. These survivors were thus stricken with a more troubling sense of social paralysis within their poor health. Most of them had abandoned their contact with their families and were completely dependent on the care of their comrades which increasingly strained those relationships and threatened the confidence they professed in their political organizations for not being treated as equals anymore. They had turned their caretaker-comrades, as it were, into their prostheses and the patience of this over-proximity in a vicious circle of its own had given rise to a tacit awareness of the fundamental impossibility of relation. No one made any plans with them and they were barely included in the social activities of the organizations let alone given political tasks and
responsibilities. But the organizations relied for its social relations heavily on their visibility as witnesses who spoke not in the name of their particular everyday difficulties but on behalf of all those who had fallen subject to the violence of the state. They were, so to speak, like Freud’s mystic writing pads; for they connected the organization with the outside as permeable membranes, and one and at the same time bore the inscriptions that have been inflicted upon it. While being mediatized as the victims of the Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome, they lived, worked, or helped in the cultural centers, family organizations, legal bureaus, and newspaper offices. These places were themselves porous spaces where the difference between the political and social dissolved in the shared intimacies of everyday life, from drinking tea and reading newspapers in a familiar place in a threatening city, to more organized cultural and pedagogical activities such as music, theater, and reading lessons.

Holding my conversations with the survivors amidst young sympathizers and comrades in these public spaces, it occurred to me that the survivors had not really shared their private experiences and that between the public and private events there were more discrepancies than correlations. The death of their comrades had placed the survivors before an essential and solitary responsibility which was the responsibility for living at the expense of their dead comrades. In every conversation, they referred to comradeship as a bond beyond kinship because it was based on sharing the possibility of death at every instant. This intense bond sealed in the sharing of the possibility of death enabled me to imagine a different relation with death that did not end in the sovereign consummation of the act. I began to change my questions. Instead of asking, “Why were you on the Death Fast?” I inquired more about this interval of time. “How did you manage to remain alive
for 200 hundred days?” “How was it possible for you to survive for such a long time?” “What did you do to pass the time on the Death Fast?” And by asking this type of question, not why but how, I became aware of a peculiar passage from a time in which death could occur to an endless interval of dying, which had effected a transformation in the Death Fast drawing it outside and beyond itself, and confounding the political act, but one and at the same time giving rise to new forms of life and social relationalities.
CHAPTER I

Temporalities of Dying

Nothing is more substitutable and yet nothing is less so than the syntagm “my death.”
--Jacques Derrida, Aporias

“Suicide is an absolute right, the only one which is not the corollary of a duty, and yet it is a right which no real power reinforces.”
--Maurice Blanchot, Space of Literature

“We’re neither dying nor living.”
--Sevgi Erdoğan, Diary Entry on March 8, 2001

There is a particular form of walking in Turkish prisons called volta, which involves cycles of pacing back and forth longitudinally between the walls of a ward’s yard or a cell’s ventilation space (havalandırma). It can last the entire day, and its practitioners may indeed be found forgetting the passing of hours, as they “make plans,” “fantasize,” “think about events,” “scrutinize themselves,” and “empty out their minds” (Kafadar 2008: 29). More or less of a secret vocabulary or of an idiolect peculiar to spaces of confinement, the term originates from the Italian word volta which denotes time. Deriving from the verbal root voltare meaning to turn, volta also refers to the number of times something happens to take place. It thus inscribes within itself an understanding of time as re-turn. I shall conceive this movement of return as a movement of constant deferral of mastery in which repetition functions as both power and powerlessness.

If the relentlessly unchanging daily routine in prison can be described as a continuous present, an identity, an everlastingness in the course of which one begins to

5 In the newly installed F-type prisons, each cell has a five-meter-square ventilation space enclosed by five-meter high walls and covered over with barbed wire.
lose a sense of the demarcation of time, *volta* appears to be the mastery or the incorporation of penal time by its spatialization in the ventilation space which is made one’s own with the specific rhythm of the footsteps of the prisoners. But the true content of *volta* can not be fully grasped without considering at the same time the temporalization of space at work in it. This mechanical, almost trance-like walk gives a feeling of escape from prison by emptying time of all presence in the endless repetition of the footsteps. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that prisoners use the term as a designator for both the space and time of walking. For instance, one could say, “I went out to *volta*, or so and so happened at *volta*.” Or one could use it as a temporal reference and say “during *volta* I forget about time” (Kafadar 2008: 30).

*Volta* takes place as a constant repetition of itself, and its effect is to bring about a striking transformation in the relationship of the prisoners to the anonymity of the prison. As the prisoners retreat from the prison’s grasp and carve out a personal hole in its impersonal being with each recurring step, they come to feel they have full mastery over themselves. The first hint of this process is that *volta* is said by prisoners to be the most private space in prison after one’s bed and it is a recognized rule among prisoners that one does not interrupt an other’s *volta*. This self-affection acquires an even greater intensity as *volta* allows a fleeting access to the outside by allying itself to a temporal dimension that may only be described as a time outside of time which is the time of return. One of my interlocutors expressed the force of *volta* with a brief statement in the present perfect subjunctive form: “we feel as though we have gone out and come back (*dişarı gitmiş gelmiş gibi oluyoruz*).” The repetitive cycle of walking enables the prisoners to overlook, as it were, their real condition of confinement and spreads a feeling
of escape. It is only when this movement of return bounds itself to the future as a moment of deferred ending that it proves to be a mere illusion, and repetition then assumes the form of compulsion and failure. Another ex-prisoner admitted that he would have taken the same steps and turned around at the exact same spot with the same foot even if the walls had not been there. He added later that he had been waiting for the day when the sky would not have appeared as a blue rectangle. The crux of this image turns on the bounded character of boundlessness and attests that freedom can be maintained here only in and through the constancy of repetition despite an irreducible yearning for the end.

I am impelled by this image which renders visible the peculiar logic of volta to pose these questions: How do those who are serving time, so to speak, give time to themselves? How do they discover time as what it is (not): as freedom, as power, as themselves? As I elaborate volta, which is a daily activity of the hunger strikers who walk to maintain their mastery over their bodies, as a metaphor for a very different understanding of the temporal relation to death on the hunger strike, this preliminary set of questions will lead to new ones: How is death made one’s own? How is death turned into a power of self-constitution?

I.

Hunger striking resembles this form of walking in the course of which, as we described it, one turns inward, and in turning inward achieves a fleeting sense of the outside by divesting the present of its presence in the endless repetition of the turn. In a similar manner, hunger striking withdraws the body from relations of power into a self-relation. Or more accurately, the relation to self is in effect here a relation to death by the detour of the relation to the embodied self which, through hunger, opens itself to death,
the void, the ultimate outside duly recognized to be inaccessible by law. Article 26 of the new Penal Sentence Execution Code (2005) prohibits hunger striking on the grounds that the act disables the state from executing the sentence of the prisoners. Here, law registers and aims to forestall the evasion of its target into an impassable realm where it will not be able to take hold of it anymore. For the longer hunger strikers go on with their fasts, the more death intrudes itself upon their lives. They approach death, creep towards the abyss and once there, they cling to it, unable to move either forward or backward. Hunger, which opens the void, does not have the power to seal it up. To persist in it would mean death, and with death the fast would end. They must therefore stay alive, but only to the extent that it keeps them at the point of death. The idea of ending is resisted in the interest of maintaining the constant possibility of the end until the attainment of their ends. Hunger strikers are thus drawn (or draw themselves) toward death at the same time as they are constantly drawn back to life. The mastery of death is never accomplished; or if it is accomplished in some sense, that is, if they are able to hold themselves in this zone between life and death or rather life-death where life has become suffused with death to such a degree that the difference between life and death has almost disappeared, we must conceive this in terms of a temporal movement of constant deferral of the end until the advent of the other’s response. For hunger strikers do not simply give themselves, give their lives. They first and foremost give time; they give time to the other to allow a response.

If this temporal structure of the suspension of the end is a sign of the Other’s transcendence which is fatefully fantasized as a totalized addressee whose response will bring their act to a closure in a unity or meaning fully revealed or discovered, it acquires
a new kind of monstrous logic—an ante-logic as well as an anti-logic which defies political calculus—within the Death Fast, one whose effects are signaled by its most peculiar feature—duration. The task of this chapter is, then, to account for the extraordinarily long duration of the movement (7 years) and self-starvation period before death (up to 558 days) by examining the temporal and organizational logics of the prison movement. It demonstrates how the simultaneous but non-contemporaneous logics of the prolongation of the moment before death and the serialization of bodies are imagined to conjure an indestructible sovereign collective body only to reveal that this double logic of temporal recurrence and deferral is the function of an extreme form of powerlessness.

Retracing the event, the participating political organizations offer little in the way of critical interpretation; their concern is rather to dramatize the duration of the prison struggle in terms of a theological-political idea of the immortal body. The idea of that which does not die is indissociable, as Ernst Kantorowicz’s classic study *The King’s Two Bodies* (1997 [1957]) shows, from that of political sovereignty—an idea which makes belief in immortality a guarantee of the durability of a political regime or institution. This idea of an invulnerable body, which appears to literalize itself in the invocation of the number of days on the fast, is bound up with a nihilist conception of political will. This

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6 I underline the fantastical literalization since it is the very doubling of the monarch’s body that historically serves to guarantee the continuity of the “body politic” in the succession of mortal, “natural” bodies on the throne. This necessary doubling of the king’s body strikingly comes into view in the practice of placing the king’s effigy in its pompous regalia over the coffin in burials of royalty. See Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies*, 420-421. See also Claude Lefort (1986) who emphasizes that it is the mortal, natural body of the king which allows for the incorporation of the body politic in a figurehead by compelling the people to recognize the king as one of them.

7 I do not use nihilism in its colloquial sense here. Following Friedrich Nietzsche, I define nihilism as the devalorization of life in the name of higher values. Nietzsche sees the devalorization of the highest values themselves as the fundamental movement of Western history impelling it towards an essential ruin. Instead of replacing values which have been devalorized simply with new values that occupy the same place as the old ones, Nietzsche acknowledges this historical impasse and seeks to overcome it by a new kind of valorization. This new valorization will reverse the nature and manner of valuing by dispensing with the supersensible world altogether and affirming the will as that essence of life which creates and posits its own
conception of the will, which mistakes self-sovereignty for political sovereignty, is susceptible of two divergent readings, depending on whether it is seen as a force of negativity which restores the sanctity of political ideals and values or one which has the power to overcome every limit and even death. Thus, there is an oscillating tension between a sacrificial will which recognizes a limit—albeit an ultimate one—in the political ideals and values, and a superhuman will which knows no limits:

“The Death Fast Resistance is an unequaled resistance in multiple respects. First and foremost, it is unequaled in its longevity and its massiveness. The world has not borne witness to such a political action in the course of which hundreds of death fasters took over the flag from one another overtaking not only months and seasons but years. It is also unequaled in the enormity of the prices paid. There is no other death fast resistance in which one hundred twenty two revolutionary warriors have been martyred and more than five hundred of them have been disabled in different degrees. The Death Fast Resistance is a political action that has shattered a number of limits. In the face of the invincibility and intransigence of the revolutionary will, even the medical sciences were dumbfounded. In a world where the human is debased in an awful manner and where honor, dignity, self-respect, and fidelity to social ideals are forgotten, the Death Fast Resistance created the human anew.”

values. However, this subjective positing of values, despite Nietzsche’s acknowledgement of its illusive yet necessary nature for the continuation of life, easily lends itself into a valorization of the will for its own sake. Indeed, by equating will with life on the basis of a common drive to preserve and ever increase their forces without any particular intent or aim other than constant self-affirmation, Nietzsche himself dangerously comes close to espousing a deadly nihilism where one is only left to affirm a sovereign subject which knows no limits. In contrast with Heidegger’s controversial reading of will to power as an ultimate affirmation of absolute subjectivity, Deleuze offers a different interpretation in his Nietzsche and Philosophy (1983), where he argues that what is affirmed in Nietzsche is actually the excess or outside which makes and unmakes the subject who traverses its own limits by ever opening itself up to difference. I am arguing that the discourse of these organizations masks this void by neglecting the fact that such sovereignty is traversed by a radical passivity at the unmasterable limits of the human. In this regard, see also Michel Foucault’s “A Preface to Transgression” in Language, Counter-Memory, Practice, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Cornell University Press, 1977, pp. 29-53). For a more Heideggerian reading of Nietzsche, see Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s “Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality” in the Dialectic of Enlightenment, which traces this transformation from the Kantian autonomous, self-legislative moral subject to the Nietzschean Übermenschen by way of the Sadean libertine.

There are multiple iterations of such hyperbolization of the revolutionary will. This one is an excerpt from the article “21. Yüzyılın Tarihsel Çıkışı,” (The Historical Ascent of 21st Century), Devrimci Demokrasi, January 16-31, 2002.
Interestingly, it is the latter conception of will, the one which knows no limits to its power that is recognized in its very negation by the state officials who reverse its absolute autonomy into absolute heteronomy. The official view explains away the remarkably long duration of the protest as a function of mere automatism dispensing with the will altogether—even that of a suicidal one since it still bears within it the consciousness of the power of destruction—and putting in its place a command structure. In fact, even the command structure is understood here to be nothing more than an absolute submission to the desire of the individual leaders of the outlawed Marxist-Leninist organizations, an understanding which is brazenly divulged in the press statement of Sadettin Tantan, the Minister of Internal Affairs at the time of the operation: “It was discovered that the death fasters were comprised of militants who had been selected by the organizations for execution. The prisoners who claim that they have been severely burnt in the operation have actually set themselves on fire under the command of the leaders of the organizations.” 9 Both the hyperbolization of the revolutionary will in the eulogical discourses of the participating political organizations and its total cancellation in the official counter-discourse occlude the highly mediated nature of this hyper-rationalized political instrumentation of the suspended state between life and death.

The Death Fast was a mass hunger strike orchestrated by outlawed Marxist-Leninist organizations which had rationalized this means into a complex mechanism over two decades of prison struggle and manipulated it to a point of exhaustion. A detailed analysis of this mechanism is crucial in understanding the temporal duration of the strike. Here, though, some more complications enter in the story. For this mechanism was beset with a complex rivalry between DHKP-C (Revolutionary People’s Liberation Party-

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Front) and TIKB (Revolutionary Communist League of Turkey) which polarized the rest of the participating organizations into two distinct camps under their leadership. We single out the two organizations—distinct adversaries, at times even enemies—because DHKP-C and TIKB were the first two organizations to introduce the death fast into the Marxist forms of prison struggle in 1984. They were also the only two organizations to provide a discursive account of the mechanism whereby the death fast in its specificity was consistently described, produced and rendered operative. Furthermore, their sustained and systematic yet oppositional formulations of the death fast determined the relation of individual fasters to the future, to death, to their bodies, and to others on the death fast.

In the form of a series of potentially endless repetitive enactments which implied both finality and incompletion, DHKP-C invested in a structure of temporal return not unlike the 1981 Irish Hunger Strike. In contradistinction to this structure of temporal return which recuperated the possible through the very actualization of death, which was itself rendered possible by the multiplication of hunger strikers, the TIKB advanced a temporal suspension in the form of a constant deferral between life and death. In this way, the two opposing political organizations came to represent for the public gaze a politics of life and death respectively through their different temporalizations of the relation to death on the fast. This differential of temporalization produced a differential of sacrifice which ended with the valorization of one form of sacrifice, sacrifice as self-preservation, over the other, sacrifice as self-dissipation. The latter sacrifice which was

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10 In contradistinction with the 1981 Irish Hunger Strike, the unit of series in the Death Fast was the team which was composed of 3 to 15 people (depending on the size of the organization). These teams were accompanied by hundreds of people on relay hunger strikes. In other words, the individual death fasters never had to bear the burden all by themselves as in the 1981 Irish Hunger Strike. See Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, p. 258.
sacrificed for its very seriality helplessly tried to prove its authenticity in the repetitive enactments of itself. And this sacrifice of sacrifice brought about the capitulation of political judgment to ethical responsibility for the dying other and spurred on the death fast with its rancor.

In articulating the long duration of the Death Fast, there seems little doubt that the analysis of this rationalized mechanism needs to be supplemented with an ethnographic description of the ethical and social worlds produced by this mechanism’s two opposing animations. For the management of this suspended state between life and death or life-death, by necessity becomes inseparable from what might be described as the familiarization of the foreignness of death. The very deferral of death saturates everyday life with death to such an extent that death gradually turns into something invisible, more nearly resembling life, in much the same way that, as we shall see in the pages that follow, it produces its own socialities which buttress the political movement, and yet which at the same time divide it ever more from itself, propelling it towards its ultimate dissolution. In explicating the temporal structure of the Death Fast as a suspension of the end, this chapter does not simply seek to uncover the temporal modality operative in the Death Fast but reads temporality itself as a cipher for the social relations that come into being with it.

Such a reading calls for the separation of the question of the ontological from that of the political. This is not to accord an explanatory priority to one over the other but to discern their entwinement in the difference which opens up between them. If the ontological discloses the limits and impasses of a politics of life and death which insists on not recognizing its essential finitude, the political supplements the ontological by
allowing us to think the novel ways of ethical and social being which are rendered possible by a politically organized collective assumption of death. This chapter argues that the question of temporality provides a privileged analytic entry into crossings between the ontological and political at that limit between life and death where decision turns to paralysis and freedom to constraint.

In his influential ethnography of the 1981 Irish Hunger Strike, Allen Feldman also makes a case for analyzing the hunger strike in terms of its temporality. In this next section, I will describe in some detail his conceptualization of the temporality of the hunger strike to better mark our differences, which revolve around our respective thinking of the “end.” This discussion will allow me to return to the hunger strike under analysis in due time by way of thinking death as possibility rather than as mere negation which will in turn bring into view a very different form of power.

II.

Allen Feldman locates the originary site of power in acts of violence. It is the performance of violence, he argues, that results in the positing—in positions—of power and not vice versa. Feldman’s point of departure for his “performance theory of power” is Friedrich Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morals (1887): “For Nietzsche, power is not ‘distributed’ from an archic center or a reserved site; rather it is fictionalized as a metonym of doing, the simultaneous site of origin and effect” (1991: 3). In other words, quasi-personified spheres of authority and totalities (paramilitary organizations or the state) arrive, after the fact, on this scene of violence, as the implicit or explicit “agents” who appear to possess, generate, direct and dispense such singular acts of violence at

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11 Being and Time stresses a similar point, arguing that the ontological plays the role of a necessary yet insufficient condition of possibility of what could be called (but Heidegger does not do so) the ethical and the political. For a critique of Heidegger’s erasure of the political and ethical, see Derrida, Aporias, p. 86.
will: “Legitimation resides in the construction of a fictive depth, a dimensionality of force which draws consciousness away from the concrete material investment in acts and effects that reproduce domination in time and space” (1991: ibid.). Power, he further asserts, is compelled to continue making a show of itself in such performances of violence, as if only through this repetition could it demonstrate its integrity and permanence.

Feldman intends to put into question this fiction or myth of a violence, which is no longer scattered in discrete acts, but is collected together in a semblance of duration by an authorial and authorized power, by rearticulating the body as the specular(ized) site of violent transaction between antagonistic forces. The reciprocal acts and reenactments of violence between antagonistic forces trans-form the body into both a product-effect (“artifact”) and an instrument (“weapon”) of violence, and thus Feldman renames the body as “the weapon artifact” (1991: 176). I must note here that his use of the verb “to form” and its related noun “formation” vacillates ambiguously between a productive or a causal transitive action (body as a product or an effect of violence), and a representational or an inscriptive act (body as an image of violent forces or a surface of violent inscription) culminating in the fetishization of the body. In this account which hyperbolizes the formative power of violence, the very act of violence that produces the body as a surface of inscription at the same time invests it with (historical) agency: “The body made into a political artifact by an embodied act of violence is no less a political agent than the author(s) of violence” (1991: 7). Such a conflation of symbolic power with personal agency is enabled by grounding the agency of the body in a theory of
“subversive mimesis” which appears to be a critical reinscription of a Foucaultian account of productive power:

“Foucault identifies the mimesis of empowered otherness as the principle of self-subjugation, but mimesis not only repeats the model but counterfeits it. There is no power in the panopticon outside of its mimesis. There is no originary act of power, only interlocking circuits of mirrored replication. Subversive mimesis subjects the ‘model’ to the detours and diversions of simulation which can detach mimetic practice from any external or originary reference. This detachment, this transformation of power’s re-presentation into novel political presentation, becomes a project of self-emancipation” (1991: 178).

It is well known that Foucault understands power as a differential of forces.

Panopticism is both the ideal form (or “diagram”) of such force relations in disciplinary societies and the very materialization of this ideal form as a particular architectural and optical regime (1979: 205; see also Deleuze 1988: 34). As such, the panopticon is a political technology which molds a multiplicity by distributing bodies in space, ordering them in time and penetrating them by training. Even if we were to understand the panopticon simply as an architectural apparatus operating on the double principle of permanent visibility of the inmates and their uncertainty about the gaze of power, inscription in a differential of forces cannot be reduced to a process of mimetic identification with a position of power or its image and let alone with doubling its violence. Here, I want to suggest that Feldman’s reading reduces Foucault’s understanding of the panopticon to an internalization of a dyadic command structure that splits the subjugated self into a dominator who possesses and applies force and a

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12 In Foucault’s account, sovereign power leaves marks on the surface of the body as the manifestation of its surplus power whereas disciplinary power penetrates the body and leaves traces in the form of compliance. In this sense, Lorna Rhodes’s (2005) reading of the violent encounters in the maximum security prison as the necessary failure of disciplinary power is more accurate in that it shows how sovereign power and disciplinary power bleed into each other without collapsing the distinction between them.
dominated (body). This splitting allows the commanding part of the self to objectify and instrumentalize its own body as a weapon against the dominating force on the outside: “Foucault does not acknowledge that it is precisely the self-bifurcation of the prisoner, the mimesis of alterity, that is the basis of prison resistance and revolt. The body as the terminal locus of power also defines the place for the redirection and reversal of power. In revolt, the prisoner also bifurcates and objectifies the body as an instrument of violence” (1991: 179). Following Feldman’s logic, agency inheres in identification with the dominator and mimesis of its violence to the end of reversing the relations of domination. Yet, the reversal of these relations of domination partakes in the very same relations it denounces, perpetuating them indefinitely. Feldman’s ethnography finds itself dramatizing this circular logic by which, in the ethnography, all objects of violence end up becoming, by dialectical reversal, subjects of violence.

This subject and object of violence is however betrayed by its very own body—the means of its self-appropriation. The more it is objectified and instrumentalized, the more it becomes other to the self. As the site where self and the other come into contact and do battle, the body bears the traces of the other and can never be proper to the self. The paradoxicality of mimetic violence cannot be overcome but, on the contrary, is intensified to such an extent that it produces an uncontrollable contamination rendering self-identity impossible. Such an intimate intertwine with the other in violence fatefuly occasions the desire for death as the only possibility of purifying the self of the other and thereby recovering self-identity. Thus, Feldman introduces the 1981 Irish Hunger Strike which brings to an end the three-year-long Dirty Protest in the H-Blocks.
The Dirty Protest that becomes synonymous with the impasse of its own ineliminable excess, instead of giving access to self-identity, exceeds its own closure. As the protesting prisoners remain suspended in this endless state of abjection, the hunger strike enters in what is seemingly the moment of sublation in Feldman’s ethnography to resolve their predicament in death and thereby to complete a teleology of self-identity. Feldman tells us that the hunger strike to the death was expected to complete the interrupted biological decay that had been anticipated with the Dirty Protest. The endlessness of the Dirty Protest and the stalemate of the negotiations with the British government had convinced the prisoners that the only way they would ever leave the prison would be in their coffins. According to Feldman, the prisoners understood the hunger strike as a final act that would emancipate them not only from prison but also from their own captive bodies (1991: 249). The hunger strike, here, then, becomes simply an act of despair, and what Feldman does, in introducing Bobby Sands as the “architect of the cultural separatist ideology” in the H-Blocks, is in fact to show that death is endowed with a historical signification on the basis of a thinking of the time of the end—eschatology.

Now Feldman does so by thinking the messianic event on the basis of death rather than thinking death on the basis of the messianic event. He posits an analogical relationship between the event of individual death and the advent of redemption on account of a temporality of human finitude understood simply as a linear movement of time sealed by the oncoming event of death. In this way, Feldman reduces the temporality of the end to the end of biological life and, indeed identifies with a certain medical measuring and delimiting of life by the time on the clock. This analogy itself is belied by
Bobby Sand’s interpretation of eschatology as a movement of return in which a radically new future re-establishes a past ideal state. With these reservations in mind, I understand Feldman to be saying that death marks accordingly both the end of the prisoner’s being and the end of the historical epoch of colonization and oppression. In this sense, death is not only the end, but also the beginning of a new historical period, the basis of both political and cultural independence. Promising salvation, death opens to a future which returns from the past to bring back a lost Golden Age, a shattered Edenic harmony at the origin. The end meets the origin in a full circle, and return here becomes a function of permanence and identity. Thus, for instance, Feldman makes a point of stating that self-immersion in Gaelic language and Irish cultural history in the H-Blocks was tied to hunger striking by a common utopian and eschatological impetus. Death, like the purity of the native language, was a denial of entwinement of the self with the other. What was true here of native language was also true for death; and the only antidote to the defilement of imprisonment proved to be the transcendence of the materiality that divulged the embarrassing secret: the impure body. To adopt the terms of Feldman’s analysis to the temporality of the hunger strike, if the hunger strike is about the beginning of the end, it is also about deathly purification of the other: “The penal imperative to incorporate the panoptic presence of the Other as a form of compliance and subjugation would itself be subjected to deflating mimesis and a final ironic reversal. In turn, the corpse of the hunger striker would be one more jettisoned sacrificial fragment of state violence” (1991: 236; italics in the original). The hunger strike, then, is a sacrificial expulsion of the other by means of eating the other, so to speak, or eating the very body which has become infested with the other, in other words, by consuming the other, all the
while consuming the self. Following René Girard who founds sacrifice upon an anthropology of mimetic violence and rivalry in his book *Violence and the Sacred* (1977), Feldman presents the hunger strike as a sacrificial rite that aspires to suspend and “purify” mimetic violence by a process of (re)presentation—or rather “incorporation”—that will end in its displacement by founding violence. The body of the hunger striker here turns into a tragic theater where the latter plays the double role of the sacrificial victim and the executioner substituting for, doubling, and finally expelling the deathly force embodied by both the agents of the state and the paramilitary organizations.13

Though the hunger strike may have pronounced the closure of political violence enshrined in the dead body of the hunger striker, the end of the hunger strike is itself not an end, and Feldman concludes that sacrificial expulsion never reaches completion. Apart from the highly significant serial organization of the hunger strike which he fails to recognize as an act that contests the possibility of ending with its strange logic of suspense and completion, the non-closure of political violence is reflected in the vulnerability of the corpse to antagonistic appropriations and, most clearly, in the very reproduction of sacrificial violence that was supposed to bring violence to an end by founding a new political order. After the Hunger Strike, the Republican prisoners were moved out of the H-Blocks and mixed in with the Loyalist ones. Both Republican and Loyalist prisoners wanted their own separate wings for military and political training. Together they took the decision to choose informers among their groups and to have them

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13 Even though the hunger strike is propelled by a no less violent logic of sacrifice, I do not think that the sacrificial violence of the state can be conflated with the self-sacrifice of the hunger striker. There is a difference between the two acts which cannot be simply effaced by equating both of them with the dialectical power of negation. This difference comes into view in the vacillating status of the corpse. The corpse appears here in two guises, as extreme negation and extreme affirmation, as the specular concentration of deathly force and the foundation of a new political order. I consider the question of sacrifice in Chapter V.
killed by the opposing group to secure residential segregation. In this way, reciprocal violence returns but it returns in an institutionalized and codified form giving the appearance of sectarian violence to a new form of sacrificial violence which repeats upon the political collective the very violence that was done to it. One murders more and more of those others that are inside or rather kills more and more of oneself since the others are inside one's self, to better demarcate one’s self from the external other. Whether sectarian violence becomes a simulacrum of itself or not, the power of negation remains the absolute master of political culture in Northern Ireland: “In the end, the Hunger Strike returned Northern Ireland political culture to the customary insight that the manipulation of the human body as an erasable transparency is the utilitarian motor of historical alterity” (1991: 265). The Hunger Strike cannot eliminate the negativity that, having provoked it into existence at the outset, necessarily exceeds its closure at the end. In this way, what may appear at first sight to be an ethnographic instantiation of Hegel’s conceptualization of negativity as the essential driving force of history proves at a second look to more closely resemble a parody of Hegel, with the result that the Hegelian dialectic comes to be doubled in Feldman’s ethnography with a pseudo-dialectic that is more like a logic of paralysis than of progression. Negativity is here in fact irreducible to the dialectic of history it is meant to propel; instead it more closely resembles an inescapable violence. Feldman’s description of the hunger strike as an eschatology serves, then, only to dramatize more acutely still the question as to the relation between hunger striking and death.

What if there is a relation to the end other than its actualization, albeit even in a nightmarish form of infinity where there is no actual getting to the end? Feldman does
not think death other than as the *moment* of death. He attributes an enormous political power to the event of death which, within history, interrupts history and opens up another possibility of history, or as he says “accelerates” history. From his perspective, the logic of the hunger strike is no different from the logics of the sectarian murders, indiscriminate civilian bombings, and assassinations of the individual members of the army or the police. According to Feldman, all these acts bespeak the need for sovereignty to disclose and affirm itself through negation, and the corpse becomes here the materialization of an alterity that is understood to irrupt in time or as time in and as the activity of negation. It must be shown that there is a different relation to death on the hunger strike that does not simply end in its realization in an instantaneous present, one in which hunger strikers misrecognize death as a subjective power.

III.

Hunger strikers in Turkey distinguish dying on the strike from dying in military operations by the difference in the origin of death. Death on the strike does not befall the self as an unforeseen event from the outside but is instead taken upon the self by a free and conscious decision. One does not suffer death, so to speak, at the hands of the enemy but one dies one’s own freely chosen death. Political authority makes its omnipotence known through the menace of death. If one can die freely, then, if one can experience freedom of one’s death, one will have deflated its omnipotence to an empty form. One will have attained freedom in death and, what is more, there will have been no absolute, not even death, left outside oneself.¹⁴ One will have absolved or loosened oneself from all bounds and become an absolute Subject.

¹⁴ Indeed, the titles of the numerous collective memoirs of the Death Fast are made up of declarative sentences epitomizing this idea that one overcomes political power by overcoming death: *Victory Lies on*
C., who had been on the death fast for 229 days in Edirne F-type Prison and who since his release from prison on presidential pardon in February 2003 had sought the company of his comrades in prison with such dismal longing, expressed the promise of such an all-embracing moment of plenitude in charged words which carried a violence all their own in the constant repetition of the “I will”: “My life belongs to me. Were I to want to die, I will die in the way I want to. Were I to want to live, I will live in the way I want to live. They cannot decide how I will live my life. I will.” He followed up his remark almost immediately with this rhetorical question: “ Didn’t we already win when we made the decision to go on the death fast?” The possibility of death becomes inseparable from life and absolute negation speaks here with the same authority as absolute affirmation. Accordingly, they are driven towards death neither by despair nor by anxiety. On the contrary, S., who often struck me as especially strong perhaps because she had desired to live and only to live and she had accomplished it after eight months on the death fast, spoke to me of pure joy:

When you go on the hunger strike, you experience liberation from the confines of your everyday life existence in the prison. You experience the joy of defying the state. It is a way of exiting the prison. You are shouting, “I exist; I am (ben varım diyorsun)!” You live that joy to the fullest. It is a feeling of freedom and the inauguration of the hunger strike is euphoric. Tables are set and a lavish meal is prepared. The next day you go on the hunger strike as though you were going to a wedding. You select your glass with meticulous care, put on your best clothing, and eat your last meal. It is like a preparation for a wedding.

The joy arises, S. puts it, when death appears to be one with freedom and self-affirmation. It is with this feeling of freedom and power that almost all of the prisoners volunteered to go on the death fast, including those whose health conditions would not
allow for such long-term starvation. F. was one of them. She had been suffering from chronic anemia and she had still volunteered to be a death faster despite the central committee’s explicit injunction against the participation of prisoners with health problems. She had disregarded their disapproval and had started a hunger strike on her own initiative which she had to terminate after three days, corroborating the prudence of the committee’s decision. In the days that immediately followed, she was taken to Bayrampaşa Hospital, the only prison hospital in the country, where she found herself embracing the task of taking care of the death fasters who were taken there after the state’s operation in the prisons. Was it not ironic, she said, that it was the same state that justified its brutal operation as saving lives that had worn her out over the years by continuously shuttling her back and forth between the prison and the hospital without giving her amnesty for her health condition? Though she felt relieved that she could be of some service to the death fasters in the hospital, an overwhelming sense of self-inadequacy permeates her plaintive remarks in a letter to her superior Kenan in the Edirne F-type Prison, reproduced in a collection of letters entitled *Damlada Okyanus, Okyanusda Damla, (Ocean in a drop, A Drop in the Ocean).* F. on one level accepts the selection committee’s reasons for declining her; but, as befits her own account of her defiance which she described in our conversation as having been elicited by “the personal nature of the state’s attack”, she dramatizes the implications of rejection in a very emphatic manner:

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15 As I will elaborate shortly, the organizational command did not allow for members with poor health to participate in the Death Fast. This biological calculus functioned to protect both the members and the Death Fast itself insofar as it was a precautionary measure against the falsifications of the authorities who were ready to exploit these instances as evidence for the executionary power of the organizations over their members.

Hello Dear Comrade (*Can Yoldaş*) ¹⁷,

These past few days have been very intense *can yoldaş* and every single heart has been rushing forth to declare “Me too, me too, I want to be among the ones who are running.” Days possess a certain density, days are difficult…And for those of us whose volunteering had not been accepted, everything we do feels inadequate for the times, writing to those of us who are running, taking over their duties, struggling, struggling, struggling for them as well and living… Still it is inadequate, it is still inadequate. Does it help to repeat that I am still a volunteer, comrade? I am not hopeful, I know why, I understand why, but in these times, it is not enough to know and understand comrade, it is not enough. (p. 90)

This inadequacy in the face of death implies an internal demand, a demand which is that of hunger striking, of merging with the general. If one was not on the hunger strike, one felt as though one were not quite inside the struggle, lacking in the capacity to respond to the attack of the state by one’s own personal means. In our conversation, F. rearticulated this exacting demand by recourse to the exigency of self-sacrifice to which she had already begun to give an economic inflection: “I think that there was hardly anyone who did not rush forward to protect those comrades whom they believed had to be kept alive for the future of the struggle. They were saying, “I should be in the forefront to protect them; I should sacrifice myself for them.” Having first posited the exigency of self-sacrifice, she was then compelled to cast it into question by intimating that the very possibility of sacrifice, of giving one’s life for another, presupposed the *right* to one’s own death. This right to death, Blanchot claims (1978: 105), “is an absolute right, the only one which is not the corollary of a duty.” In the context of the Death Fast where the preservation of the political collectives took precedence over the desire of the individuals, however, one had to fight even for one’s right to die. F. told of the fierce competition

¹⁷ *Can* means life substance in Turkish and it is a popular proper name for males. Since Turkish is an agglutinating language, terms of endearment such as *canım* (my dear) are constructed out of this substantive by adding the suffix for the personal possessive pronoun (*can+ım*). The form of address here is a marker of intimacy to the point of sharing the same substance or even being of the same substance.
among the volunteers. The volunteers communicated their candidacy by personal letters, communiqués, and oral declarations. In these correspondences, they gave their reasons for volunteering, trying to convince the committee of their eagerness, preparedness, and determination. They also made strenuous representations to persuade their comrades to suspend their candidacy. They wrote to one another at least three times a day to dissuade each other from nominating themselves in order to increase their chances of being selected for the teams. They went through multiple interviews and wept over decisions which left them out for the time being. In a letter written on May 23, 2001, I.’s pronouncement of his candidacy turns into a veritable imploring:

Comrade, I can imagine your busy schedule, but I still want to let you know about something. I was not able to secure a place on the second team. I was either too slow or could not express my decidedness well. Comrade, I want you to know that I want to be on the third team which I know is about to be formed. Comrade, I had told you about my difficulties in expressing my thoughts. I always leave out some things. Comrade, my dear comrade (can yoldaşım), don’t you forget that I am a candidate for the third team! You don’t have to ask me again, comrade. You don’t have to ask me to restate my candidacy. I am waiting for your decision. (p. 380)

According to F., each one was relentlessly arguing that it was their right (hak in Turkish) to take part in this political action because they had put so much labor into the struggle over the years. The competition between those volunteers who were closest to each other was even more irresistible. One had come to ask oneself, as F. put it, “What does s/he possess that I do not?” Each volunteer believed that they were as capable as the others of taking up such an arduous task. There were also those volunteers who had failed to perform their duties in the past, one common failure being speaking under torture. These ones thought that they could assail this exacting task and by doing so prove themselves to their political organization. Şafak thanks his superior for fulfilling his long-
hoped-for wish after a long period of waiting in a letter written from the Edirne F-type prison:

Comrade, I am so happy to be joining the action because it will be the first time I will have done something properly for our organization and the revolution. You know that I made a lot of mistakes in my revolutionary life. In a way, volunteering for the Death Fast will be a form of self-critique. I believe and trust myself that I will be able to fulfill this duty adequately. I thank my organization and you my comrades for trusting me with this task. I will not let you down. (p. 390).

This irrefutable appeal of death did not simply bespeak a sacrificial will to die for the other but a claim to one’s right to die. It was a desire for a different kind of substitution which sought not replacement but equality in the very unsubstitutability of one’s death. If s/he can die or has the power to die, why cannot I? Or rather I can too. Theirs was a demand to be recognized as the subject of a political movement which was deemed to be very close to victory at least at the very beginning. One wanted to be close to the center of the struggle. The more one participated, the more one was inside. One wanted to partake of the victory in its very center by proving that one could die. This illusion of the subject in both senses of the genitive is an effect of the extreme ambiguity of death. It is because death “is” neither outside nor inside or “is” both inside and outside the self, or better yet, it “is” the event which (dis)articulates the outside with the inside in the embodied self that the radical alterity of death is misrecognized as a subjective power.

IV.

For all the emphasis on the instant of decision, death is not given by a single stroke on the death fast. Rather than being a determinable event in time and space, death manifests itself as a menacing yet elusive “presence.” For if the threat of its imminence cannot ever be expelled, then, conversely, death always comes too early or too late.
Accordingly, the feeling of freedom does not emanate from the power to realize the possibility of death but rather from the power to retain it as a possibility. In this sense, being-on-the-death-fast is not unlike being-towards-death in Heidegger’s famous analysis in *Being and Time*. According to Heidegger, one does not die once, once and for all, at a single moment at the end of one’s life; rather one is close to the end at every moment of one’s being.

Death, like one’s shadow, pursues one with a strange intimacy which at the same time holds one at an irreducible distance. One cannot ever escape this shadow of death for one has received the gift of death like the gift of birth as an imperious law: one is born to die.\(^\text{18}\) Death cannot be negated, to accept or deny it returns to the same. But even if death has in some sense already happened to one and no longer belongs to the realm of possibility, it is still to come from the future as an unknowable event. If one cannot ever be freed from death, one can nonetheless, Heidegger claims, become free *for* it by taking on—receiving and affirming—the possibility of one’s annihilation in anticipation. Unlike the irrevocability of one’s birth which reminds one of the impossibility of pure self-constitution, the always future possibility of one’s death gives one the hope of mastering this irreducible passivity, which we might call time. One cannot undo one’s birth, what has already taken place, but one can anticipate one’s death, the future by a structure of repeatability which turns the future into a ghostly premonition of the past.

The OED defines anticipation (from *ante-†-capere*) as “the action of taking into possession, actually or virtually, beforehand.” Heidegger rejects the first understanding of anticipation as the actual possession of something in advance of its expected time. He

\(^{18}\) As Derrida (1985: 167) reminds us in “Tours de Babel”, playing on English and German, the gift is always poisoned—thus, one cannot refuse it.
wants to conceive of anticipation almost exclusively as a virtual possession, vacillating between presentiment (a fleeting sense of nothingness as a possibility in and as angst) and preconception (consciousness of one’s finitude) which, despite his strenuous efforts to make it appear as self-witnessing of one’s own death, it is difficult to understand in any other way than as representation. In stark contrast with other modes of relating to a future possibility (such as expectation), the anticipation of death, Heidegger stresses again and again in Being and Time, strictly excludes any implementation or realization of death.\(^\text{19}\) One does not precipitate towards one’s actual death in anticipation, but to the contrary, one holds the possibility of death as a possibility without transforming it into reality. Indeed, Heidegger contends, it is the very anticipation of the possibility of death that first discloses and makes this possibility possible, therein freeing one for death by making death one’s own.\(^\text{20}\)

The splendor of the “I” overshadows the anonymous character of death—“one dies”—by affirming its singularity in death, alone.\(^\text{21}\) One can say “I,” so to speak, because no one can take away one’s death from oneself. We glimpse here one of the oldest and greatest ruses of philosophy—an appropriation of the very event of

\(^{19}\) Being and Time, p. 262: “As one comes closer understandingly, the possibility of the possible just becomes “greater.” The closest closeness which one may have in Being towards death as a possibility, is as far as possible from anything actual. … Death, as possibility, gives Dasein nothing to be “actualized,” nothing which Dasein, as actual, could itself be. It is the possibility of the impossibility of every way of comporting toward anything, of every way of existing. In the anticipation of this possibility it becomes “greater and greater”; that is to say, the possibility reveals itself to be such that it knows no measure at all, no more or less, but signifies the possibility of the measureless possibility of existence. In accordance with it essence, this possibility offers no support for becoming intent on something, “picturing” to oneself the actuality which is possible, and so forgetting its possibility.”

\(^{20}\) Being and Time, p. 309: “The certain possibility, however, discloses Dasein as a possibility, but does so only in such a way that, in anticipating this possibility, Dasein makes this possibility possible for itself as its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. The possibility is disclosed because it is made possible in anticipation.”

\(^{21}\) “One dies” would be the grammatical form for “demising” as opposed to “I die” in Heidegger’s schema of three different forms of ending: dying properly speaking (Sterben), perishing (Verenden), and demising (Ableben).
disappropriation, an overcoming of the most radical form of otherness and negativity by opening the event of death to a process of replication or duplication whereby death becomes oddly synonymous with the possibility of death. One can become capable of dying only in anticipation that is in and through a certain redoubling of death in a scene of representation where death as event metamorphoses into death as possibility. By inscribing death as other than itself within a scene of representation, Heidegger transforms a radical impotence regarding the conditions in which one finds oneself to be born to die, into a power—but power less in the sense of being able to give death to oneself than in the more primary sense of being able to be even before death, as if it were, against death. Heidegger is not averring that death should be taken up as a possibility, but he rather wants to conceive of “death” as the disclosure of possibility itself. In other words, the relation to death as a relation of possibility does not open the future as death, which would simply be awaiting death or committing suicide—the end of all possibilities of existence. On the contrary, it opens up new possibilities of existence in the present by producing the “I” as an origin for actions that have yet to be, that is to say, for the future. In a counter-intuitive turn, then, Heidegger figures the scene of death—the originary encounter with one’s mortality—as a scene of birth where a subject or an “I” comes into being by grasping the ever open possibility of death as pure possibility in anticipation.

Now it is precisely this anticipatory relation to death that distinguishes death fasting from self-immolations and suicide attacks. Whereas the latter display a desire to actualize death within the immediacy of a supreme moment, what is essential in death

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fasting is that the relation to death as a possibility be itself maintained as a possibility. Insofar as this suspended event of dying holds death as a possibility, it necessarily also holds it back and hence holds within itself the possibility of life or better the possibility of return to life. As such, the anticipatory relation to death on the hunger strike draws an enormous power from keeping the possibility of death in suspense, that is to say, from keeping death intimately near but nonetheless indefinitely distant unlike the power of negation which dissipates itself irreversibly in a paroxysmal moment of actual death. As one of the iconic figures of the Death Fast, Sevgi Erdoğan, liked to finish off her letters, “Prepared to die today, full of hope to live tomorrow.”

Everything, she insisted, depended on the power of the conditional: “On the death fast, you never say to yourself I am definitely going to die. You try to show that you are prepared to die if your demands are not met.” Accordingly, anxiety does not emanate from the threat of death’s imminence, but rather from the inescapable anachrony between the two deaths—the passage of time that separates “death” as possibility from death as event which comes either too early or too late.

V.

There already is, as hunger strikers discover, another, more threatening death which comes earlier and which has little in common with the finality of death, namely the loss of consciousness. Their dread of this condition turns crucially on an awareness of the oscillating tension between the two deaths: between death which comes in one’s own time and one’s own way and death which is never accessible as such for any subject, who is unable to address dying as a personal experience belonging to any self-present subject.

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23 Yasemin Berrin, Büyük Direnişin Uşak Cephesi Baseğmeyen Kadınlardır, p. 105. It is this power of suspension which bears within itself the possibility of both death and life that the Turkish state takes away from them by submitting them to forced feeding.
at all. The hunger strikers want to die without ceasing to be an “I” with full mastery over their bodies and speech. They seek to be conscious of their dying so that they can safeguard their bodies against the prison officials who keep them under surveillance to intervene at the onset of unconsciousness. They also want to remain as speaking subjects who throughout can render an account of their act by continuing to speak back to prison guards, doctors, and kin who interrogate or question their intentions and motives. In order to postpone the inevitable loss of consciousness, hunger strikers have developed over the years various techniques such as daily calisthenics, diary-keeping and most importantly, the intake of a dietary supplement, vitamin B 1, which ensures a balanced intake of water, sugar and salt by keeping the nervous system intact.

Yet struggle as they do to maintain a distance from this other death which has already come without coming, the hunger strikers gradually fall under its grip, and instead of remaining themselves even in death, they lose their relation to themselves. A gap slowly opens between the “I” and “me” and the “I” dissipates itself in this crevice where a radical otherness inhabits it to such an extreme point of intimacy that not only others but the “I” itself can no longer touch its very self. Hunger strikers who enter into this inaccessible space of death are constantly pulled back into the sociality of going-to-death-together by a continuous speech with the dying individual until the moment when the individual suspends his or her relationships with everyone else and turns towards death, “latching onto death,” (ölüme kitenmek) as its witnesses call this death, which is already there even before it is realized. The dangling head, rolling eyes, murmuring voice are not simply the signs of an approaching death but death itself which never takes place except as a ghostly occurrence of itself.
If the individual remains lodged in this crevice until death completely seizes him or her, the prison movement continues to recuperate death as a possibility—inasmuch it can boast of an inexhaustible reserve of individuals who are ready to take upon themselves death. In the early stages of the prison movement, the political organizations had proceeded with the certainty that they could resolve the conflict by pursuing the hunger strike to its limit by giving up their first three teams to death, but they quickly saw that death as an event had as its paradoxical outcome the very withdrawal of death from the realm of possibility.

The hunger strikers who were violently transferred to F-type prisons after the state’s operation on December 19, 2000 stopped the intake of vitamin B-1 on January 10, 2001 thinking that the advent of death would stir the national public which had hardly expressed any outrage against the brutality of the operation. The months of January, February and March, however, came to pass awaiting death, baffling all who did not understand why death would not come in their time. Taking advantage of the interval of time, political authorities used the absence of death against the hunger strikers by spreading the false rumor that their survival was a sign of their secret eating. In an effort to expose the falsity of such rumors, some cut down water, sugar or salt. But each of these tactics was quickly found wanting, and none of them proved strong enough to make a death come which still escaped the intentionality of the hunger strikers. The first death occurred on March 21, only after five full months, with consecutive deaths following it in the month of April. In response, political authorities sought to preempt the occurrence of more deaths in prisons by closely monitoring the hunger strikers. They separated the hunger strikers from their comrades with the detection of unconsciousness and
immediately transferred them to hospitals where they were force-fed. But if the political authorities in this way reduced the number of deaths coming about within prisons, they also sparked off a new form of dying. Some hunger strikers affiliated with the outlawed organization DHKP-C began to set themselves on fire to outmaneuver the state’s new tactic of forced feeding which had only served to prolong the ordeal of dying by opening up a wholly new series of deaths and resurrections. For upon regaining consciousness, the hunger strikers would pull off their IV lines and resume hunger striking. But after a few rounds of these undesired resurrections separated by weeks from each other, hunger strikers had become exasperated with resuming an act interrupted by medical intervention, and had sought shelter in death, which appeared to them to be the only way out of this endless comings and goings of life (or death). They wanted to give themselves death before it was, so to speak, taken away from them. In the meantime, the national media was hardly covering the newly occurring deaths and the number of people attending the funerals was increasingly abating. Against these distressing circumstances, self-immolations had acquired the appearance of a new rigor marked by desperation masquerading as self-sovereignty. Most of these self-immolations in the later stages of the movement were unauthorized by the central committees of the political organizations and they almost always missed the chance of giving themselves death more quickly for they were put out by prison guards and died painful, slow deaths in hospitals.

The anticipation of one’s own death then has itself to be thought together with the endlnessness of waiting on the hunger strike. The “not yet” turns from the possibility of time into the impossibility of time passing, and the hunger strikers are faced with what

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24 In the later stages of the movement, even those death fasters who were still conscious were taken to hospitals against their comrades and their own will which renewed the crises in prisons.
Blanchot (1978), referring to the withdrawal of the event of death and using the substantival infinitive calls the impossibility of dying: “le mourir.” The withdrawal of death has the oddly contrary effect of reinforcing the will to die. “The search for death’s possibility, as Blanchot (1978: 95) writes, “ceases to be a meaningless issue.” If the very impossibility of dying begets the desire to die, its further retreat serves only to intensify such desire. Exasperated with the political impasse, Sevgi Erdoğan wrote in her diary in early March before the first death: “When and how is death going to come? We’re waiting. Come death, come death!”

Such powerlessness in the face of death is redoubled with a powerlessness to control the effects of their own political action which can only end once that ending is witnessed, endorsed, and countersigned by the other(s). Though this undecidability is true of all political action which always originates in the unknown and receives its signification and value from the other, it is exacerbated in the act of hunger striking wherein the active assumption of death is traversed by an extreme passivity with no possibility of mediation between the two. There is not much to do on the strike but to wait for the advent of the other’s response. Awaiting death takes on a different turn then tipping the relation to death into a relation with the other who, to echo Lévinas (2000: 115), discloses him or herself in and as the temporal duration of the very suffering of the hunger strikers. Instead of the coming of speech across the rift between strikers and their addressees—a rift that also interrupts speech—death arrives as though mortality were the mark of being always already exposed to the violence of the other who, in not responding, attests to its power of negation. The eventual death on the hunger strike is almost always read as a sign of murder.

Though the hunger strikers admitted that it was impossible to calculate in advance the duration of a particular hunger strike, none of them had anticipated that the prison struggle would last for such a long time, and what is more, would still not succeed in eliciting a response despite the death of one hundred and twenty two people. One hundred and twenty two deaths had failed to deliver them from this interim state between two deaths—death become possibility and death itself. Indeed, one might well argue that the prison movement had cast itself down into a similar state of suspension overwriting the conclusiveness of its demands with a weakness born of exhaustion and repetition. Unable to concede its own incompletion after seven years and one hundred twenty two deaths, the end of the Death Fast was declared a “victory” by DHKP-C, which had continued with the struggle for four more years after the decision of the rest of the organizations to call off the death fast on May 28, 2002. But it was a strange declaration of victory in that the end itself was announced as an indeterminate suspension of the protest, its terminal finality fully incumbent upon the Turkish government’s putting into effect the circular which promised ten hours of socialization among prisoners in the F-type prisons. The rest of the organizations responded with disbelief, to the strange, belated pronouncement of victory which was only the mask of unmentionable defeat, a hidden despondency, and an embarrassing powerlessness.

VI.

This chiasmic temporal structure of the hunger strike, where deferral and recurrence combine to invert end into endlessness, implying both power and impotence, is complicated further by the political organization of the Death Fast. The duration of the

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movement (7 years) cannot be thought separately from its mass character (1500-2000 persons at its peak) for the prison movement was neither organized nor conducted as a solitary assumption of death by individual hunger strikers. In fact, the participating political organizations invested in the very substitutability of the unsubstitutable relation to death. If I cannot substitute for the other in his or her death, and nor can the other ultimately replace me in my death, this apparently absolute relation to my own death is nonetheless infinitely substitutable. Derrida raises this very same issue when he remarks in *Aporias* (1993: 49) that if death “names the very irreplaceability of absolute singularity (no one can die in my place or in the place of the other), then all the examples can precisely illustrate this singularity. Whence comes a first exemplary complication of exemplarity: nothing is more substitutable and yet nothing is less so than the syntagm “my death”’. Death is irreducibly singular, and yet it is always already part of a predetermined series. I die only once, in a manner which is mine alone; but death is the most general and impersonal of events, to which, sooner or later, each one of us succumbs. Death is neither exemplary nor typical only because it is exemplary and typical. This substitutability of the unsubstitutable relation to death constituted the enigma and drama of the temporal duration of the Death Fast.

The substitutability was achieved not by effacing the singular relation to death but only by accentuating it, not by denying the differences between the volunteers but by recognizing their irreducibility. It was the deliberative abstraction of self-starvation that enabled the suspension of the end of political action for seven years. But if the reserve of volunteers made possible the temporal extension of the Death Fast, it was the internal economy of recognition which produced and reinforced the desire to participate in the
death fast itself. The selection committees’ discretion both translated a desire for an ample reserve and implied a belief in exceptional integrity. Each organization was compelled to make a presence in the prison movement in direct proportion with the size of its prison constituency. The selection committees were also concerned to display, deliberately but allusively, an acceptable proportion between the leading cadres and rank and file. They wanted to mobilize all their resources without jeopardizing the future of the organization by risking the lives of their most valuable members. But equally, they did not want to allow for the opening of a controversy in which the state authorities would present the selected volunteers as sacrificial victims picked by the leadership who chose to spare themselves the agony. Indeed, it was clearly to reinforce this very point that, some weeks after the beginning of the Death Fast, the political organizations disclosed the ages of the death fasters on a list.\footnote{Haklar ve Özgürlükler Platformu, “Yalanlar,” (Lies), December 24, 2000.} They also had reservations with regard to the legal status of the volunteers. Were they convicts or detainees on trial? How much time did they have left to serve? For here, as in their caution about the political status of the volunteers, what was at stake was a requirement that one attended not to impose the burden of responsibility only on those convicts who faced a long time of imprisonment.

In this regard, it is no accident that later in the prison movement, after the state’s decision to discharge death fasters from the prisons in late spring 2001, the central committees of the political organizations that considered continuing the death fast outside the prison used the occasion to select those who legally qualified for immediate discharge.

While the selection committees spent considerable time balancing between these various calculations, they have consistently and single-mindedly discredited eagerness to die as a desirable quality, maintaining as a result the necessity of political consciousness
and motivation. In this regard, knowledge of the political itinerary of the volunteers has come to exert a decisive influence over the decisions. What were the positions of the volunteers in the prison organization and in the overall movement? Was there a discrepancy between their duties and performances in the years leading up the Death Fast? Were they fully committed to the cause and determined to take the struggle to its end? Or did they show a false enthusiasm spurred by the political effervescence of the moment? Were they prepared to sustain such a demanding, arduous task? Or did they just want to be held in higher esteem? Yet despite the insistence on the determining effects of the political commitment of the volunteers on the decisions, the central committees of the participating organizations have rarely departed from what might be called a biological calculus: a calculus that sought to shun the risk of early attrition, fatigue and untimely death in order to preserve their limited forces and by so doing affirm the value of physical strength and stamina. Did the volunteers have any medical problems? Were their bodies more susceptible to early debilitation because of their participation in the 1996 Death Fast? The central committees of the participating organizations established a hierarchy among the volunteers by making a distinction between those who were capable of persevering and those who were not. The attribution of value was however tied in with specified obligations to be fulfilled. As the select few appeared on the stage to enter into this extreme form of contract, they might have been recognized as political subjects, but their agency was henceforth displaced onto the organization. In a pirouette, the free consent of the death faster turned into a constricting bind in this contractual relationship which concealed its violence under the name of volunteerism. It was then no longer the

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28 This biological calculus is another sign that the purpose of the Death Fast was not to die pure and simply but rather to occupy a suspended state between life and death until the acceptance of their demands.
death faster himself or herself but the central committees of the organizations that made the decisions about the suspension or termination of the fast in accordance with the new developments in the conflict whilst absolving themselves of any responsibility for their decisions by claiming that death fasting cannot be undertaken other than as an unforced and willed act on the part of the individual death fasters.

This displacement of individual agency onto the central committees produced many contingencies which internally divided the movement. For instance, the collective decision to cut the intake of vitamin B1 following the state’s operation in the prisons accelerated the event of death for the initial teams of militants. At the same time, the new teams of militants initiated into the death fast subsequent to this decision lost consciousness more rapidly and were hospitalized in great numbers. With a view to prevent the escalation of deaths inside the prison walls, the government discharged the death fasters from prisons en masse by the provisional suspension of their sentences or by presidential pardon on the grounds of their deteriorating health. The Forensics Council issued scientifically dubious medical reports for death fasters who were in the early stages of their fasting or in some cases even to those who were not on the fast. This counter-tactic of the government fragmented the movement around the means of struggle to be employed outside the prison. While DHKP-C and MKP denounced the discharges as “bribery” and expected their death fasters to continue fasting outside the prison, the remaining organizations took the decision to terminate the fast upon discharge from the prison intensifying the polarization between themselves and the former two
organizations. As this decision increased the possibility of survival for the latter’s teams of fasters, it compelled the families of the former to rescue their children on the fast from the clutch of former two organizations. Moreover, these organizations did not expect their death fasters who were discharged from the prison before the decision to continue fasting outside the prison which was in stark contradiction with their violent ostracization of others who made the decision to terminate their fast outside the prison. In other words, this structure of centralized control paradoxically created unintended inequalities between the practitioners within and among different organizations as well as conflicts with families resulting in further divisions.

Instead of bringing the Death Fast to an end, these divisions, on the contrary, kept it going. If the substitutability of the relation to death appeared to be secured by centralized control, there was always the risk that the individual would refuse to substitute for the other in his or her death. The very prolongation of the struggle disclosed the gap between the personal agency of the individual hunger strikers and the agency of the political organizations themselves. Even though this gap was denied on the basis of a volunteerism, which was provided as the proof of a fully conscious and willed self-identification with the political organization, the individuals ultimately had the liberty to break the contract and go off the fast at any time in spite of political and ethical pressures, even if such personal decisions might have meant violent banishment from the political organization and, in most cases, a certain finalization of political lives. In the face of such decisions which were taken right after the prison operation and which increased

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exponentially with the receding wave of optimism, the central committees had no other option than to select new volunteers to compensate for the withdrawals. In turn, this drive to select new volunteers had the inverse effect of increasing the very same cases of individual withdrawal since the selection process had lost its earlier scrupulousness and inflexibility in the rush to replace the old teams with new ones, and in fact it was entirely abandoned in the last year of the struggle.\(^{30}\) The implications of this vicious cycle of new teams replacing individual withdrawals from earlier teams leading to ever new withdrawals were serious ones for those militants who were continuing with the fast, for they were compelled to persevere for a longer period of time and here derived one of the forces behind the superhumanly long self-starvation period.\(^{31}\) These initial remarks lead us to a more detailed consideration of the political mechanism of hunger striking which derives its force precisely from playing on the movement of deferral and difference between life and death.

\(^{30}\) Far from interrupting the fast, this lack of rigor in the selection process turns out to have already been used as a tactic outside the prisons to draw ever more people to the movement especially after the joining of close kin and sympathizers in the death fast. This abandoning of the course of the movement to personal decisions is actually a singularly important sign of the centralized control of agency. This tactic, as I will show in Chapter V, was instrumental in the fated conflation of political commitment with ethical obligation.

\(^{31}\) As I will demonstrate later, the other two reasons behind this incredibly long self-starvation period are the use of vitamin B1 and the state’s policy of forced feeding which was imposed only after the loss of consciousness. In terms of number of days, 200 days would be the average for most death fasters though there were fasters who died as early as on their 60ths as well as other ones who went on till their 558ths.
Chapter II

The Political Machinery of Death Fasting

In the aftermath of the military coup on September 12, 1980, the military administered the prison as a territory in which it enclosed the Marxist militants in an absolute war, a war without limitations in the use of violence, but one that would not spread outside the prison. The body of the prisoner was the new battlefield in and on which the military and Marxist militants fought for the political ordering of life.

The prisoners had a de jure military status in the junta prisons and they were therefore identified as privates of the Turkish army corps until the end of their trial after which they served their sentences in civilian prisons. Military power aimed at the correction of the militants by conditioning and shaping their life as if the military organization of life could make soldiers out of the Marxist militants. The military commanders instituted meticulously detailed daily programs from strict sleep schedules to roll call and marching, from mandatory education and training in Atatürkism and religion to memorization of marches and synchronous recitation (İbikoğlulu 2010). In this way, military power sought to establish a perfect military society in the prison that would function as a machine, not a mechanical machine but a machine that functioned as a natural body in the prison. That it could only compel the prisoners to obey orders with arbitrary and excessive violence was a sign therefore of the failure of its disciplinary control of the prisoner’s body.

Political prisoners affiliated with Dev-Sol (Revolutionary Left; predecessor of DHKP-C) and TIKB in the Metris Prison in Istanbul refused to wear prison uniforms,
which they deemed a capitulation to the military regime that treated them as privates of the army, and a new form of prison struggle was thus born with the advent of the 1984 Death Fast (Laçiner 2003). This seventy-five-days-long death fast ended in the death of four prisoners, with the government granting the political prisoners the right to wear civilian clothes of the same color as the prison uniforms. Notwithstanding this paltry gain, Dev-Sol and TIKB considered the 1984 Death Fast to be a politically symbolic victory of the revolutionary will against the brutal repression of the military junta opening a path to gain of new rights in the prisons in the future. For the first time, the 1984 Death Fast put death on the fast on a par with death in armed struggle, turning it into a form of vanguard war waged in the prisons (Sarıoğlu 2007).

In the early years of civilian rule, the prison system developed in tandem with a counterinsurgency strategy that increasingly combined extra-judicial executions in the streets with juridical attrition. At the same time, both the clandestine character of armed struggle in general and the repeated execution of political and military cadres in particular made ideological transmission outside the prison impracticable. Consequently, the rapid rise in the prison population coupled with the ward system of incarceration, residentially segregating the prisoners in terms of their political affiliations, facilitated the development of self-governing political organizations, which in turn removed the prisoners from the disciplinary regime of the prison administration. For the outlawed Marxist organizations, the prison gradually became the center of revolutionary pedagogy and thus of ideological reproduction, and prison struggle relegated the military and
political campaigns outside the prison to a supplementary position.\textsuperscript{32} The armed propaganda groups outside the prison began to act as agentic extensions of political prisoners instituting an economy of revenge across the prison walls. The members of martial law courts along with several military commanders, prison officers and doctors overseeing torture in the military prison regime were shot by members of the propaganda groups; and courthouses, governmental buildings and construction sites of new prisons were bombed throughout the late 1980s.

The Turkish government recognized that the ward system had only served to radicalize prisoners further by allowing them political indoctrination and training and made the first attempts at changing its penal strategy with the passing of the Anti-Terror Law on April 12, 1991. The Anti-Terror Law stipulated that the sentences of those convicted and awaiting or standing trial on charges under the provisions of this law would be served in “special penal institutions” built on a system of cells holding from one to three inmates, explicitly foreclosing any open visitation as well as communication and interaction between the inmates.\textsuperscript{33} The new cellular system of incarceration, though it made a distinction between small group isolation and solitary confinement, refused to recognize any social structure larger than the individual inmate. The inmate’s social space was reduced to the prison cell and to his or her minimal interactions with the prison staff reserving no place for political organization and ideology. The prisoners’ consciousness of the radical restructuring of the penal regime is evidenced by the


\textsuperscript{33} For the full text of the Anti-Terror Law (Law Number: 3713) April 12, 1991, see \url{http://www.yargitay.gov.tr/bilgi/kanun_liste/PC13713.HM5.frameset.html}. 
centrality that hunger strikes (1991, 1993) and death fasts (1996, 2000) occupied in their struggles to forestall the forced transfers to special type prisons in Eskişehir and Kartal which were the forerunners of the F-type prisons in 2000.

After the failed attempts in 1991 and 1993, the transformation of the penal regime in 1996 was precipitated by the riotous May Day demonstrations during which young militants burned cars, broke ATM machines, pulled down bus stops and crashed shop windows in the demonstration area as a reaction to the killing of three young men by the police at the initial stages of the gathering. In the wake of the mass arrests, the Minister of Justice published a series of circulars announcing the overflow of central prisons and authorizing the incarceration of new convicts and detainees in the special type Eskişehir Prison. The potential class consciousness of these fiery young militants had arisen directly out of the practical experience of daily struggle against police brutality in shantytown neighborhoods, and it was to be transformed into political and revolutionary consciousness in the prison. However, the radical Marxist social organization in the prison—command hierarchies and ideological training programs—was tailored for the ward system with its collective living situation and “revolutionary captive” psychology. Thus, they were unprepared both as individuals and as organizations for the radical transformation of the prison situation and its new psychological, political impact on the inmates. The segregation of the young militants in the new cellular prison meant the refusal on the part of the prison administration to recognize their organizational affiliations and therefore produced their extreme individualization. In an important

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34 The tension between the police and the radical Marxist groups resulted in the killing of three young men affiliated with DHKP-C before the beginning of the demonstrations. After this incident, the young militants started stoning the state hospital, breaking ATM machines, and crashing the shop windows in the demonstration area.
respect, the government’s new penal strategy targeted the total destruction of the ideological transmission between the old political cadres and the new militants recruited from the disenfranchised youth in the cities. The organizations threatened dire consequences, including a death fast, if the circulars were not annulled and the earlier prison situation was not restored. The prison struggle commanded much popular support and ended with the closing down of the Eskişehir Prison at the cost of twelve militants who died on the fast.

The Death Fast in 2000 acknowledged the legacy of the 1996 Death Fast and reaffirmed the hope for the future by invoking its victory. In retracing its history, my aim is not primarily to put into question its retrospective construction as an exemplary struggle conferring unity on the particularly sectarian Marxist culture of Turkey, with its multiple fractions and splintering organizations, but more importantly, to bring into view the major ideological and tactical divisions that continued to have determining effects on the Death Fast in 2000. The 1996 Death Fast was openly divided at its inception around its collective naming: an indefinite hunger strike or a death fast? The debates surrounding this division proved to be significant for the prison struggle in 2000 too.

The radical Marxist movement in Turkey makes an ideological and tactical distinction between an indefinite hunger strike and a death fast in terms of their demands. In contradistinction to the hunger strike, which is employed against the abuses of rights in the prison, the death fast is a “higher form” of prison struggle of the highest stakes in which the defense of rights in the prison is extended towards and linked with “greater political ends.”35 From this perspective, the 1981 Irish Hunger Strike and the 1984 Death

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35 Ölümü Yenenleri Kimse Yenemez: Süresiz Açlık Grevi ve Ölüm Orucu Direniş Güncesi [No one can Defeat those who have Defeated Death: Journal of Hunger Strike of Indefinite Duration and Death Fast],
Fast are seen as conceiving a proper relation between means and ends. The prisoners affiliated with the PKK (Kurdish Workers’ Party), on the other hand, are criticized for repeatedly calling off their death fasts prematurely and thus consuming the political force of this means of struggle. For the most significant characteristic of the death fast lies in the declaration of determination to die for the purported demands. It is not death but life that is contingent on the death fast. The imperative nature of the demands rules out any flexibility in the negotiations; and it is not supposed to be terminated without the event of death. This is not to say, however, that the death fast must continue until the compliance of the state with their demands. Rather, it must not be concluded without first gauging the impact of deaths on the conflict. For this reason, the practitioners are usually selected out of the leading prison cadres who could be trusted to persist with the act through to the end.

The discussions which preceded the decision for the death fast in 1996 are highly instructive about the ways in which the political organizations rationalized this means into a complex mechanism for combating the penal strategy employed by the state. After the forty-fifth day, the collective hunger strike of the ten participating organizations had split into two forms. Under the leadership of DHKP-C, the seven of these participating organizations decided to convert their collective hunger strike into a death fast to be performed by select teams. Represented by TIKB, the remaining three organizations objected to this alteration in the means of the prison struggle and carried on with their collective hunger strike. The latter argued that the DHKP-C along with the other organizations on the death fast had not introduced and propagated transitional demands.

ed. Ulaş Osman Yılmaz (İstanbul: Öz Basım-Yayım, 1997), p. 357. The name of the editor is a pseudonym made of the first and last names of the strikers who died during the 1996 hunger strike. In what follows, I summarize the debates in this book.
which corresponded to the newly chosen means. More importantly, a comprehensive analysis of the objective historical conditions undermined the rationale for a vanguard war in the prisons. Turkey was experiencing an outbreak of one of the broadest mass struggles since the military coup in 1980 when the families were the sole supporting force outside the prison, and they were moved to mass action only by their children on the death fast in the prisons. In return, DHKP-C and other organizations reproached TIKB for committing collective suicide by not calling off the hunger strike after the forty-fifth day. They had designated this number of days as a limit for their general population whom they assumed would not be able to continue the hunger strike beyond it. In reply, TIKB called attention to the fact that the hunger strike did not have a definite term and contended that such lower limits could not be put arbitrarily on the duration of the hunger strike prior to the actual action which had historically proved to be able to surmount these cutoff points again and again.

Nonetheless, TIKB conceded that the quality of the forces in the prisons might have necessitated a tactical change. After the new wave of arrests, the prison population of each organization had increased massively though not proportionally, DHKP-C possessing the largest prison population. Yet its forces consisted of newly recruited militants who might have easily yielded under the straining conditions on the hunger strike in prison due to lack of political consciousness and necessary ideological preparations. Taking into consideration the size and quality of their forces in the prison, TIKB suggested to DHKP-C and other organizations that they manage a reduction in the number of their hunger striking inmates either by administering their time of withdrawal or, even better, by adding them to the collective hunger strike at assigned grades of
ascending time zones (such as 20 days, 30 days, 40 days). If the former tactic would put out of sight the weaker forces, the latter would culminate in a gradual expanding of the forces in prisons across the country in a protracted war against the state. TIKB maintained that the tactical change of DHKP-C and other organizations had fatefully caused a reduction in the number of hunger striking forces from 1500 to 270 and thereby facilitated the government’s counterpropaganda. Furthermore, the families of children who came off the hunger strike had begun to carry food to prisons during open visitations, alienating the rest of the families who were still struggling for the well-being of their children on the strike. In reply, DHKP-C contrasted the large size of its prison population (around six hundred) with that of TIKB’s (approximately one hundred) and stated explicitly the difficulties of selection among such a large prison population. Nevertheless, DHKP-C made a group of twenty persons continue their hunger strike until the fifty-fifth day and increased the number of its death fasters.

In 1996, then, TIKB was severely taken to task by the other organizations for what they called its “suicidal” insistence on the indefinite hunger strike; and DHKP-C was on the other hand presented as safeguarding its forces in its very decision to transform the indefinite hunger strike into a death fast. In 2000, DHKP-C’s seven-year-long death fast was condemned as a fetishization of death by other leftist groups, and this organization was depicted both in mainstream and leftist media as a religious order (tarikat) or a sect (mezhep) exalting mass suicide.36 Between 1996 and 2000, a radical

reversal took place in the portrayals of the two opposing groups, bringing into view the
difference in the logics of the death fast and the indefinite hunger strike.

It could be argued that hunger striking as a modality of prison resistance functions
on the basis of a radical reversal of the principles of modern punishment, which, in
Foucault’s (1979) account in *Discipline and Punish*, is marked by a decisive
disappearance of public spectacle and minimalization or elimination of pain. If a “non-
corporeal” form of punishment is exercised in the secrecy of the prison, hunger striking is
the public disclosure of its invisible violence in the staging of a suffering body. If
execution is reduced to an instantaneous event ending life rather than torturing the body,
hunger striking is a prolongation of suffering. And if disciplinary power annexes the
prisoner’s body to a machinery of production by fragmenting it into part-objects and
speeding up its performance through repeated exercises, hunger striking is an extremely
slow wasting away of the body. All of these propositions are true in one way or another
and both the hunger strike and the death fast invest in this inverse logic of
spectacularization. In the difference between the hunger strike and the death fast however
we discover the splitting of this inverse logic of spectacularization in two different forms.

While the death fast capitalizes on the visibility of the corpse, the indefinite
hunger strike exploits the visibility of number. Their distinct logics of visibility in turn
disclose a respective valorization of life and death. The visibility of the corpse indeed
relies on the value of the life of the inmate, and in this sense, it makes a legal claim to the
right to live, a strategy which, conforming to Foucault’s argument in the second lecture of
*Society Must be Defended* (1997: 37-40), seeks to partake in the democratization of
sovereignty by putting to radical use the disjuncture between law and right to fight back
against disciplinary forms of coercion. According to DHKP-C, the emergence of the corpse from the secrecy of the prison is to set in train the events that are to culminate in the concession of the state to the demands of the death fasters. TIKB, on the other hand, finds fault with this logic’s basic assumptions about the value of the inmate’s life. Since the state would prefer to dispense with the inmates and especially with the select few on the fast at any rate, TIKB argues, DHKP-C is serving the state by dying on the death fast. By dying on the death fast, one is actually carrying out the designs of the state, and in this respect, the death fast is simply a sacrificial waste of the present and future cadres of the socialist movement. According to TIKB, the collective nature of the indefinite hunger strike on the other hand disables the state from presenting the prison struggle as the rebellion of an unruly few. And at the same time it preserves the lives of the inmates in view of the fact that individuals who are dying can be pulled off the strike as long as a certain number of inmates are maintained on it. In opposition, DHKP-C makes a point of the impossibility of turning hunger into a spectacle. As the state very well knows and puts to propagandistic use, nothing can be seen in the performance of hunger striking. But the more nothing is seen, the greater the suspicion that some eating must be going on. In fact, no one could possibly watch the hunger strikers constantly, day and night, and so no one could produce firsthand evidence that their fast had really been rigorous and continuous. In this sense, the corpse could produce the only “proof” for the performance of hunger and thus DHKP-C insists that there can be no results to one’s wasting away in the secrecy of the prison without the emergence of the corpse behind the bars.

37 Franz Kafka’s short story “Hunger Artist” asks precisely this question. Can hunger become a performance? Can it be watched as a spectacle?
In spite of these contentious debates, strangely enough, the distinction between the two forms was completely suspended in the course of the action in 1996. Unlike the death fasters, the hunger strikers were clearly not obliged to carry on with their act to death. Yet, most of them ended up doing so out of commitment to their cause and ethical responsibility for their dying comrades, a decision also impelled by the ward system wherein the collective living conditions ensured perpetual and meticulous care by one’s comrades but also inescapable moral encounters with them. Furthermore, the central committee of TIKB which had the full authority to pull dying hunger strikers off the strike let die four of its hunger strikers who had attained a certain visibility in national media. One may begin to see here that the prison struggle derives its political force neither from life nor from death but from the difference between them as it became more evident with the Death Fast in 2000.

Whereas the difference between indefinite hunger strike and death fast had divided the prison struggle in 1996, and in dividing had effaced the distinction between them, the prison movement in 2000 combined both forms to make better use of them in what it projected a long-drawn-out war. It played off the visibility of the corpse against that of number and it did so precisely by maintaining the distinction between the indefinite hunger strike and the death fast. It also introduced a further division of labor by internally differentiating the form of the hunger strike based on two criteria: time and level of commitment. To protect or rather to employ their limited number of “forces” sparingly and to sustain a “reserve army” at all times, the organizations initiated rotating hunger strikes and hunger strikes with definite terms in addition to the indefinite hunger strike. While they staged their power through its show of force in both quantity and
quality, in this way, they were also able to include everyone and secure their complete identification with the movement.

The participating organizations also turned the intake of vitamin B1 into a tactical instrument to capitalize on the deferral between life and death. The decision to use vitamin B1 was taken after consultations with a group of neurologists from Istanbul University who had conducted research with the prisoners on the effects of long term hunger on the nervous system in the wake of the 1996 Death Fast. Since vitamin B1, which is not a nutrient but helps maintain the nervous system, was not used in the 1996 Death Fast, these neurologists argued, the cause of death was the terminal collapse of the nervous system in almost all cases.\(^{38}\) Given the publicization of this information by the Association of Turkish Physicians, the intake of vitamin B1 functioned as a political sign sending the message to the government and the national public that the death fast was not a suicide but a deferred death that could be preempted in due time. Accordingly, the cutting of the intake of vitamin B1 after the state’s operation for six months (from January 10 till June 12), was to assure the government of their determination to die for their unaccepted demands by accelerating its eventuality. In other words, political maneuvers were almost always made in the space of a difference between life and death.

The anticipation of the prolongation of the struggle had compelled the organizations to maintain the distinction between the hunger strike and the death fast.

Ironically, it was the unforeseeably long duration of the struggle itself which resulted in

\(^{38}\) They also discovered that there was a direct correlation between the deficiency of vitamin B1 and the Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome the contraction of which resulted in eye movement disorders, ataxia, and most importantly in a severe form of amnesia. The amnesic state is characterized by both anterograde and retrograde amnesia. For a complete description of the disorder, see Gokmen, Emel. *Wernicke-Korsakoff Hastalığı ve Açığın Diğer Nörolojik, Sistemik Komplikasyonları* (Wernicke-Korsakoff Disease and Other Neurological and Systemic Complications of Hunger). Unpublished Medical Dissertation. Istanbul University, School of Medicine, Department of Neurology. Istanbul, 1999, esp. pp. 27-60. I explore this issue in Chapter 6.
the effacement of the very same distinction. After the first year of the struggle, there was no longer any difference between the regimens of the various forms of hunger strike and the death fast. The official regimen had included twenty cubes of sugar, one and a half teaspoons of salt and at least four liters of water a day which could be increased to up to nine liters a day. In a protracted war under the dreary conditions of isolation, the practitioners were gradually allowed to drink black and herbal tea, coffee and lemonade, and sugar cubes could be replaced with a special type of candy (konya şekeri). Neither was it possible to differentiate the death fast from a rotating hunger strike after the state’s decision to use medical intervention to break down the resistance in the prisons. The death fasters who were subjected to medical interventions had to suspend their fast and recommence after a week or two.

The Death Fast came henceforth to be practiced as a purely abstracted form of self-starvation where the only distinction between a hunger strike and a death fast could be made by a performative act of naming. It was the central committees of the participating organizations who had the power to call into being a difference between a hunger strike and a death fast by positing a value for the practitioners themselves. In some cases, this task devolved to the rank and file who visited the prisons to tell upon the status of the individual death fasters. Whether this act of naming could cover up the utter debasement of the individuals or not, it was clear that they were no longer subjects but mediums animating a political action which was affirmed in the very abstraction of their deaths. As the slogan went—Long Live the Death Fast Resistance! It was for this reason that the seven-year struggle had to end with the self-sacrifice of an exemplary individual.

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39 The decision to include these new additions and substitutions in their diets were left to the individual death fasters since the state did not procure the necessary goods in the commissary stores in every single prison.
whose freedom and social status as a lawyer and human rights advocate differentiated
him from the rest of the death fasters who had lost their particular qualities and had come
to possess a generic body. The death fast of Behiç Aşçı, in a remarkable shift, sought to
transform their negative abstraction into positive equality under the encompassing
category of the human by claiming to sacrifice his life in the name of the humanity of the
political prisoners.

Let us now turn to the very beginning of the Death Fast to focus our attention on
the debates over its timing and conduct, which will prove to be determining for the later
splitting of the movement into two forms of dying with their different temporalities,
corporealities and social relationships.

As early as June 12, 2000, a meeting was held in the Bayrampaşa (Sağmalcılar)
Prison to decide on the means of resistance against the impending assault of the state. It
was during this meeting that four organizations—DHKP-C (Revolutionary People’s
Liberation Party-Front), MKP (Maoist Communist Party), TKP/ML (Turkish Communist
Party/Marxist-Leninist), and TIKB (Revolutionary Communist League of Turkey)—
agreed that it was imperative to begin a death fast. In the wake of the meeting, the
representatives of the four organizations continued to meet among themselves to reach an
agreement about the timing, conduct and regimen of the fast including the intake of
vitamin B-1. In their last meeting on August 20, they concluded that all their forces
would initiate a collective death fast in the case of a state operation in the central prisons
such as Bayrampaşa and Ümraniye. Nonetheless, the representative for DHKP-C
announced that his organization wanted to discuss among themselves certain issues like
the public declaration about the intake of vitamin B-1. A week later, TIKB received an

40 *Ufuk Çizgisi*, July 1, 2005, no. 17
invitation for a private meeting from the representative for DHKP-C. In this meeting, the latter expressed his organization’s concern about the possible consequences of a delay in starting the death fast which they proposed to initiate on the anniversary of the Ulucanlar Operation on September 26. With the opening of the Parliament in early September, they predicted, the state would make slight amendments to Article 16 of the Anti-Terror Law and thus give the appearance of a less severe isolationist regime in the prisons weakening the humanitarian support for the prison movement. They also expected a declaration of amnesty around October 29 which would mean the fragmentation of the resistance inside the prisons as well as the withdrawal of the support of the families. The representative of DHKP-C announced their decision to start the death fast immediately and added that they would do so even if the rest of the organizations left them on their own. TIKB was critical of this decision on several grounds. To the contrary, its representatives argued, the self-determining action of DHKP-C would divide up not only the prison movement but also the families which constituted the backbone of the public support outside the prison. The representatives of TIKB claimed that starting the death fast as a single organization without waiting for the participation of the rest would relegate the entire prison resistance into a simple duel between DHKP-C and the state and justify the latter’s falsifications of the prison movement as a mere opposition on the part of an unruly marginalized group to the new prison project. More importantly, TIKB identified the leading cadres as the main target of the state’s new penological strategy to

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41 This operation in Ulucanlar Prison in Ankara on September 26, 1999 resulted in the death of 10 inmates and created much public denouncement. While the state justified its violence with the claim that the political prisoners had taken over an empty ward, the political prisoners insisted that the violence of the security forces was unwarranted and deemed the operation as a precursor for the total transformation of the penal regime.

42 Ufuk Çizgisi, July 15, 2005, no. 18
liquidate militant socialism. Insofar as they were the bearers of collective memory, the physical or ideological destruction of the cadres in prisons would have constituted a new rupture in the transmission of revolutionary theory and practice after the notorious 1980 coup d’état. For this reason, TIKB criticized DHKP-C for dispatching its forces to the battlefront prematurely and thus facilitating the state in achieving its aim of denying a legacy to those who practiced Marxist politics. In turn, DHKP-C deridingly claimed that TIKB was absolving itself of the burdens of the struggle and relegating them to the “streets” while it pretended to protect the cadres.⁴³ TIKB rejected these charges by maintaining that it recognized the necessity and inevitability of resistance with full force. Yet it also drew attention to the fact that this war was going to be a protracted one unlike the other prison struggles in the past. It reckoned that the state would not attack constantly but would interrupt its assaults to make concessions to the mediating groups to draw them towards its position, and thus the war would be spread across time flaring up and calming down periodically necessitating carefully planned tactical attacks in a war of strategic defense. DHKP-C, on the other hand, anticipated that the war between the organizations and the state would be decided in a single violent clash like in the death fasts in 1984 and 1996. Accordingly, it calculated that the increasing number of deaths would determine the outcome of the war. From this perspective, the struggle would have lasted for three or four months at the most, but it would have definitely ended in victory with the loss of perhaps 20-25 persons. In keeping with this calculative logic, DHKP-C deliberated that it would reap the fruits of acting as the first organization to initiate the death fast. In opposition, TIKB argued that DHKP-C was seeking to take advantage of

the lacuna opened by the disbanding of the Kurdish separatist movement with the capture of their leader Abdullah Öcalan in February 1999 and thus to come forward as the only competent revolutionary vanguard in the country. By claiming leadership with the sheer force of its numbers, DHKP-C was striving to make use of the prison movement as a sign of its sovereignty. 44 TIKB warned that DHKP-C’s will to sovereignty would create doubts and uncertainties about the political ends of the prison struggle and delegitimize it in the eyes of the larger democratic movement against the new prison project. TIKB underscored the importance of building a strong democratic movement outside the prisons before initiating a death fast inside the prisons. In allying with a broader democratic movement, the prisoners would be saved from carrying the whole burden and paying the heaviest prices. DHKP-C, on the other hand, disparaged TIKB for adopting the campaigns of human rights organizations and argued that only the initiation of a death fast inside the prisons could detonate a mass movement outside. It invested in the political efficacy of dead bodies emerging from behind prison walls and fully expected the state to concede to their demands under the moral and political burden of these deaths. 45

Winning over MKP (Maoist Communist Party) and TKIP (Turkish Communist Workers Party), DHKP-C initiated an indefinite hunger strike on October 20, 2000.

44 According to the statistics available on the official website of the General Directorate of Prisons and Detention Houses, there were 49,512 people in prison at the time of the major transformation in the penal regime. The official number for the political prisoners convicted and detained under the Anti-Terror Law (Law #3713) was 8,657. Unofficial sources of information report that the prisoners affiliated with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) constituted the three quarters of this population while the remaining quarter belonged to the outlawed radical left organizations. In other words, there were a little over 2,000 prisoners affiliated with the various fractions of the radical left in 2000. Inmates affiliated with DHKP-C were estimated to be 640. For official figures, see http://www.cte.adalet.gov.tr. For unofficial estimates, see Ufuk Çizgisi, July 15, 2005, no. 18, p. 10.

45 Devrimci Halk Kurtuluş Cephesi, “Neden Direniyoruz?” (Why are we Struggling?) August 26, 2002.
These three groups ended their collective hunger strike after a month while their first teams of death fasters that emerged from this collectivity continued on. The second teams of death fasters began their fast after a ten day interval accompanied with the rest of their prison constituencies, who restarted collective hunger strike that was to last for yet another month. These pre-selected teams composed of 3 to 15 militants were serially launched, initially with ten days between each team, and later with greater intervals. Along with TIKB, the rest of the organizations, TKP/ML (Turkish Communist Party/Marxist-Leninist), MLKP (Marxist Leninist Communist Party), MLSPB (League of Marxist-Leninist Armed Propaganda), Direniş Hareketi (Resistance Movement), TKP (K) (Communist Party of Turkey (Spark)), TKEP/L (Communist Labor Party of Turkey/Leninist) waited until December 10 to begin a collective indefinite hunger strike which was turned into a death fast after hundred days, otherwise following the same alternating rhythm. Besides giving affective support to the individual death fasters on the teams, this alternating rhythm of expansion and contraction not only maintained the mass character of the resistance, but also gave the message that each and every prisoner could become a death faster.

This ideological and tactical difference between DHKP-C and TIKB reflected a more essential difference in the revolutionary strategies of the two organizations which came to overdetermine the relation of the individual strikers to death, their bodies, and others on the fast.

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46 DHKP-C launched thirteen teams over six years. The dates for the launchings are as follows: November 19, 2000; November 29, 2000; December 14, 2000; May 11, 2001; June 3, 2001; July 28, 2001; July 28, 2001; September 26, 2001; May 1, 2002; November 30, 2002; October 20, 2003; July 25, 2004; May 9, 2005; May 1, 2006.
In line with its Politicized Military War Strategy (*Politikleştürilmiş Askeri Savas Stratejisi*), DHKP-C viewed the death fast as a military campaign against the state and intended to organize it as such by naming and ordering its death fasters into sacrifice units (*feda birlikleri*). For DHKP-C, the ideological and tactical equivalence between death fasting and military violence was based on the unmasking force of death. From this perspective, the force of death acted fundamentally by itself to shake the legitimacy of the state and to make transparent its violence. DHKP-C thought that it could ride on the waves of the force of death and secure the support of the national public. Oblivious of the fact that the signification and effects of death could never be self-present insofar as they always remain open to what befalls them in different contexts and scenes; it assumed that the reception and the effect of deaths would be under its control. DHKP-C’s investment in the force of death called for both its immediate actualization *and* its suspension by means of serialization, yielding itself to a fantasy of the infinitude of the political community: “No political movement on the entire face of the earth has come to an end by “dying”; yet there are hundreds of political movements which died out because they consumed themselves away politically.”

In opposition, TIKB declared the bankruptcy of this “archaic” form of vanguardist politics which espoused sacrificial death. There was no self-proclaimed vanguard whose sacrificial death would produce the very spark that would ignite the fire of revolution. Rather, the vanguard had to win recognition as a vanguard—the historical right to act as a vanguard—through its attempts to establish revolutionary ties with the


advanced part of the proletarian class and its actual struggle. Without the systematic organizational work of such a revolutionary vanguard outside the prison, it would be absolutely illusory to assume that suddenly, overnight so to speak, with the mere impact of the deaths of militants, a consciousness equal to the demands of the present situation could be created among the broad masses. TIKB’s investment in the labor of revolutionary pedagogy transformed the death fast into a labor of dying. Driven by a fantasy of the immortality of the body, a sovereign self was summoned to master all the forces of life against death to defer it endlessly into the future.

We now turn to the narrativizations of these two different ways of being in the space of dying.
Chapter III

Labor of Living, Invisibility of Dying

“For, nearing death, one doesn’t see death; but stares beyond, perhaps with an animal’s vast gaze”
--Rainer Maria Rilke, Duino Elegies, Eighth Elegy

“On the Death Fast, you rediscover life and everything.”
--C., Revolutionary Communist League of Turkey’s Death Faster

“In the world he is mortal, but in death—in this finish without definition—does he not risk becoming infinitely mortal?”
--Maurice Blanchot, The Space of Literature

“I wanted to die standing upright like a tree.”
--O., Revolutionary Communist League of Turkey’s Death Faster

From programmatic articles, communiqués and collective memoirs to letters, diaries and shared testimonies, the Revolutionary Communist League of Turkey’s (TIKB) narrativization of the Death Fast leads narrators and readers into an experience where each step forward towards death is necessarily a step back towards life; where the endlessness of dying gives way to the plenitude of an industrious life; where inadequacy in the face of death is omnipotence, passivity activity, and remembering forgetting death. In this narrativization, death is, strangely, an absent figure and if it figures at all, it figures in such a way that the whole abyss, that separates the present and death, “the margin”, in Emmanuel Lévinas’s (1987: 79) words, “at once both insignificant and infinite”, by remaining invisible, effaces the difference between life and death all the more. Dying, living becomes so close to one another that they die living and the incommensurability that exists between death and life is consequently transmuted into a relationship that
admits of mediation, a mediation whose inconspicuousness is vouchsafed by the labor of
death fasters and the intensity of their desire. Dying becomes (already) a manner of
living, (already) a way of enveloping the limitlessness of the outside in the limitlessness
of desire, the excess of death in the surplus of desiring labor. Such an effacement of the
alterity of death is bound to its imaginary transcendence in the workaday continuity of the
struggle towards a future perfect as if the future did not always come as other, like death.

I. Surviving as a Ghostly Future Perfect

The whole thrust of the TIKB’s argument is that the Death Fast should not be
conducted as if it were a life and death struggle between two warring political wills. If it
were indeed such a definitive war between revolutionary vanguards and political
authority, it could have come to a conclusion much more quickly. One could have simply
given up one’s body to political authority in the name of one’s ideals and values,
sidestepping the excruciating labor of hunger striking. But, as K. contended in one of our
conversations at Yapı Sanatevi, it was imperative to address the masses caught between
the two political wills and the TIKB sought to remind them of their inalienable right of
refusal by fasting unto death: “You’re locked up between four walls and you have a fully
armed state apparatus against you. Even under such impossible conditions, you have the
freedom not to surrender, not to accept. The decision to prefer not, to say no belongs to
you and only you.”

Located on the third floor of the Rumeli Han in Beyoğlu, Yapı Sanatevi was a
gathering place for a host of people associated with the organization to varying degrees,
from young sympathizers to one-time comrades who still preserved social contact despite
their withdrawal from political service, from members newly released from prison to
those in charge of the social activities who behaved with more solemnity. Though it was known as the cultural center of the organization, the place had the appearance of a coffee-shop with a library and music-room in the back. The regulars stood around the tea stove exchanging the latest news or they sat in small groups, drinking tea, smoking and chatting leisurely. That the place was often raided by the police gave the convivial scene some shadowy hint of danger for me; yet it still retained its welcoming and tranquil character owing to the comfort of my company. K. frequently visited the familiar place for a change of atmosphere and to adjust himself to the life outside the prison. He had fallen a temporary victim to the Korsakoff’s amnesia after his one-hundred-twenty-days death fast and he had made a speedy if not full recovery.

Our conversation proceeded with K. adducing an example from the Spanish Civil War to explain the logic of this absolute, categorical refusal. He readily conceded that there was indeed a danger in singing the Internationale in mass demonstrations under fascist rule, for the militants thereby exposed themselves to a violent death in a manner which might be defined as “suicidal or even foolish” by acting with the full knowledge that they were going to be killed for their rebellious act. What the Death Fast had in common with this historical example in K.’s mind was that the militants in both contexts knew that the odds of winning in the historical present were nearly impossible, and yet they lacked any doubts about the future efficacy of their acts. Their dominant concern was not then present victory, but preparing the future as the condition of the past and thus, success was not measured only by the extent to which they achieved their ends immediately in the present, but by setting into motion a ghostly future perfect. In his appeal to the Spanish Civil War, K. was evoking the futurity implicit within the past by
reminding me not only that the past was a condition of the future, but that the future was conditioned by the past. As mortal beings, they faced the risk of dying, but their actions, so to speak, did not truly pass; they were not something past for they would continue to act on the future from the past. The imperishability of their actions made them invulnerable to losses in the present which were, conversely, seen as infinitesimal gains on the way to ultimate victory.\footnote{Such certainty ignores the unmasterable nature of futurity—the chance but also the risk—contained in the historical past, announced by Walter Benjamin (1969: 255) in the fifth thesis of his famous \textit{Theses on the Philosophy of History}: “The past can only be seized as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again…. For every image that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.”}

S. was on the first team of death fasters and she admitted that she had not expected to survive in view of the historical lesson that the Turkish political authorities did not concede demands without the exigency of death. But she had harbored no doubts that their struggle would result in the improvement of the conditions in F-type prisons. She knew this for a fact because she had been in the movement long enough to witness the aftereffects of the 1984 Death Fast in prisons. This seventy-five-days-long death fast had ended in the death of four prisoners with the government finally granting the political prisoners the seemingly minor right to wear civilian clothes the same color as prison uniforms. But this paltry gain, S. insisted, had ameliorated the prison conditions greatly and indeed had paved the way for the elimination of the prison uniform in 1986. According to her, the 1984 Death Fast had such an abiding effect that it had even helped them repeal the new legislation reintroducing the prison uniform in 2000. She ascribed the staunch opposition of the liberal left to the prison uniform to this past struggle since they had not shown similar reservations regarding prison work which had also gone into effect with the new Penal Sentence Execution Code. The past would always be a
presence, ineffaceable, and on that account S. contended that the Death Fast could never be a zero-sum war in which they either gained or lost everything. The end result of the war was rather a “synthesis” between their demands and the government’s written laws, to be realized over time and in time.

“Laws are made in the streets,” she said derisively, letting me know that she was repeating the very words of Mehmet Ağar, the Chief of Police who had been overseeing the multiple prison operations since the early 1990s. As S. quoted the Chief of Police’s words to describe the war between the Turkish state and Marxist-Leninist organizations in this way, she attested to what Walter Benjamin (1986) had critically formulated in his famous essay “Critique of Violence” as the founding violence at the origin of law, that violence which functioned in S.’s argument as the mark of the very vulnerability of power. Violence which preceded the law was thus not identified with the manifestation of a self-identical power; instead as an instantiation of political division, it always already bore the mark or re-mark of an encounter with a counter-force that could only be apparently assimilated to law by a seeming victory, one which was premised upon hidden concessions as much as spectacular displays of force. According to S., the prison struggle might not have attained its purported ends, but it had aborted the proper functioning of the new prison regime and had announced the promise, the coming of new laws in the future.

If the past was there to remain, the future of the past depended upon its utopian completion and inevitably, raised the participating individual to the level of a historical subject. “At such historic moments”, K. professed, “every single action of individuals, political groups and even masses, determines the future”: “It is a responsibility not only
for the past, that is to say, our legacy and values which we have created with our own labor over the years, but also for the future. Once you come forward with the claim to a different future, it is no longer a past or a future outside of you.” The Death Fast was ostensibly such an historic moment and the TIKB urged its members to comprehend themselves as active participants in the drama of history which meant that they would adopt a vision which was perpetually turned towards the future, that future which took longer than tomorrow to come but was already visible in the present.

Whence, perhaps, the brazen disclosure of the economic logic underlying their modality of sacrifice: were they permitted to die any of their members, they would do so by sacrificing the few for the preservation of the many and they would make a selection among the volunteers in consideration of the future of the struggle. While this calculus was the main target of derisive remarks by the members of the DHKP-C (Revolutionary People’s Liberation Party-Front) who saw it as an embarrassing sign of the reigning inequality between the leading cadres and the rank and file, the members of the TIKB criticized the latter for the high number of withdrawals among its death fasters. For TIKB, such a high number of withdrawals in the aftermath of the operation were due to the fact that the death fasters of DHKP-C lacked a vision of the future, which, they insisted, extended beyond the next day. C., who shared a cell with two fasting members of the DHKP-C in Edirne F-type prison, told me of their certainty that a mass movement had overtaken the streets in the wake of the prison operation. C. was putting precisely this certainty into question, including their other certainty that the prison authorities would be closing down the F-type prisons, transferring them back to their old facilities in a matter of a week or ten days. C. acknowledged the complete interruption of communications
with the outside world in the aftermath of the operation during which the prison authorities had put an interdiction on any correspondence and visitation with others, including families. Yet, he still refused to justify their living in a world of chimeras. Such chimeras, he contended, had led these two slowly into an empty space, a space whose emptiness had convinced them of the futility of death fasting. If only they had had a more expansive vision of the future, he argued, they would have able to overcome the twists and turns of their lengthy and wearing itinerary. Similarly, the TIKB imputed the self-immolations of the members of DHKP-C to an impatience ensuing from an inability to conceive of a distant future. According to the TIKB, the death fasters of DHKP-C desired to die too much and they should not have equated the Death Fast with death by casting the shadow of an anxious desire to die upon it. Instead of taking up the arduous task of staying alive, the members of the DHKP-C had preferred to turn away from such a long term struggle in order to quickly arrive at death that lay beyond it. While the self-immolations during the prison operation had allowed the political authorities to impart their responsibility for the death and injury of other prisoners onto the entire prison population by reporting all of them to have burned themselves to death, self-immolations in the F-type prisons convinced the authorities of increasing demoralization and resignation among the prisoners and emboldened them to aggravate the hopelessness. Perhaps the TIKB’s virulent critique of such an impulse to die comes into view most poignantly in their chastising of one of their own, a man who set himself on fire on his own initiative. He had done so in the atmosphere of ambiguity and desperation regnant in

50 F., caretaker of death fasters at Bayrampaşa Prison Hospital, also claimed that the majority of DHKP-C’s female members had initially withdrawn from the fast in the hospital upon finding out that they were already transferred to the new prisons after the operation. According to F., many of those death fasters recommenced their fast after a short period of time from an encumbering sense of guilt.
the F-type prisons after the state’s transfer of the TIKB’s commune principals (sorumlu) which had had the effect of isolating the rank and file even more. In a prison note which was circulated among all the members of the TIKB in Edirne F-type prison, his superior writes:

Yesterday friends first told me that you had passed out. It was only later that they informed me that you had attempted to set yourself on fire. When I heard this, I was surprised, saddened, and enraged! I must tell you that our organization does not espouse such a mode of action and you would not be able to find a single comrade among us who would affirm and approve it. Perhaps there would be some among us who would regard it as emotional revolutionism, but even those of us would deem it not as emotional strength but rather as mere weakness. Today, what should stand out in our struggle should be patience, composure, fortitude and resiliency. These are the greatest heroisms. Heroism is to bleed to your death drop by drop. Even if they were undertaken with the highest revolutionary intentions, emotional reactions and hasty behaviors would harm the resistance. I had given you the example of a marathon runner not only to describe the long-running of the resistance but also to explain that physical attrition and mental stress reach their utmost level in the final rounds of this long run. We have entered the last round. The state is trying to suppress the struggle by means of censorship; it is trying to choke it with silence and ambiguity. Isn’t the purpose of the isolation to break our morale? Psychological war is of the greatest importance in the struggle today. If we win this psychological war, we will win the entire war. Under such conditions, some throw away their gun and flee; some attack the enemy individually and sacrifice themselves. This second act appears as individual heroism. It is actually a mere reaction. If we were to analyze it, we would see that one would have chosen that road because one could not have held one’s own against the war’s mental stress. We certainly do not deem such an action as communist and proletarian heroism. I have been through many military operations. I am speaking in the name of Comrades Osman, Fatih, Ismail, Sezai, we would judge these acts not as prowess but as panic and fear.51 We understand your emotions. But you are the one who needs to surpass yourself. You have to stay alive for one more day to prove to the enemy your strength. Bleeding to death drop by drop is the right thing to do even for our fasting comrades today. Think about these issues, we are waiting for a self-criticism from you.52

Writing of the self-immolation in this way, the author of the note presents it as an act of despair and panic and asks the addressee to resist the temptation to flee the struggle

51 These are the TIKB’s death fasters who died in the past death fasts in 1984 and 1996.

52 Tuncay Günel, Damlada Okyanus, p. 352.
by dying once and for all. The author endorses neither the hastiness of the act nor the individualism of its heroism. The emphasis falls instead on a higher form of heroism marked by the duration of endurance and patience. Indeed, the investment in the force of death that necessarily entails seriality by virtue of its demand for immediacy is displaced here by an investment in the endless deferral between life and death that calls for perseverance. The logic of ‘one by one’ gives way to the logic of “drop by drop,” “piece by piece”—the logic of endless approach to the goal.

II. Drop by Drop, Piece by Piece

F. had used her own illness—she was suffering from Mediterranean anemia—as an excuse to be admitted to the Bayrampaşa Prison Hospital after a serious infection. The military had isolated the death fasters in the hospital by prohibiting admission after discharging as quickly as possible the injured from the prison operation. F. had coaxed the doctor in the emergency room of Şişli Etfal Hospital into transferring her to Bayrampaşa Prison Hospital on the grounds of insufficient security measures at the state hospital, and the doctors at the prison hospital had felt forced to accept the fait accompli despite the strict orders from the military. They placed her in the living quarters of the hospital, taking care to separate her from the death fasters. The military had divided the death fasters into two groups, those who still continued to fast on the upper floor of the hospital from the ones who had drawn their death fast to a close on the lower floor—the former wished neither to see nor to hear anything of the latter who were rewarded with greater servings of food and extended privileges in the commissary. When some among the latter resumed fasting under the weight of an inexorable sense of guilt, the military decided to remove them from the rest who had abandoned fasting once and for all and...
lodged them with F. in the living quarters for lack of any other available space in the hospital. Thus, F. became the self-appointed caretaker of the death fasters, and the Bayrampaşa medical staff silently acquiesced. Aside from cleaning their rooms and changing their bed sheets, she carried the parcels of bottled water which had to be ordered twice a week from the commissary. It was also F. who kept the records of their water consumption to make sure they drank at least 5 liters of water a day, filling up their empty bottles and preparing their hot water and sugary water drinks. Companion in suffering to the death fasters in her care, F. had soon become the eyes, arms, and legs of the death fasters, notwithstanding their refusal to be treated as invalid patients, taking them to the bathroom, giving them a bath, massaging their feet, and reading for them.

In our conversation after her release from prison in the summer of 2006, F. described death fasting as a form of political action which extends itself in time. First, she made the point that the death fasters desired to win “piece by piece,” and then, in seeming contradiction with herself, she continued to say that they desired to win “every single moment.” This temporal dichotomy between the piecemeal accomplishment of the act and the momentous fulfillment of its ends did not engender a questioning of the distance that already separated the death fasters from their addressees; it served rather to repeat and enact it in what she advanced as the message of life in death fasting: “I am taking the risk of dying for my demands. I can die at any moment, but if you concede my demands, I can also return to life immediately.” In this sense, every single moment was a charged ellipsis in which one held the possibility of winning the word of the other against the possibility of death, demanding of one a perseverance equal to the promise of the future. Despite appearances to the contrary, then, death fasting gave prominence to life by
delaying the advent of death: “You undertake this form of struggle reckoning that the longer you stay alive, the greater your chances of winning.” Understood in this way, death fasting had in fact little to do with self-dissipation. On the contrary, it was a productive consumption of life forces which aimed to bring forth a different form of existence by refusing to live under the conditions in the F-type prisons. According to F., it was the F-type prisons which were the very site of consumption proper (or unproductive consumption) where they would waste away bit by bit and inconspicuously not unlike the cumulative consumption of lives of surplus value extraction outside the prison. The decay of the prisoner was the very same as the exhaustion of the laborer who had to work, more than his body could bear, only to survive the conditions of existence. There was a hidden link between political violence and economic exploitation, and F. compared the death fast to the proletarian strike by conflating the interruption of social production with that of individual reproduction on the basis of a common interest in the betterment of material conditions of reproduction. She contended that workers whose lives are consumed with new coercive measures everyday, begin to struggle for better life conditions when they turn off the power switches to finish with that kind of labor in which their lives are wasted and gesture towards other forms of existence which may be beginning at this very moment: “Their life changes its form. It becomes a form of life looking forward towards winning. In the end, you’re going on the strike to better your life conditions. The more you force them to concede your demands, the more you win your life.” The longer one lasted on the death fast, the higher was the possibility of returning to life under better conditions. She acknowledged the possibility of death, but

53 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari make a similar argument in Anti-Oedipus (1972) about the immanence of death to the capitalist system where each act of production is inextricably linked to the process of anti-production as life is expended for the valorization of capital.
she added that she would still have won life for the survivors, just like the striking workers who might not have been allowed to return to the factory but who would have changed the working conditions for all future workers. It was neither a personal gain, nor an organizational one but rather a gain for the social.

In identifying the physiological consumption of the body with its social consumption, both of which are measured by the general equivalent of abstract time, F. conflates the relations of domination with relations of exploitation in the interest of suspending the consumption of the body for the expansion of capital and consolidation of state power. In so doing, she re-determines its use in accordance with the ends of a renewed social. The interruption of individual reproduction interrupts the realization of the reproduction of social relations within the prison which is already transformed into a site of ideological struggle by the Marxist-Leninist organizations. An invitation to undertake a similar act in institutions outside the prison, the death fast is narrativized here as a spectacle in which an enduring body refuses to be used (up) by capital and state power alike and becomes an radical space of experimentation and imagination regarding the relation to social surplus. In this sense, perseverance is both the message and the necessary personal quality to give time to the exploited others outside the prison to read this very message.

54 In his famous essay “Ideology and Ideological Status Apparatuses,” Louis Althusser (1994: 114) concedes that even the repressive state apparatuses like the prison cannot solely function by violence.

55 In this narrative, the formation of a different social subject becomes possible by way of extorting advantages like new legislations and labor contracts which at first sight might appear to remain within the legal and political constraints of the capitalist state. Yet as her comrade S. averred workers did not become agents of transformation by virtue of poverty but rather by shortening the working day to have time apart from the usual round of work and rest to think and form a judgment about the conditions of their existence. In this sense, one might argue that they take to task Walter Benjamin’s (1986: 291-292) distinction between “political” and “proletarian general” strikes by claiming that any strike takes place in the border region between “political” and “proletarian general” strike, between negotiation or, rather extortion, and “a wholly transformed work”.
Crucially, however, this imperative of perseverance transformed living into a more difficult task than dying. In this narrative, life and death were not absolute opposites but rather they blended with each other to such a degree that the ability to die turned into a luxury. S. elaborated a very different understanding of the relationship between life and death which concealed a deeply rooted antagonism with regard to that enshrined in the narratives of DHKP-C’s members. She would not attempt in vain to expose the true face of the Turkish state by dying since dying in such a way, she would have entrenched, without willing it, the myth of the indefatigability of the Turkish state ever more deeply into a world which was already marked by the signs of its violence. It was far more threatening, as she put it, to keep the Turkish state beside itself by living on for one more day. They were struggling to stay alive and it was no exaggeration to say that, for them, the labor of living was more demanding than dying: “We had to drink six liters of water to remain alive. It was such a torture to drink six liters of water everyday. Compared with this, dying is very easy.” According to S., they attempted something more essential than simply the task of dying. Instead, they pushed themselves to the limit of their endurance by fighting with death with persistence. From this view, an easy death was not permissible. It was supposed to be an unrelenting battle in which one was not to surrender the struggle even if it were to end in death. In a prose poem arrayed from letters written by death fasters to each other, the model of this merciless fight was figured by a commanding anonymous voice as the battle of Stalingrad with its memorable floor-by-floor, close-quarters combat in the city’s apartment blocks, factories, warehouses, and office buildings: “You will not surrender a single cell, a single muscle without fighting like in the battle of Stalingrad, street to street, house to house, room to room.”

56 See Tuncay Günel, Damlada Okyanus, p. 283.
Extending the battle lines into every point of contact, they were then able to bring death and life out of infinite distance and into infinite proximity. The consequences here were dramatic, for such an intimacy with death paradoxically vanished away death. The most commendable fight took the form of ignoring or forgetting about death to the point of living as if one were not bound by time. C. confessed that he had never thought of death but always of living and winning during his two hundred and twenty days on the death fast. Unlike the death fasters from other organizations who were waiting to die, they had not assigned themselves any number of days. For his comrades and him, to approach death, or better, to be approached by death, was to confront the limitless limit of the indeterminable: “Nobody could believe that we could go beyond our hundredths and two hundredths by only drinking liquids. We had presumed that deaths would begin to occur serially on the sixtieths and seventieths, but people did not die till much later. After the hundredths, we stopped keeping track of the days. If we had survived our hundredths, we could have survived even more. We stopped thinking that we would be bedridden after our two hundredths. We no longer had any day delimitations on our minds. We were still doing well on our two-hundred-twenty-ninth day.” Walking upon death and lying down to death were two different things and the secret of their enduring force lay in vigilant and lucid resistance to death. A long-time comrade of C. and a leading cadre, Y., who was on the death fast for two hundred and five days, began to address this unremitting attachment to life by telling of their refusal to recognize any limits restricting their relation to life on the death fast. She gave a moving account of their endeavors to turn the new prison cell into a habitable space by petitioning for kettles, writing equipment, games, radios and televisions. Commenting in detail on the acquisition of these objects,
she pointed at the radio on her writing desk: “Look, this radio is very valuable. I wrote hundreds of petitions to get this radio. And when it was finally allowed in the cell, together with this radio life entered in the prison where there was not a single breath or voice before. I sometimes tuned in to the Turkish classical music channel, and sometimes listened to the news from 95.1 Free Radio. The entire ward was able to hear the voices on the radio.” The sheer struggle for the possession of these objects riveted her to life, reinforcing her will to live. No sooner was she allowed to have a radio in the prison cell than her protracted struggle reasserted itself with greater intensity for another object. Next, she was petitioning for a television and asked her husband to deposit the money for it with the prison administration on her two hundredths. If she was still able to stand upright and hold onto life on her two hundredths, Y. said, it was because she had no limits in her mind as to what she was capable of realizing.

Instead of desiring to die quickly, Y. and her comrades were driven to push themselves to their limits, and in the process, they had also exposed themselves to the limitlessness that lay within them by redirecting all their attention to life which they were resolved to continue in its former state. It was important for them to continue with their ordinary life because they sought to impose measures on this long-term struggle with death involving paths which repeatedly called into question their initial resolve by so many dilemmas, so many sideways turnings or failings. Their prison life was already organized by a self-imposed penitential discipline, one which had acquired a new vigor with the Death Fast as if they were frightened that dying would free them from all discipline and restraint, abandoning them to one of the most dissolute of powers. They did not need to wake up at six in the morning for exercise and breakfast as they were used
to doing in the past. They could have slept in, Y. granted, yet they still took the trouble of waking up at the same hour.\(^57\) Instead of breakfasting, they now drank their water mixed with sugar and salt which had become completely “natural” like eating three times a day. It was as though, C. said self-bewilderedly, they had been living this way since the day they were born. The only difference was that they were spending hardly any time on the reproduction of biological life itself which, according to Y., had stolen precious time away from them unawares within the endless circuit of daily preparation and consumption of food. Once eating was eliminated from their daily activities, they had accrued a surplus of time which had allowed them to freely develop their full potential and to experience, as C. put it, an unprecedented degree of “productivity and creativity”.

Each in their own way, on multiple occasions, dramatized the progression of the Death Fast in terms of a limitless self-transcendence beyond the endless circular movement of simple self-reproduction. They had read profusely, studied subjects from quantum physics, geometry to philosophy and foreign languages, and written numerous articles, petitions, and letters in stark contrast with the listless resignation of the DHKP-C’s death fasters, who had allegedly watched television in lassitude all day long. According to these accounts, the Death Fast had revealed such measureless possibilities that they felt as if they did not have enough time to realize all of them. In a letter written on her hundredth day from the Bayrampaşa Prison Hospital, where she was taken

\(^{57}\) Most would wake up around six or seven to drink their liquid mixture. Then, they would go back to bed only to get up for the eight o’clock body count. After the body count, many would go back to bed to wake up at noon and spend the rest of the day watching television and conversing with each other. According to Erdinç, another of their comrades, most of the death fasters did not even have to get up in the later stages of their fasting. The prison administration had made sure that each death faster was sharing a cell with a comrade who was not on the death fast so that they would take care of the ones on the fast. These caretakers would bring the liquid mixture to their bedside and they would not have to go down to the lower floor for the body count either. True, the longer the death fasters were able to continue with their everyday activities, the longer they survived the death fast, but according to D.’s testimonial, most did not follow this rule.
together with Y., L. speaks of the swift flight of time: “Time is slipping away between
my fingers and I feel distressed that I cannot catch up with it, make good use of it… Days
are just not enough. And we have so many things to do, don’t we, comrade? We need to
run faster and faster.” A surplus of time turns unaccountably into one of lack here
precisely because time is no longer synonymous with a measurable sequence of present
nows simultaneously coming along and passing away in an uninterrupted flow. Time
feels to be both abundant and deficient because it marks the very opening of a finite being
to itself. The Death Fast is figured as such a moment of originary quickening that ushers
the subject into the limitlessness of its possibilities. With a slight inflection of
Heidegger’s thinking of time on the basis of death, we could say that the TIKB’s
members acted as if time to die were time to be. Transported by his memories, C.
declared from a temporal distance, without heeding the contradiction in his words (which
did not give way to a dialectical synthesis): “On the death fast, you rediscover life and
everything.”

This insistence on the essential irrelevance of the difference between life and
death that allows them to test to the extreme the possibilities embodied within the space
between the possibility of living and possibility of dying is a seemingly odd citation of a
certain fantasy of communism as an ideal social order in which social forces of
productivity would finally thrive purged of capital’s constitutive antagonism. In the

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58 Here, I reverse Emmanuel Lévinas’s aphoristic translation of Heidegger’s thinking of time on the basis of
death. As he writes in God, Death and Time (2000: 42): “Having to be is having to die. Death is not
something in time; rather time is originarily zu sein, that is zu sterben.”

59 In fact, Slavoj Žižek (1989) justly calls this “capitalist fantasy” insofar as it can only think communism
in the figure of an idealization of capitalism as the order of limitless productivity and technological
progress without the ruinous social consequences. For a phantasmatic notion of productivity in
neoliberalism, see Michel Foucault, “The Birth of Biopolitics,” in Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984,
community imaginary in Turkey, prison is the quintessential site for the cultivation of this fantasy and the Death Fast is narrativized here as an exceptional movement of its intensification. The perseverance of this fantasy of communism is, however, rendered possible by a conflation of private production with social production which finds its support in a radical forgetting of the social history of prison labor in Turkey.

III. Deathly Repetition of the Past

In the period leading up to the joint promulgation of the Labor Code and Penal Code in 1936, early republican industry had been characterized by a high level of labor turnover and absenteeism in consequence of the fact that the labor force in the country was comprised of peasant-workers who worked in the factories for short periods of time only to earn the necessary amount of money to pay for their taxes and debts and to return to their land. To accommodate the need for a steady, cheap labor force in the newly developing productive and extractive state industries, the early republican state turned towards captive labor power in prisons. According to Ali Sipahi (2006), the early republican state was not interested in inculcating in prisoners the discipline required of factory laborers so that they would join their ranks upon release. It was much more interested in consuming the use-value of this captive labor power, and consequently, prison labor took the form of wage-labor rather than unproductive, punitive, forced labor.

In the language of early republican penology, prisoners were regarded as a mass of consumers living idly in prisons, wasting away the limited resources of the state and their families under the dire economic conditions during and after the Great Depression.60 It

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60 In 1929, the Ministry of Justice decided that no bread was to be given to prisoners who could afford one okka (1283 gr.) of bread a day because of the insufficiency of the provisions. By 1936, the Ministry of Justice was trying to collect money for the provision of stale bread from prisoners who refused to give any
was argued that prison labor would lessen the heavy burden of prisoners on the state’s shoulders by automatically cutting the food expenditures from their wages. In the labor-based prisons (iş esasına dayalı hapishaneler), prisoners would earn their keep and even save extra-money which would be deposited in a bank account in their name while realizing the surplus-value necessary for national capital accumulation.

In actuality, prison work was an essential aspect of prison life even before the establishment of labor-based prisons. Prisoners who did not have a family sending them money or provisions had to earn their bread. Some earned their bread by manufacturing handicrafts and selling them for profit both inside and outside the prison through the intermediary of prison guards who claimed a certain amount of the earnings for their services while others worked as personal servants for more opulent prisoners. Indeed, Sipahi argues that the new labor-based prisons were welcomed by prisoners in the old prisons who preferred to work for the republican state with circulating capital rather than serving as slaves of individual capital in their constant search for food and services in the prison.

The new penal regime was structured as a “stage system” (devre sistemi) which consisted of four stages. The first stage would be spent in the cell day and night in isolation known as the Pennsylvanian system. Following this stage, the prisoners would pass to the second stage after a period of one to six months during which they would

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61 In the 1930s, there was a very high demand for the handicrafts of the famous Sinop Prison where most Turkish communists including the communist writer Sabahattin Ali and poet Nazım Hikmet were serving time.

62 Ibid., p. 44.
spend only the nights in the cell at the end of collective, silent work during daytime known as the Auburn system in the criminological literature. In the third stage, there would be no cell confinement, and more importantly, three working days would be equivalent to four days of imprisonment. If the prisoner was employed in construction, roadwork, or mines, the ratio would be one to two, which was the case for all prisoners in the fourth stage. In this final stage, the prisoners could also petition for parole if they had completed 3/4 of their heavy sentence or 1/2 of all other kinds of sentence.

Although these Western cellular penal regimes were much discussed among the republican penologists, the high costs of construction rendered the realization of the stage system highly unfeasible. In actual fact, the two early stages corresponded to the sentence time served in the old prisons, and the last two ones to the sentence time served in the new prisons, namely the labor-based prisons. Consequently, punishment increasingly became more labor-oriented and the stage-system was replaced by a new triad system functioning on the basis of a formal equality between work time and sentence time both of which were measured by the number of days. At the first stage, one day of work would compensate for one day of the sentence; at the second stage, this one-to-one ratio would increase to three-to-four; and in the third stage, to one-to-two.\(^{63}\) Moreover, the prisoners who worked overtime in these labor-based prisons were entitled to a bonus since the labor-based prisons were more than bureaucratic state apparatuses. They were rational-capitalist corporations managed by a technocratic class which also occupied important positions in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of the state. It is Sipahi’s conclusion that the work in the labor-based prisons did not appear to be compulsory to the prisoners as the alternative was to serve sentences in the old prisons with no income,

\(^{63}\) Ibid., p. 46.
and even worse with a redoubled sentence period. There was a chance to choose, so to speak, to work or to starve to death—like in a market economy. The disciplined factory laborer might have originated in these labor-based prisons, yet in contrast to other histories of prison labor (Foucault 1977; Ignatieff, 1978; Rothman 1971), prison labor here was not simply disciplinary and coercive but, to emphasize once again, it was first and foremost productive and exploitative, and thus one might argue that it put into crisis the distinction between free and unfree labor in the liberal understanding of capitalism, which sees the sole basis of accumulation on the individual wage-earner conceived as a free laborer.

It is therefore of particular interest that there was a group of criminals who were deprived of the “right to work” in these labor-based prisons. These were the political prisoners who had committed “crimes against the personality of the state,” and they had to stay in the old prisons for the entire duration of their sentence because it was feared that political prisoners would disseminate “dangerous ideas” among common criminals and interrupt their insertion into the circuit of surplus value production for the capitalist state in labor-based prisons. If the fear of the technocratic-managerial class resulted in the exemption of political prisoners from prison work from the very inception of the penal regime in republican Turkey, it also, indirectly, produced the conditions of possibility for the imagination of a different kind of labor in prisons.

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64 Ibid., pp. 178-181. Crimes against the personality of the state were punished with Articles 141 and 142 in the first section of the second part of the old Penal Code. Article 141 punished the formation of organizations with the goal of establishing communism, dictatorship, racism and destroying national sentiments. The latter article functioned in tandem with the former one, punishing propaganda activities toward these ends.

65 In a letter from the Bursa Prison, the communist poet Nazim Hikmet describes his daily regimen in words which exalt his inexhaustible productivity bound only by the hours in a day: “In case it might interest you, I’m writing about my 24 hours: I wake up at 7 in the morning, listen to the radio...
Crucially, the republican state turned its attention to political crime only when the labor-based prisons began to lose their importance due to the rapid rise in population, surplus labor force, and mechanization with the Marshall Plan’s subventions in the early 1950s. The republican state was no longer interested in classifying prisons in terms of the economic value of inmates. In the new language of penology, the labor-based prisons were criticized for motivating the unemployed and penniless to commit crime owing to the shortening of sentence times, good health conditions and, most importantly, wage-earning therein. A new and more punitive attitude toward the proper role of punishment emerged, and the post-1950 republican state re-structured its entire penal regime on the principle of dangerousness, seeking to separate the less from the more dangerous. The prisons were henceforth divided into “open”, “semi-open”, and “closed prisons”, a division largely by level of security. Concomitantly, the earlier investment in the productivity of the inmates was superseded by an investment in the punitiveness of imprisonment in direct proportion to the penal importance of the offense. As a result, cellular punishment in the first stage was annulled for inmates with light sentences, and they served their entire sentence time in labor-based prisons, skipping the stage system altogether. For inmates with heavy sentences, on the other hand, prison labor began to function distinctively as a reward. The latter were allowed to work in the labor-based prisons only at the third and fourth stages (the latter stage was completely dropped in 1956), that is to say, after cellular punishment for a period of one to six months in the

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66 Sipahi, “The Labor-Based Prisons in Turkey 1933-1953,” p. 175. In 1952, the entirety of prison-mines was closed as a result of the abundance of “free” labor.
first stage and compulsory work in the work-dorms within their penal institutions for the
duration of the sixth of their remaining sentence time in the second stage. Yet it is clear
from the regulations in the law of the specified exceptions to its own rule that the number
of penal institutions lacking in work-dorms was not negligible at the time, resulting in the
rapid construction of prisons extending from major cities to small districts. In such
exceptional circumstances, inmates convicted with heavy sentences were given the right
to transfer to labor-based prisons after spending a quarter of their sentence time in good
conduct incarcerated in closed prisons. According to Article 20, inmates convicted of
crimes against the state, drug trafficking, murder, theft and bribery were not eligible at
any time to work in labor-based prisons. Hardly any different from its predecessor, then,
the new law maintained the separate status of political prisoners from the rest of the
prison population regarding prison labor. Indigent political prisoners continued to work in
the work-dorms, if there were any in closed prisons, for their food and clothing. However, the work-dorms in the newly constructed prisons were nothing like the labor-
based prisons which functioned as quasi-capitalist corporations with the goal of
increasing their profits, and hereafter it was interestingly the leftist prisoners who exalted

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67 If there were no cells in the penal institution, prisoners with heavy sentences would serve half of their
sentence time in closed prisons at the end of which they could be transferred to labor-based prisons upon
showing good conduct.

68 For the complete text of the Law Number 6123 dated July 9, 1953, see
http://www.hukuki.net/kanun/825.13.text.asp. The central prisons (merkez cezaevi) were located in the
major cities and they were specifically designed for prisoners with heavy sentences as opposed to the
district prisons (ilçe cezaevi).

69 If the labor-based prisons exhausted their full capacity, then these inmates were enforced to work in
agriculture, roadwork, construction, and mines as part of work-teams which were supposed to be comprised
of no less than two inmates.

70 According to Article 14, prison labor was voluntary for detainees who were allowed to work in the work-
dorms within the penal institutions for their food and clothing. Exceptional cases aside, political prisoners
usually had better means than the other inmates.
voluntary work in prison, insisting that prisoners could find their full and complete essence only in productive work.

It was under the new penal code that cellular punishment was annulled indiscriminately in 1965 and prison labor was rendered mandatory both for convicts and detainees.\(^{71}\) For all its centrality in the penal regime, however, the enforceability of prison labor remained incidental to the existence of work-dorms within the penal institutions.\(^{72}\) There were inevitably many inmates who were not bound by this new rule due to the insufficiency of the work-dorms. Consequently, inmates with light sentences in open and semi-open prisons took the center of the labor regime and it was only those inmates in closed prisons who had served one quarter of their sentence time with good conduct that were allowed to work outside the prison in state enterprises ranging from agriculture, roadwork, construction, and mines to services in public institutions.\(^{73}\)

The continuity between the penal codes from 1965 to 2004 regarding prison labor was almost seamless and of the two, the latter restricted it to convicts without any profession unlike the former which had generalized prison labor. Though a law had already declared compulsory labor in prison to be an exception to the international ban on the use of forced labor in 1985, the legal definition of prison labor oscillated ambiguously between transformative and voluntary work in the new Penal Sentence Execution Code. According to Article 29, “physically and psychically healthy convicts lacking a

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\(^{71}\) Henceforth, cell imprisonment was used only as a disciplinary punishment which could not be more than fifteen days at a time.

\(^{72}\) At the end of 1960s, there were 95 work-dorms in 613 closed prisons. See Ali Rıza Mengüç, *Ceza İnfaz Hukuku ve Ceza Müesseseleri*, (Ankara: Cezaevi Matbaası, 1968), p. 308.

\(^{73}\) Sipahi, “Labor-Based Prisons in Turkey 1933-1953,” p. 176. In the early republican regime, petty criminals who did not meet the requirement of minimum one-year sentence were not able to serve their sentence time in labor-based prisons by reason of the necessary time to acquire a skill.
profession and those with professions who volunteer can be made to work (çaşıtırılabilir) in the prison work-dorms and ateliers in exchange for wages within the means of the penal institution” (emphasis is mine). Despite the ambiguity of the definition of prison labor in this article, the Head of the Department of Work-Dorms in Prisons and Detention Houses, Kürşat Hamurcu, argues that the conditional in the letter of the law should be interpreted as a mark of the physical and technical constraints summoning the future construction of more prisons with work-dorms.74 In the same programmatic article, he makes the point that the term profession corresponds to an understanding of profession in its narrowest sense defined as “a lasting occupation by means of which one earns one’s livelihood,” leaving it to the discretion of the Administrative Board of Work-Dorm in each prison to decide whether an inmate has a profession or not. To justify the recourse to this narrow definition, he argues that prison labor is entrusted with the task of reforming individuals and, pursuing the same logic, he maintains that it constitutes the main component of the individualized treatment system, which tailors the punishment to the individual convict, to his or her personality, attitude, and willingness to change in the new penal regime. In the final analysis, he contends that the entirety of the prison population should be forced to work regardless of their professional status.75

74 For the full text of his article on the website of the Department entitled “Türk Hukukunda Tutuklu ve Hükümlülerin Çalıştırılması” (Detainee and Convict Labor in Turkish Law), see http://www.iydb.adalet.gov.tr/makale1.asp. Indeed, the law which had founded this Department in 1997 had also endorsed the construction of work dormitories and ateliers in every prison and detention house in the country. For the full stipulation of this law (number 4301) dated August 6, 1997, see http://www.hukuki.net/kanun/4301.15.text.asp.

75 Despite the ambiguity of the legal definition of prison labor, the refusal to work is unequivocally considered a disciplinary infraction and punished accordingly, proving that prison labor aims first and foremost at establishing a power relation by subduing the individual. Article 42 stipulates that prisoners who refuse to work in occupations designated as appropriate for them by the Administrative Board of the
Inasmuch as prison labor functioned as a motive and measure of individual transformation in an individualized treatment system, however, the introduction of high security closed prisons known as F-type prisons in 2000 proved to be an anomalous exception to the new penal regime. Adding a new level of security to the carceral continuum, these prisons targeted a specific category of criminals, namely those who were convicted and awaiting or standing trial on charges under the Anti-Terror Law. The penal regime specific to these prisons can best be described as sorting individuals into groups according to the degree of control warranted by their risk to society and state.\textsuperscript{76} Such a penal regime which shifts focus away from the individual convict and his or her capacity for rehabilitation to the identificatory offense itself is markedly concerned with techniques for identifying, classifying and managing groupings sorted by dangerousness.

\textsuperscript{76} Article 220 of the new Penal Code stipulates the punishment of the formation of criminal organizations. Article 314 is a special article which regulates the punishment of armed criminal organizations and it constitutes one of the subcategories in the Anti-Terror Law which functions on the basis of a much wider definition of terrorism than the recourse to arms. The latter law describes terrorist organizations as criminal organizations comprised of at least two people that use force, violence and intimidation toward the ends of coercion and suppression. The Anti-Terror Law singularly punishes the aim of the crime, taking into consideration neither the (realized) effects of the crime nor the motives of the individuals who are punished one and at the same time both for their acts and their membership in the organization. The terrorist organizations are divided into two groups based on their aim: "absolute terrorist organizations" and "relative terrorist organizations." The former organizations which are referred to as terrorist organizations proper are political organizations that threaten to destroy the security of the nation and the state (namely the Kurdish separatist movement) and the constitutional order (namely the Marxist-Leninist organizations) whereas the latter are comprised of interest-based criminal organizations such as the mafia. For an interpretation of the Anti-Terror Law, see Mustafa Avcı, “Yeni Yasal Düzenlemelere Göre Türk Hukunda Örgütlü Suç Kavramı” (Organized Crime in Turkish Law According to the New Regulations), \textit{Hukuk ve Adalet}, 5 April 2005, pp. 248-273.
rather than the social and personal transformation of individuals. Accordingly, the entire penal regime in these prisons is based on isolation which arguably leaves the inmates immune to the lure of the totalizing immanence embodied in their criminal organizations by separating them from each other and, most importantly, from their leader.

Though an exception at the initial stages of the penal transformation, the General Directorate of Prisons and Detention Houses anticipated extending this cellular regime by building new prisons based on the cell system and remodeling the large wards of existing seventy-five prisons into cell units in the following years for the effective administration and management of prisons. This imminent transformation of the penal regime was adjudged by political prisoners to implicate Turkish society in its entirety. Despite the government’s clothing of the penal transformation in a fog of “reform,” their argument ran, the new penal regime aimed not to promote greater security and order within prisons but merely to consolidate the new, neoliberal order by incarcerating the growing, menacing urban poor who were being precipitated headlong into crime by their conditions of existence. In programmatic articles which presaged the future and

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77 Under the pressure of delegations from the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, the government amended the Article 16 of the Anti-Terror Law on May 1, 2001 recognizing the right to have access to programmes of cultural, social, educational, vocational and sport activities which would enable the prisoners to spend five hours outside their cells. CPT does not disapprove of high security measures such as solitary confinement on principle, but tries to regulate its conditions. Recommendation No R (82) 17 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (1982) urges member states such as Turkey to “apply ordinary prison regulations as far as possible to dangerous prisoners, to apply security measures in a way respectful of human dignity, to counteract the possible adverse effects of reinforced security conditions and to provide education, vocational training, work and leisure-time occupations and other activities to the extent that security permits.” The prisoners affiliated with outlawed Marxist-Leninist organizations did not exercise this right reasoning that it would mean the acceptance of the new prison project.

78 Prison struggle was not exterior to other social struggles and they expressed this argument in their slogans “F-Tipi IMF Tipi Yaşama Hayır” (No to F-type and IMF-type Life) and “İçeride Dişarida Hücreleri Parçala” (Destroy the Cells Inside and Outside).
prefaced their struggle, they denounced the new penal regime for its reliance on a repressive apparatus that combined coercive individualization with compulsory labor by re-organizing the prison as a factory without any acquired social rights and securities.\footnote{For some examples, see “F-tipi Hücre Hapishaneleri Yıkacağız” (We’re Going to Destroy the F-type Cell Prisons), \textit{Kurtuluş}, August-September-October 2000; DHKP-C, TKP(ML), TKIP Joint Statement, November 2000; “Şehitlerimizle Zafere Yürüyoruz,” (We’re Walking to Victory with Our Martyrs) \textit{Kızıl Bayrak}, 28 July 2001; “F Tipi Tabutluk Gerçeği,” (The Reality of F-type Coffin) \textit{Ekmek ve Adalet}, 5 June 2002.}

Besides the general maintenance and development of the state prison system, the primary function of prison labor had been the disciplinary preparation of inmates as future workers with meager yet consistent payments from the late fifties until the construction of the F-type prisons in the late 1990s.\footnote{According to available statistics, the number of prison workers increased from 3,214 in 1997 to 59,187 in 2002 and there were 68 types of occupation ranging from carpentry to shoemaking, carpet weaving to furniture making, from ironworking to needlework and from construction work to printing. According to Article 7 of the Law 4301, ninety percent of the gross income is reserved for the maintenance and development of prisons and detention houses. The construction of eleven F-type prisons was funded by income from prison labor which was compensated at a rate one third of the minimum wage in 2001. See Yasemin Özdek’s articles, “Küreselleşme Sürecinde Ceza Politikalarında Dönüşümler,” (Transformations in Penal Regimes in the Age of Globalization) \textit{Amme Idaresi Dergisi}, vol. 33, no. 4, December 2000, pp. 21-48 and “Ceza Reformunun Görünmeyen Yüzü: Hapishanelerde Zorla Çalıştırma” (The Invisible Face of Penal Reform: Compulsory Labor in Prisons) \textit{Günüşiği}, February-March 2005, pp. 18-21.} For prison labor was heavily subsidized by the state and it was in no condition to compete with the private sector since its inferior quality products took a long time to procure at higher costs.\footnote{According to a sociological study of open prisons, there were carpets waiting to be finished for the past ten years in work ateliers in open prisons. See Ilkay Savcı, \textit{Adını Kader Koyduk} [We Named It Fate] (Ankara: Phoenix, 2004), pp. 120-157.} Indeed, it was only on March 27, 1998 that a new regulation had authorized the exploitation of prison labor by private firms by allowing prisoners to work for private capital inside and outside the prison. As such this legal transformation was a sign foretelling the incipient articulation of relations of domination with relations of exploitation by making available a cheap labor reserve in prison. The F-type prisons were an architectural harbinger of this
new penal regime with their spacious work ateliers built above the prison cells. Political prisoners insisted that the goal of the new prison regime was the subsumption of the prison to the capitalist system where—to anticipate my argument below—“desiring production” had managed to survive within this exceptional enclave—or shall we say enclave in an enclave?—which had hitherto been kept separate by the Turkish state from the circuit of surplus value production.

IV. A Different Kind of Labor

I borrow the term “desiring production” from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* ([1972] 1994) to supplement Marx’s category of “use-value” in the interest of elucidating the counter-intuitive representation of the prison as the quintessential site of social surplus. As they state unequivocally: “The unconscious poses no problem of meaning, solely problems of use. The question posed by desire is not ‘What does it mean?’ but rather ‘How does it work?’” (108; emphasis in the original). Deleuze and Guattari argue for an “identity of nature” between desiring production and social production on the basis of the common essence of libido and labor as “the activity of production in general” (302-3). An essence which “is” itself neither fixed nor determinate, production-in-general (or abstract human labor in Marx’s terms), becomes visible under capitalism only to be subject to a radical privatization within the ostensibly segregated domains of commodity-production and reproduction.

Deleuze and Guattari endeavor to undo the capitalist segregation of desire from labor and posit a link between them by means of the concept-metaphor of “desiring

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82 Despite the lingering language of rehabilitation, General Directorate of Prisons and Detention Houses had a gross income of 150 billion YTL with a profit of 24 billion YTL by 2004 and was planning to continue its business under a holding company called CE (the first two letters of prison in Turkish). See “Cezaevi Özel Sektörü Geçti” in *Zaman*, December 12, 2005 and “Cezaevi Holding Kuruluyor ‘Sayılı Gün’ Marka Oluyor” in *Hürriyet*, March 20, 2005.
machines.” As a concept, “desiring machines” replace the theatrical model of the psyche with a factory model of productive desire. Desire, they insist, does not lack anything, does not aim at what it does not have or what is “missing”; on the contrary, desire is first and foremost a productive force which exceeds the subject, and what it produces is the real world: “If desire produces, its product is real. If desire is productive, it can only be productive in the real world and can only produce reality…. The objective being of desire is the Real in and of itself” (26-7). Only secondarily, as a result of the organization of social production, does productive desire become reactive and construct a parallel world of gratification as imaginary compensation for what has been taken from it by agents of “anti-production” that organize the expenditure of social surplus.

Indeed, the concept of “anti-production”, like the term “desiring machines,” provides for Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis a crucial link between the realms of desiring production and social production. Following Freud and Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari describe anti-production in the realm of desiring production as “primal repression,” an originary libidinal decathexis which brings into being an affective medium (“body without organs”) as the condition for the formation of a surface of inscription (“miraculating machine”) signaling the advent of a process of recoding and a subject (“celibate machine”) as the residual product of this process. For Deleuze and Guattari, the recoding process in the realm of desiring production is equivocal. By interrupting the repeated cathexes of singular objects, anti-production frees libido from remaining closed in on itself in an autoerotic loop, but at the same time it exposes this newly available libidinal flux to the danger of subjection in generalized systems of representation.83

83 The hegemonic form of social repression in capitalism—the oedipalization of desire—leans on and is built from this primary repression which makes subjectivity possible in the first place: “If the family is able
It is one of the distinctive traits of the capitalist mode of anti-production-social production that it raises the equivocality of the recoding process in the realm of desiring production to the utmost. It revolutionizes and socializes productive forces; but then it yokes them to the dead-weight of private appropriation of social surplus, preventing the expenditure of surplus for purposes other than reinvestment in surplus value production. It frees desire from fixed codes by destabilizing previously existing social bonds, breaking up traditional belief systems, and dissolving established identities; but then it mobilizes a stronger and more devious apparatus of repression by locking desire up in a familial drama playing the Oedipal dialectic of subject and Other (337). What interests Deleuze and Guattari is the possibility of radicalizing the positive moment of this contradictory process unleashed by capitalism and turning it against its own order by freeing labor and libido from any objective determinations and limits.

In Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, what is singular about capitalism is the peculiarity of its relation to its own limits. Capitalism fails any attempt at its circumscription and containment and makes the limit itself a function of the limitlessness on which it is necessarily premised. And though its continuity is secured by its limitlessness, Deleuze and Guattari argue that capitalism’s endlessness rests on the impossibility of dying where nothing can die if only because everything is already dead like “images” (337). Incorporating Freud’s notion of the death drive into their own text to interrupt it, they show that death becomes an “instinct” proper only under capitalism. An internalized movement, death no longer comes from the outside but is immanent to the

in this manner to slip into the recoding of desire, it is because the body without organs on which this recoding is accomplished already exercises on its own account, as we have seen, a primal repression of desiring-production. It falls to the family to profit from this, and to superimpose the repression that is properly termed secondary” (120-21; emphasis in the original).
very capitalist system. Besides the death enterprise which is one of the principal forms of the absorption of surplus value in capitalism, Deleuze and Guattari argue that each act of production is inextricably linked to anti-production where everything is expended for the valorization of capital.

The limitlessness of desiring production, on the other hand, constitutes a limitlessness that is irreducible to any law of identity and infinitely asymmetrical with it. For this productive force takes pleasure in variation, ramification, proliferation, and improvisation rather than in the mechanical repetition of the same. This repetition of difference is founded on a syncopal movement that requires a counter-force to bring it to a halt, to suspend or freeze the past cathexes in order that new and different ones may become possible. Deleuze and Guattari tell us that these desiring machines work by breaking down, or break down because they work too well. Hence, the risk of collapse, exhaustion, and destruction are intrinsic to their driving force. Death and desiring production do not exist in isolation from each other since perpetual dying belongs to life as its very condition of possibility for becoming other, and it is here that can be found their equivalent of the death drive which, for them, designates the interminable exposure to otherness which brings into being new existences of difference: “The experience of death is the most common of occurrences in the unconscious, precisely because it occurs in life and for life, in every passage or becoming, in every intensity as passage or becoming” (330).84

84 This particular reading of death drive resonates with Heidegger’s reading of death in Being and Time, where Dasein always finds itself cast back to the otherness of its world with the possibility of the impossible experience of death. Deleuze and Guattari, however, prefer to cite Maurice Blanchot, a discreet critic of Heidegger, who in fact emphasizes the impossibility of dying: “Maurice Blanchot distinguishes this twofold nature clearly, these two irreducible aspects of death; the one, according to which the apparent subject never ceases to live and travel as a One—“one never stops and never has done with dying”; and the other, according to which this same subject, fixed as I, actually dies—which is to say it finally ceases to die
One may well argue that their political ontology of desire restores the significance of the category of use-value by locating the source of change in the radical heterogeneity of use-values which disperse and coalesce without unity or totality like the subject who dies only to be born as (an) other in that untrammeled but unpredictable trajectory of desire. And it is to this end that Deleuze and Guattari affirm the radical primacy and irreducible alterity of desire which belongs to the outside by virtue of multiplicity and errancy—albeit in social totalities where it is always already entangled in processes by which the former use their power for the purpose of self-preservation: “There are no desiring machines that exist outside the social machines that they form on a large scale, and no social machine without the desiring machines that inhabit them on a small scale” (340).^85

From Marx to Deleuze and Guattari, then, the pivot of analysis remains the same yet the use of the analytical category use-value as a political mover is displaced in the opposite direction in their respective critical lexicons. If Deleuze and Guattari reveal the opaque idiom of desire as a threat to the libidinal economy of capital, Marx introduces the language of reason into the commodity language (Warensprache) by conferring a privilege on the effacement of the difference of use-values in the name of a radical

since it ends up dying, in the reality of a last instant that fixes it in this way as an I, all the while undoing the intensity, carrying it back to the zero that envelops it” (330-331; italics in the original).

^85 Compare their statement with Gayatri Spivak’s reading of use-value in “Scattered Speculations on Value”, Diacritics, vol. 15, no. 4, Winter 1985, p. 80: “In my reading, on the other hand, it is use-value that puts the entire textual chain of Value in question and thus allows us a glimpse of the possibility that even textualization (which is already an advance upon the control implicit in linguistic or semiotic reductionism) may be no more than a way of holding randomness at bay….For use-value, in the classic of deconstructive levers, is both outside and inside the system of value determination…. It is outside because it cannot be measured by the labor theory of value…” The following reading of Marx is informed by Spivak’s reading reiterated in different formulations in her “Limits and Openings of Marx in Derrida” in Outside in the Teaching Machine (New York and London: Routledge, 1993) pp. 97-121, “Ghostwriting” in Diacritics, vol. 25, no. 2 (Summer, 1995), pp. 64-84 and in A Critique of Postcolonial Reason (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).
equality. For commodities harbor within themselves the trace of their possible deletion and substitution by another commodity; by that very token, they also display in the necessary possibility of their effacement, the risk and chance of their abstractability and subsequent comparability. By inscribing within use-value the possibility of exchange, capital turns any commodity—and especially labor-power since the entire system is founded upon its use as abstract labor—into a ghost (Marx calls it “ghostly objectivity” \[gespenstige Gegenständlichkeit\] in Capital I, 46) constantly divided from itself and dismantled from within by abstraction. For that reason, Marx subordinates the multiple exteriority and immeasurable alterity of use-value to the unity or totality of abstract average labor in order for his implied readers, workers, to recognize their individual, privatized work as (constituting a) part of abstract social labor and invest an anonymous social subject.  

This ultimately explains the counterintuitive identification of prison as the site of surplus labor in the discourses of the Marxist prisoners. Here surplus labor in prison, to the extent that it cannot be (historically) included in the abstract average labor, indeed serves to operate as a name for desire itself, necessarily invoking that which exceeds the capitalist organization of social surplus, and just as the uses of commodities are infinite, or infinitely open, so too are the ways of consuming labor power. If the immanence of desire and surplus labor, which Gayatri Spivak (1985: 80) calls “affective labor,” discloses that there is no pre-given logic for defining the excess of surplus labor over socially necessary labor and thus for organizing the social relations to such so-called...

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86 In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak writes that “Marx’s project is to dislocate a restricted definition of the subject (which would ignore “superadequation,” that it is worth more ([Mehrwert = surplus-value] than itself) from the intent of the agent, so that it can occupy (besetzen—“cathect?”) this subject-position for others, not just selves. (69).
“excess,” the accentuation of desiring production in prison brings into view a desire for a qualitatively different kind of labor which puts into question the capitalist way of dividing the total labor-time into its necessary and surplus components. For in this representation of prison labor, the toil and fatigue of the laborer gives way to the pleasure of working in prison as political prisoners devote their days to reading, writing, learning, debating, producing handcrafted gifts (such as miniature carpets, embroidered cloth, cigarette boxes, wood carving, collages from scrap cloths, and bead jewelry) and creating anti-commodities by using the “means at hand,” like Levi-Strauss’s (1966) *bricoleur* (a game of billiards from broomsticks and crumpled paper; making natural dyes from fruit and vegetables; turning the tips of pens into a rosary).  

In identifying the consumption of one’s own labor power with the consumption of the fruits of one’s labor, this narrativization of prison labor dispenses with the social relations of production to bring into the limelight a self-driven communist subject who enjoys his surplus labor without any obstructions. Insofar as the homology between surplus production and labor in prison ends in the staging of the immediate appropriation of the fruits of one’s (surplus) labor, this narrative cannot offer any other fantasy than self-affection to reorient the affective relations to social surplus. As such, the communist subject here proves to be an impossible subject of imaginary identification for those outside the prison whose relation to their surplus labor is always already mediated by social relations of production. “With a single subject,” Marx writes in *Grundrisse* (1993, 87). 

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87 In contrast with the proletarians in nineteenth century France who had to write in the space of time intervening between the constraint of work and the constraint of sleep preparing the body for the next day’s work, political prisoners here occupy the privileged position of having all the days and nights of their desires. See Jacques Rancière’s moving account in *The Nights of Labor: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Drury (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).
“production and consumption appear as moments of a single act”: “The individual produces an object and, by consuming it, returns to himself, but returns as a productive and self-reproducing individual.” He goes on to disclose such identification of production with consumption to be an illusion which covers up the social relations of production coming between the individual and the fruits of one’s labor: “In society, however, the producer’s relation to the product, once the latter is finished, is an external one, and its return to the subject depends on his relations to other individuals.” (94)

By conflating society with an individual subject, the communist fantasy here inflects the capitalist libidinal economy by overdramatizing the right to enjoy one’s surplus labor. It would not be inaccurate to argue that this communist fantasy is a mirror image of the economic determinist narratives which reduce the movement of capital into a self-regulating expanded self-reproduction. In the place of the constitutive contradiction of capitalism which turns the expansion of value into an end in itself in the former narratives, the insatiable drive originates here in a subject of production who cannot be interrupted in its illimitable self-reproduction.

This uninterrupted circuit of production and consumption, which is thrown out of balance only by the ontological openness of the desiring subject of production, however, dissimulates the law of equal distribution among political prisoners which makes desiring

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88 In the Introduction to the Grundrisse (1993 [1857], 88-100), Marx identifies production with consumption only to reveal that social relations of production produce the very means, motives, manners and, most importantly, subjects of consumption.

production possible in the first place. This desiring subject of production who owes his or her existence to the law of distribution, cannot appropriate the fruits of his or her own labor directly if only because his or her survival depends upon identification of his or her desire with the desire of the group, and it is in response to this purported qualitative alterity of labor in prison that I will later explore the status of desire at length, by revealing the closure of its trajectory in the identification of the subject’s desire with the desire of the political collective. This discursive construction of the prison as the site of desiring production has as its reverse side, as we will see, the organization and perhaps repression of desire.

But one might still ask how the labor of death fasting is imagined to be productive of surplus labor over the necessary labor of staying alive that is, if we pursue S.’s distinct rendering of such labor to its letter, the amount of labor required by the death fasters to reproduce themselves in order to remain on the death fast. What kind of a homology do the members of TIKB posit between surplus labor and the labor of death fasting? And what does such a homology function to produce in their narrative?

C. had avoided narrating explicitly the details of their productivity which he was nonetheless clearly concerned to distinguish from mere preservation and reproduction of life. And in seeming contradiction with the unambiguity of his earlier remarks, he cast this productivity into question by drawing attention to their life of relative “ease and comfort” compared with that of their comrades and kin outside the prison. While the latter were running from a government office to a demonstration in great consternation

90 In the old prison regime, the prison representatives of the organizations could collect the individual deposits in a pool and distribute it equally among the prisoners. The new prison regime has rendered this law of distribution obsolete by individualizing the deposits of money, clothing and food. See the regulation which went into effect on July 13, 2005.
about the well-being of the death fasters, all the death fasters had to do was to experience the boundless pleasure in living. He characterized as “utterly crazy” the joy of life to which his comrades and him had been prey, and began, in sounding words, to exalt the time when they had gone out to the ventilation space to feel the rain on their skins on their hundred and fourth day. The two hundred and twenty nine days that he was on the death fast were the “happiest time of his life,” and he continued to depict everyday life on the death fast as a sequence of eventless days when they were left to amuse themselves at their leisure in art, play and camaraderie not unlike the French Hegelian Kojève’s figuration of the end of history when history would know no further significant events. They read books, recited poems, sang folk songs, played games, wrote letters, and made gifts.  

But in such narratives C.’s concerns were not simply anecdotal ones; for it would not be entirely untrue to recognize in his enumeration of these gratifying and entertaining everyday activities, which were decidedly not necessary to reproduce the conditions and means of survival but which instead had their ends in themselves, an appeal to the relation between surplus labor and desire. He was saying that they were capable of reproducing themselves as subjects of desire who did not merely look to their own self-preservation and reproduction but wanted to produce—and to consume—more than themselves even under these conditions in which their embodied selves were decaying.

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Dispersed in single or three-person cells in the new F-type prisons across the country after the prison operation, political prisoners initially re-established communication by means of their naked voices within their respective prisons. They were given paper and pen two weeks later and at that time they began writing notes to each other which reached the other cells in the form of paper balls thrown across the adjacent walls of the exercise areas of the individual cells. At the end of their first month in the F-type prisons, the prison administrations gave back their right to communication by letters, and consequently letter writing became radically uncontrollable within the bounds of the prison. Written and read in the mode of a collective conversation, letters appeared to establish temporal and spatial proximities not unlike the medium of speech. They contracted into the present the past but also the future which was written as if it were already happening at the moment of writing and as such promised its final fulfillment. These letters were supplemented with photographs and material objects such as dead butterflies, bugs, feathers, dried flowers which were found in the exercise areas of the prison cells and thus they carried metonymically their place of origin into their destinations, reconstituting the social in and by letter writing.
No longer synonymous with the quantitative difference in abstract labor time, surplus here designated the surplus of desire over death. Whatever the anguish of survival expressed by S., death fasters, on C.’s submission, were nevertheless able to domesticate the force of death by their desire and transmute it into the constancy or permanence that characterized the everyday. The endless finitude of the everyday came to stand for the resilience of their desire which disclosed itself in the hunger for something extra beyond the appetite for survival: a poem, a song, a letter, a game shared with others as if perpetual recitation and play could vie with the interminability of dying. Recurrence, here, however, did not shatter apparent self-identity; instead it was thematized as the affirmation of a subject who still held onto his desire despite the desultory force of death and derived a strange enjoyment (haz) from such mastery: “There was a certain comfort and easiness deriving from the lack of dread of death. They took you and locked you up behind four walls. They have separated you from your friends, other prisoners and the life outside. There are only three of you in the same cell, but they still cannot touch the thing that makes you respect yourself. That is of course a great joy (haz). To feel it, not to be on the losing side.”

One might say, without doing too much violence to their narrativization that this desiring subject of production is staged as a full subject who coincides entirely with her or himself. If division between desire and interest is constitutive of the ideological

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93 Gayatri Spivak (1999: 261) takes Deleuze and Foucault to task for seeking an (impossible) continuity between desire and interest unlike Marx’s project of class consciousness: “Full class agency (if there were such a thing) is not an ideological transformation of consciousness on the ground level, a desiring identity of the agents and their interest—the identity whose absence troubles Foucault and Deleuze. It is a contestatory replacement as well as an appropriation (a supplementation) of something that is “artificial”
subject—the division expressed in “I know that it is not in my interest to desire this, but
still, I desire it”—the communist subject which perseveres on the Death Fast is defined as
one who precisely lacks such a split. Indeed, the communist subject here displays to
excess the coincidence between its desire and interest by narrativizing the experience of
dying as an occasion for joyful self-transcendence against political authorities who coerce
the militants into seeing through their desire their “interest”, one which is necessarily
described as an individual interest in survival, love of life and well-being and life of
pleasure. According to C., the communist subject repudiated this familiar life of
pleasure which was comprised of “meaningless activities, subordinated to ordinary and
paltry needs,” for a “true passion”, to respond to the demand of another law, one that was
intimate and seductive, whose persuasiveness rested, paradoxically, not on a set of
legitimate interests, but was strangely coincident with the subject’s desire. “The uncanny
excess that perturbs the simple opposition between external social law and unwritten
inner law,” Žižek (1991: 239) writes, “is the short-circuit between desire and law,” and
by reading Lacan against Kant, he continues to explicate this short-circuit as “[the] point

94 This identification of desire with interest replicates itself in the identification of communist desire with
the common Good. But such identification can always be refused to the political prisoners whose sacrifice
for the common Good is susceptible to being exposed as a mask either for individual interest or even worse
of being the instrument of the Leader’s enjoyment. I will reconsider these questions when I examine the
mass mediation of the event in the final chapter. It is important to remember here that Marx did not make a
moral argument about the exceptional status of the proletariat as a social agent of transformation. In fact,
the proletariat occupied an exceptional status insofar as it was a non-class deprived of all status, property
and particular quality. The proletariat was a real abstraction which potentially included everyone collapsing
the difference between individual interests and class interest, and it is for this reason that Marx preferred to
use the term “mass” (Masse) to refer to the proletariat. For Marx, it was the very “deindividuation” of
the proletariat that opened up the possibility of true individuality or better singularity. See German

95 The state authorities presented the new penitentiary regime of isolation as the autonomization of
individual prisoners under ideological constraints. In this discourse, coercive individualization became the
condition of possibility for the exercise of “individual liberties.”
at which desire itself becomes Law, a point at which insistence upon one’s desire equates to fulfilling one’s duty, a point at which Duty itself is marked by a stain of (surplus-) enjoyment.” There is a fundamental nonequivalence between the two moments or instances of the short-circuit described in Žižek’s account and it is by respecting this dissymmetry between the transcendence, always singular, of desire and its domestication in an over-identification with law that we will demonstrate the necessity of testifying to the pains and pleasures of perseverance on the Death Fast. Such perseverance on the Death Fast can be explained neither by the transgressive singularity of desire nor its complete alienation but rather by its ideological capture.

V. Subjects of Desire

Death fasting which was described in the first instance as a “natural” reaction to the Turkish state’s attack came to be expressed by Erdinç shortly after in grammatical terms, as something one “must” do, an imperative marking the lack of the discretion and reserve of judgment. The decision of death fasting was then not bound to the question of judgment; instead, according to Erdinç, it now appeared that an imperative had already intervened to suspend the alternative between “right” and “wrong,” and that, by passing beyond that alternative, one had begun to respond to an urgency, a demand, that nonetheless could not be traced back to an injunction of the Other but figured only as a

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96 Insofar as we search for pathological (in its Kantian sense) motivations such as social prestige and glory lurking behind the act of the death fasters, we will not be able to imagine this subject. It is our argument that symbolic expenditure cannot be the sole measure of this extraordinary perseverance.

97 To imagine the ideological subject, we need to steer between the Scylla of desire and Charybdis of law. In our description of the enjoyment here, we thus part company with Žižek’s depiction of the communist subject (or rather the Stalinist subject) as a mere object-instrument of the law which is hardly any different from the Turkish state’s propagandistic representation. For an extraordinary historical account which casts into doubt Žižek’s analysis, see Jochen Hellback, Revolution on my mind: Writing a diary under Stalin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).
imperious silence: “Nobody asks you to go on the death fast, and if you are not on the death fast, nobody asks you why you are not on the death fast.” Yet nobody could bear to be refused inclusion under the lure of this effusive and all-embracing totality. The absence of the call, as it were, exacerbated the demand and one felt obliged to offer one’s being to attract the attention of the Other. What did the Other promise to give that one could put oneself forward to die and in such great numbers? Was it the anticipation of social recognition achieved at the risk of death? Or was it the certainty of escaping death by the immortality of the proper name? Or was it still something beyond all these prospects?

We have seen that the covert process of selection disclosed a mechanism of interpellation which can be described as a performative speech act that recognized the difference of the volunteer in the conferral of the title “death faster” by organizational agency. This performative speech act transformed a mere captive into an autonomous political subject as one and the same with the bearers of organizational authority who were invested with a narcissistic perfection within a prison scene where a differentiating

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98 I use the “Other” in its Lacanian sense here referring to the symbolic authority that regulates the social relations in prison. This symbolic authority can be embodied by various individuals from one’s superiors in prison, to the members of the Central Committee, and the leader of the organization who are more or less idealized as its representatives. Here, I want to emphasize that the appeal to the excess of death is itself organized by a symbolic code. Death is both beyond and within the symbolic, or better yet folds, as it were, into the symbolic. Understood in this way, my ethnographic observations concur with Judith Butler’s epistemological and political critique of the relation between the Symbolic and the Real in Lacan and Žižek. See her Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 187-223 and Antigone’s Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), pp. 40-55.

99 I am not citing Althusser here because his specular scene of interpellation confounds symbolic identification with imaginary identification insofar as the former is identification with an empty place in the symbolic network instead of with the image of an individual who might be occupying that place. Of course, this is not to deny that, in almost all cases, symbolic identification is confounded with imaginary identification.
grade of membership organized social relations hierarchically despite its apparent non-
acknowledgment by the Turkish judiciary and prison administration.\footnote{The organizations make a differentiation between sympathizers (sempatizan), partisans (taraftar), and members (üye) proper whereas the Anti-Terror Law does not recognize such distinctions. One of the main complaints of the advocates of political prisoners is that young men and women, who are arrested participating in pirate demonstrations, carrying the organization’s newspaper and other print material or painting the street walls with the emblem or slogans of the organization are charged with membership albeit the non-recognition of membership status by the outlawed political organizations themselves.}

This symbolic investiture, then, did not only endow the death fasters with an
imaginary mastery which they have mistaken for the reality of a sovereign subject but
also rendered them enviable in the eyes of other volunteers reinforcing the desire of the
latter to take part in this self-transformative event. The volunteers were enveloped in this
imaginary rivalry to such an extent that there were some among them who were ready to
disregard the rules of proper investiture to accede to this place of full(er) subjectivity on
their own initiative by means of unauthorized initiations of fasting and, rarely, self-
immolations. Indeed, these (in some measure) illicit claimants exposed the gap between
the title and the occupant of the title, and the closure of the gap depended on a felicitous
performance on the part of the occupant. The title had covered the occupants like a
tombstone offering to them an almost immortal representation, except that this
representation was incapable of guaranteeing the value of the subject once and for all; it
had to be substantiated in their failure or success to measure up to the continuous
demands of authority.\footnote{Neither was the title capable of representing the singularity of the subject. N. told me of his ambivalence towards the memorialization of death fasters who lacked the qualities of a communist subject in their personal and professional life. If the latter was unnecessarily aggrandized and secured an undeserved lofty place in the history of the movement by virtue of their ability to bring their act to a successful conclusion in death, the contrary was also true. Participants including leading cadres who had given their years to the struggle fell from favor and lost face as a result of their infelicitous performance even when it was admitted that they had pushed their bodily capacities to their limit. In this sense, performance has overridden both the symbolic value of the title and singularity of the occupant, and ultimately resulting in the vitiation of the dependability of organizational authority. For a reading of this demand for performance as a sign of crisis
the occupant of the title was faced with the task of aligning this highly individual experience with a prescribed manner of dying, which exploited to radical effect the many paradoxes governing the relationship between the general and singular that were in themselves an uncontrollable consequence of the collective structure of the Death Fast as such. What was distinctive, however, about this demand for congruous performance was that it pushed these paradoxes to the extreme by enjoining the occupants of the title to persevere and if need be to consummate the act in death and one and at the same time to desire the very act itself; and it is at this point that everything changed and one was no longer allowed to discriminate with finality between what was general and what was singular, what was an external command and what was an autonomous act, what was subject to the law and what was beyond it.

There were many death fasters who proved to be incapable of assuming fully and without restraint such a task and their inconstancy had betrayed, according to their comrades, a blind yet calculative impetuosity that was produced by the irresistible auraticity of the title during the jubilant inauguration of the Death Fast. Though the withdrawals in the early months of the struggle were distinguished from those that occurred long after the political inefficacy of the act became evident, this interpretation may thus be read not only as a commentary on the impressionability of individuals which was itself inseparable from the consecration of the death fasters, but also as a radical questioning of the object status of their desire if by that what is implied is that their desire

\[^{102}\text{N. indeed ascribed the high number of withdrawals in 2000 to these rituals suffused with a masculine heroism which, in his observation, had attracted numerous volunteers who had not carefully judged the self-repercussions of their decision to partake in the death fast.}\]

\[^{102}\text{in symbolic authority in modernity, see Eric Santer’s My Own Private Germany: Daniel Paul Schreber’s Secret History of Modernity (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1996).}\]
was entirely bound to the desire of the Other: they desired nothing else but to become the
*object* of the Other’s desire. The consequence of this critical evaluation, in turn, has
been to determine the difference of death fasters whose felicitous perseverance is deemed
to take them on this account beyond such object status.

Their difference may be measured by the extent to which they identified with the
Other (and, once again, *not* with the object of the Other’s desire) to *be* desired as a
subject who would, in turn, fix the gaze of others on the unfigurability of their desire.
The Other standing in the shadow of death reflected back at them the non-being of their
desire as a blinding excess. If they nonetheless confounded this non-self-identity with
narcissistic omnipotence it was because it became visible in its very invisibility only with
the uncontrollable retreat of death on the fast.

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103 For this reading of Lacan which distinguishes between the object and subject of desire on the basis of an
understanding of human desire as pure negativity, see Mikkel Borch-Jakobsen’s “The Alibis of the
Subject” in *The Emotional Tie: Psychoanalysis, Mimesis, and Affect*, trans. Douglas Brick (Stanford:

104 In *Group Psychology*, Freud indeed describes society as a unanimous “mass” whose members have all
put the same “object” (the Leader) in the place of the ego ideal and who identify with each other as a result.
It is interesting to note that what remains specific to the totalitarian subject in Žižek becomes a predicate of
political subjectivity in general in Freud.

105 Indeed, such unfigurability generates the possibility and even the obligation of figuring, and for this
reason, it must be also responsible for all those cases where the figures in question turn out merely to be
provisional, false, or assumed ones. The organizational authority has always tried to control the difference
between proper and improper figurations until the moment when the whole stability of this dominant
discourse became undone with the political failure of the prison struggle revealing a plethora of singular
figurations underneath the general one. At the risk of repeating the violence of generalization, I must say
that honor and fidelity were the most common figurations of this desire that individual death fasters found
themselves compelled to profess as their own reasons for continuing with the fast in the later stages of the
struggle. I return to this question in Chapter V.

106 Following Borch-Jakobsen’s reading, I am reading the originary lack of desire as the *lack of being* of
desire which can only be recognized in the unobjectifiable excess of the Other’s desire.

107 In my reading, the closure of the transcendence in immanence of desire is secondary to its capture with
the lure of a force enabling self-differentiation. Underlying Žižek’s (and the rest of his Slovenian Lacanian
School) critique of Althusser’s theory of ideological interpellation is the issue that has to do with the degree
to which the promise of autonomy and self-identity can account for the way subjects are gripped by
ideological practices. However, even Žižek’s reading remains somewhat unsatisfactory for it too is
For, on one level, the demand for performance left much of the distance between
the title and its bearer in place, while wildly exacerbating its effects in order to turn the
emptiness of the title into a full embodiment of desire by doubling the death faster’s
body; thus, on another level, it served to expose the lack of desire by introducing a split
between the mortal, suffering body and another one which was supposed to be equal to
the limitlessness of desire in its phantasmatic invulnerability. N. had turned away from
his own body to such a degree that he did not once doubt that the dandruff-like flakes
falling off the cuffs of his pants on his hundredths were the dust on the dirty cell floor
until the time when the doctors who visited their cell to check upon their health condition
told him that he was shedding his own dead skin. If their act had brought death into
proximity, they also wanted to keep death at a distance, to exclude it from the purview of
life by a withdrawal of cathexis from their mortal bodies. This decathexis, however, was
not simply a way of avoiding the encounter with death; it was at the same a way of
bearing their title by displacing the narcissistic libido onto an ideal ego. They elevated
themselves above their mortal bodies only by saving their narcissism, by blowing
themselves up to the height of their ideal ego which was deemed invulnerable. The more
they approached their end, their death in an endless movement, the more they

ultimately dependent on the reduction of desire to a desire for an impossible full identity. If the subject does
not inexorably find its own place in the symbolic network, does this failure of symbolic self-representation
necessarily produce a desire for full identity which ideology exploits to radical effect by offering the
subject the eluding object that provides enjoyment as opposed to mere pleasure? In the last analysis, is
desire always a desire for an impossible full identity or rather does desire always desire its alteration
because it is not fixed on any predetermined object? For, as Deleuze and Guattari claim in Anti-Oedipus,
desire invests first of all and most fundamentally not in this or that object, nor in this or that objective, but
in an increase of force, even though such force is usually and most easily and widely accessible through the
very power structures that channelize and repress it.

108 Freud calls this differentiation within narcissism “idealization”. In his paper “On Narcissism: An
Introduction” (Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. 14, p. 94),
Freud writes: “This ideal ego is now the target of the self-love which was enjoyed in childhood by the
actual ego. The subject’s narcissism makes its appearance displaced on to this new ideal ego, which, like
the infantile ego, finds itself possessed of every perfection that is of value.”
apperceived themselves to be invulnerable, feeling a dominion over the world and others. C. spoke of his heightened power of cognition and clear-sightedness which came with such feeling of invulnerability: “I felt as if I had conquered the world. All the burdens and responsibilities of everyday life had disappeared or they had begun to appear as insignificant and trivial. I was able to provide everyone with solutions to their problems including families who were visiting us in the prison. I had an amazing lucidity. I don’t think I ever felt this lucid since I joined the movement. Life had become transparent.” Unlike the feeling of the sublime which is always a negative pleasure, a pleasure that takes the place of a discomfiting fascination with an overwhelming force by separating oneself from it and thus by vanquishing it with the power of one’s reason\textsuperscript{109}, the feeling of elevation, here, is akin to a manic elation where symbolic identification with the ego ideal collapses into an imaginary doubling, propelling them toward death, toward the death they want to master with full consciousness, without being rent apart by it.

Y. wanted to be conscious of dying and not consciousness dying, and identified her desire for impossible self-presence before death with a desire for uprightness which was, in her words, only the property of man: “You know trees die standing upright. I said I am going to die standing upright in the act. I imagined a fully conscious death coming at an unexpected time for them [the prison administration] in order that they would not be able to force feed me. I knew from witnessing the death of other comrades that it was biologically impossible to remain conscious. As the body gets weaker, you begin to lose consciousness, but still I wanted to die with full consciousness remembering all my comrades. In other words, I wanted die like a human being, like a man [sic].” She

referred to M.’s death as an exemplary one because she had hidden the signs of death until her very last moment. “The doctors saw into the weakness of her body and attrition, but they still could not tell that she was so close to her death which took her that weekend. We were discharged to the hospital on April 19 [2001] and she died on the twenty second. We had gathered around her on her last day. She was so weak that she was not able to join in the conversation much. During the night her pulse got slower and around 2 am, a comrade who was watching over her told us that she had given her last breath. She seemed as if she were sleeping calmly. She had frustrated their attempt at forced feeding by latching onto death in this way. She knew that she would have died not one, but a thousand deaths following the medical intervention.” To refuse her death would intensify her suffering so much that she would die not one, but a thousand deaths. One had to render death invisible, then, to evade greater suffering impending in the hands of the other; but the ability to conceal death was only another name for the ability to conceal the prevailing suffering. One had to struggle as if there was life and only life before the moment of death, as if life had not already passed overtly, and without mediation, into its opposite. The only death allowed them was an unforeseen and inconspicuous “drop down” in the course of an active and industrious struggle for there was supposed to be no dying but only life abounding in itself in the space where they found themselves suspended between life and death. This was the burden of the TIKB’s fasters.

VI. Disciplining Dying

To speak—and to be open—about one’s own pain was therefore to fall subject to the “weakness of the will” which produced a renewed and interior struggle, one through
which the death fasters who could not cope with the suffering would be compelled to transform themselves in the ideal image of the communist subject. The exemplary communist who was to be emulated was Nikolai Alexeevich Ostrovosky, a Red Army soldier and writer who had continued to struggle for the revolutionary cause in spite of his paralysis and blindness. In a letter from the Uşak Prison, M. described the death fasters in these words: “They had set their eyes upon becoming Ostrovsky. Beyond their readiness to welcome the possibility of severe impairments, they imagined to continue to live on in this condition. Rather than succumbing to the loss of their limbs, they were looking forward to recuperating their missing limbs with an unlimited drive for self-transformation which would overcome all limits including the lack of limbs. They were always enraged with those who chose to consume themselves by fearing incapacitation. They had become limitless (sinirsızlaşmışlardı).” Becoming Ostrovsky is, then, to “overpower” or transcend one’s limits in going to the limit of what one can do. The TIKB’s death fasters were driven by this notion of the limit which always already becomes the passage yet to another limit until it touches on its own impossibility, the limit of suffering that a body can still endure.

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10 His first novel, *How the Steel was Tempered* is translated into Turkish as *Ve Çeliğe Su Verildi*. The online reviewers of the Turkish translation speak of the powerful impact of the novel upon their decision to join the communist movement after reading it during their high school years. I also encountered paraphrases of his famous quote among the published letters: “Man’s dearest possession is life. It is given to him but once, and he must live it so as to feel no torturing regrets for wasted years, never know the burning shame of a mean and petty past; so live that, dying he might say: all my life, all my strength were given to the finest cause in all the world-the fight for the Liberation of Mankind.”

111 See *Damlada Okyanus*, p. 174.

112 With Blanchot, Deleuze, Foucault, and quite a number of others that they read Hölderlin, Sade, Nietzsche, Kafka and Bataille, one could only transgress internal limits, but then the limit borders upon the limitlessness of a space and time without bounds. Each transgression of the limit must engender yet another transgression. For this notion of spiral transgression, see Michel Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression”, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 29-52.
Nuray suffered from severe headaches during her last few months. She felt nauseous with every sip of water. To preempt vomiting, she had developed a few methods. She was lying down in bed without a pillow, pulling one of her legs up to her abdomen, and swallowing her spittle ten or fifteen times. When her comrades wanted to give her a head massage, or massage her entire body suffering from rheumatism since the age of six, she would say, “Don’t worry about it, it does not help at all. You haven’t read the papers today, why don’t you read me some articles?” (253) They knew that her bones hurt as if they were going to be scattered into pieces. Yet she still did not talk of her pain though they were able to read it on her face momentarily or make her tell them with irritation. One day they had seen the pain on her face and she had seen that they had seen her pain, and trying to fend off their gaze, she said smiling, “These are natural symptoms of the death fast. Why are you looking at me with such grief? It is not so bad at all” (254). When her pain resurfaced in her facial expressions another day and they inquired, she reported nonchalantly, “Nothing, my entire body has become numb.” (254) Numbness was from anemia, a serious condition when it was aggravated by the heat. It sometimes spread to her head and they would lay her down on a cool place and massage her body to promote her blood circulation. She had been seeing ever more poorly over the previous four months, but she did not care much. They rested her eyes with cotton pads and gave her a massage, starting from her eyes and moving towards her hair tips. This massage would suddenly revive her and they would find her either writing a letter to a comrade or

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113 This following section on Nuray’s experience is an excerpt from a twenty-page letter or rather a report written by her superior in Uşak Prison which I have perhaps improperly rewritten in some measure in free indirect style. For the entire letter entitled Kolektif Özne [Collective Subject], see Damlada Okyanus, pp. 250-68. I give the exact page numbers for the direct speech quotes in the body of the writing.
looking closely at the cards and stationary that they were preparing as gifts, or watching
the news by pinching her eyes.

The best way of living with pain was to act as if it was not there, as if it was
“nothing,” and one had to fight a veritable war within oneself, complete with hesitations,
lapses, failings, and renewed commitments to achieve this more or less apathetic state
under the gaze of friends and enemies. One was challenged, then, to an internal war
which was deemed to be far more important than the ideological war raging outside for
self-conquest was believed to bring into being the “free communist subject”; and
consequently, the lack of body was almost always registered as the lack of desire in the
fasting subject whose every outward move and expression was observed and recorded
minutely. Reporting on the worsening temper of Nuray, who had started to have
difficulties in taking in liquids, Hüsne wrote with no less certainty: “We knew very well
that the problem was neither in the stomach nor in the throat but in the head. Our whole
endeavor was to impel her to strengthen her will against her weaknesses which had
nothing to do with her bodily capacities.” (257) Perhaps, it had everything to do with the
capacities of the body and the disavowal of bodily lack dissimulated the subjection of
desire which found its ideological expression in the idiom of “will.”

114 In her critical genealogy of the faculty of will in Western theology and philosophy, Hannah Arendt
makes the claim that will was discovered in its impotence—“I will but I cannot”—an impotence which
originates from the division of the self between its opposing powers of affirmation and negation—“I will
and I nill”. She goes on to argue, following in the tracks of Nietzsche, that it is actually the experience of
self-conquest that gives the illusive feeling of power by means of which we become aware of a faculty
called will. By identifying ourselves with the part of the self which commands, we experience a feeling of
superiority which comes from wielding power. But as Arendt insists—and so does Nietzsche—power here
is only a feeling of power and one which is born of self-subjugation though the acting subject, who is a
force among other forces, experiences him or herself as a causative agent by mistaking the effects of these
multiple forces as its own making. If will turns out to have any effect at all, then, it has the effect of
producing an interiority which mistakes its self-subjugation for real freedom in the world. Arendt writes
(1978: 138): “Harborer of freedom turns out to be the destroyer of all freedom.” One could argue, then, that
this insistence on the will is a form of coercion whereby the subject is compelled to vanquish its suffering
part to become “free.”
ideological captivity is sealed first and foremost in the misrecognition of oneself as an autonomous and self-identical subject, we can contend after Althusser that the idiom of will is the ideological effect par excellence and as such it covers up coercion—the disciplinary coercion which goes into the making of an ideological subject who is supposed to recognize the effect of such work as its own desire springing from his or herself, intrinsic and unforced. Accordingly, the voice of the suffering body marks the place of the disjuncture between desire and law, and attending to this voice which sounds so self-indulgent, so narcissistically closed upon itself in these narratives, we will see that it is actually muffled by the reverberations of a superegoic voice which raises narcissism to another level by which the subjects are asked to measure, value and align themselves.\textsuperscript{115}

The war inside Nuray, in Hüsnê’s words, was continuing on with forward and backward moves: “When she made a leap forward, she was overjoyed, but when she could not cope with the pain, she would start attacking others around her.” (255) Nuray was shouting with untypical impatience and brusqueness when the salt or drops of lemon juice in her water were a little too much. One of their comrades who did not know Nuray well could not put up with her capricious demands anymore and exploded one day: “She thinks that ‘I am a death faster, so I deserve everything. I can shout at anyone, I can despise them’.” (255) Hüsnê and others explained to this comrade that the ground of Nuray’s domineering behavior was not in arrogance. Nuray was acting in such an imperious manner because she was no longer able to handle the suffering and looked for

\textsuperscript{115} In “On Narcissism: An Introduction” (\textit{SE}, 14, 93-94), Freud writes that idealization “heightens the demands of the ego” raising the level of repression. By showing that idealization is one method of forming the superego, the narcissistic way, Freud makes the important point that narcissism is indeed a way of repressing and channeling desire.
others to blame. True, one could have continued to struggle in this way, Hüsne conceded with disdain, one could have overcome obstacles in this way, and one could have died in this way. They had always thought that confining the struggle to dying was a short-sighted vision. “Why should we limp and demand of our comrades to carry us on their backs,” she asked, “when we have the chance to fly in the sky?”(256) It was not enough to be able to die. One had to be capable of dying upright without yielding to the sordid intimacy of death which could not have been shared with the others. They alluded to the death of Cengiz Soydaş, DHKP-C’s death faster who was the very first one to die on March 21, 2001. They had heard by word of mouth that he had vomited out parts of his internal organs, and neither the doctors who came to check upon him nor his comrades had realized how much pain he had been going through until his very last moment. He had spent all his energy reassuring everyone around him that he was doing well. They had become aware of his self-dissimulation by looking at what had come out of his bed after his dead body was taken away.

Nuray’s condition was getting serious and her cantankerousness had gone out of control. Her entire world had begun to be comprised solely of her pains which had begun to reach up at her reason. Every sip of water was sitting on her throat like a fist, and she was coughing for a very long period of time when she was not able to swallow the water. When Hüsne compelled her to drink water one day, she shouted back at her acrimoniously, “Come and drink it yourself if you can with this throat and stomach!” Hüsne reminded her that she had been doing much worse than Nuray on her fortieths during the Death Fast in 1996. For each teaspoon of water she had drunk, she had vomited for hours. Hüsne had not stopped trying and she had finally stopped the
vomiting. Hadn’t Nuray herself been a witness to her efforts at the time? They were aware that she was suffering from great pains, but Hüsne and her other comrades were determined to keep her from riveting herself to her pain. If she were to think about everything in the cosmos except her pain, her pain would have diminished considerably. For though theirs was a companionship in suffering, yet Nuray suffered, as it were, alone even to the point of finding satisfaction in the anticipation of their bodily deterioration: “I’ll see you all if you yourselves get worse tomorrow.” All of them had pains in different parts of their bodies and they knew that their pain was going to intensify over the coming days. They acquiesced that they might not have the power to say a single word the next day, but Nuray had the power to do so at the moment, and yet she still refused to take in any liquids with a perilous stubbornness. “Why do you have your eyes set upon pain?” they asked in a reproaching manner as if death and only death was her aim. “Why do you assume that you are feeling worse than everybody else?”(257) A feeling with which, by their verdict, she was fleeing from life whilst certainly deceiving herself about her weaknesses. It may have been this companionship, its example and the control it exercised, which held Nuray back from closing in upon her death. But it also made her flee its corrective and restricting influence upon her more extravagant manner of dying. Here, we see that the reduction of pain to weakness of the will clandestinely performs the reduction of the singularity of death. Death is no longer singular and irreducible, but comparable. The paradox of death—that death is irreducibly singular and general at the same time—is leapt over by imposing an impossible synchronicity—dying at the same time.116 This imperative of synchronicity (which substitutes for simultaneity) is

116 In Aporias, Jacques Derrida figures this anachrony as originary mourning: “(death is ultimately the name of impossible simultaneity and of an impossibility that we know simultaneously, at which we await
transformed into a desire for going on (and thus dying) endlessly in R.’s narrative of his experience in the death fast in 1996 which was preserved and transmitted to the death fasters in 2000 as an ideal conduct to be emulated.

VII. The Law of Perseverance

While the rest of the hunger strikers, even those whose existent infirmities and ailments had prepared everyone for their early debilitation, were still on their feet, R. became bedridden on his thirtieth day. He had started feeling unwell towards his thirtieth day; and after a minor recovery which had proved to be temporary, he was completely unable to stand up and walk on his thirty-seventh. His spine and joints were aching terribly and, with each new day, he became incapable of doing the things he was doing the day before. He was looking for difficult tasks to assign himself in order not to become completely immobile. What could he have done in bed? For a while, putting on and taking off his sweat pants had become his major occupation. He was able to accomplish this task two or three times in more than an hour.

After becoming bedridden, he had started to feel a strong sense of guilt. It was “too soon” for the onset of vomiting and immobilization: “It was not easy for me to overcome this feeling of guilt which had its grounds in these symptoms. I kept thinking that I was demoralizing everyone around me by becoming bedridden so early in the struggle. I suspected that I was weakening everyone else’s resolve to continue with the action” (116).\footnote{R. was one of my first informants and he was introduced to me as a heroic figure in spite of his ongoing, tumultuous separation from the organization at the time of our encounter in the summer of 2003. I quote here from his diary which is published as part of the collective memoir entitled Ölüümü Yenenleri Kimse each other, at the same time, \textit{ama} as one says in Greek: at the same time, simultaneously, we are expecting this anachronism and this contretemps\textquotedblright, p. 65. The ethical relation to the other’s death is here overshadowed by the violent generalization of dying.} He did not want to be seen by anyone as if the signs of his mortality
would have the effect of rendering the rest of them vulnerable to death. He found the visitations of his comrades disquieting for he was reminded of his ailing state whenever he had to talk to them and he could not escape from the feeling of embarrassment. To save himself the trouble, he was trying hard not to demand anything of them. His “too soon” debilitation in relation to the imperative of synchronicity had instigated a pernicious self-questioning. He exhausted himself in questions: Why had he become like this at such an early period in a struggle which would go on for a long time? How had he prepared himself for it? Was he disheartening everyone around him because he had not prepared well? It was clear to him that he had not prepared well for the struggle. If he had established a strong relationship with the struggle, he insisted, he would not have fallen into this condition at such an early stage. Brooding at length over the implications of his early debilitation, he concluded that it was not so much his will as his physical strength which had betrayed him in the struggle. Corporeality was the real medium of betrayal and he acknowledged readily that it went beyond his powers to surmount such bodily impasse. Yet this acceptance of his finitude, instead of disburdening him of his anger at stumbling so soon, served only to confirm his desire to die quickly. He was the only one, he wrote, who could have put an end to his troubles. To end the struggle would mean to accept self-defeat, so it was inadmissible to withdraw from the strike. If he did not have the physical strength to continue with the struggle, he should, then, be able to die. But would he able to achieve dying? On his fiftieths, he had his last conversation with comrade T. who had also become bedridden a few weeks after him. If the struggle were to stretch itself in time, the two ailing men conjectured, the condition of the rest of

_Yenemez_ [No one can Defeat Those who have Defeated Death] (Istanbul: Özbasım Yayın, 1997), pp. 115-126.
the comrades would begin to deteriorate, escalating the risk of physical and mental impairment. The two came to the conclusion that they had to achieve their ends before the rest of the comrades became bedridden like themselves. They agreed upon the exigency of accelerating the process by dying. But if this decision to hasten his death is an important thematic turn in R.’s account, it is also one that announces its own necessary retraction. Later in his memoir, R. admits that it was difficult for him to search for sources of motivation other than death which made of his impotence an interim state. The signs for new sources of motivation were revealed to him in his deathbed conversations with others which opened a completely new phase of tenacious resistance to death. When he was unable to move even a finger from repeated vomiting on his fiftieths, one of the sympathizer comrades came to R.’s bedside and asked in a distressed tone, “Why aren’t you withdrawing? You would know better, but it seems to me that you cannot go on in this way. The best thing to do is to withdraw.” (118) It was a very disturbing encounter for R. and while he was trying to restrain the violence of his anger, his visitor went on to say, “I cannot come near you. When I pass by your bed, I close my eyes so as not to see you. I cannot stand to see you in this way, I am getting really sad.” Taking notice of his trembling voice, self-interruptive speech, and hesitant gestures, R. had already made up his mind that his response would have to be to convince the young sympathizer of the necessity of continuing with the struggle without injuring him. R. explained to him that they had to continue with the struggle to preempt the other comrades from becoming bedridden like them. Withdrawing here and now, R. told him, would be to impel the other comrades to fall into the same condition. After a momentary silence, R. asked him when he was thinking of withdrawing. Upon this question, the
young sympathizer responded to R. in the most decisive tone, “If you’re not withdrawing in this condition, why should I?” This conversation reinforced R.’s will to live by making him realize that his very perseverance could be one of the ways of spurring his comrades to go on. If his continuing with the struggle was a source of motivation for his comrades, then his task was to go on as long as possible. He had been feeling useless since his early collapse, but now that his new task was revealed to him, he experienced a renewed determination to live. In the end, his becoming bedridden early in the struggle had driven him to fight against death even more strongly and redoubled his reasons for living.

VIII. The Law of Invisibility

R.’s position in the Death Fast in 1996 is singular and his perseverance is susceptible of two radically divergent readings, depending on whether death is seen as triumph or defeat. In 1996, the crucial role of vitamin B-1 in the postponement of death was not yet known and, as a result, the period of starvation was crucially shorter, rendering death an inescapable necessity for the majority of the death fasters. Moreover, the death fasters had a greater ability to exercise their right to death for, as was to be discovered in the ensuing years, the Turkish government proved to be incapable of taking control of the operation of the death fast because of the peculiar specificity of the ward system where the death fasters began and always ended their act under the perpetual protection and care of their comrades without the constant threat of seizure. R. was an exceptional figure in 1996 in that he sacrificed his right to death by dedicating himself to the collective as a model for uninterrupted performance. But if R. in this way became a model for the TIKB’s death fasters in 2000, the generalization of his performance was a

118 In fact, death fasters were given medical care by their own comrades and the bodies of the dead ones were not delivered over to the prison officials before proper funeral ceremonies in the wards.
paradoxical outcome of the withdrawal of death from the realm of possibility in the latter death fast. It may be remembered that the appeal to Blanchot was a key move in my argument for it allowed me to figure the relation to death on the fast one and at the same time as extreme possibility and impossibility. I now want to emphasize that the use of vitamin B-1 in 2000 exacerbated this radical ambiguity of death and, furthermore, the deployment of forced feeding on the part of the Turkish government had the effect of making death impossible, leaving in its place the alarming prospect of becoming an invalid in the hands of the enemy.\footnote{Whether forced feeding results in permanent impairment of the nervous system or not is a contentious issue between the government and the political organizations. I will examine the respective arguments of these oppositional positions in Chapter VI. But suffice it here to say that it was the administration of intravenous saline without a dose of vitamin B-1 which was behind the various degrees of impairment besides the irreversible effects of long-term starvation. The Association of Turkish Physicians had already informed the physicians at the prison hospitals and elsewhere about this fundamental requirement and the former incidents were in fact an unintended consequence of the continuous deferral of ethical responsibility among the physicians that culminated in the delivery of unconscious death fasters into the hands of physicians who knew hardly anything about their condition. But what is crucial for our purposes is that death fasters tried to evade from forced feeding on the fearful assumption that they would be intentionally impaired by the government’s physicians which was not untrue in certain exceptional cases.}

The TIKB’s fasters in 2000 were keenly aware of the limits imposed upon them by the impossibility of dying; but they realized too that those limits were not only the end, but also the beginning of their very attachment to life, the basis of both their impotence and inexhaustibility, their vulnerability and forbearance. Consequently, indiscernibility became the only conceivable condition of (more) proper death for the death fasters who endeavored to disappear into the general company to avoid being seized by the government appointed group of physicians visiting the prison hospital every day.\footnote{As I have noted in the prior chapter, the Turkish government decided to collect the death fasters in hospitals without waiting for their conditions to worsen after the first death in March followed by consecutive ones in April. Some of these death fasters who refused to accept medical treatment were sent back to their prison cells. In a letter written in April 2001, an anonymous prisoner-doctor informs his comrades that these death fasters were adversely affected by the long and burdensome transfers which were wearing them away unnecessarily. See Damlada Okyanus, p. 316-317.} And this is why, as death receded from their grasp, these survivors

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of an impossible death exhibited a veritable narcissistic vulnerability regarding the integrity of their physical image. But if this concern with their appearance arose in response to a sense of the threat of forced feeding hanging over them, it was also a direct consequence of the imaginary rivalry between the death fasters who had fallen subject to the necessity and the compulsion to compare themselves with each other. This destructive game of rivalry between equals or “competition” in their idiom was another name for the desire for synchronicity—the impossible desire to die at the same time—which was turned into an imperative, as we have seen, by the disciplinary gaze of organizational authority. From 1996 to 2000, however, the rivalry between the death fasters had changed its aim from death to life for the auraticity of proper death had given way to the abject impossibility of dying. In 1996, such imaginary identification had introduced an antagonistic tension between the individual death fasters who were competing with each other to reach death before the other precisely because the possibility of (a more) proper death promised to render one incommensurable with the rest of the fasters. Accordingly, each healthier case was thus driven to think slightly of itself in front of the dying one and the event of death gave rise to an irremediable distance the only antidote to which proved to be death itself, again. In his diary published as part of a collective memoir on the 1996 Death Fast, an anonymous death faster expresses his inadequacy in the face of death with these words: “I was feeling equal to the comrades before they fell as martyrs in the course of the action. Our journey was still continuing and we had the same chance of meeting at the line of immortality. But it is very difficult for me now to accept the fact that this equality has been lost forever. For this reason, I cannot restrain myself from wanting to stop time in order that the feeling of equality will linger.”

121 Not incidentally

121 See Ölümü Yenenleri Kimse Yenemez [No one can Defeat Those who have Defeated Death] (Istanbul:
then, the closeness to death forged an intimacy which apparently only served to aggravate the competition between the death fasters who found themselves in a dyadic relationship regarding death. In the same collective memoir, we find a transcription of the voice recording of Osman [Akgün]’s last conversation before his loss of consciousness on his sixty-fourth day. Two anonymous death fasters who profess to have already lost the competition (and thus perhaps their anonymity) address the vicious competition that still continues at the very heart of the relation between Seyit and Osman who had started fasting at the same time: “No doubt you [Osman] have warm feelings for us. We feel the same way towards you, but we also know that Seyit occupies a special place for you since you two have started at the same time and have been running together ever since. You have guaranteed to be ahead of us in this competition, but nothing is conclusive yet between Seyit and you.”

And echoing back the spur of his two comrades, Osman swears to compete with Seyit to the very end testifying to their bondship in death. But this idiom of competition might best be seen, as F. related to me, as humorous playfulness on the part of the death fasters in better condition. When they prompted their counterparts in lesser health to compete in order to embrace death, they were instead prescribing life to their comrades and the competition was made to signify here in fact a competition to take death upon oneself, to die in the other’s place since they believed that they could preempt the other’s death by dying before the other. But humor, as Freud (1988: 428-429) observes, “has something of grandeur and elevation,” and this distinguishing feature, he continues, “clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the

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122 Ibid., p. 67. According to the transcription, Osman’s words were recorded at 7.48 pm on July 22, 1996, five days before his death which took place on the last day of the death fast.
victorious assertion of the ego’s invulnerability.” It is such grandeur and elevation that the death fasters approaching death have lost in 2000 because the possibility of proper death was withdrawn from them with the result that the death fasters of this latter period endeavored instead to preserve their individual dignity by blending into the general population. During this latter period, both the possibility of life and death was largely reliant on the similarity and thus the paradoxical impersonality of appearance in order to escape from being delivered over to the government’s physicians with the loss of consciousness. For incommensurability had come to be seen as a sign of vulnerability to becoming a thing in the hands of the enemy, and thus death fasters sought to keep up an average look to ensure their anonymity among the larger group gathered by force in hospitals. Such being the attitude, it is easy to understand that each death faster was inclined to appear as healthy as possible, even struggling so as to belong to the circle of the able-bodied, or come as close to it as possible. And so they served as mirrors to each other reflecting back bodily differences that were disclosed in order to be immediately concealed from outside eyes which sought to detect every single change in their physical appearance and movement. Has she lost weight or not? How visible is it? Has her face sunken? What must she do to make it look more bright-eyed and ruby-cheeked?

According to F., their caretaker at Bayrampaşa Prison Hospital, the death fasters made an effort to help each other to conform to the standard by sharing critical knowledge regarding their physical states. If one could drink three liters of water, she would propose ways of making it easier for the other to raise her level of intake. If one identified a type of herbal tea that quelled her stomach pain, she would offer it to the other.
The death fasters in lesser health became aware only belatedly of their differences and acted as if they could perpetuate their selves by way of mimesis of the others in better condition. However, the converse might also have been equally true in this stoic play, and it is arguable that the death fasters in better condition too were compelled to efface their difference to deflect the daily assaults of the committee of physicians, military officers and government officials. This society of death fasters in the prison hospital would attempt to deceive the latter’s gaze by gathering together and dispersing around the sicklier ones according to a random movement of similarity and difference, a reciprocal intensification of indistinguishability. At times, some lay in bed, others sat down and some others still stood up; at others, the same persons shifted their places haphazardly in order that the bedridden death fasters could hardly be noticed by the unwanted visitors who would be confused by such inconstancy. Despite the work of dissimulation, the law of imperceptibility would nonetheless encounter an inescapable limit when individual differences could no longer be concealed and a small number of them would stand against the rest in all their singular frailty.

With time, L.’s hands and face were covered with bleeding sores and if she was able to secret her hands from the gaze of the inspecting committee, it was impossible to hide her face which she saw reflected in the concerned looks of her companions. Indeed, when, at one moment, she ran into Bahar, a death faster from an earlier team which had started fasting two months before hers, F. heard her exclaim while commenting on the awkwardness with which she endeavored to remain alive: “Have you seen Bahar?” Bahar had started a long time before L. and yet she looked healthy and firm. She did not have any sores and she was able to walk by herself. L. tormented herself for not taking full
control of her body as if her body would listen to her commands like an obedient soldier.

She confronted her mortality with an overwhelming sense of guilt which only served to identify her with the very force of dissolution that undid her two hundred days of work and ruined the very possibility of victory. The death fasters, as we have brought to attention earlier, were divided up into teams that joined in the movement at different intervals in 2000 and the comparison and the competition associated with such comparisons were especially recurrent among those from different teams. That L. was unquestionably the worse case of the two F. could not deny in all sincerity. Yet, at the time of this strange and climactic encounter, she had reminded L. in a knowing way that two hundredths was an incredible number of days for her given that she was shot at the age of fourteen in a police operation and in the light of this private event she concluded that L. should not put too much pressure on her feeble body. But what was immediately clear was that L. did not compete with herself but with an other at the very moment when equality proved to be impossible. The constitutions of the two women were irreducible to each other and yet it was far from evident that L., to the extent that she measured her threshold of endurance by that of the latter, was convinced that it was a great achievement for her to bring her body through this number of days for there were others who had already reached their three hundredths in good health. Whatever her partial blindness to her bodily limits, the law of perseverance that required L. remain invisible was inescapable. R. did not have to hide the mortality of his body; this, exceptionally, he had converted into a pedagogical advantage for the ideological formation of the political collective if only because he could indeed die a more proper death among his long-time comrades. L., on the other hand, had to respond to two demands at the same time, the
demand for perseverance and the demand of invisibility for she was allowed to end her fast by her organization on the sole condition that she was released from prison, and she could only be released with a forensic report diagnosing her with Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome. Like the other TIKB fasters, L. had to hold herself indeterminately on that thin line between life and death which meant that she would be perpetually dying.

L. died in Çapa University Hospital on January 8, 2002 ten days after her release after a brief recovery. Her family had put all their efforts toward having her forensic report faxed to the office of the Attorney General from the State’s Forensics where it had been waiting for weeks and according to her sister, who was L.’s official visitor at the prison hospital, their private ambulance arrived at the scene at the same time with the military ambulance which was leaving with L.. By then, she was unconscious and no longer able to intervene in the final fight over her body. In her unproduced screenplay Lemon Tree (2006) L.’s sister, D., gives an account of L.’s struggle before her loss of consciousness and I want to quote this scene at length in order to share this eerie incident in which, as L. lies moribund on her bed, having apparently already slipped away, she hears the metal door—at which point she revives and is brought back to life, not once but twice.124

Scene VI A Block

123 A copy of the screenplay was given to me by L.’s sister, D. herself. I translated the entire screenplay into English for her funding applications for film production.

124 The title of the screenplay comes from a widely circulating story among the members of TIKB which recount the sprouting of a lemon seed from muddy soil fuming with deathly gas vapors. TIKB’s women prisoners (including L. and Y.) were all covered with mud from their hair tips down to the soles of their shoes, having been dragged along a muddy ground and beaten up with their face in it during the operation in Ümraniye Prison. Instead of washing off the mud in the bathroom, they collected it in a tub and aired out the soil which was suffused with the gas from the bombs used in the prison operation. They put a lemon seed inside this soil and took care of it every single day, changing its place constantly depending on the sunlight available, and in the first week of April, they finally saw the lemon seed giving a sprout. The screenplay opens with this story and continues to tell of their unremitting attachment to life throughout L.’s final days on the death fast.
L. doesn’t hear F. at all. She wants to walk. She stands up with D. and puts her arm around her shoulder. They walk together a few meters in the room. L. is shaking as they walk. She gets tired quickly and throws herself on the bed. D. puts her in bed and covers her. F. is waiting with a glass of water in her hand. L. extends her hand to take the glass with great difficulty, her hand is covered with open sores. She takes the glass, but doesn’t drink the water. She holds the glass right over her chest and closes her eyes. D. and F. look at each other in distress.

F.: She shouldn’t sleep. L., comrade, come on open your eyes!
D.: Everyone sent you their greetings, they love you so much!
F.: Comrade, drink your glass of water first and then you can sleep…
D.: If you don’t wake up, I’ll start singing a song!

Right at that moment they hear the metal door opening and someone coming in. L. suddenly opens her eyes and sits up. F. and D. are looking at her in astonishment. L. is sitting up in bed and is looking at the doctor who has just come in the room. She turns her head towards him.

Doctor: Good morning, L.!
L.: Good morning.

The doctor is looking at her with attentive eyes
L.: As you see, I’m doing fine. How are you?
Doctor: I’m fine, but it seems like your sores have increased
L.: Yes, this is also a part of the struggle

The doctor doesn’t say anything and looks at D.

Doctor: I will stop by later. Take care of yourself.

The doctor leaves the room. One hears the metal door opening and closing behind him again. L. collapses and closes her eyes.

F.: Comrade, not again! Please don’t sleep anymore.
L. doesn’t respond back and doesn’t open her eyes. D. and F. try to wake her up and make her talk, but L. doesn’t talk back and open her eyes. It seems like she is not hearing them at all. Then, the same scene repeats itself. The metal door opens noisily and L. opens her eyes and sits up in bed. The same doctor enters in the room and she smiles at him.

L.: Hi
Doctor: I wondered how you were doing
L.: As you see, I’m doing fine, but it seems like you’re not
Doctor: Why is that?
L.: You look at me so worriedly

The doctor smiles and caresses her hair.

Doctor: L., I just want you to live.

L. smiles
L.: I don’t have the intention to die yet. There’s still so much to do.

The doctor leaves the room and L. lies down in bed again closing her eyes. F. and D. try to wake her up again, but they don’t succeed.

The violence of her anger at having to live on as an invalid, instead of being allowed to die in the arms of her sister and comrade, serves only to stimulate her into a more violent refusal of death. No sooner does L. hear the metal door announcing the arrival of the other, the semblance of death gives way to the semblance of life until some hours later, when she loses consciousness, so to speak, for good.

L. was an uncanny embodiment of the law of perseverance like the rest of the TIKB’s death fasters who were dead at one moment and alive the next or, better, alive and dead at the same time. But though this perseverance in being had turned into a perpetual recapitulation of death, it proved culpably to be a selfish appetite for living from the point of view of the DHKP-C’s fasters who were chasing after a death which would come at a single blow. In the next chapter, we will see that the mode and tense of being on the fast changes completely, displacing this law of perseverance with a law of sacrifice which purports to dispense altogether with an interest in self-preservation, hidden as it were in wanting too much to live on.
Chapter IV

Burning: The Temptation of Death

She had a cigarette lighter in her hands. She must have stashed it away for the foreseen occasion since it was not lost in all the upheaval. She ran the lighter along her hair as if wanting to set all of her self alight at the same time. The flame laboriously licked her hair, but suddenly the alighted parts burned out, proving her efforts to be in vain. She caught the smell of her own singed hair, and in desperation called out to her comrade at the window looking on to the exercise yard. Her body was not feeding the fire. The piece of nylon they found for a fuse did not do the work either. On her far side, another comrade was trying to set herself on fire, and Yasemin asked for her lighter. When she refrained from bringing it, she castigated the defiant comrade. Not everyone was authorized to set themselves on fire, she exclaimed immediately. With the indisputability of an order she declared that she would be the only one.125

Yasemin, in the course of her conversations with the volunteers, had spoken of the Death Fast as if it were a temptation to all, suspending and reversing the literal meaning of confinement: “If I had been outside, I would have wanted to live such a time inside the prison.” The head of the DHKP-C ward in Uşak Prison, then, had appealed to the volunteers—it was such a “special feeling” to be a death faster—and everyone had a right to this feeling. Yasemin could not partake in the ongoing Death Fast solely and simply because she had already been a death faster in 1996. Though to be sure she

125 This detailed account of the events in Uşak Prison during the prison operation is based on a collective memoir and my extended interviews with an eye-witness. The collective memoir is published under a pseudonym contrived from the proper names of the two militants who burned themselves, Yasemin Berrin, Büyük Direnişin Uşak Cephesi Başeğmeyen Kadınlar (İstanbul: Boran Yayınevi, 2004).
begrudged any falling off in the duty she owed to the struggle, she was disallowed to join in the Death Fast in compliance with the Party’s decision and she could only put up with her non-inclusion in the measure in which she could service the death fasters in every way. Though she was not there, she said, to watch her comrades dying in front of her eyes, she had had her turn and she did not want to be “selfish”—she wanted everyone to have the chance to experience this feeling. Having pursued a vigorous polemic against the total neglect of feelings in furtherance of the struggle under the direction of reason, she was now offering this special, extra feeling as a reward for entering into the struggle. What was the allure of this prized feeling that Yasemin reluctantly capitulated to the volunteers for the latest Death Fast? Already in Nazım Hikmet’s oft-recited line, “No tree will have [not] borne such a fabulous fruit,” (Hiçbir ağac böyle bir yemiş vermemiştir) the nature of this reward seemed to have been fundamentally concealed with the double negative; and one could argue that it was thus marked in advance with the possibility of its qualification (or disqualification) as non-object or nothing or even death. That the promise of communism persisted and made its claims felt with a certain insistence from the outside had the effect of exacerbating rather than appeasing its lure. For this promised but necessarily unrevealed surplus feeling invoked a subject that occupied the place of an exception, a subject who never failed to enjoy an excess jouissance and who never failed to diminish still further the little jouissance the others were constrained to have.126 One could say that much the same structure of difference as purportedly obtained between DHKP-C and other leftist organizations also governed the relation between death fasters and the rest of the members. While the other leftist organizations had wholly succumbed

126 For this phallic structure of jouissance, see Lacan (1998a: 64-89) and for discussions of his formulas of sexuation, see Copjec (2004: 201-236) and Žižek (1999: 273-306).
to castration because of their fear of the state—and what is castration but a limit or a limitation?—DHKP-C’s members knew no limits or limitation; and, indeed, Haydar dramatized their self-characterization as “demented” by the police officers in a manner that very closely echoed, in content if not necessarily in its vocabulary, Yasemin’s description of the death fasters as seductive figures who took exception to the law. As a result, the fantasy of a subject not subjected to law—the fantasy of no limit—determined DHKP-C’s organization of jouissance on the Death Fast as well. This phallic organization of jouissance was itself limited by a place of exception which indeed stimulated a response, a certain haste, a precipitation towards that absolute satisfaction only attainable by a chosen few. But more crucially each and every member’s equal right to this place of exception was prone to provoke a contagious, mimetic passion of identification with the narcissistic subject who, one might say, is the subject par excellence.127

When the captivating conversation had led to the drawing up of the team lists, Yasemin had indeed spoken with a firm conviction in the equality of the volunteers, “Everyone can be a volunteer, the Party decides.” One of the volunteers had asked her, “What about those who had never been in any action, say someone who had not even posted up a placard?” “All you need is belief,” Yasemin had answered the volunteer, assigning to belief the predominant place over experience. This affirmation of belief was the measure of her abiding trust in the organizational command which, in her eyes, could never be proven wrong by experience, and it was by reinforcing the essential

127 I refer the reader to Freud’s *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* ([1922] 1989) and especially to the two chapters entitled “Identification” and “Hypnosis and the State of Being in Love” for the following argument. For critical readings of Freud’s and Lacan’s understanding of identification, see Borch-Jakobsen (1993: 1-35); Žižek (1989: 94-145).
irrefutability and certitude of that authority that she had subordinated judgment to compliance. Yasemin had conducted a brief interview with Berrin when the latter had to produce herself after the morning exercise, up in the dormitory where she was secretly given the good tidings of her election away from the gaze of the others who had been waiting for the past two days for the decision: “From where are you going to secure your force on the Death Fast?” Berrin had begun to count the names of the martyrs, but the examples she had before her eyes were inadequate in the end for Yasemin. If Berrin was to respond to the exhortation, it would mean confronting, not simply the question of fidelity, a question that for her was embodied in the figures of martyrs who had invested a good deal of labor in her political formation, but more urgently, in Yasemin’s view, the question of belief. Though Yasemin had begun her discussion by suggesting how belief radically transcended experience, her speech ended not by testifying to belief’s indifference to experience and rational arguments but by demanding of the volunteers that they elevate their undertaking above and beyond fidelity to their dead comrades. As far as Yasemin was concerned, what was beyond the other, so to speak, was the Other, but the Other in the guise of a code that governed everyday practices and rites endowing them with sense if only by guaranteeing their pure and simple repetition, and this law of repetition could be defied by the ethical demand of fidelity to the otherness of the other.  

For to properly pay tribute to another means paying tribute to another’s

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128 Pascal’s scandalous advice to non-believers is well-known. The best way to become a believer, he suggests, is to simply follow religious rituals whereby belief will come by itself with an inescapable necessity. Though Žižek emphasizes the objectivity of belief following Althusser’s reading of Pascal, he nonetheless takes Althusser to task for ignoring the Other of the symbolic order with his insistence on nothing but the materiality of the rituals. For, Žižek (1989: 39) argues, there is an unconscious belief embodied in the ritual, a “belief before belief” which produces the Other by ascribing to the senseless ritual a supposition that it means something even if one does not know what—a belief that there is something to believe in and that there is a “subject supposed to know” who can make sense of the nonsensical ritual: “What distinguishes the Pascalian ‘custom’ from insipid behaviorist wisdom (‘the content of your belief is
difference; and this is achieved not by faithful repetition but by recognizing the necessity of infidelity. Forgetting for the instant that she was not unexempt from the Party’s rule that gave permission to those and only to those on the first team who had already pledged to die, Yasemin did not desist from setting herself on fire notwithstanding her last word on the inadequacy of fidelity. Before the prison operation, she repeated to the death fasters what she had said once already, “You never know who is going to die first.” She had already decided upon her death on her own, authorizing herself from herself.

From the roof of the administration building, the hosemen had begun to spurt water into the blazing wards, and splashes of water passed through the people in the exercise yard as well. Confronted with the impenetrable smoke rising from the wards, Yasemin thought to herself what the assault troops were doing to her comrades left in the smoke-filled ward. They needed to bring the operation to a halt one way or another. Yasemin could not stand still. She regulated the lighter in order to produce a long flame, yet her body did not catch fire. She was soaking wet. The Kurdish inmates who had filed out into the exercise yard at the command of the troops without raising any barricades headed towards her to take away the lighter. She tried to flee, took a few steps, still firm, then advanced along the wall of the exercise yard towards the smoke-filled wards. Suddenly her legs gave away underneath the pressure of their restraining hands, and she fell to the ground cursing with frustration.

The troops had already entered the corridor giving access to the wards when Yasemin and Ayşen on the lookout alerted the others in the wards before the two women

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(conditioned by your factual behavior’) is the paradoxical status of a belief before belief: by following a custom, the subject believes without knowing it, so the final conversion is merely a formal act by means of which we recognize what we have already believed.”
were summarily hurled into the exercise yard by the overbearing troops. Groping their way in the darkness, all the DHKP-C’s inmates aggregated in the ward reserved for the death fasters to barricade the door by putting beds on top of beds. Some were shouting at the top of their voices, “Long live the Death Fast Resistance!” as they defended themselves against the bludgeons, others were hurling threats as they attacked the invading soldiers, “If you enter in the ward, we are going to set ourselves on fire, we are going to burn ourselves.” The soldiers were already opening up gaps in the barricade through which they jumped into the ward advancing with easy cruelty towards the inmates who had begun to retreat to the back of the ward in the direction of the death fasters. They knew that the protection afforded by the barricade was temporary. Their liberator was fire which could have served just as well as a bulwark or as a weapon. They thought they could take refuge in fire for it would maintain an impassible boundary between the troops and themselves, guarding their autonomy and self-identity. Though they refused to confront it, their position seemed to be a paradoxical one, particularly since fire threatened to devour all boundaries and limits beginning with its very own with a dizzying and outrageous indifference. Yet fire, for the sieged inmates, was a signifier of the other, inner fire, the fire that preceded the fire, the fire that was itself impervious to any smothering, but which was the necessary prior condition of their act of burning. This fire—fire “as such”—was their desire whose boundlessness could only be manifested by a rigorous insistence on separation and difference. But no sooner the limits of their act were marked than those very limits were overwhelmed by the boundlessness of affirmation that spilled beyond them, and such excess posed an ineliminable challenge to the totality and stability of domination. In this respect, fire proved also to be a weapon,
but a weapon which burned the other, one might say, without burning, even and especially when they did not run towards the troops as deadly torches.

The death fasters were standing in a huddle. Berrin was anxiously searching for a light in the middle with the other three fasters peering at her from an outer circle. The retreating inmates arrived at the scene to form the final concentric ring in order to protect the death fasters from the troops. Berrin started with her hair and hastily spread the flame from her hair to neck, then from her neck to her entire body without letting it die out. “I’m going to leave the prison on shoulders,” she had declared to her comrades during her pledge of fealty, “I was not able to be Sibel, I am going to be Idil.” 129

Marked by prophetic certainty, Berrin’s pronouncements had remained suspended on a death scene that refused to develop beyond this heroic ending. And as she confirmed her pact with death, she addressed her friends with all the animation of an actress, alluding to her act as if she were acting out a role. That Berrin did not speak under the name of the other at the time is clear from her words; but if that was so, her pledge also gives an indication of the degree to which she thought she was that other in repeating her exemplary act in the present. Though the exemplary other still appeared as other, as the quotation of the two proper names suggests, and Berrin still recognized a distance between her role and self, she wanted to cross that divide and come into the place of the other who by the same token would no longer be an other but rather “herself” albeit with the risk that Berrin, for one, would have found herself deprived of the memory of the

129 Sibel Yağmur (1973-1995) was a DHKP-C militant who died in a lethal attack against the center-right True Path Party’s (Doğru Yol Partisi, DYP) quarters in Şişli, Istanbul in 1995. Ayşe Idil Erkmen (1970-1996) was the first woman death faster to die on a death fast. She lost her life the day before the end of the Death Fast in 1996, and at the time of her death, she had had less than a year left to serve in prison like Berrin.
other. Indeed, in the discretionary suspension of the Party’s rule, the law of example was overridden by an uncontrollable contagion of burning, leaving behind nothing but replications of the self performing the same act at the same time like fire that did not take heed of any boundaries or limits between the self and other gathering everyone into its all-embracing totality.

One after another, the other death fasters eventually took the flame from Berrin, enkindling their hair from hers. Then, the rest of their comrades received the fire as something which in a way protected them, just as the prison walls did before, and suddenly the flames multiplied, transforming themselves into one great ball of fire. The troops would have to pull off their arms before they would let go of each other for all together they would not disband even in this fire.

Having bored a hole in the roof of the ward, the firemen sprayed the ward with heavy water, knocking down the inmates. Struggling to their feet, they managed to get out of the smoke-filled ward. Almost smothered, many of the inmates came staggering into the exercise yard, the death fasters, feeble still, could scarcely drag themselves along, swaying as if they were about to collapse into a heap. Yasemin approached the death fasters whose strength was giving out and beseeched them to hold out as best as they could, for their greater fear was that the troops would round up the death fasters to take them to the hospital. Before long Yasemin was proved to be right, the troops asked the death fasters to come forward, watching out with the guards who had already begun to identify the death fasters. Holding the death fasters firmly in their middle, they stayed together, pressed up against each other, shouting out their slogans, “Heroes don’t die. People cannot be defeated.”
Though the slogan endowed its speakers with a powerful invulnerability against death, it did not deny, as it did so, the threat of death hanging over them. For immortal though they were, they were immortal only to the extent that they were also able to die, and indeed, to die a death that left behind a void which could not be occupied by anyone else. This absence of both life and death was sheltered in the empty rigidity of the proper name; but as though, to refuse to allow even that much, the immortality of the hero was relegated to the immortality of the animal by the imperious dismissal of the singularity of their dying by the authorities. For on Bataille’s (1990: 8) submission, whose reading of Hegel is closely based on that of Kojève, the animal, so it is said, never dies because it is condemned to a life that is ever merged with the perennial life of the species if only because it is incapable of grasping itself as a separate entity among other entities. From the perspective of the authorities, the immortality of the hero behaved according to this blind principle of pure substitutionality, and their death occurred, to the extent that it maybe described as occurring in time at all, without occurring: one martyr replacing another until being displaced by yet another in an endless succession that changed, as it were, each member of the series to a replica of the transcendental subject who only in retrospect subsisted beyond them all. But it would be to trivialize matters unduly simply to identify, as authorities have done, the immortality at issue here with mere seriality for the essence of immortality lies not in a process of replication or duplication, but rather in a movement of return that turns each event or person into a ghostly occurrence or repetition of another. Despite the name, the immortal subject is thus not an entity, nor is it, properly speaking, a transcendental. It is rather another name for what Derrida (1988: 127) has called a “quasi-transcendental”: it cannot be found to endure anywhere else than
in the singular persons and acts by which it is quoted and reenacted not unlike the anonymous voice in the slogan which spoke in the third person while speaking through the first person, withdrawing identity and dividing its enunciator from itself. So what spoke without speaking, once more, for the first time, repeatedly but always differently was a phantasmatic subject who declared its deathlessness in the interminable echoing of the slogans that passed from one mouth to another, exposing the troops and the guards to its lack of origin and, more disturbingly, to its irreducible multiplicity.

Having fought off the soldiers for the time being, they began to dance the halay in the small but populous yard ululating under the gaze of the other inmates, prison guards, and soldiers who were perturbed by their joyful performance in the face of death more than their resistance. Holding each other hand to hand, they began to turn around in a circle, chorusing a Group Yorum march, “Bize Ölüm Yok,” “There is No Death for Us.” As they circled around the empty hole in their middle, the act of encircling itself, neither adding an object to the world nor removing one from it, installed within the real—which it thus suspended—a gap, a void that could not be filled by anything like the emptiness of their hunger.

Stretched along the wall of the exercise yard were the troops who were still awaiting the death fasters to drop down on the ground. Yeliz lasted no more than a few rounds in the halay. She found herself unable to keep in step with the rest of the inmates who had begun to tread on her heels. A death faster from the third team, she had shoved

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130 Halay is a folk dance mostly performed during weddings and other festive events. Typically, halay dancers form a circle or a line, holding each other with the little finger, or hand to hand, or shoulder to shoulder, with the first and last dancer waving a piece of cloth.

131 As Lacan (1997: 121) writes, “the fashioning of a signifier and the introduction of a gap or a hole in the real is identical.”
newspapers underneath her pajamas, reclined on a bed in the very back corner of the ward, and set herself alight without wanting anyone to notice her. She had burned until the troops managed to see her and put out the flames. Yeliz had resisted all this while, but she could no longer maintain her pose neither before her comrades nor the soldiers, who took advantage of her fainting and attacked the group in order to snatch away the seventeen-year-old woman who had become all body.

In less than ten minutes, all the able-bodied inmates had been divided between two ten-person cells on the disused left-wing of the prison after a rapid and summary body search. What happened to the death fasters, to the wounded, they could establish only later: the latter were collected together in a third separate cell after their short-lived stay at the hospital.

The next day, they were provided with soap and blankets. “And what about our death fasters?” accosted Yasemin, taking advantage of this opportunity to ask the warden to distribute the death fasters and the wounded inmates between the two other cells. They could not be expected to take care of themselves, wounded and feeble, moreover their painful condition was being made even worse by the fact that they were all put in dilapidated, filthy cells. In keeping with the order of the troops, the warden refused to accept Yasemin’s solicitation for a new rearrangement. That was asking too much, Yasemin announced in a loud voice that they had begun a collective death fast without water, and he gradually allowed them to send a comrade to nurse the death fasters and the wounded inmates in the other cell.

The following day, a tiny group was given permission to gather together belongings from the wrecked wards. The dispatch came back with a bundle of dry
clothing among which there was a red shirt. They tore the shirt into long, thin strips to make new headbands for the death fasters who were sleeping in the safest place of the cell to gain strength. That same day, in late afternoon, the guard delivered the papers. The succession of headlines began with the joyous announcement that the troops had taken over the prisons from the seditious organizations, and a description of the fanatical devotion of the death fasters to the organizational hierarchy. One after another, the subordinates had burned themselves on the order of their superiors who were dispensed from the same scandalous duty of putting their lives at stake. Yasemin protested with indignation at the lies of the papers, “They will see whether the Principals are dying or not.” Only they saw what the papers were hiding, and she thought her death would pierce through the deception that the papers had concocted overnight. There was little doubt that the papers were alluding to their fugitive leader in Belgium and the rest of the leading cadres who have been steering the negotiations with the state officials in Bayrampaşa Prison, and Yasemin did not discern that, by endeavoring to die, she was falling victim to the very same portrayal she sought to contest with her death. Berrin began to cry when she saw the photograph of Ahmet Ibili in the paper, the first death faster to set himself alight in the Ümraniye Prison. The soldiers had shot him to death when he came running towards them like a torch. “If only I could have gotten hold of a lighter faster or have found some cologne, I could have torched myself successfully,” Berrin spoke from remorse, “I wasn’t equal to the task.”

Then, they heard the metallic noise of the outer gate. No sooner did the soldiers appear at the main entrance than their commander shouted, “Open the door! We’re going to move you to another place,” and as if afraid that his verbal command, however
vigorous, might not be heeded, he impatiently repeated his staccato summons, “Step outside right now. I am a soldier. I don’t bargain. I give the orders here.” When the voice stopped, an indignant chorus of protests broke out, “We’re not going to go in the cells.” If the soldiers were to carry out their threats, they would aggravate the situation with immediate dramatic consequences insofar as they were prepared to set themselves on fire. The threat of the commander had failed to intimidate them, it had only pushed Yasemin to complete her unfinished act with this awaited opportunity, “We’re burning ourselves.” Blocking the passage of troops with a cupboard, she proceeded with her plan. The soldiers retreated to the gate, covered by the rifles which they were pointing unsteadily between the railings as if the inmates were about to make a retaliatory attack. Encouraged by the retreat of the soldiers, the warden tried to forestall Yasemin’s initiative. In a nervous voice, he guaranteed that they would only be moved into better cells. Pointing to her hair in flames, Yasemin gave a preliminary warning, “Look, it has started up here and it can go until the feet.” If anyone were to get too close to the door, she would not hesitate to set her entire body alight. “We will come out only to return to our wards,” Yasemin rebuked the warden with a sharp declaration. Resigned, he turned back immediately and went in search of the prosecutor. “I doubt whether they’re likely to keep their promise,” she said. All of them feared that this was a ploy. How did they know that the soldiers wouldn’t start firing? After what they had done already, they were capable of anything. They were not to be trusted. “I will set myself on fire,” Yasemin announced imperturbably. “I’m coming with you,” said Berrin. Already gathered around the two volunteers, the inmates came to an agreement that Yasemin should not be allowed to burn herself. According to the rule approved by all of them, a single death
faster was supposed to set herself on fire in the likely case of an assault. Once it had been decided that one and only one person was going to set herself on fire, Yasemin silenced the rest of the inmates with her determination, she was going to be the one, even if she was not a death faster. Yasemin accompanied by Berrin, put on the most inflammable clothing available and the two women padded themselves with newspapers. Then, they opened the doors of the cupboard to preempt the soldiers from putting out their fire. Some of the inmates gripped the two’s hands tightly and said they wanted to join them. “Only two,” Yasemin stated definitively. The two took off their shoes and walked in the direction of the cupboard without faltering for a moment as if, “they were two brides,” A. recounted, “hastening toward their wedding.”

Like the rest of the death fasters, the two were likened to brides because they had fulfilled their desire at the risk of approaching the limit between life and death, and A. went on to claim that they had done so by escaping if not death at least the anguish of death, as she put it, they had gone to their death as it were “a great celebration.” That the realization of their desire was fantasized as a fulfillment, and in particular as the fulfillment of love, was an indication that they had the same desire for death as for the desire of the Other. Death, as it were, communicated something like an appeal from the Other, something like an appeal of love and they were more than ready to offer themselves to the Other as the object of its desire if only because the Other they glimpsed lurking in the place of death gave access to a promised but necessarily undisclosed plenitude. This taming of desire into the desired also evaded the enigma of death,

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132 This figuration of death as wedding is common among the Palestinian guerrillas and other resistance movements across the Middle East. For a descriptive account of the transformation of martyrs’ funerals into weddings in the camps of Lebanon, see Laleh Khalili, Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine: The Politics of National Commemoration (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press), 2007: pp. 124-127.
converting “nothing,” the question mark, into an illusory fullness—“deception of love”
Lacan (1998b: 268) calls it—a joining of two complementary halves fulfilling each
other’s desire. The price of full identity, one may say, was objectification for they saw
themselves as the object that was capable of fulfilling the desire of the Other, as
“loveable” (Lacan 1998b: 243) or as A. described with superlatives which attributed the
distinguishing traits of the death fasters to the transforming effects of an outside gaze:
“But of course,” the death fasters were called brides, although one didn’t have to
preoccupy oneself with a such a self-transparent question, for having been chosen out of
a mass of volunteers by the Central Committee, they were “the most beautiful, the most
perfect, the most powerful.” The specular identification with the Other’s imaginary
object of desire had endowed them with a surplus value, and it was this elevating
transformation which death was to make permanent that had driven their fellow inmates
to make a whole preparation that was almost ceremonial. They had taken meticulous care
in cleaning and arranging the ward of the death fasters, adorning their beds with
embroidered pillow cases and sheets as if they were conjugal beds. They had hand-picked
their bottles, glasses, straws, and pens labeling each with the proper names of the death
fasters. The death fasters knew that they had gained power over the other inmates, but as
if their person alone or their person without signs, that is to say, their naked body without
attributes was too bare to reflect the magical operation which had aggrandized them
without altering anything in their nature, they wanted to mark their bodies ardently with
the signs of the organization. They were wearing a red headband, the color of the Party

133 For transference love, Lacan explains in the last lecture of his eleventh Seminar, consists of an
identification “centered on the Ideal point, capital I, placed somewhere in the Other, where the Other sees
me, in the form I like to be seen” (1998b: 268): the subject seems himself in that point as: “loveable” (ibid.,
243), as the object capable of fulfilling the desire of the Other.
flag, which was tied by the hands of a surviving death faster from the 1996 Death Fast at their pledge of fealty, intimating double fidelity to both their cause and the martyrs, and they took particular care to wear it at all times, tight around their forehead. They also wore a DHKP-C star pendant, Party insignia, and in anticipation of the confiscation of these symbols by the prison guards, they had hennaed their hands by placing a star-shaped piece of paper in their palms. The red of the henna accentuated the skin-colored star making them appear as if they were carrying the red Party flag with the yellow star on their skin. The incorporation of the transcendental signifier of desire, and transcendental signifier it was to the extent that the Party had ushered in the void of desire only to occupy it with its name and insignia, had served ultimately to seal the breach between their bodies proper and the signifier, so much so that, in A.’s view, the signifier overtook the place of the body in its final form: “You are going to your death with your star in your hand, and you’re flaunting it to the State. Even when your body is dead, your belief is stamped in your hand.” That the brilliance of the signifier overshadowed the impersonal gravity of the corpse can be inferred from her words; but as the signifier diverted attention from the corpse of the death faster, it also captured some of the uncanny obduracy of the corpse which gleamed through it as a materiality that refused itself to full identification. Indeed, after the series of fumbling attempts at burning which failed to reach conclusion, at the tenuous peak of Yasemin and Berrin’s self-immolation, a telling fissure cast into question A.’s account that made the body of the death faster appear to be nothing but a necessary support for the transcendental signifier

134 During the final days of the Death Fast in 1996, DHKP-C’s female death fasters were searching for a particular sign to mark their soon-to-be dead bodies, and the result was the practice of hennaing the hands which, according to A.’s explication, mingled fealty with uncompromising defiance. This spontaneous act became a sanctioned practice in the succeeding Death Fast in 2000, and moreover, it proved to be an effective tactic against the confiscations of the headbands and pendants.
of desire. For the signifier of desire was no longer single, but singular and multiple, personified in the figures of the two women.

Suddenly the voices had fallen silent. Standing in the tiny cell, they looked on intently, with increased acuity, at the distant sight of two burning bodies as if there were an uncrossable distance between these bodies and themselves, a distance which was brought into existence by the breach of time. It was by virtue of their act that Yasemin and Berrin had fissured time; yet the beginning of their act remained suspended on the threshold of its own violence. “Maybe,” wrote a witness, “time had stopped,” rendering the beginning and the ending of their act in fact remarkably indeterminate. The hesitation was itself the result of their exposure to the interval of time between the beginning and the ending or, one may say, between two deaths that separated them and challenged their self-identity, delaying the closure of their act. This interval of separation between two deaths became inseparable from what might be described as an experience of blindness. “Maybe,” the same witness wrote in the lines that followed, “everything had become invisible” for they could see nothing except “the two sparks that were struck.” They saw the burning bodies, then, as the object that had prevented them from seeing anything else, and it was neither fear nor pity but the extraordinary proportion of pain undergone by two impervious bodies that fascinated them. “Neither the ones who were going dragged their feet,” wrote the eye-witness, “nor the ones who were staying held onto their feet and told them not to do it. Both Yasemin and Berrin felt the pain in their skin, in their flesh.” The suffering body, Lacan (1997) tells, fixes the gaze of the other, and it does so by blinding it to the ultimate cause of its fascination insofar as it displays and hides in one and the
same movement the void that lies beyond this impassible limit between two deaths that he designates as the site of desire.  

Berrin’s feet had begun to burn. She was barely able to keep upright, “Hold my hand Fidan, Murat… I’m coming to rejoin you,” Berrin was calling out on another scene. Further along, very slowly, she fell to her knees when her feet were completely burnt. Yasemin was still supporting herself with her arms in the air. “Stop crying, stop crying,” she ordered them, while the other inmates watched her complete an act which was thus far aborted by unwarranted interventions and miscalculations. She advanced in a straight line towards the door and shouted out, “Comrades, we love you, as much as our martyrs…” Death had taken on, in a certain sense, the traits of the dead martyrs and had thereby lost its threat and perhaps had become even seductive. Then, she paused, undecided, asked, “Am I burning,” as if her body were no longer hers, as if she were a voice separated from her body. She needed the other inmates to see herself, to regain her corporeal integrity momentarily. But Yasemin could no longer see herself, that is recognize herself—in the gaze of the others who were briefly blinded by the excessive exposure to the “more or less unbearable brilliance” emitted by the burning bodies of Yasemin and Berrin, that brilliance Lacan calls the “beautiful” (1997: 297). For the two figures hovering at the limit between death and death, between corporeal death and “nothing”, the question mark of desire, had burned through the impenetrable but indeterminate obscurity of desire, both reflecting and refracting it. They had themselves become the irreducibly opaque signifiers of desire.  

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The fumes had brought tears to the inmates’ eyes and a stinging sensation to their throats and nostrils. They could no longer stay inside the cell and took refuge in the bathroom in the back. Far from being overwhelmed by the circumstances, Sevgi Erdoğan, the ward leader, refused to leave without saying a final good-bye to Yasemin and Berrin. It was Günay Öğrener who was to perform the same act three years later that warned her that she could not stay there anymore. Sevgi wrote in her diary on January 6, 2000:

“Yasemin—the first female guerrilla of the Aegean Rural Units, the 1996 Death Faster—took Berrin with her. They began the fire dance and fell as martyrs. She really wanted to be a martyr, and she managed to trip me up in a rapturous manner. Their determination, their last words were beautiful inside the fire dance. Particularly, Yasemin was standing upright till the last moment and was calling out. Her determination was reflected in her speech. Before such a heart, I wanted to say good-bye even inside the fire dance. I took my leave with the victory sign when both were burning like torches.”

Cries could be heard coming from the adjoining cell. The stench of burning flesh had also reached the inmates in the other cell. “What’s happening there?” they cried out. “It’s only Yasemin and Berrin,” the spectator-inmates replied. The latter were afraid that the others would think everyone was setting themselves on fire. Then, there would be no way of controlling them.

Panic in Uşak Prison, one might conclude, had a seemingly peculiar manifestation for it was not in fact the anarchic dispersion of individuals and the narcissistic drive for self-protection that made such a movement of dispersal possible, but rather the sacrificiality of an unruly mimetism which had almost taken on an absolute dimension by rendering the self indistinct from the other.\textsuperscript{136} However, even this reading remains somewhat unsatisfactory, for it does not take into account what Borch-Jakobsen (1993: 9) has described as the “paradox” of panic, namely that panic is “a disbanding bond or an

\textsuperscript{136} Mimesis as sacrifice becomes indistinguishable from mimesis of sacrifice on this exceptional scene.
asocial sociality.” According to Borch-Jakobsen, panic leaves one with no reliable criteria to distinguish between that which is “narcissistic,” “asocial” and that which is “non-narcissistic,” “social,” even though the difference between the two is indispensable—as difference—to the very possibility of establishing the social bond.¹³⁷

For underlying the very narcissism of the individuals is a certain weakness or vulnerability to others that threatens the integrity of their bodies and identities: “panic is precisely an uncontrollable breaching of the ego by (the affects of) others, or if you will, a mimetic, contagious, suggested narcissism.” The contagious act of burning in Uşak Prison can be characterized, then, as an inverted embodiment of the paradoxical truth of panic for strictly speaking there could be no act of contagion insofar as it is becoming other in opening to the other—something that can only be “experienced” as a kind of exposure. For the intentional act of burning was already divided from itself here by a primary exposure which veered towards incorporation with the total collapse of the separation between the self and the other inasmuch as each one let herself be acted by the other. As such, the exceptional turn of events in this provincial prison brings to light, like an unwieldy symptom, the fundamental ambiguity that traverses DHKP-C’s structuration of the Death Fast, splitting it apart between autonomy and heteronomy, freedom and obligation, desire and law, self-identity and anonymity.

For the organizational command upheld that the only act that can be properly called a political act—as opposed to “activity” which merely acted within the limits of law—was one which took the risk of self-annihilation in negating the totality of the legal and political order as such. The main difference between the radical political act and its

¹³⁷ That Freud was at pains to reduce the implications of this paradox to a mere effect of the divisive rupture of the libidinal-political bond is already clear from his remarks in Group Psychology on the necessarily foundational character of the libidinal-political bond for every social bond.
impoverished version lay, then, in the immediate and absolute negativity of the former and, by that token, in its absolute self-affirmation in the face of the order of law. The limit of law in both senses of the genitive was identified here with the limit of existence insofar as the threat of death held the gap between the jouissance of absolute freedom and the order of law. As a result, the encounter with the agents of law was almost always narrativized as an encounter between two deaths, death against death, whereby the murderous power of negation recoiled back on itself only to fall short of negating itself. Though the negation of negation manifested the full subject, we might say, it manifested him or her as death, and this proved to be an absolute aporia for the full subject was no longer a subject to the extent that s/he ceased to be in the act—which is not an act—of dying. The negation of negation was a self-defeating double bind which, unchecked, was liable to produce an unavoidable political paralysis insofar as it led to nothing other than the dissipation of death in death. DHKP-C, by conceiving of political action as immediate and absolute negation, demonstrated, in spite of itself, the propensity of this fervently defended act to lapse into suicidal escapism, for absolute freedom, as DHKP-C’s leftist critics had charged, was only achieved at the level of individuals who did not survive their act, leaving behind a political conflict which was not susceptible of resolution. By a fatal contradiction, then, DHKP-C was threatened with becoming the reverse image of its opponents, the liberal left and in particular the oppositional camp

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138 In seeking to illustrate the irreducibly imaginary character of absolute freedom, Blanchot (2004: 28) writes Sade into the Hegelian dialectic. By unleashing an uncontrollable excess in the negative moment at the center of the Hegelian dialectic, one that is accentuated by Bataille (1990) himself in “Hegel: Death and Sacrifice,” he demonstrates that absolute sovereignty, the Sadian temptation, is ultimately nothing other than the dissolution of the subject itself: “The complete subject, completely affirmed, is also completely destroyed.”
under the leadership of TIKB, whom it held in contempt for their escapist half-measures and lack of audacity.

Yet the immediate and absolute negativity of the act, despite appearances to the contrary, was already subject to the limits of a sacrificial economy—and isn’t every economy of death (or life) indeed a sacrificial economy?—that curbed the drive of the individual members by organizing them into a hierarchical series wherein each member acceded to the right to act in the measure of its resemblance to the exemplary model. The name of this sacrificial economy was vanguardism, and it operationalized the internal difference between the exemplary original and the examples to impose an interval of time between acts which were themselves ranked according to their degree of proximity to the principle of immediate and unconditional form of dying, a principle which had turned the ambiguity of death on the death fast into an imperative. Instead of safeguarding the lives of the vanguards, this economy of vanguardism, which took on a very different, not to say diametrically opposed meaning to that of the organizations in the oppositional camp, functioned, as far as the vanguards were concerned, as an excessive possibility of substitution for it was by placing its political and military cadres at the deathly center of the struggle that DHKP-C had, by a seeming paradox, fomented their continuous elimination and replacement. The perpetual consumption of the vanguards was, thus, the complement rather than the opposite of their exemplary distinction, and DHKP-C’s vanguardism, despite its emphasis on sacrificial dissipation, already contained within itself the principle of its own restriction inasmuch as it conserved the exemplary model without conserving the examples. Which means, of course, that this economy of sacrifice was fundamentally supported by identification, and such identification was already, as we
have seen, divided from itself by a more primary, excessive form which had radically challenged—if it had not indeed undone—the sanctioned identification. The sanctioned form of identification abided by the law of (specular) mediation which required that it kept the necessary separation between the subject and the sacrificial example for without this exigent distance the subject would not be able to re-present him or herself and s/he would be seized by or, one might say, sacrificed to the other. By contrast, the prohibited form of identification which might be termed sacrifice proper, were it not that sacrifice is already a radical form of impropriety, suspended the very separation between the subject and other in consequence of an affection whereby the subject, no longer the same, no longer a subject, had become an opening by and of itself. An intractable contagion—perhaps the very contagion that, according to Bataille, is indistinguishable from sacrifice—affected both these forms of identification, implicating the one in the other, constantly transforming the one into the other, and yet the possibility of appropriation which was always already implicit in the economy of sacrifice was effectuated in fact by restraining the latter form of identification. The unauthorized, simultaneous acts of burning in Uşak Prison appeared as an aberration from their authorized, serial counterparts in the prominent prisons, but an aberration that brought to surface the hidden truth that the absolute negativity of desire which had always already abandoned itself to the desire of the Other was taken under control by separating the acts of burning by means of pauses that indeed functioned in sync with the division of death fasters into teams succeeding each other on the battlefront.

Bataille conceded as much when he laid bare the tragic-comic subterfuge at the center of the sacrificial act in his “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” as the subterfuge of
identification, namely identification with the sacrificial victim who alone allowed the subject to manifest himself to himself—and the subject must manifest him or herself before him or herself to become a self-consciousness—as the radical negativity of desire or, as Kojève puts it, “death which lives a human life” (quoted in Bataille 1989: 18). But if Bataille was ready, in “Hegel, Death, and Sacrifice”, to exploit Kojève’s anthropological reading of Hegelian desire, he was willing to accompany the Hegelian dialectic up to a certain point. Ultimately, Bataille turned Kojève’s Hegel against himself insofar as negativity, rather than marking a necessary moment within the teleological unfolding of the dialectic, came to figure instead a recalcitrant impasse testifying to the failure of the dialectic. At the outset, Bataille reiterates the claim, made by Kojève in his lectures on Hegel, that for the living being to become fully human, he must negate the natural, animal being in himself for the human way of Being—desire—is not satisfied by the merely immediate and unconscious way of Being of natural life. Yet to negate the natural, animal being—that is, his self-identical “given being”—necessarily means negating the human being himself, and thus the human being finds himself in a quandary of having to negate his natural, animal being to reveal himself to himself as perpetual self-transcendence, but by so doing, he has to face his own extinction. The human being is dispossessed of his own negativity in the encounter with death that is the non-dialectical other of existence and as Bataille writes in his final comment on this scene of suspended self-reflection: “The privileged manifestation of Negativity is death, but death, in fact, reveals nothing.” (ibid., 19; emphasis added). In the end, of course, in order to surmount this paralysis, the human being is forced to come up with a conjuring trick, and that trick is sacrifice: sham of a death that is not a death but only a simulation that is in
fact performed on the basis of having already predetermined the Being of beings as a common substance or ground subsuming the totality of beings within its undying unity. Yet what for Hegel is construed as a paradigmatic case of dialectical mediation and passage, remains for Bataille an encounter with the impossibility of sacrifice inasmuch as death itself is the impossible communion of finite beings. The singular event of dying, because it is singular, renders impossible the immanence of Being to itself by exposing the substantial ground to be nothing but a differential relation between Being and beings.139 There is no Subject or substance of common being, and the Hegelian Aufhebung turns here into an aporetic impasse, but one Bataille only exacerbates by emphasizing that the fraudulence of the dialectic is irreducible. Sacrifice is not a ploy for which there exists some more authentic alternative for death is an event without a present, an experience without a subject, a simulacrum without an original: “At least, it would be a comedy” he writes, “if some other method existed which could reveal to the living the invasion of death” (ibid., 19). To the extent that the scene of sacrifice is necessarily a representation, it is a representation of a scene that cannot take place except as a simulacrum of itself. As Blanchot ([1955] 1978) reiterates in a host of essays throughout the same period, death is only ever mine: but when it takes place, it takes place in my absence because in death “I” do not die; the one who dies is the impersonal, anonymous “one”. The identification with the scene of sacrifice cannot therefore be identification for not only does the “I” not recognize itself in the death of the other, but more disturbingly, there is no one recognizable. Instead of finding itself in the other, in another “I”, the “I” itself comes to be the site of its own excess, its own alterity, its own

difference with itself by opening to the other “who” has lost its relation to itself as possibility or propriety and has dissipated itself to a point of extremity where it has become one with the impersonal anonymity of the event of death.

Impersonal anonymity of death though it cannot be thought as a reserve gathering together its multiple and singular instantiations, it still draws them into relation but a relation without relation, relation without adequation, equality, symmetry or reciprocity. Separated and drawn together by the interval of difference, the simultaneity of the acts of burning may not be properly thinkable within chronological time for they evince a different kind of simultaneity, the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous insofar as death constantly differs from itself, and by that very token, occurs without occurring, once more, for the first time, repeatedly but always differently, in singular instantiations (single instants and singular bodies). In this regard, the simultaneity of the acts of burning in Uşak Prison may in fact contest the law of exemplification with their peculiar status as examples without example for the fatal and faithful exigency of return here reveals in the law of repetition the excess of difference; and one could argue that the difference between desire and law, act and conduct, event and ritual hinges ultimately on nothing other than the difference between the two forms of repetition. The reproduction of heroic death as an exemplary model, while it may seek to order the repeated return of death by way of seriality, is always already threatened with dissolution for death is by definition beyond all possible models and models of possibility. Lacking a self-present origin, death is repetition as such or repeated return of the different that suspends the distinctions between original and copy, act and citation, instant and instance. Which in turn explains why the simultaneous acts of burning, though the organizational command had no
alternative but to affirm their insubordination, were construed as inordinately violent and illicit since they transgressed both the law, and in competition with the law, the law of their own organization. In this sense, law and transgression, as the organizational command was bound to acknowledge in its impotence, had themselves already been transgressed, so to speak, by the repeated return of death which was irreducible to any dialectic of limitation and transgression. The simultaneous acts of burning in Uşak Prison were other than the law and the transgression that already belonged to the law, not because of their superior power or legitimacy in the face of the law, but rather because of their ultimate refusal—on the grounds of a certain vulnerability to the Other—to be addressed by the language of law despite the continuous exchange of threats between the troops and the prisoners during the operation. Far from being beyond the law, the serial acts of burning in the principal prisons (Bayrampaşa, Ümraniye, Buca and Çanakkale), which in fact behaved as a prototype of the temporal succession of teams insofar as the precipitation of dying inhabited DHKP-C organization of the Death Fast as its abiding, innermost principle, on the contrary, recognized the law by entering into a reciprocal relation with it, albeit a reciprocity that indeed lied outside of the law of equivalence governing the negotiations between the political and administrative authorities and the organizations, and presented itself as a challenge of death.

For the prison operation coming at the heels of the unilateral ending of the negotiations by the authorities had in fact rendered null and void the calculated equivalence between the lives of the death fasters and the demands of the prison movement, and it had done so by revoking the exchange-value of death on the principle
that the fundamental right to life was irrevocable and inalienable. The affirmation of
the right to life by the legal discourse of the political and administrative authorities, in a
violent reversal of terms, had converted this right into a duty, imposing upon its bearers
in both senses of the term (carrier and sufferer) the obligation to live, and what is more to
live for the conservation and improvement of their lives. For the right to life was also a
right of the state, society and the family over the person whose life was a parcel of social
value and capital which was entrusted to its bearer on the sole condition that he or she did
not misuse it, let alone use it up, by putting his or her life and bodily integrity at risk.
Which, in fact, meant that the bearers only had a right of usufruct, and this is why the
constitutional law indeed protected (human) life as a value in and of itself for and, if
necessary, against the person who was reduced to a mere beneficiary of the right to life, a
beneficiary who was strictly banned from relinquishing or alienating this entrusted life.
The corollary of this legal argumentation for the prohibition of suicide and equally
importantly, of self-sacrifice was that the death fasters could not give a life that was
always already given to them. They were already indebted to the state and society for
their life, and accordingly they could not obligate the state with their deaths.

This is why, as the counter-propaganda of the authorities came to a head with the
prison operation code-named “Return to Life” which was allegedly undertaken to save
the lives of the death fasters who were represented as hostages in the hands of the
organizational command, DHKP-C turned the prison struggle into a struggle whose

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140 In a series of books on the Death Fast in the prisons of Turkey and hunger strikes in general, the
investigative judge Ahmet Taşkin (2005a; 2005b; 2005c) presents the legal argumentations of the Turkish
state and I am here paraphrasing them.

141 In Basında Cezaevi ve Gerçekler, Taşkin (2005a: 54-55) writes: “The fundamental rights and freedoms
are bound fast to the person. These rights which protect the person as a value in and of itself above the
person consist of right to life, right to bodily integrity, right to self-improvement, and right to freedom. The
person can neither relinquish these rights nor transfer them to another person.”
primary goal was to defend the Death Fast itself by re-establishing the exchange of death which no longer took account of the law of equivalence but, as Baudrillard (1993) would say, only the challenge and reversibility of exchanges—death against death. Unlike TIKB and the organizations under its leadership which had taken the decision to wait upon the reaction of the political and administrative authorities before launching their teams of death fasters, DHKP-C launched its third team four days before the prison operation, and raising the stakes even higher, the death fasters of its first team in every prison made a declaration of their decision to burn themselves in the likely event of an operation.

The operation, as G. has indicated in his retrospective account, had forced them to choose between life and death, and both choices had seemingly ended in the same losing position to the extent that neither life nor death belonged to them any longer: “‘Surrender and live!’ ‘Life’ is always presented as a reward for self-surrender, but this is a ‘life’ which is granted to you only in exchange for your freedom. When you enter through the door of this granted life, it is no longer your proper life, you are no longer the same you. You know that you do not possess your life anymore for that life is granted to you as a reward in return for your surrender.” But this life of “slavery” was not inevitable, and G. reminded those who might indeed like to forget that in the last instance one always had the right to refuse. And to refuse this hollow parody of life which was severely limited by loss of self-propriety including one’s values and ideals, inasmuch as freedom, as G. has affirmed it, was the absolute, irreducible condition of life, did not thereby dispense them from the challenge of meeting the threat of death on its own terms; and it indeed stimulated them to refuse, more radically still, this death by responding to murderous
power with an equal or even superior death insofar as death could not be threatened with
death: “Under such conditions, to ward off the threats of death by running the risk of
dying and walking upon the enemies of the people would be a breach in the wall of
enslavement. It brings about the defeat of the tyrants who trust their threats of death
because death is, simply speaking, defeated.”¹⁴² The irreversible transitivity of death (or
life, to the extent that death necessarily implies the possibility of life) has given way in
his account to a radical reversibility, albeit a reversibility marked by a supreme paradox:
they have defeated “death” only by dying. But it is perhaps in his final summing up, in
his “simply speaking,” that the ambiguity of death insists in a series of questions, even if
obliquely: Which death is it that is defeated? And if it is, as he appears to intimate, the
murderous power of negation that is defeated, is it defeated by them, by their power of
death? Or is it rather defeated by their inalienable and yet unpossessable relation to
death? Asked otherwise, is it defeated by the irreducible incommensurability of the
relation—the relation without relation—that binds them to their own death?

For it was not the act of killing which had become reversible insofar as the object
of the act of killing had not turned into an agent. They did not kill the other which was
not to say that they failed to act upon the other as they had claimed to do so, and in an
“explosive” manner, in their declarative speech-acts. Nor, the agent and the object of the
act, despite appearances to the contrary, had collapsed into each other in a reflexive
transitivity. It is in fact arguable that such reflexive transitivity was even possible since
the subject of the act was not external to the act itself as he or she would have necessarily

¹⁴² In fact, the threat of death on the part of the political authorities was often ridiculed (at least in words)
by DHKP-C’s death fasters who saw it as a sign of the impotence and helplessness of the authorities in the
face of their commitment to die. How could someone who had already lied down to death, they asked, be
threatened with death?
been in the act of killing, and they could have remained external to the act of dying only at the risk of complete objectification of their bodies. But their bodies resisted being instrumentalized by their will, and this was a sign that they were patients of a verbal act which had not originated in them and yet somehow still abided in them to the point of separating them from themselves. And though the source of the act may be said to lie outside of them inasmuch as it was unknown, they were not—as marked grammatically in the sheer impossibility of passivating the intransitive verb “to die”—mere objects of the violence of the Other even if one were to ascribe an agent to the event of death and one almost always succumbs to do so, as Lévinas (1977: 233) has suggested, by identifying the approach of death with the approach of the Other. For the Other would still not have appeared as another subject—someone who can be known as a human presence—but as the coming of the absolutely unforeseeable.

In this sense, DHKP-C’s death fasters did not desire to simply be the agent of “death,” they desired more, they in fact wanted to be identified with the verbal act itself, the event of death or better as death insofar as death is the ultimate example—the example that cannot by definition be an example—of the absolute alterity of the event. This temptation to merge with the immediate, the “immediate” which, as Blanchot (2003: 38) argues, “excludes everything immediate” because it can only be grasped by way of a detour or turning, was more than an isolated case of intensified hostilities, and recalling much of our earlier analysis, its effects extended to DHKP-C’s organization of the Death Fast as a whole. Already, DHKP-C’s death fasters had envisaged the scene of their death as a sudden void, notwithstanding the impasse of time which separated their own death from death as an anonymous event, as a sudden absence in the place of their addressee as
if death was the presence of the absence of the Other. They had in fact, in seeming contrariety with their bodily deeds, figured themselves as deathly weapons in their declarative speech-acts at their pledge ceremonies before the operation. In the case of performative speech-acts, where the division between the subject of enunciation and the subject of statement is less clearly demarcated, it is often the similarities between the utterances that are indeed more striking than the differences between them; and thus this pervasive self-figuration that first occurred in the context of the pledge of Ali Rıza Demir, a death faster on the first DHKP-C team in Ümraniye Prison, returned in barely modified form in the recitations of the death fasters on subsequent teams conferring to his words the status of a quasi-formula:

To the calls of surrender by the enemy in the prisons, we are crying out with a stronger voice, ‘we are going to die, but we’re not going to surrender.’ We are bullets loaded into the gun barrel. Each one of us is going to explode in the hands of the enemy in this attack against the people, and in particular, against us the prisoners. We are going to be martyred.\textsuperscript{143}

Read not simply in terms of what he appears to mean or say but in terms of what it literally says, the figure of weapon here demands to be read less as an instrument and more as an event. For he does not quite mean to say that they weaponize death or life insofar as life is only another name for the capacity for dying, but rather he declares themselves to be, beyond metaphor, weapons which are ready to strike as the event of death, and veering towards an absolute aporia, he even declares themselves to be death insofar as death bursts into the present only to occasion a breach of difference between the apriori perfect and infinitive of death, separating and drawing together my death and death as an impersonal event by an inescapable interval of time which keeps the

coincidence of the two deaths in perpetual reserve. And this is arguably why DHKP-C did not ultimately discern a difference in the efficacity of the various forms of dying (death-fasting, self-burning, and suicidal attack) which were subsumed under the category of the sacrificial act, *feda eylemi*, with the emphasis falling on the offensive nature of the act. For they thought that each form of dying displayed a force with an equal magnitude notwithstanding the direction of the force which merely had the function of effecting its transmission, and thus this was a force which always reached its target inasmuch as it blasted the law, ushering, through the fissures of the law, the claims of the Other that, manifesting itself as death, sought for itself—and perhaps gave itself—a language that would reveal the truth, a truth hitherto unsayable and unregarded, by closing the very gap or disjunction between truth and power that their declaration to die for their demands had itself placed at the center of political discourse.

DHKP-C had defined death from the outset as the goal of the Death Fast, and by doing so it had determined death as an object, state, or end that must be reached and attained, at least by the death fasters on the inaugural teams which were glorified as “vanguard battalions” in view of the certainty of the death of their members. The death fasters of these teams had in fact made their pledges knowing fully well that they would have to die and yet they were more than ready to accept their approaching deaths for, as Ahmet Ibili had explained in a conversation before he burnt himself in Ümraniye Prison, they would bring the victory: “Neither I nor you, nor the others will see the day of victory because we will bring the victory. We will bring the victory with our deaths. We will fall as martyrs.” Far from being a secondary effect or a by-product of their act of resistance, in this perspective, death had become an end in itself.
In this sense, death had already taken place, and they found themselves suspended between death and death, between a death that had occurred when they made their pledges—the pledge ceremonies were in many ways preparations for funerals—and a death which had yet to occur because they had to accomplish the task of dying still, against life which was no longer their own life proper but a life that was in some sense anonymous if only because it reasserted itself with a plaintive perseverance, speaking in the first person while making its host refer to herself in the second person:

You are putrefying. You smell the odor of acetone coming from your mouth. Your head aches so much that you hit it on the walls. You want to live instinctually. All of your cells want to live physically. Even the pain is a sign of life. It is saying: Make me live, look I’m dying. Despite the pain, you don’t stop. Your will and spirit fight with your body. Can’t I live?

As they hung indeterminately between the necessity of death and the endlessness of dying, they were dead and alive because, as G. reveled while reading the memorial poems which were written down to be recited in her own final absence, their form of dying had given them the chance to hear their funeral speeches in advance of the end, and they were alive and dead because they prepared their own funerals, deciding upon the grave sites and detailing their burials in their statements of last wishes which echoed back and forth from one to the other like reciprocal quotations the hope of a communion punctuated by an extravagant supplication to be buried together with the martyrs of the past, next to or even on top of each other. The future had turned into a ghostly premonition of the past and, in this sense, it was no longer the future at all, but already belonged to the past which had become the site of a tantalizing responsiveness, offering them beyond life and beyond death a timeless presence on the condition that they continued to be its guardians.
The presence of the past which was always already less than present just as it was always already more than present had set them apart, making them indifferent to the everyday demands of the living because they had made a pact not with the living, but with the dead still living, and their war was not with life but rather with death, with the death they could never seize, not even when they quested after their own death in heroic impatience, for they could not be done with dying, not without experiencing to the limit the anguish of the wait.

Ali Rıza, in a letter written to one of his comrades from the prison, expressed his displeasure with his abiding health despite their recent decision to refrain from taking vitamin B1 which had served only to defer their death:

My health is good, god damn it! I’m dreaming of the days when I can write to you that I am feeling bad. I long for the coming of those days with my whole heart. I cannot wait to explode in the hands of these murderers.\(^{144}\)

He was restless to die, and yet he was still living, a life only afflicted with waiting in an empty present save the fervid anticipation of his future death because the truth of their demands, were he not to die, would never come to any proof. The political authorities, seemingly deaf and indifferent to their demands, had exploited the absence of death to cast aspersions on the truthfulness of their act. They had spread the false rumor that their survival was a sign of their secret eating. He longed for his death because death and only death could give expression to his truthfulness and testifying as it did to the truth of their demands. Were he to defer his death, on the other hand, by taking vitamin B1 for instance, he would only prolong the Death Fast and by consequence, occasion albeit inadvertently the death of others for only the precipitation of deaths could prevent

\(^{144}\) Ibid., p. 400.
the introduction of new teams. Survival was always already, then, the sign of a broken promise.

The fortuitous survival of H. (and in a sense, it was always fortuitous to survive the Death Fast to the extent that all decisions about the suspension or termination of the fast were left to the discretion of the organizational command after the prior consent of the individual death faster) had the oddly contrary effect of arousing his anger. It was not that he was feeling guilty of surviving in the place of his comrades, quite the reverse. The violence of his anger at having survived the death fast had its source in his falling short—as announced in the performative naming of the act—of the task of dying, and thus he berated himself for not measuring up to the demands of the organizational command which had little in common with the repressive authority of the state because they had incited him to action by the seductive nakedness of a question: Can you die? That is to say, do you have the power to die? He did not quite remember the number of days he was on the fast—and why should he show care or concern about the number of days when death is the aim of his striving?—but he believed it to be 180 days referring to his father for the exact number, 186. He began with the surprise of the unexpected delay of his death only to fulminate against the absence of the event which had left him suspended in an inescapable lapse of time, and lest his impossible survival was understood to be a lack of desire on his part, he subjected his body to a frivolous interrogation, harassing himself with insatiability and persistence.

It’s been 150 days, 200 days… You’re not eating anything, just sugar, salt and water… nothing else. I was getting surprised at myself. I was on my hundredths and I wasn’t vomiting. I was getting angry with myself. Why isn’t anything
happening? Why didn’t I die? I was really getting angry with myself. What the fuck! Is there a problem with our body?  

The withdrawal of death from the realm of possibility threatened their virility and heroism, transforming impatience into the most excruciatingly patient wait. Days were marked by the tedious repetitiveness of dying, which did not allow itself to be mastered by the sovereign power of negation still:

Days resemble each other. On the one hand, we wait for death and feel its approach and on the other hand, for victory… But death, the death that will put that point, the last point, is withholding itself from us.  

But this doleful insight into the impassibility of the distance between the present and the future of death, and it was impassible to the extent that it was already there (she felt its approach), had reinforced her desire to die. Sevgi Erdoğan concluded her diary entry on January 26, 2001 (six months before her death) by apostrophizing death with the urgency and beseeching tone of a certain eschatological “come” which addressed the future, the future that death gives, as power, (“victory” she writes), and the imminent presence of the community to itself: “Come death, come death!”

This movement of advance and retreat had taken a spiraling turn with forced feeding which had prolonged the ordeal of dying, submitting them forcibly to an endless series of deaths and resurrections. “The tape,” A. said to me, “rewinds itself.” The ability to live was only another name for the ability to die, and the endless circle began again:

“You then need another 50 or 100 days to die.” But after a few rounds of these undesired

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145 Though I asked my questions in the second person singular, H. always answered them in the first person plural. His use of possessive adjective in the first person plural gives an indication of the complete identification of his desire with the desire of the group; his body does not belong to him, it has already merged with the collective.

146 Yasemin Berrin, Büyük Direnişin Uşak Cephesi Başeğmeyen Kadınlar, p. 150.

147 Ibid., p. 154.
resurrections, death fasters became exasperated with resuming an act interrupted by forced-feeding, which had turned the struggle into a struggle to defend the Death Fast itself. The exigency of death underlying the act of death fasting, as DHKP-C saw it, underwent a further inflection whereby the necessity of a detour through partial deferral that alone had inhibited the Death Fast from achieving its aim of death was itself side-stepped by overreaching it in the immediacy of self-burning. The death of the individual, though it now took the form of a calculating act accomplished in order to recover a more proper death by abolishing the necessity of waiting, had to be repeated *itself* in a series of potentially endless re-enactments which indicated both finality and incompletion, time and timelessness.

That the Death Fast had not faded away owing to the exceptional perseverance of the DHKP-C whose teams of death fasters had succeeded each other uninterruptedly over seven years was averred by DHKP-C as a proof of its exteriority to law. Yet, far from being beyond the law, DHKP-C had in fact fallen hostage to law since the repeated negation of the law by the return of death necessarily confirmed the supremacy of law as a limit. The result was the relation to the limit of law, like the relation to death, began to resemble the limitlessness of time, a limitlessness that gave rise not to another law, but the endless succession of teams and thereby deaths that still resisted designation as events. They were in fact more like absent events, events without events if only because they were bound to (and by) the future as the coming of victory. As Ç. recapitulated their slogan “To the End, To Eternity, To the Last,” during the seventh year of the struggle, each death faster was never the last but the penultimate one in an infinite but closed series, a series of absolutely singular yet substitutable placeholders: “Every volunteer,
every death faster is a last man, but they are not the last point. In 1996, Yemliha [Kaya who was the last person to die before the state agreed to negotiate] was the last man. There is no last man until victory.”

The organizational command invoked the endlessness of the Death Fast only to abstract a revolutionary Subject (and thus capitalized after the fact) from the uninterrupted continuity of its teams, and it did so by subsuming the singular acts of dying within a dialectical unity and closure. The temporal succession of the teams expressed the defining value of a revolutionary “culture” for which self-sacrifice, *feda*, was only ever an occasion for the demonstration of the impotence of power to take hold of this deathless Subject. But the singular acts of dying, though they now appeared, by a fetishistic inversion, to be the embodiments of this self-same sacrificial Subject, had in fact given rise to this ideal and unchanging self-identity by their possibility of repetition. In fact, DHKP-C had recuperated the possibility of repetition itself as a new possibility on the second year anniversary of the Death Fast by exploiting to radical effect the structure of repetition and difference that is the calendar. Henceforth, the ninth and subsequent teams (4 more) were named after exceptional martyr-death fasters, and these rememorative teams were introduced on the anniversaries of their deaths and other events of note. In this manner the inaugural series re-duplicated itself to constitute a new series

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148 For a description of this “culture” after the end of the Death Fast, see Yürüyüş, “Büyük Direniş 2000-2007 Ölüm Orucu,” (The Great Resistance 2000-2007 Death Fast) October 12, 2008, no. 2, p. 10: “The Great Resistance, both from its ideological and political starting point and the values it has produced within the resistance itself, became an important barricade against imperialism’s politics of degeneration. In the midst of this depravation, it has added new values to the values of the people. This culture and its values are the most important inheritance that will shed light on the struggle of people. That it has demonstrated that there are still people who are willing to die for their beliefs, for their comrades, and people, this and only this, is a real strike against the bourgeois culture and its individualism. This is one of the victories of our resistance.”
of death fasters who repeated the past events as if they were looking forward to their own ghostly repetition for completion.\footnote{The ninth team was named after Zehra Kulaksız, a member of TAYAD who had died on the death fast outside the prison in Küçükarmutlu in June 2001. The tenth was named after Gültekin Koç who died in a suicide attack against a police headquarters in January 2001. The eleventh team was named after Sevgi Erdoğan who had continued to fast in Küçükarmutlu after her release and died in July 2001. The twelfth team was named after Fidan Kalşen, a female prisoner who had set herself on fire in Çanakkale Prison during the prison operation. The last team was named after Cengiz Soydaş, the first death faster to fall martyr in Sincan F-type Prison in March 2000.}

By turning towards the past events to re-call them, in spite of the irrevocability of the past, and not because of it, one may equally conclude that they had also turned away from the pursuit of power to inscribe the event itself as a timeless instant within time whereby the singular acts of dying severed their relationship with law to respond to the law beyond the law—the law of the Other. That the organizational command sought to capitalize upon, or at least to recuperate this repeated return of death by harnessing it to a rival code of values could not efface its unanswerability. As far as the outside gaze was concerned, the unanswerability of this insistent repetition was perhaps the one that disturbed the most, for at the very moment that the Death Fast lost its political force and justification, its own repetition of itself divided the presence of the present and denied the seeming closure of the event. Though this repetition could only appear as mechanical repetition from the outside, which was why in turn it appeared as empty ritualism, as the necessity and the compulsion of the code, it was in fact itself the event which knew no negation.
Chapter V

_Feda: The Sacrificial Knot_

*What is this force that drives the drive to reproduction, even if mere reproduction would mean death?*_


_Revolution is sacrifice and audacity._

*DHKP-C (Revolutionary People’s Liberation Party-Front)*

*There is no last man until victory.*

--Ç., A death faster who decided not to go through the end

*Let me be the last one.*

--Fatma Koyupınar, The last death faster to die

“We’ve already won,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, announcing their “victory” dispassionately. Having kept her composure all day without any easily discernible venom in her eyes, Z. spoke as if the government had not persistently refused to meet their demands, as if one hundred twenty two people had not died on the fast, as if her sister, Fatma, the one hundred twenty second one, had not died three months ago.

A woman of firm appearance with a look of surprised inquiry and yet of haughty pride in her eyes, Z. had served ten years in prison for taking part in the bombing of a police station as a commanding member of the outlawed Marxist-Leninist organization *DHKP-C* (Revolutionary People’s Liberation Party-Front). Her sister, a long-time comrade, had died on April 27, 2006 after fasting for three hundred and fifty four days. And three hundred and ten of those days were spent together in a cell with no one else but Z., as the prison administration had given her the impossible task of attending to her dying sister all alone.
In one way or another, both of us were prey to blindness. My blindness lay in seeing no truth other than loss. Hers was in clinging to a strange faith in the future that disallowed her from confronting the undeniable presence of deaths in the present. Yet, I did not dare to question her certitude openly for fear that I would reopen her wounds with my incredulity and thereby wound one more time. Instead I waited for some words from her that would allow me to understand the sense of her claim. Her conclusive evidence for their victory was their losses. Such, then, was the power of wounds in her imagination--dehiscent wounds that would burst open like flowers and let what was already coming into presence, the people, arrive. Together, we were suspended over a precipice dangerously oscillating between bestowing either too much or too little sense to the seriality of deaths.

I had chanced upon Z. when I visited Behiç Aşçı in the summer of 2006. Behiç Aşçı was the advocate of political prisoners affiliated with the outlawed Marxist-Leninist organization DHKP-C. In solidarity with the political prisoners in solitary confinement, he had begun fasting on April 4, 2006 together with Gülcan Görüroğlu, a mother of two, and Sevgi Saymaz from Uşak Prison as the only remaining member of the thirteenth death fast team. The rest of the outlawed Marxist organizations had called the death fast off on May 28, 2002, declaring that the death fast had consummated its role in the struggle against the new prison project. Isolated in its struggle, DHKP-C had carried on with the death fast for four more years despite public inattention and lack of support.

When I met him, Behiç Aşçı had been fasting for the past hundred and thirty-one days in a house located on a parallel street from the courthouse, itself located on the main avenue running through the middle of Şişli. A central area of İstanbul serving as a hub for
public transportation, this wide avenue was lined with general goods shops, coffee-shops, and restaurants under tall buildings of offices, banks and apartments. The back streets were still residential, housing many working class families and students who attended either the well-known high schools in the area or a great number of evening and weekend schools where they prepared for the annual high-school and university exams or learned English.

I ventured to see him at the time scheduled for me. A couple of young men with yellow vests indicating that they were on the picket line opened the door and showed me into the living room. The hallway was dark and the doors of the three rooms at the opposite end were closed. It was a spacious and well-resourced apartment. I was seated on a sofa across the large screen TV on the right and was told to wait. There were several people in the room. Between the greetings with two young women in picket line vests who wrote down my name and occupation in a notebook and an elderly couple, I turned and shifted carelessly about, surveying the living room. Behind the seats on the left was a long dinner table with a potted geranium placed in the middle. A series of chairs for visitors spotted the wall joining the two separate parts of the room from the right hand side to the left. On the left hand side of the wall hung a news board where someone had pinned various news items about Behiç Aşçı’s death fast cut from national dailies and the organization’s own paralegal publications. And suddenly I noticed this startling object on the left hand side of the wall. It was a small wooden device placed on a metal file cabinet with a pot of daisies on both sides. As I peered at it persistently and curiously, I realized that it was a time meter of some sort registering the passage of days. It read 131. It
seemed as though the number of days was made to signify here both patience and
impatience, beckoning to a victory to come before death.

On the right hand side of the wall at the opposite end of the room was an
approximately eighty by forty inches poster which read “Where there’s no justice,
resistance is a right.” This red poster with yellow block letters was distinctly colored with
the insignia colors of the Party. It was flanked on both sides with posters half its size.
These smaller twin posters in black and white gave a slightly different message: “In a
country where law and justice are destroyed, I am on the death fast for the fundamental
right to live.”

It might appear absurd for the “I” of the phrase to declare that it is dying in order
not to die. According to its logic, the “I” of the phrase can escape the miserable fate of
dying under an unjust and lawless political order by dying on the fast precisely because
the senses of the two deaths are different. The first death does not refer to the cessation of
life, but to the lack of possibilities of existence under such a political order. By playing
on this double sense of death—ontic and ontological death—the phrase reveals the death
fast to be yet another possibility: death as a possibility which will inaugurate another
ability-to-be. Here, death as horizon is not only the end but also the beginning, opening to
and making possible all that can come from the future. Yet, at the same time, the
evocation of death as a possibility here secretly harbors within itself a reference to a
future that might never become the present of the “I” itself. Notwithstanding the great
dissolution, in dying, of relationships with everyone else, as stated by Heidegger in
Section 50 of Being and Time, the “I”, in dying for a right to come, is first and foremost
dying for the other.
No sooner did he make his tardy entrance with a deferential group of young men behind him, then Behiç Aşçı rested his gaze upon me. For a couple of minutes he stood by the sofa in the same position, apparently deep in thought; but soon a cold, listless smile forced itself to his lips. He shook my hand and slowly sat down on the sofa. His face was pale and stern, as if quite frozen, motionless. He decidedly resembled an inanimate wax figure. His daily routine, he said, was clearly articulated, carefully organized. He had newly arisen from some two hours’ repose after the visitations in the morning. As soon as he told me this, one of the young men in picket line vests started to serve sour cherry juice. I looked at his emaciated hand as he sipped the beverage which was not allowed to the earlier death fast teams. I remembered at that moment having been told by the survivors of these earlier death fast teams how the death fast had passed imperceptibly into an indefinite hunger strike in the later stages of the prison resistance during which the standard diet was modified in accordance with the size and political consciousness of the forces of the participating political organizations inside the prisons. He must have sensed my inquiring expression because he immediately felt the need to give an explanation for his diet. “There is not a fixed formula for death fasting in the world that specifies the acceptable kinds of liquids,” he said. “For us, unmixed vitamin B-1 is fundamental. It does not have a nutritive value, yet it ensures the proper functioning of the nervous system and the brain. In the course of the 1996 Death Fast, most of the deaths occurred due to the collapse of the nervous system rather than due to hunger. Secondly, we are drinking different types of liquids: water, tea, instant coffee, and various kinds of herbal teas as well as sugar and salt. There might be variations in this diet, but what distinguishes the death fast from an indefinite hunger strike is the
resolution to die. One takes the same liquids on the hunger strike, but there is not a declaration of the determination to die.” Though his definition of the death fast was consistent with the ideological and tactical differentiation between the death fast and indefinite hunger strike officially recognized by the radical Marxist groups in Turkey, the modifications of the standard diet have had a great impact on the time of individual deaths. For this reason, his altered diet was rather a sign that the Party was giving time both to the government and to Behiç Aşçı for the resolution of the conflict which had extended well into its seventh year.

Their current campaign identified the generalized censorship as the last one in a series of governmental counter-tactics (such as forced feeding and mass discharges from the prison) which sought to introduce a new level of isolation by interrupting the communication between the prisons and outside. The State Security Court in Istanbul had imposed censorship on the national media for covering news related to the continuing prison struggle as early as December 14, 2000. The ensuing operation in the prisons on December 19 coupled with the successive waves of mass arrests in public protests had intimidated the crowds of protestors and gradually stifled the civil movement against the new prison regime. In order to break through this censorship which had taken the form of a compliant silence, the Central Committee of the organization had called for the fasting of a member with status such as a legal advocate or a medical doctor outside the prison.

“The resistance demands lives be forfeited (can bedeli),” he said in a low voice to me, bending forward as he added: “The Ministry of Justice took the decision for the death

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150 Radikal, “Umut Var, Çözüm Yok,” (There is Hope, but No Solution), December 15, 2000.
Committing a crime against humanity, the Ministry of Justice made 122 people, Gülcan, Sevgi and I take the decision for the death fast.”

From these first two phrases alone, a suspicion is already born about the identity between the one who spoke the law and the one to whom the law applied. As the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1988: 97-104) has shown, the pronoun of the first-person plural is in effect the linchpin for the discourse of authorization in a republic. Substitutable for a proper name, We, the Turkish people, is supposedly able to link prescriptions such as articles in codes, court rulings, laws, decrees, ordinances, circulars and commands onto their legitimation. The republican principle of legitimacy is that the addressee of the norm and the addressee of the obligation are the same. The legislator ought not to be exempt from the obligation he or she asserts as norm. And the obligated one should be able to promulgate the law that obligates him or her. The first-person plural that reputedly unites the addressee of the law is constantly threatened with being split and this threat appears at its height when the obligation made to the addressee is that he or she die. That which orders death is excepted from the obligation, and that which undergoes the obligation is excepted from the legitimation. The authority comes out of a we from which the addressee is excepted once and for all. Thus, there is an invocation of a greater “we” called humanity (which is not a collective proper name), that acts as a witness to that lesser “we” which has vanished with the complete splitting of the addressee of the law. As we will see, there is no “we” in Turkish society except in the extinction of the “I” in the name of the nation.

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151 Though it reads awkwardly in English, the literal translation of his words in Turkish would be the following: “The resistance demands life payments.” In Turkish, the emphasis is on the substitutive value of lives in an economy of violence with the state.
A few days ago the Minister of Justice had publicly asked Behiç Aşçı to bring to an end his unlawful act and to continue to pursue the rights of his defendants in court. He had said in a press conference, “In our country, a state of law, the paths of pursuing legal rights are by all means open. Therefore, it is impossible to accept this act of death fasting which was begun on the abstract assumption that there is isolation in the prisons.” The Minister of Justice’s public invitation to legal action performs a double function. While it operates to push political action outside the law and thereby criminalize it, it simultaneously becomes the means to absolve the state of its responsibility for the deaths and purifies it of its own violence.

There is little faith in the applicability of law in Turkey and it is commonly believed that the legal “I” is a pure appearance as a fictional bearer of rights. This status of the legal “I” is an unintended consequence of the modernist-nationalist program of institutional reforms undertaken in various spheres from law to language at the inception of the Turkish Republic in 1923. This radical project of state-led social engineering sought to replace all Ottoman-Islamic social, political, and cultural institutions with institutions modeled on those of the West. Within two years of the birth of the republic, the caliphate had been abolished, religious schools and courts had been shut, wearing of the fez had been banned, and Ottoman Arabic-Persian lettering was replaced with Latin phonetic orthography.

Kemalism, the official ideology of the Turkish Republic founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, fabricated a strange relation to the West that denied its foreignness by recognizing the West as its proper self. The foreign could not in effect be something that

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152 BirGün, “Adalet Bakanlığı Aynı Yerde,” (The Ministry of Justice is in the Same Place), August 10, 2006.
posed itself outside the self; it was always already a part of the national self. This was a national self that willed itself to be an absolute subject by subordinating alterity to the unity and totality of the national One. It pretended to do so by positing itself as the self-present origin to all possible origins of difference. In its first congress held in Ankara in 1932, the Society for the Study of Turkish History propounded the “Turkish Historical Thesis”. This theory, which Mustafa Kemal emphatically supported, held that the Turks were descendants of Aryan inhabitants of Central Asia, who had been forced by drought and hunger to other areas such as China, Europe and the Near East (Berktay 1983; Ersanlı 1996). In doing so, they had created the world’s greatest civilizations. Similarly, Sun-Language Theory launched in 1935 as part of the language reform held that all languages derived originally from one primeval language, spoken in Central Asia, that Turkish was the closest of all languages to this origin and that all languages had developed from the primeval language through Turkish (Lewis 1999; Ertürk 2011).

The famous saying of the national founder—“We look like ourselves” (Biz bize benzeriz)—was a tautological articulation of the nationalist phantasm of pure immanence in which the foreign other would be no other than the Turkish self itself. Such a fully self-constituted national self that allowed no being apart from itself would have threatened to become the extreme moment of the impossibility of sociality and yet this deadly closure still depended upon an originary supplementarity. It was the founder himself who divided this totality to constitute the nation’s exemplary Other.

Mustafa Kemal in Western clothing, at the blackboard, teaching the nation his new alphabet, figured as an absolute translator endowed with the power to transform every illegible sign into transparency of meaning. The national founder neutralized the
force of the foreign by translating its irreducible difference and multiplicity into a universal language and thereby, one might say, essentially killed it. He was the embodiment of the abstract logic of rationality, and as such, was as clear as daylight.

Here, then, is a seeming affinity, even identity between the founder and death embodied in the pure concept. But the pure idea cannot be devoid of materiality altogether and this proved to be an irresolvable paradox.

According to Michael Meeker (1997: 171), the relationship between the founder and citizens was figured in a language of familiarity and intimacy: “the citizen could be seen and heard by the founder, just as the founder could be heard and seen by the citizen.” But what does it take to be in an intimate relationship with a pure concept, that is to say, with a void or nothingness of some kind? It would be no exaggeration to say that the citizens of the new republic were asked to identify with their own death. To be a citizen was to lose the materiality of one’s distinct being. The national “I” was not only self-effacing, in the sense of being humble and inconspicuous, it was also self-effacing in the much more radical sense that the position of the “I” implied its eradication as the undoing, the erasure of any relationship that could be conceived between what the “I” was and what it ought to have been as a national subject. One must have had nothing characteristic of itself to become a part of the national society, or, in other words, one had to be “nothing” in and of itself.

Such an impossible demand for identification with one’s own “death” ended in the splitting of the national “we” prefigured as a total(izing) Subject. The Turkish sociologist Meltem Ahıska (1998) critically describes this condition as the bifurcation of the Republican everyday into the two deathly horizons of national identity: the vacuity of
official identity and its substantive inside rejected by the Kemalist ideology that solicited and consigned it to obscurity. While the popular “I” with its particular determinations (such as ethnicity, language, religion, political ideology) was expelled from the public gaze to survive in the darkness of a ghostly realm, the official “I” remained visible but oddly existed only on paper. This condition was exacerbated by the incapacity of the newly founded Turkish state to produce a national “we” lacking the necessary resources, technologies, and institutionalization.

Turkish society was split apart by these two competing “I”s, so to speak, that recurred in one form or another throughout the entirety of its history, but whose differences could not ever be equalized, reconciled, or mediated, but only ever registered in their fundamental incompatibility, dissymmetry, and discord. Every time the “I” of speech tried to take charge of the openness of the abstract “I,” it was immediately negated. It was unable to extend beyond itself towards others to make common cause and was therefore bound to exist as a mere “I.” The official “I”, on the other hand, simply did not exist. It was so abstract that it fell completely into nothingness and had no bearing on anything specific, no substantive content at all. This disjuncture of the “I” could only be sutured in the complete identification with the national being which would have required the total negation of the “I”.153 Said otherwise, neither of the two “I”s could become a political subject. In this society, one acceded to political subjectivity only in self-(ab)-negation, but then one was no longer a subject. Correlatively, there was no common

153 Every child is molded in this sacrificial subjecthood as they learn to repeat the founder’s words at the beginning and end of the school week: “Let my being be a gift to the Turkish being!” (Varlığım Türk Varlığına Armağan Olsun!)
language in which the sub-communities that made up the national society could speak to each other except the official language.

In this respect, the gargantuan drive for self-identity did not only founder on the sheer impossibility of suturing the rift between the two “I”s, which were of its own making in the first place, but also, more importantly, it continued to produce an uncontrollable excess. To the ghostly remainders of the national “we” was added the spectrality of the official “we”. The ghostly realm which harbored the specific “I”s was imprisoned in the darkness of its interiority. If it did manage to break into daylight, it was effaced away as mere “exception” redoubling the originary effacement. Hence, it ceased to exist as truth hidden behind the appearances waiting to be rationalized and normalized with the extension of law. Instead it became mere hearsay and thus essentially unverifiable. At the same time, the abstract “I” which did not exist became the only truth of the national identity, a “truth” which was indifferent to truth in its emptiness. In truth, both realms came to partake of fiction which, in Blanchot’s terms (1999: 396-7), is “truth and also indifference to truth.”

It was the state which thrived on this rift between the two “I”s. It kept this ghostly realm as a space of lawlessness and administered and exploited the illegalities therein to establish and increase its power. At the same time, it left the law intact so as to better mark its difference from the extra-legal forces with which it was intimately entangled. This ability to move back and forth across the rift between law and lawlessness bestowed the Turkish state with an incredible spectral power. As Yael Navaro-Yashin (2002: 175)

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154 Ahıska (1998: 25) cites the modernist Ottoman thinker Abdullah Cevdet to give an example of the pragmatism of both Ottoman and Republican modernities that have invested in the power of lies: “…What the Oriental mind says is not untrue. But we are not in need of the true, but the useful. In my view, every lie, every fake, every non-sense which arms the human being with resolution and will in the arena of life struggle is the truth itself. For the supreme truth in life is the life struggle.”
critically observes, the Turkish state appeared in multiple faces and guises: the mafia
dealer, the police officer, the parliamentarian, the military official, the spy, the figure of
Atatürk, and so on. Paradoxically, it was by withdrawing identity from itself that the
Turkish state was able to operate as an endlessly excessive possibility of erasure,
displacement, alteration, and proliferation. “The state,” she writes, “emerged as an
apparition—now you see it, now you don’t—an intangible nonentity that appeared
constantly to change hands.” It is this movement of self-differentiation that rendered the
political order in Turkey illegible.155

The sovereignty of the Turkish state, then, does not reside in legitimation, which
is almost always called into question. The sovereignty of the Turkish state resides in its
power of metamorphosis, in its ability to appear in multiple faces and guises. It “is”, in
essence and in effect, unverifiable. Hence, the Turkish state is not threatened by powers
of unmasking which would capitalize on the moment of verification but rather by powers
of fiction, which thrive on unverifiability.

It is my argument that a politics of truth is bound to fail under these conditions.
However much evidence one produces for its illegitimate acts, the Turkish state does not
lose its power. It is this illegibility, unidentifiability, or unverifiability that revolutionary
insurgency needs to take into consideration. The question to be posed, then, is: What is
the force of death fasting under these conditions? What are its modes of strategic
functioning and vulnerabilities? How are they marked by this very nature of the Turkish
state which is itself an effect of the divided national self?

155 Or, Walter Benjamin would say, mythical. Benjamin (1986: 295) describes the powers of a mythical
world with two keys words: as “demonic” and as “ambiguous.” The ambiguity of such a world is demonic
because it is tied to the polytheism of the mythical world, in which no clear hierarchy permits an
unambiguous identification of authority.
Behiç Aşçı talked of his futile labors as an advocate of political prisoners and of the illegible law in Turkey—what he said traced the passage from his failed attempts to obtain justice to his decision to death fast. The terms of the Anti-Terror Law gathered in their extensive sweep a range of activities that could stamp “anyone,” he said ominously, with the criminal agency of membership in an outlawed organization. The root of the word for organization in Turkish, örgüt, is the verb denoting the act of weaving, örmek. In contradistinction to the English word which indicates a system of rules governing behavior, the Turkish word refers to a web of social relations. It however has the sinister connotation of conspiratorial scheming as if any other collective identification and action would threaten the well-being of the Turkish state and nation. In this respect, the verbal root of örgüt brings into view the disjuncture between the legal name and the web of social relations that it purports to name. As Christopher Bracken (1997: 120) has aptly demonstrated, the legal text “grants the world an object to be observed, regulated, handed over to the police—and arraigned.” The legal name produces a dubious specter that divides its referent from itself proliferating it to its detriment. We were too caught in the abysmal workings of what was in fact the law itself. Örgüt ceased to mean what it meant.

156 It can be argued that the word adopted this connotation after the military coup in 1980 which forcefully installed a neo-liberal economic regime in Turkey. The post-1980 military and civilian governments did not grant to any social class other than the bourgeoisie the right of organizing and forming themselves as an autonomous political force. Galip Yalman aptly describes this form of socio-political structure as “authoritarian individualism.” In line with the New Right thinking in England and elsewhere, it was understood that a strong state would be necessary as the political guarantor of economic individualism. See his “The Turkish State and Bourgeoisie in Historical Perspective,” in The Politics of Permanent Crisis: Class, Ideology and State in Turkey, eds. Neşecan Balkan and Sungur Savran, (New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2002), p. 46.

157 For this reason, the outlawed leftist organizations identify this word as a term employed in the idiolect of the police and prefer to use instead the words siyaset (politics) and/or yapı (structure) to refer to themselves. While the first word posits the political nature of their acts against the state’s criminalization of Marxist militancy which puts their acts on a par with organized crime, the second one lays emphasis on the founding character of such political action.
legally but began to oscillate uncontrollably between what it still did mean legally and the always other possibility that it meant something different, something that inhabited the legal name as its own fundamental alterity. Behiç Aşçı switched back and forth between disclaiming his connections with DHKP-C and fully embracing them. It was never clear whether he was speaking as a singular “I” dying in the name of humanity or a communal “I” sacrificing himself for the protection of the “we”.

The public prosecutor had filed a lawsuit against him alleging that he was a member of the outlawed organization DHKP-C on account of his act. There is presently no law banning the practice of death fasting outside the prison. The syllogistic reasoning of the prosecutor, he explained, went more or less like this: Death fasting is the act of the outlawed organization; He is performing this act; Then he must belong to the outlawed organization. He was not punished for his infraction of the law, but rather for his association with a social group that was considered to constitute a risk to the order of the state.  

Behiç Aşçı’s account of the criminalization of Marxist militancy and its extra-legal elimination testifies to the ontologization of criminality that Michel Foucault (2000: 198-199) exposes in the emergence of the figure of the “dangerous individual” at the turn of the twentieth century. Dangerous individuals are not punished for what they have done but for who they are and, being the persons they are, for what they will have done in the future. It would be no exaggeration to say that any “I” of speech, because it is ultimately

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158 The fear of being taken for someone else that James Siegel (1997: 185) describes as the precarious condition of sociality in revolutionary times was an affect that overwhelmed me on a daily basis in the course of my field research. I was reminded by the insinuating remarks of my interlocutors that I could be taken into custody simply for talking to them. To be in relation with them—even at such a preliminary level—was a risk to be heeded; and yet, at the same time, such risk taking constituted the basis of any possible intimacy between us.
an uncontrollable source of speech, can devolve into a dangerous individual in Turkey where, as I have argued, the national “we” is impossibly (de)constituted in the voiding of the existence of “I.” The split nature of political ontology in Turkey necessitates the constant policing of the gap between the official “I” and the “I” of speech. The publicly declared dangerous individuals, then, with the generalized policing that they authorize, constitute, as Foucault has argued (1977: 281), a means of perpetual surveillance of the entire population. Such generalized policing of the population does need to be written into law and thus redoubles the illegibility of the political order.

Behiç Aşçı told of the policemen who had been repeatedly acquitted of all charges in the killing of his defendants in every single State Security Court despite their admission of guilt and evidence. He counted his numerous filings of complaints, criminal charges, and lawsuits against abuses in prisons which were almost always dismissed by prosecutors. He continued to speak indignantly, trying to take control of such illegibility by attaching it to a single source of decision-making. “It is said that tecrit (isolation) is a state policy. And you cannot fight state policy in Turkey. It has been always said that there was a master plan behind the prisons and that the implementation in the prisons abided by this master plan. But neither the Istanbul Bar nor we can get a hold of this master plan despite the fact they have asked for it in official writing. In other words, there exists a law which we neither know nor see and our filings of criminal charges are dismissed according to this law.” Almost powerlessly he lowered himself deeper into the sofa. I offered him the glass of water on the coffee-table; but despite his

159 Heirs to the infamous martial law courts, the State Security Courts had a three-member judiciary panel comprised of a military officer and two civilian judges. Having started to operate in May 1984, they came to handle cases dealing with terrorism, gang-related crimes, drug smuggling, and membership in illegal organizations with the passing of the Anti-Terror Law in 1991.
paleness and even the trembling of his hands, he declined it and continued to speak. “In appearance, there is a law; but there is also another law in effect which cannot be seen by anyone. The written laws deceive the people. It writes of our freedoms and rights. The unwritten law abolishes all of our rights one by one.”

Rights, he was saying, cannot be taken for granted in a political context wherein the applicability of legal entitlements and protections are nullified by the force of such “unwritten laws.” The objective of the death fast was therefore to expand the terrain of struggle for rights by creating a “ground” for the coming into visibility and simultaneously into speech of the prison conflict and thereby for its eventual resolution: “The death fast cannot achieve anything by itself alone. The aim of the death fast is to create a ground. It is to bring out a problem into the open and to create a ground for its resolution.” In his account, the death fast disclosed the commonly unrecognized violence of cellular incarceration which redoubled its violence in the denial of violence by an other violence which inscribed itself into the space of law. From this perspective, the death fast was a violent act of inscription (Derrida 1974: 112) bringing the ghostly realm in the dark into the daylight of speech in a political order where the law of law was forever to keep the two realms intact and yet separate from each other.

We sat for a few minutes in complete silence as the nonchalance of this moribund man’s intellection lingered with me. It suddenly compelled me to remind him of the event that he had come to witness at the state’s forensics center. In an earlier interview with

160 In *Discipline and Punish* (1977: 222-223), Foucault entertains the suggestion that “the disciplines constitute nothing more than an infra-law,” only to reject the notion and argue that they should be regarded as a “counter-law,” in that they do not simply extend the forms defined by laws into the micro-level but actually undermine the formal and juridical liberties. However, the mechanism of power does not operate here to produce normalization and goes awry in the attempt of doing so, but rather thrives on its lack thereof.
him published in DHKP-C’s paralegal weekly, I had read that he had resolved to go on
the death fast after witnessing this event. In the wake of the prison operation, he had
accompanied the families of two dead prisoners to the morgue of the state’s forensics
center to claim the bodies of their dead children. Both of the bodies were severely burnt
to such a degree that the families were unable to identify their own children. Finally, each
family decided to claim any one of the bodies. In the interview he had reported their
exchange in these words: “You take one and we take the other. In any case, aren’t both of
them our children?”161 The violence of the state was such that it destroyed difference. It
even dissolved the radical heterogeneity of the dead. This process of dematerialization
which resulted in their absolute substitutability nonetheless generated something else and
something more. For the families opened up the possibility of another sociality in the
name of which their children had given their lives, a sociality that invested in an
anonymous subjectivity, despite and because of its violent erasure. Yet this possibility
itself was foreclosed when pure substitution opened onto pure identification on the basis
of a thinking of community as communion in death. In the same interview, Behiç Aşçı
was also reported to say that he had carried 122 coffins and that he had to pay his “debts
of conscience” (vicdan borcu) to these fallen death fasters. I came close to being
sacrilegious when I asked him whether it was the ethical significance of these deaths that
had kept alive the resistance for the past seven years above and beyond the viability of its
political calculus. He listened and answered in a weary and displeased voice: “Debt of
conscience is intertwined with politics. It is impossible to separate these from each other.
If you did not have political consciousness, you would not be able to experience the
feeling of indebtedness. I can say that a person cannot go on the death fast simply for

161 Yürüş, “Vahşeti Gördü Gözleri,” (“His Eyes Saw the Brutality”), December 24, 2006, no. 84.
debt of conscience, cannot do it, cannot risk his life. To put at stake his life, he must have political consciousness. But as he continues the action with his political consciousness, at the same time he naturally settles accounts in his conscience.” What emerges here is yet another narrative of the hierarchy between political class consciousness and affective attachment. But something else also becomes evident, and that is the degree to which this form of politics operates entwined with and sometimes indistinguishable from ethical obligation.

We had talked for a long time, more than an hour, and he was still in the same torpor; not a muscle in his face moved, not the slightest movement appeared in his body. Finally, there came the quiet, deep sound of the big wall clock striking once. With a certain uneasiness he turned his head to look at the face of the clock, but at almost the same moment the door, giving onto the living room, opened, and a group of boisterous people appeared with bouquets of flowers. The newcomers streamed in joyously through the living room door and soon they all settled themselves into the chairs in the room as though they had never risen. The old lady who talked in a Black Sea accent hugged me and only then inquired about my identity. When the lean woman diagonally opposite, Z., overheard our conversation, she excitedly invited me to TAYAD and gave me the address and the phone number to make an appointment.

Though there was nothing out of the ordinary at first sight, one thing struck me particularly, and confirmed my perturbing intuition. As I looked at the young women and men in uniforms intermingling with persons of casual attire, the dinner table decorated with flowers reclining against a wall with political posters, and public visitors conversing with the members of an extended family coalescing around its “sick” kin, I became
conscious of the inconspicuous blending of the intimacy of a domestic space with the anonymity of a political stage in this room. The state of anomalous ordinariness associated with sickness that reigns in the practice of death fasting practically compelled home visitations. Yet these visitations were not simply understood as a sign of political alliance but also as a promise of social identification with them. In fact, they bespoke a complicity of interpellation as they were an attempted enfolding of any visitor by means of addressing these others as if they were already part of the group, sharing stated premises, goals, and social attitudes. The hosts imputed to the visitors a desire for intimate association. In doing so, as Michael Meeker (1997) has perceptively argued, they recognized the existence of a mass society of anonymous others, but they understood it in terms of personal, face-to-face relations.

Another way of saying this is that the political subjectivity that had emerged in the socialist movement in Turkey in mid-1960s had acquired a clandestine character with the violent coup d’état on September 12, 1980 and had thus ceased being relational for a long time. Its clandestine character was no doubt a necessary dimension of political action and survival under the brutal military regime, but at the same time, it paradoxically meant the withdrawal of the socialist militants from the streets and their gradual isolation from society. In the words of the Turkish socialist cultural critic Sezai Sarıoğlu, the organization had transformed itself into a “home” for the militants.162 This domestication of political organizations became all the more acute with their disengagement from the general field of politics and concomitant devalorization of forms of action practiced therein. Consequently, they appeared to function as a secret counter-society with its

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unknown chiefs, rules, principles of obedience, forms of conduct and private language. The question to be asked, then, is: How does the experiencing of the political universal as a familiar particular introduce another economy, another relationality that does not enter into, or at least deflects part of itself outside of and away from the economy of violence? That is to say, how is the question of political sovereignty reconciled with ethical responsibility? To answer such questions requires that one listens to the narratives of self-sacrifice (fedā) within which the members of this organization negotiate political commitment and ethical responsibility to the familial other as each other’s shadow.

There are two different words standing for sacrifice in Turkish, both of which are turkicizations from the Arabic: kurban and fedā. Kurban goes back to the Hebrew korban which “expresses the idea of “approach” or “bringing near,” possibly to the altar” (Robbins 1998: 286). In Turkish, it has the connotation of lack of consent on the part of the sacrificial victim. Fedā, on the other hand, refers to a sacrifice of the self that is willed and desired. It is a turkicized form of the Arabic word fida’ which means “redemption, repurchase, ransom.”

Fida’i, derivative of the former, is a figure of devotion. It is a name used of special devotees in religious and political groups who offer up their lives to save the rest of the community. Its cognate in Persian, fedā’i (plural fedā’iyan) is closely associated with martyrs who died fighting at the Battle of Karbala (Abrahamian 1988:4). The DHKP-C militants are however inspired by the contemporary

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163 According to the Encyclopaedia of Islam (2008: Vol. XII, 306), fida refers particularly to the liberation of Muslim captives in Christian territories by ransom.

164 Among the Isma’ilis it was used of those members who risked their lives to assassinate the enemies of the sect, and thus is derived their name as Assassins in the Western tradition (Hodgson 1955; Laqueur 1978).
Palestinian guerrilla fighters. They see themselves as fighting an analogous war of liberation in a country under the occupation of imperialist powers.\textsuperscript{165}

DHKP-C’s use of the word *feda* encompasses a range of insurgent forms of self-sacrifice such as self-starvation, self-burning and suicide bombing. Nonetheless, the word is often used to refer to the latter two forms with the idiomatic expression *feda eylemi* (feda action). This idiomatic expression functions to mark DHKP-C’s difference from the rest of the leftist organizations which refuse to employ these latter two means of resistance. It also appears to found a new tradition of Marxist militancy distinguished by its absolute commitment since the latter two forms completely rule out the possibility of survival, unlike the death fast.\textsuperscript{166} In its semantics, we need to take notice of fidelity as much as (if not even more than) of belief. What the word *feda* bears witness to is the fateful inseparability of total devotion to one’s comrades from total commitment to one’s cause.

II.

After circumambulating twice the building located a few blocks from Behiç Aşçı’s apartment on a Sunday afternoon, I finally rang the bell of TAYAD in anxiety. A window opened on the fourth floor and an old woman with a white head covering peeked out. “Who are you?” she asked. I offered my name and muttered diffidently that I had made an appointment with M. on the phone the day before. She went inside and about a

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\textsuperscript{165} Nasser Abufarha (2009: 70) makes a distinction between ‘amaliyyat istishhadiyya (martyrdom operations) and ‘amaliyat fidai’ya (self-sacrifice operations), a term used earlier in Palestinian resistance discourse to refer to operations where the undertaker had little or no chance of returning, making the execution of the mission a commitment to self-sacrifice. The former term “istişhadi”, on the other hand, is a newly coined one by Hamas, endowing the earlier term “fida’i” with religious qualities. In line with the earlier term, DHKP-C’s use of the term is strictly non-Islamic.

\textsuperscript{166} I say “appear” because the Kurdish separatist movement has been employing these means of resistance since the early 1990s. DHKP-C could however be considered the first leftist organization in Turkey to make use of these tactics notwithstanding the Marxist components of the Kurdish guerrilla struggle.
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minute later she threw down the key for me to open the heavy iron door. It was my second time at the Solidarity Association for the Families of Prisoners and my eyes searched for the few faces that I had gotten to know a couple of days ago. TAYAD represents solely the families of the outlawed leftist group DHKP-C (Revolutionary People’s Liberation Party-Front). It works to publicize the grievances of prisoners, conducting various campaigns to solicit the attention and support of the general public to the cause of the prisoners. It organized an important part of the civil movement outside the prisons in order to support the struggle within the prisons by pressuring the public to take action.

During my first visit, M., who appeared to be in charge of the organization, had informed me about tecrit (isolation) ending with the showing of a gory documentary with long pannings of disfigured and burnt bodies in the morgue accompanied with the sounds of a dissonant electronic music. She had severe burn marks on her face, arms and legs herself. As I gazed attentively at the burnt bodies resembling tree trunks, I straightaway felt Z.’s eyes upon me, turned, and looked away so quickly that she smiled, pointed at one of the unidentifiable figures as her comrade and, with a vaguely mocking look on her face, told me that they themselves had filmed the scenes in the morgue as evidence against the brutal operation in the prisons code-named “Return to Life.” The encounter was gripping at the moment and even more afterwards—for only in retrospect was I clear as to what had actually happened. Z. was not simply insinuating that I could have been in their place. Rather, she was asking me to see through their loss and take notice of another sacrifice, one which was unmarked. It was a matter of the most silent, inner sacrifice. Z. wanted me to be impressed by their self-control as they sacrificed themselves to the
severe duty of documenting their loss. Did I have the subtlety to comprehend that proving one’s loss meant delaying mourning and putting it off indefinitely? That was the secret relation I was compelled to see between the two kinds of self-sacrifice.

What was more, they had to prove the violent deaths of their comrades, for which, they were held responsible by the judicial system. M. had looked me straight in the face and had declared in amazement that they were being summoned to the court for public cases on the deaths of their comrades on charges of “encouraging and assisting suicide.” One could witness the death of others and bear witness to it, but there was one thing that was impossible: one could not bear witness to one’s own death and to one’s own incapacity of bearing witness. This was a paradox, and the paradox redoubled itself, because it was also true that in order to be able to remember and to describe, to recount and to record, what happened to them, survivors needed to describe everything as though it were slightly external, as though they had been only witnessing—witnessing the sufferings and deaths of others. If they had done more than only witnessing, with the very thin line between witnessing and bearing witness, they would not have survived. The state officials not only held them accountable for bearing witness to the deaths of their comrades, but they also capitalized on the ineluctable shame of survivors and forced them into complicity with the brutality of the state’s violence.

To my dismay, I was told that M. and Z. had just returned from the weekly demonstration in Sultanahmet Square and were presently in a meeting. Every Sunday, TAYAD reads testimonial letters from the political prisoners in maximum security

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prisons. They appeal to pedestrians with words involving both imprecation and reproach: “They died for their people. What did you do for them?”; “Tecrit continues to kill, will you remain silent?” Theirs is a cry for help, addressed not to anyone in particular, but to the passersby as anyone---anyone can help. Death should have a dispropriating effect on the one who must respond. Yet they are appalled when no one is overtaken and is made to respond. TAYAD’s branch in the capital has been meeting under the allegorical monument of hand in Abdi Ipekci Park for the past 1150 days. One cannot really tell whether the hand opened towards the other is making an offering or praying for a miracle. Maybe they are doing both: the first act in public, the second in secret.

Amidst running children, I waited for M. and Z. drinking tea and watching the group of men in the middle of the large living room commenting favorably on the fierce woman on the television screen. I suddenly became aware of their desire for self recording. It rendered the members of this community capable of appearing to themselves, I thought. Yet, it was not their losses but their violent encounters with the authorities that enabled them to irrupt into public view. As I was captured by the contrast between the composed figure of the captain of the policemen and her frenzied manners that the intimacy of their contact at the border between the demonstrators and special police teams brought out, she entered the room with some young men who were coming to have dinner from Behiç Aşçı’s house a couple of blocks down the street. The dark, green-eyed, petite lady was B. Z. and M. dashed out from one of the four rooms in the interior of the apartment and introduced me to her. I hurriedly inquired about mothers that I had requested to meet in our first meeting. Z. answered curtly that B. was one. She was the widow of a rural guerrilla who had died six years ago in a clash with the security
forces. Both of her sons were serving time in prison with the charge of membership in DHKP-C. Her elder one, T., was suffering from psychosis under solitary confinement. They made me hasten to the study past the rooms in which I could only spot a row of bunk beds. On the table, in the middle of the study, the tea pot was boiling and there stood a full but untouched and forgotten glass of tea. T. was dawdling around the table and going into all corners of the room, not conscious of his movements. He had been released from the Kandıra F-type prison three weeks ago. He seized me at once by the hand and said ardently, “Welcome, sister (abla).”

I soon saw the wall covered with the pictures of the fallen death fasters. One hundred and twenty two passport size portrait photographs were collaged together into a poster. While the individual frames of the portrait photographs brought out the singularity of the dead, the encompassing rectangular frame of the poster appeared to bound the multiplicity of the dead into an individuated holistic form not unlike the cells of a prison. Slightly underneath this poster was stretched a canvas banner with the words of their latest slogan: “To the End, To Eternity, To the Last.” On the adjacent wall hung a widely circulated photograph of Sevgi Erdoğan, one of the iconic figures of the movement whose funeral had brought together thousands of people. The photograph heightened and accentuated her physical parts. The corporealization, so to speak, of all her being as an effect of hunger hollowed her living presence but at the same time enveloped her with a spectral power captured by the slogan underneath it: “Long Live the Death Fast Resistance.” Next to her photograph was a placard quoting the last words of a 1996 death faster, Berdan Kerimgiller, who, I was told, had stood out among others for reciting the
epic of Şeyh Bedrettin in his unconscious state\textsuperscript{168}. "The future of mankind is incredibly open. We have all the possibilities." With the gaze of the dead fixed upon us began a conversation in which specters and revenants intertwined inextricably with omens and portents to form the knot of the present.

“We are resisting for the right to resistance,” Z. said with a faith holy and steadfast. Such an abstraction of their ends in the sixth year of their resistance means to mark the limit of power relations and bring to the fore the recalcitrance of the revolutionary will which constitutes a permanent limit to the exercise of power that tends to (impossible) fulfillment and thus, Foucault would say (2000: 347), suspend itself in reducing its adversary to total impotence, thereby becoming mere violence. “We will continue with our resistance until our very last man. I could be the only remaining one, but I would never surrender, even unto death,” she continued switching from the first person plural to the first person singular as if there was hardly any difference between the two. Faced with the intransigence of the revolutionary will on which it has no purchase, which it has no power to win back, the state re-constitutes itself only by becoming the violence of the negative. The response to the state’s denial and negation of alterity takes the form of absolute negation of the revolutionary self, and thus redoubles the state’s gesture of projecting nothingness onto the other. Difference from the state is thought to

\textsuperscript{168} Şeyh Bedrettin (1359-1420) was a charismatic preacher who led one of the greatest peasant revolts against the Ottoman Sultan in 1416 in the Aegean coastal region of Anatolia. Bedrettin and his companions, Torlak Kemal and Börklüce Mustafa, precipitated an insurrection among the poor peasantry of Karaburun suffering enormously from high taxes during a period of political unrest as a result of the fratricides after the Battle of Ankara (1412). Bedrettin induced the peasants not to pay their taxes and share the land equally among them. After a series of initial victories, Bedrettin had to withdraw on the Karaburun peninsula with his 10,000 men who were slaughtered by the sultan’s army. Börklüce Mustafa was immediately crucified while Şeyh Bedrettin was taken to the city of Serez where he was hung. The leftist culture in Turkey likens Şeyh Bedrettin to Muenzer and other revolutionary theologians. Owing to the Turkish communist poet, Nazım Hikmet’s epic poem on the same figure, one of his alleged sayings is widely quoted: “Share all you have apart from the lips of your beloved.”
be reinstated in the absolute negation of the revolutionary self. The opposite of victory is not defeat but total submission to the state. Total self-annihilation, then, becomes a form of victory.

This had been their claim and they had proved their claim that they would never surrender even unto death by their 122 martyrs. “We said we would refuse to surrender unto death and we are doing it,” she said with great emotion pointing at the photographs of the fallen death fasters. One speaks here as if one’s words are divided into two by a temporal interval like in a promise. One speaks in the present but one enacts one’s words at some time in the future. They become one’s proper words, so to speak, only after their enactment in the future. Words are essentially falsifiable, that is they threaten to become lies, unless they are brought into action by their speaker. The truth of one’s words is then decided only in and by their enactment.169

The one who sincerely promises, Nietzsche says in the second essay of the Genealogy of Morals (1998: 35-36), wields the power of the sovereign to enact what he says, to bring into being what he wills. The promising being, one who is able to discharge words into deeds, produces an “I” which stands for itself across time.170 The “I” appears however to be sovereign in its absence here. Or rather appears to be sovereign in its half-presence as a corpse which stands as the proof of the return of the “I” to itself as one and

169 Since Austin (1962), we know that performatives, unlike constatives, are never true or false. Following Paul de Man’s argument in “Promises” (1974), an essay on Rousseau’s Social Contract, I would like to emphasize however the logic of sovereignty here which finds its ground in the triumph over the temporal disjuncture between the constatives and performatives. One authenticates one’s claim in action and differentiates itself from other claimants by the differences in the capacity to do so. Truth of sovereignty itself is based on the felicitous performance of such actions.

170 Here I also want to acknowledge the influence of Jacques Derrida’s Rogues (2005) and Samuel Weber’s essay “Rogue Democracy and the Hidden God” (2006) in conceiving the ontological structure of sovereignty as “ipseity.”
the same, be that in death.\footnote{One of the heroic deeds of DHKP-C militants often told is their fighting onto death with the police forces. A much glorified incident is one of the leading cadres and her cell’s writing of their last words in their own blood on the walls of the cell house discovered by the police forces. This is a telling gesture which discloses their desire to mark metonymically their presence even in their absence that the writing of words necessarily entails. See the pamphlet “Ellerimizde Silahlarmız, Dilimizde Sloganlarımızla Kucaklyoruz Ölümü,” (With Our Guns in Our Hands and Our Slogans in Our Tongues do We Welcome Death), n.d.} But the “I,” as support of power, cannot say “I” in death and, as Blanchot writes (1981), dissolves into the impersonal, anonymous “one”.

For families, close relatives, and inhabitants of Küçükkarmutlu, the corpse remains an “I” within the hold of affective attachments. Yet, it at the same time stays behind as a proper name having a universal signification. The death fasters had already pronounced themselves (half)-dead at the moment of their decision, but had continued to speak for hundreds of days before death came to find them. The declarative statement “I’m (half)-dead” did not partake of the extraordinary as death became quite banally a part of everyday life. In these close circles of identification, the interlocutors of the fasters were not only at a loss with words, but were also unable to eat any food. In the face of a speaking death which literally choked them, the only way they could have continued on with their everyday life and, at the same time could have engaged with this half-corpse was to talk to this “I” as if it were immortal. The “I” would be immortal not simply because it would continue to live in their memory but also because it was a proper name that would survive its bearer in (world) history. They had to constantly make the move from relating to the fasters as intimate others to seeing them as the sensory appearances of universal ideas. Such a conflicted relation to the death fasters was necessary for the continuation of sociality in a community which was compelled to identify with this death with an intimate face. One could not otherwise watch a loved person dying, take care of her or him over a period of hundreds of days, and most importantly, restrain oneself from...
interrupting his or her death when it is in one’s power to do so. In a community wherein only death speaks, how else can one make a distinction between oneself and a murderer? I am presently interested in the (mis)figuration of the relation of the corpse to the anonymous others, but I will return to this issue of identification with a speaking death inside the close circles of identification later in the chapter. I invoke the latter aspect here to make a note of the fact that what makes the continuation of the social possible in the close circles of identification is precisely that which constitutes the fundamental paradox in the figuring of the corpse’s relation to the national society of anonymous others. How is it that the most particular is also expected to be recognized as the most general? And what are the consequences of doing so?

In effect, the death fasters were already dead to themselves even before they undertook the death fast. When others looked at them, they did not necessarily see a person. They rather saw thoughts. To understand their thoughts was to have seen them. The death fasters were personifications of universal thoughts, pure abstractions such as freedom, justice, and equality, and communism as their absolute, irreducible condition. What Blanchot (1981: 39) writes of the French revolutionaries in the Reign of Terror is pertinent to the Marxist militants as well: “The Terrorists are those who desire absolute freedom and are fully conscious that this constitutes a desire for their own death, they are conscious of the freedom they affirm, as they are conscious of their death which they

172 In Kojève’s reading of Hegel, such a synthesis of the particular and universal constitutes the end of history when “the strictly particular, personal, individual value of each is recognized as such, in its very particularity, by all, by Universality incarnated in the State as such; and in which the universal value of the State is recognized and realized by the Particular as such, by all the Particulars” (1980: 58). The Marxist militants misrecognize themselves as syntheses of the particular and the universal precisely because the political universal is experienced as a familial particular. In truth, the Party can impersonate the political universal either by borrowing from the future when it will have been recognized by all the particulars or by synecdochally expressing the will of the people which is itself an improper but generic naming of universality.
realize, and consequently they behave during their lifetimes not like people living among other living people, but like beings deprived of being, like universal thoughts, pure abstractions beyond history, judging and deciding in the name of all of history.” In other words, the “I” had to be devoid of any individuality or specificity. It had to be as general as it could be, so much so that it could be called a purely (or merely) grammatical subject. It was an “I” which, by definition, could not say “I.”

In actual fact, the Marxist militants hardly use the first person singular in their speech, as if they know that the “I” of speech is bound to conflict with the generality, the pure grammaticality, of this “I.” Instead, they prefer to use the first person plural as if the “I” were “We” and the “We” were “I.” Émile Benveniste explains the displacement of the first person singular by the first person plural in these words: “The reason for this is that “We” is not a quantified or multiplied “I”; it is an “I” expanded beyond the strict limits of the person, enlarged and at the same time amorphous” (1997: 203). This expanded “I” can never be a true plural, however, because its extension always has a limit. As Benveniste concludes: “Only ‘the third person,’ being a non-person, admits of a true plural” (1997: 204). The limited generality of the “We” is confounded here with the anonymity of the third person plural owing to the certitude about the abstract generality of an “I” that has become universal thought. Universality is of course not the same thing as plurality. Unlike the third person plural which stands for the infinite alterity of anonymity, pure concept can never be as plural as the third person plural since it dissolves the pre-conceptual singularity of beings in the total generality of meaning. But the disjunction between the two perspectives is compounded when these thoughts

173 For the paradoxical status of the allegorical “I,” see Paul de Man’s “Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s Aesthetics”, Critical Inquiry 8 (Summer 1982), p. 775.
themselves appear to lose their value of universality and the communal “I” is threatened ever more with remaining a mere “I”. Such a widening gap between the communal “I” and the anonymous other is thought to be bridged in addressing the latter as an always already known other. In other words, there is a persistent desire to transpose the relationship to the anonymous other into an extended face-to-face relationship. The uncustumary exposure of the face in the public funerals drives away the incipient impersonality asking the people to relate to the corpse as an intimate other and to recognize the “I” in the “We”. The short biographies which detail the name, date and place of birth, and ethnicity of the fallen death fasters (and other DHKP-C militants) in their obituaries has a similar function in that it compels the anonymous readers—after all some among them must have been born in the same local town or belonged to the same ethnicity—to recognize the dead person as one of their own. Here is an example: “Şefinur Tezgel was born in 1971 in Tokat, Armutalan village. She came from a poor family of Alevi. She was a nurse and worked to organize other health workers. She was arrested and imprisoned at the funeral of a guerrilla who had been martyred in Tunceli. She joined the first death fast team in Çanakkale Prison and set herself on fire on the day of the attack in the prisons. When her body was found, she was still making the victory sign.”

National communities, Benedict Anderson (1998: 55-56) emphasizes, make sure that the “unknown soldier” remains unknown—that is unidentifiable as a particular person. Instead of an empty signifier—like the legal “I” which lacks any material inside in its formality—that may be affectively invested by everyone, each fallen militant in this case is a particular person who demands to be recognized by and for his/her familiarity. In her last speech before she set herself on fire on December 28, 2004, Sergül Albayrak
addresses the people in the second person plural and asks this anonymous addressee to identify her as one of them and thereby recognize her act as a sacrifice for them: “You, all the peoples of my homeland, you should know that this force is coming out of you. It is you who create this force. Embrace that which belongs to you; don’t give it up to the enemy. We are burning for you. Bury our ashes in our homeland. Look at the world which will be born from our ashes.” There is confusion in the limits of the “we” here. One cannot tell whether it designates the communal “we” or the national “we.” The sacrificial act marks the moment of their possible (mis)identification and the corpse carries forth this intimate voice into the future as a sign that continues to call the anonymous others to action.

This anthropomorphic metaphor of a speaking sign endowed with a voice might seem misleading.¹⁷⁴ From the perspective of my interlocutors, however, the corpse of the Marxist militant was both a universal sign and a familiar face. If there was a transparent sign, so to speak, it “was” the corpse. At the same time, the corpse was imagined to have the intimate voice of an absent but familiar person with whom one continued to speak as if it could respond beyond the border between life and death. Transported by that corpse, they could not understand why the others did not hear the message of the corpse which was supposed to be absolutely translatable. This impossible configuration of the corpse as both a universal sign and an intimate voice was thought to be possible by the mere facticity of death.

“People are dying day by day minute by minute. The people of this country should be starting movements which would shake the entire world. It is a great

¹⁷⁴ For this figure of speech called prosopopeia, see Paul de Man’s “Autobiography as De-Facement” in Rhetoric of Romanticism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 64-81
contradiction that there is no response,” T. interjected almost beside himself. The mere facticity of the corpse—that there is a corpse—calls “the people” into being in the hyperbolic expectation that “the people” that the corpse made possible will eventually catch up with this projection. “Right now we do not have a people fighting next to us. But we believe that this accumulation (birikim) will make the people fight,” Z. continued prophetically. “The accumulation?” I interrupted. “122 deaths,” she answered my question, referring to a deposit, a precipitate, a heap of corpses. They were astonished that the society at large did not respond to this heap of corpses which called upon it.

“What makes you think that the deaths will precipitate the coming into being of a collective revolutionary agency?” I inquired. “The slightest exceeding of the limit (sinır aşma) might be sufficient to pour the people into the streets,” T. said, restraining himself with difficulty. M. completed his sentence, “They are trying to destroy the force which can create that mobility. We are that force.”

The imagined effectivity of the corpse relies upon a conflation of personal sovereignty with political sovereignty that finds its ground in the imputation of a desire to others for identification with a source of force that manifests itself in the audacious acts of the militants. T. and M. were putting Mahir Çayan’s theory of revolutionary violence into words.

DHKP-C claims to be the only “true” heir to THKP-C (People’s Liberation Party-Front of Turkey)—the legendary guerrilla organization of the early 1970s. Captivated by Guevarist ideas of guerrilla warfare, Mahir Çayan, the principal ideologue of the organization, worked out his own theory of revolutionary war called Politicized Military War Strategy (Politiklemeşmiş Askeri Savaş Stratejisi) in his famous series of pamphlets
“Uninterrupted Revolution I-II-III” (Kesintisiz Devrim I-II-III) published in April 1971 as a book. Politicized Military War is a specific form of people’s war to be waged in countries of belated capitalist development under the economic domination of neo-colonialist powers such as the United States. In colonial and semi-colonial countries such as China and Vietnam, overt foreign invasion coupled with a feudal system characterized by weak central authority had provided the objective conditions for building up a popular army in the rural areas which eventually had the strength to encircle and capture cities, and finally to seize power in the entire country. Çayan claimed that foreign occupation had nevertheless become covert with the enforcement of capitalist relations of production by the local ruling classes dependent on foreign capital and propped up by its military forces. The greater centralization of government, concurrent increase in transportation and communication networks across a national territory united by a market economy, and the growing importance of cities and working classes had created an “artificial balance” (suni denge) between the oligarchic regime and popular forces ruling out a classic people’s war formulated by Mao Tse-tung. Çayan argued that the general uprising had to be sparked off by organized and well prepared military operations by a revolutionary vanguard during the course of which the masses of the people would be drawn in and armed as in Cuba. At the same time, drawing on the lessons of Che’s failure in Bolivia, Çayan wrote: “The doctrine that the masses will, in some spontaneous way, respond to an


177 As Che wrote: “… the essence of guerrilla warfare is the miracle by which a small nucleus of men—looking beyond their immediate tactical objective—becomes the vanguard of a mass movement, achieving its ideals, establishing a new society, ending the ways of the old and winning social justice.” See Che Guevara, Guerrilla Warfare, p. 114.
insurrectionary center—a military foco—needs serious reexamination.” He distinguished his understanding of the vanguard war from that of THKO (People’s Liberation Army of Turkey), which he associated with Régis Debray’s foco theory.\footnote{\textit{Çayan, Kesintisiz Devrim,} p. 325.} According to Çayan, Debray tended to proceed from the proposition that the most important form of propaganda was military action to a conclusion that in most of Latin America the creation of military skilled guerrilla foci was sufficient to bring about favorable conditions for an eventual people’s military victory. Thus, he underrated the vital connection between the vanguard war (which in its early stages must of necessity be of a limited magnitude) and other forms of militant mass activity. In contrast to Debray, in other words, Çayan appeared to emphasize the need for a political leadership as much as for a military one and the need for the political mobilization of the masses. However, Çayan too could fall easily into Debrayist formulations. In order to disrupt the false equilibrium and to force oligarchic regimes to reveal their true character as dictatorships of violence, he argued, a revolutionary vanguard had to perform a series of successful armed actions which would display a surplus force as a counter pole of attraction for the people: \footnote{\textit{Çayan, Kesintisiz Devrim,} p. 318.}

\begin{quote}...
\end{quote}

\footnote{Debray worked out this theory in his famous \textit{Revolution in the Revolution?}, trans. Bobbye Ortiz (New York: Groove Press, 1967). After his release from his imprisonment in Bolivia, Debray published a re-evaluation of \textit{Revolution in the Revolution} which essentially disavowed his foco theory now dubbed as vanguard war. It might be for this reason that Çayan is making such an effort to distinguish his theory of vanguard war from that of Debray.}
with great curiosity and hesitation lacking faith in the armed revolutionary front. Upon the success of the guerrilla operations, the masses will see that the armed revolutionary front is a significant force—indestructible and everlasting. At that time, their sympathy will turn into trust. This is the second phase. This fact does not mean that the support of the majority of the people is gained. It is only when the guerrilla war becomes continuous and consistent that their trust will turn into support.

The impact of the guerrilla operations, he claimed, would be greater in a country like Turkey where the strong state tradition of the Ottoman Empire had persisted with the Kemalist single party regime into the 1950s. Unlike in Cuba, however, it was the urban areas which would become the main theater of guerrilla operations in the initial phase. Çayan had designated the urban areas as the desirable site for such spectacles of revolutionary violence because he believed that the earlier activities of university youth organization Dev-Genç (Revolutionary Youth) such as boycotts, university occupations and demonstrations against the U.S. Sixth Fleet had created favorable conditions for more violent forms of armed action. More notably, he anticipated that these acts of revolutionary violence would have been spectacularized by mass media, and in this way the force of that violence would have been extended in space and time through its dissemination. From this perspective, the manifestation of a surplus force in the stagings of violent acts in the urban areas would disclose the false invincibility of the state and thus transform the absolute war between the vanguards and the state into a totalized war with the participation of the proletariat and peasantry who, as witness-spectators, would be awed and thus swayed by such shows of counter-force: “The armed

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181 As Çayan rightfully noted, the national public had gained knowledge about the guerrilla operations of Maoist TIKKO (Workers’ and Peasants’ Liberation Army of Turkey) in the southeastern provinces a year and a half after the fact. He also admitted that they did not have the time to prepare for a rural guerrilla war. For the objective and subjective conditions for urban guerrilla war, see Çayan, Kesintisiz Devrim, pp. 345-6.
propaganda jolts the masses at first and gradually raises their consciousness. It shows that
the central authority is not as powerful as it appears to be and that its power above all else
relies on demagogy, clamor and intimidation.” The labor of transmission of revolutionary
theory and practice is overshadowed here by a transmission by enthrallment which is
imagined to translate itself—through repetition—into a hailing of the vanguard’s heroic
action. Revolutionary pedagogy is displaced by pure affectivity (affection by the audacity
(cüret) of the vanguard) which automatically creates the ability of the masses to
spontaneously recognize the vanguard as a new source of authority. The regular
recurrence of military victory acts fundamentally by itself and unleashes a politically
efficacious force. Yet the political efficacy of this force derives neither from the
legitimacy of its cause nor from the scale of its violence. It rather mobilizes by its power
of unmasking: an unmasking which reveals the groundlessness of the state’s power in the
violence which measures and makes the difference between different claims to
sovereignty.  

There is however a significant shift in the modality of revolutionary violence
between the early 1970s and the present. The spectacles of revolutionary force presently
happen to take the form of self-destructive negativity which is understood to be the one
and only way of binding a power that knows no limits in its use and degree of violence.
“The enemy is so reckless, so merciless,” Z. said. “But all types of weapons,
sophisticated military technologies are ultimately powerless before the human will.

182 The guerrilla operations of Çayan and his group consisted merely of bank robberies, hostage taking and
kidnapping of foreign experts and civil servants residing in Turkey. Having taken hostage two foreign
technicians to forestall the capital punishment of the military and political cadres of THKO (People’s
Liberation Army of Turkey) Deniz Gezmiş, Hüseyin İnan and Yusuf Arslan who had been caught earlier on
their way to an operation base for rural armed struggle, Çayan and his group were cornered in the Black
Sea village of Kızıldere and were brutally killed by the security forces on March 30, 1972. Ironically, it was
their crushing defeat, not their astounding victory that entranced the succeeding generations of militants.
Human will can defeat any force however powerful it is. Whatever it does, it cannot take away death from me. It is rendered inoperative in front of my death. The enemy is frightened,” she continued referring to the acts of self-immolation. “They cannot come face to face with us. They can only look at us from the tip of their water hoses and gun barrels,” M. said turning to me.\(^{183}\) The eye of power cannot gaze upon the revolutionary force without the necessary distance and armed mediation. This condition, were it to fail to respect, it would subsequently be exposed to its own destruction. The audacity of their acts is such that it has the capacity to intimidate and thus overcome sovereign power by going beyond the limit beyond which it is said not to reach: death.

In as much as the corpse is the material proof of self-sovereignty, it is also the sign of the power of Marxist ideology. This ideological power, however, does not originate from the contents of thoughts. Its power rather comes from its ability to magnetize wills which embrace it to the point of sacrificing themselves for its sake without reserve. “Günay,” went on Z. who had witnessed the thirty year old woman burning herself to death in Uşak prison on February 29, 2004, “was showing us how to step out of our proper self and put the ideological source in its place.” Günay had been in prison for 5 years, with six months left to her release, and on the death fast for 133 days. Z. demurred—yet continued anyhow, the rest of us listening with a certain suspense: “It was the power of that source, it was that will that embraced her body with the fire of feda.” Thus, the corpse is thought to be a tantalizing figure as well which provokes the onlookers into imagining themselves as the recipients of such excessive giving. The self-

\(^{183}\) The opposite is not true. DHKP-C militants proclaim that they will pursue, find, and persecute every single one of their murderers and torturers. They ensure that they will see through even those who go through aesthetic operations to hide their identity. If their acts blind those in power, their vision is penetratingly disclosing. See the pamphlet “Devrimci Sol,” n.d., p. 29.
sacrificial acts bring into view a different kind of power which is prepared to give itself up for the life and future of the people in strict opposition to a power that demands sacrifice from its subjects for its own self-preservation. This is a kind of power that dissipates itself in love for its subjects, and in doing so, creates a collective subject to which it is immanent.  

The agonistic exchange with the source of authority is, then, imagined to bind the people to an enduring economic relationship with the revolutionaries, shifting the signification of the sacrificial act (feda) from an unproductive expenditure (Bataille 1985) to a gift given in excess to the social that founds the new political community. It is as though for this second form of sacrifice to take place what has to be sacrificed is the pure sacrifice without reserve itself. The aneconomical understanding of sacrifice inevitably gets sublated by an economical understanding of sacrifice. Such an economy is based on the myth of pure giving without return. “Self-sacrifice is the highest dimension of sacrificiality. You cannot see the result of your action. You gain nothing. You are giving your self up for the people. For the future. This is at the same time your faith. You believe that it is going to happen whether you are there or not,” Z. said reassuringly about the future.

In actual fact, however, there is a strange oscillation between the aneconomical and the economical marking the community’s most extreme moment—of both possibility and impossibility. Said otherwise, sacrifice begins at the moment when sacrifice becomes a question. In her last speech before she set herself on fire in Gebze Prison on May 1, 2004, Selma Kubat testifies to this aporia of sacrifice: “My people! I love you so much as

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184 The DHKP-C militants understand their leader’s relation to them in the same idiom of sacrificial love.
to burn for you, turn into ashes. You are worth it. Listen to us; do not listen to those who say you are not worth anything. Happy days are not far away but are soon to come. Believe in us, trust us. I trust you, my people.”

To believe, Émile Benveniste (1961: 1971; quoted in de Certeau 1985) says, is to “give something away with the certainty of getting it back.” Michel de Certeau (1985: 195), on the other hand, underlines the temporality of this closed economy. “Believing,” he contends, “makes a communication practice out of the alterity of time (or of non-immediacy).” The temporality of belief is a temporality in excess of the present. It preempts the present from coinciding with itself and gives a future by inscribing the other within the self. De Certeau writes (1985: 201): “Belief, by means of a gift (or sacrifice) creates the empty space that installs the other, but that other must fill the void. It produces this ‘other’ presumed to insure against what it is losing. It is not surprising that belief should obey this dynamic circularity. Is this not the very structure of the lived present? This present is, in fact, what, by vanishing, constitutes the alterity of a future.” The “I” loses a part of itself in the present and expects to recover it in the future from the other as other and more than itself. As M. said: “Those who are only troubled by their lives proper perish, disappear one day;” and added immediately: “Those who sacrifice their lives [literally say life sacrifice] multiply towards new lives.” In this spirit, then, they contemplated and imagined their death, in the idiom of a sacrifice that multiplied rather than consumed; with crowds of people coming behind, as they took the final step looking forward, to their arriving from the future.

But, I am impelled to ask, again, what sort of sacrificial drive is this, which fails to draw any response from the other, and yet which stubbornly refuses to come to an end,

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and in so doing dissipates itself recklessly? This sacrificial drive derives its force of repetition from a twofold certitude. Sacrifice, in order to qualify as such, to make sense, must be recognized. So it proleptically projects its own recognition into the future as though time were always lagging behind itself and as though, in equal measure, it were always ahead of itself. The copula in the Party’s dictum—“The revolution is sacrifice and audacity”—calls the revolution into presence as an event which first occurs as something that has already occurred. The occurrence of the revolution is the extraordinary happening of that which has always already happened and nevertheless has yet to happen, and thus remains unforeseeable.\footnote{This temporalization of the revolution appears to be an eschatological version of Çayan’s “uninterrupted revolution” (kesintisiz devrim). He argued that a “revolutionary situation” was not necessary for a guerrilla or people’s revolutionary struggle to be waged successfully. In colonial and semi-colonial conditions, the commencement of armed activity did not have to be necessarily related to the moment in time when the question of the seizure of power was on the agenda. The society could be transformed with the deliberate creation of organized groups that embarked upon protracted armed revolutionary struggle. The vanguard was a political fighter, a member of an organized revolutionary force, who used the struggle itself, the vanguard war, as an instrument of agitation and mobilization. He aimed to raise the level of popular participation to the point at which revolutionary aims became general. In Çayan’s view, people’s war under neo-colonial conditions necessitated the indefinite prolongation of the vanguard war, which formed the preliminary stage of all people’s wars, rendering the revolution continuous: “The pacifists in our country claim that we are still in the stage of evolution and that the objective conditions for armed struggle do not exist. In countries under imperialist invasion, the two stages of evolution and revolution cannot be strictly separated from each other. In these types of countries, revolution is not a short but a long stage. \textit{It is practically impossible to determine where the stage of evolution ends and that of revolution begins. Rather, these stages are telescoped into each other}” (Çayan 1992: 300; emphasis mine).} Sacrifice points forward to the moment of recognition which is to come, which it anticipates as its decisive end and with respect to which it will have been a mere forerunner.

But, the revolution, the end of sacrifice, so to speak, depends on its very return. The return of sacrifice is the condition of both the impossibility and the possibility of recognition. Sacrifice is indeed destined to return, as though it hoped to fulfill and complete itself. It promises to repeat itself and to return until it finally accomplishes what it has promised. But there is no guarantee that another sacrifice will assume the legacy of
the promises made in a preceding one. The agent of recognition has changed in the passage from the one to the other, and together with it, so has the meaning and temporality of sacrifice. In deferring the fulfillment of the promise into the unforeseeable future, one encumbers the present with demands for payment, binding it in relation to the legacy of the past and the promise for the future. One gives too much time, if you will, to the anonymous other; and alas, too little time to one’s fellow comrades to respond.

I will return to Michel de Certeau one last time to question the source of this twofold certitude, a certitude with no ground which will bring into view a wholly different modality of sacrifice. According to de Certeau, the impossibility of grounding belief sets off a movement towards an (more upright) other of the other culminating in the figure of an absolute Other. But the very advent of this figure, fabricated as the only real guarantee against the fragility of the relation to the other, is itself an effect of the fidelity of others. Belief is in fact grounded in neither integrity nor truth but phantasmatically in number. “Belief of the other”, de Certeau argues, “is the postulate of belief in the other”: “It is because others (or many) believe that an individual can take his debtor to be faithful and trust him. A plurality guarantees the guarantor” (1986: 200).

I will repeat my question. If the proclaimed debtors, “the people,” refuse to respond to the sacrifice on their behalf, why does sacrifice still continue? Why does it not come to an end? In keeping with de Certeau’s logic, then, it must be continuing on because there must still be believers who are continuing to give on the strength of a guarantor. It could be said that the Party acts as the guarantor for the continuation of sacrifice. It assures the endurance of the resistance by surviving the sacrifices of its individual members. Yet the longevity of the Party itself depends upon the prestige and
desirability which reflects back on it from these individual sacrifices. The continuation of sacrifice relies then on the reciprocal relationship of trust between the Party and the sacrificial will. But this reciprocity of trust itself stands upon an ethics of comradeship (yoldaşlık) characterized by total devotion to one’s fellow comrades.\textsuperscript{187} Sacrifice, which guarantees the coming of the moment of recognition by continuously returning to itself, generates a new form of sacrificial economy. Beyond the Party and its leadership’s assurances, it is the fidelity of the intimate other that guarantees that one’s sacrifice will not have been in vain because it will have been repeated by a chain of others until the moment of victory.

B. who appeared to be endowed or perhaps afflicted with a heavy gift, which she bore in all humility, began to speak after listening patiently for some time to what the others had to say. Those words had been uttered clearly and fluently; these came rather hesitantly and brokenly. Yet they stood out all the more like a clear and sharp nucleus within a pale and misty envelope. From her half-utterances, her broken phrases, and bursts of scolding, I gathered that what I heard corresponded to their expectations. She was there to prove to me that their sacrifices were not for nothing.

B.’s son was placed in a three-person cell in May 2001 and his health had steadily deteriorated. He constantly heard voices. In the beginning, these voices uttered single words. Gradually, he started to talk to the voices as if they were with him in the cell. They were saying, “burn yourself, burn yourself, kill…” He could not bear to hear these voices that began to acquire faces. He was swearing, shouting, punching the walls, and hitting his head on the cell door. Locking himself up in the bathroom, he beat up the apparitions with the broom in order to make them disappear. One day he stayed in the

\textsuperscript{187} In Turkish, yoldaş literally means of the same path, yol.
bathroom crying for forty-five minutes. His eyes were blood red and his neck and chest were marked with his fingerprints for he had tried to choke himself. He went up the stairs muttering: “Dishonorable, despicable creatures, they are trying to kill us. They are telling me to set myself on fire. You go ahead and set yourself on fire, why should I set myself on fire? … Am I crazy? You are crazy.” He lost himself and attacked the glass window cutting himself. He was bleeding badly, but he refused to be treated in the prison infirmary. His cell mates calmed him down and he was discharged to Bakirkoy Psychiatry Hospital where he stayed for twenty days. He was brought back with a report stating that he had fully recovered. A few days after this return, he once again tumbled down into the world of the other to the point of attempting to set himself on fire twice.

B. ranted at the state for not releasing her son. She struggled for a year and a half just to have him transferred to a hospital. If he were on the death fast, she said, the prison administration would already have called the doctors on him for a medical intervention without even consulting the family. On the other hand, she added, death fasters who were “in good physical shape” were discharged by the state. She furiously remarked that those who did not continue their death fast outside the prison were “traitors” who were set free at the expanse of their comrades by making use of the so-called “gift” of the state.

B. was assured that the fasters were not dying in vain. They were dying so that new generations would not descend into madness in the F-type prisons. After all, she exclaimed, her son did recover and he recovered because of the devotion and patient care of his comrades. Such fidelity was on a par with motherly love. “My son says that he was able to stand on his feet because of his family and comrades. If I’m alive today, he says,
it is because of these two kinds of love.” Her son, she declared, derived his strength from the resistance of the fasters who were dying for the future of the people. “I tell everyone. Look at your loved ones before going to bed. Our children are dying for people whom they do not know in any way. Why does a young woman at the age of 22, in the best years of her life, set herself on fire? She also would have liked to live. But she chooses to die so that people will not fall into madness in isolation. She’s dying for you and me. For heaven’s sake, they will say no to injustice one day, won’t they? We’re not the only ones, are we?"

But when, “they,” the anonymous other does not respond, sacrifice becomes the fateful repetition and commemoration of the original sacrifice of the intimate other, your sacrifice for me and my sacrifice for you, “you and me” bounded within the sacrificial knot. Then, every sacrificial act comes to entrust itself as a deposit for safe-keeping into the hands of another which, when it follows, restores to life the specter in waiting, deposited in the preceding act, and is haunted and possessed by it. Sacrifice connects the next moment to the one before, attaching the past to the present. It obliges the future to account for the deposit with which it has been entrusted and to assume it with fidelity. It brings the future to pass, summoning it as of now, sooner than it would have wished, to the point where it becomes one with the present. Here there is both chance and danger: chance, because the repetition of sacrificial act is a way of making the other live on in the self; danger, because this appears to be the only way of doing so.

As Marcel Mauss (1964: 74) stated long ago, “sacrifice contains in itself the condition of its recurrence.” Here I argue that fidelity to the intimate other constitutes the unpresentable excess of the sacrificial machine that has in fact continued to uphold and
sustain it incessantly. And paradoxically, this excess comes into view when the sacrificial
machine suddenly breaks down. But that story cannot be heard here where the sacrificial
machine appears to function uninterruptedly. We need to go somewhere else to bear
witness to a life which chose not to repeat the sacrificial act.

III.

Ç. was managing a coffee shop on the third floor of one of the historic hans, Rumeli Han, flanking the İstiklal Caddesi in Beyoğlu.\textsuperscript{188} It takes a few cruises and
attentiveness of a peaceful mind to fall out of sync with the rhythm of this thoroughfare
to take notice of the art nouveau hans and the passageways whose facades and entrances
are usually covered up by the glitter of advertisements and palimpsest of political posters.
Whereas temporary visitors look for enchanting experiences in one of its havens on the
weekends, its permanent residents refer to it as an open prison.

Along with a series of highly publicized renewal projects had appeared the specter
of crime unsettling the euphoria of the new millennium. Pickpockets and glue-sniffers
had begun to descend into the thoroughfare from the poor neighborhoods bordering it on
each side as well as the far-off ones connected by the new subway line. In response, the
police forces, making a show of their force with their tanks at rest at the entrance to the
thoroughfare in Taksim Square, had displaced themselves into the mobile mass and were
roaming in groups of two or three with machine guns, forming a mirror image of the
gangs of thieves on the street.

As I joined the rest of the pedestrians who continuously ripped apart and sutured
back this main route with their steps, the words of the Turkish poet Küçük İskender

\textsuperscript{188} Han is a multi-story apartment building where wealthy non-Muslim Ottomans used to live. Each has a
proper name which refers to different parts of the world such as Rumeli Han, Afrika Han.
(2000) reverberated in my ears: “In Beyoğlu, everyone believes in the revolution as much as they believe in suicide because in Beyoğlu everyone has returned from their death sentence.”

An old album of the famous Turkish female singer Sezen Aksu was playing when I entered the coffee shop. As he greeted me and seated me at one of the tables, Ç. did not bother to turn down the volume. We spoke for a few hours while the voluminous music provided a secretive sheath for our conversation in the midst of which he confessed more than once that it was very difficult for him to talk about this “matter”: “I am tousled (darmadağın oluyorum). Frankly, that is why I do not talk to anyone.” To this day, I can only fathom the reasons behind his decision to talk to me. Was it because A., a higher ranking militant who had also left the organization, had brought me to his coffee shop to talk at a “quiet” place? Or was it because he had found a medium for the transmission of his words which would have flowed in a different circuit of communication?

“I was on the third team,” he said. “How did you decide to volunteer?” I inquired. “You ask yourself whether you can die or not. If you say I can die, you become a volunteer,” he answered. But immediately, he started to recount his reactions to the television screening of a violent assault on the members of TAYAD: “TAYAD is making a press release. Old women, young women are being beaten. At that moment, you can set yourself on fire. If you were outside, you would kill every single one of them. They took away everything from the people, their properties, their lives. They hurt you and you want to hurt them too. (Senin canını acıtıyorlar, sen de onun canını acıtmak istiyorsun). For this reason, you can do anything. If you cannot do anything, you set yourself on fire.”

viewers as those kinds of viewers who can be wounded by the wounding of others, and who can feel this wounding as the assault on that which is proper to them.” In a similar vein, Ç., the emasculated male subject here, is driven to kill the other in the self in order to purify himself of such patriarchal complicity with the enemy.

When I interjected that hurting the enemy and hurting oneself were two different things, he explained himself by recounting yet another story. During the state’s operation in Bayrampaşa Prison, Ç. tries to dress the wounds of his comrade under heavy fire from the security forces. He takes his dead mate whose body has literally disassembled out into the prison yard and performs a funeral rite of some sort: “I was naked. I just had a jacket. I took it off and put it under his head. At that moment, I went and poured some stuff over me. Had they allowed, I would have set myself on fire.” In Ç.’s narrative, the victim is a part of the self that has been partially separated. In burning the self, the surviving self re-embraces the victim as part of the self. In another sense, it destroys that part of the self which has entered into complicity with the perpetrator. For survival itself is a sign of entering into complicity with perpetrator. That is why he wants to be scarred by power’s violence. The scar is a clear trace and memory of wounding and its lack thereof might be an indication of treachery. In such a context, it is only normal that everyone in this political community would prefer to die for the other to living. In fact, twenty-eight of the thirty prisoners who died during the operation were members of DHKP-C. They did not, Ç. said proudly, seek shelter from the fire, but walked right into it to barricade for each other. “How can I tell you of that moment?” said he. “Many people are falling down, bleeding, and shouting around you. You try to protect them. What do they say? You
become motherly. You are ready to sacrifice yourself right there. There is no such barrier as the fear of death,” he continued.

He continued to talk about dying for the other, but he said nothing about his very decision to end his death fast. He was declared a traitor by the organization for his decision to end his death fast after the medical intervention. It was doubly difficult for him to live with this stigma because his sister, G., had died on the death fast outside the prison a couple of weeks before his decision, followed by her close friend. Both women had children and earned their living by babysitting and cleaning houses. I did not venture, however, myself to address him directly, who, for his part, let an hour elapse before he raised the subject. He said that he did not believe they were going to die. “They were not supposed to die. They should not have died.” “We were all surprised when they died. We had thought that the Party would not allow for their deaths. I had not thought in such political terms at the time. I knew that the war was going to extend itself and become a people’s war, but I was surprised because they were the first ones to die.” When Ç. told about his decision, his superiors replied that political prisoners did not have the luxury of keeping their lives as common people, implying G. and Ş., gave theirs away. They told him that he could either recuperate his dignity by restarting the death fast or live as a despicable traitor for the rest of his life.

He never explained to me what this meant for him. I asked him whether he felt any differently about the past. “While I was inside the war, I experienced very beautiful feelings,” he said. “I was very pure, I wasn’t soiled,” he continued in a self-mocking tone. The disarticulation of the “I” from the communal “we” had left it vulnerable to a certain errancy which is interpreted here in a phallocentric manner as rape by the capitalist order
of the state. In fear, Ç. sought to secure himself against such self-dissolution by holding onto his masculinity which he considered as his only inalienable possession. He refrained from commenting on the present further and returned to the past once again to recount how he had welcomed his injured comrades into the cell after the operation. Even though he was on the death fast, he was feeding his injured comrades. “Can you imagine the emotional condition of these people? They cannot just say they won’t eat because they need to get well as quickly as possible so that they can begin to take care of us who are on the fast.” But although Ç. talked of this period of his life with great nostalgia, it was impossible to discover what his true feelings were. He would return again and again to talk about nothing but this sacrificial bond which now kept his voice in bondage.

“Some people do not have the right (hak) to speak. I am one of them. I do not find the right to speak in myself,” he said determinedly. “But you also lived through it, why wouldn’t you have the right to speak?” I intervened. “Yes, I’ve lived it, but there are still people living through it. I have been away from it for a long time.” He repeated that he did not have the right to speak. When I dared suggest that there was more than one subject position, he scoffed at such a liberal notion of “right”: “I am aware of my individual rights (hak). But what I tell you can only be a recollection (anı). What I have lived is tiny compared with what those people have lived. We’re one in a thousand, one in a million maybe. A. has lived perhaps more intensely than I did. She has both chosen and was chosen. But she doesn’t have a right either after some time. I believe that it remains as a recollection because nothing has come to an end. Those who have called off the fast should not be at ease either. I am not, they should not be either. They do not deserve it (hak etmiyorlar) because they are not fighting. They have surrendered. It’s
really difficult to explain it. You’re being beaten up and some others are telling its story. If today people can walk around and have the courage to establish political parties, it is thanks to you, you pay the price (*bedel*) for it. Others rely on these labors (*bedel*). Yes, they also paid a price, but there are people still paying a price, one should respect them. They should not speak at all because they would do harm to these people. I do not want to be one of those people who do harm.”

He insists that I register his words as mere recollection. He wants me to do so not because the event has come to an end but precisely because it is still continuing. One could say that he is not in the act anymore and not being in the act he has fallen out of social time and perhaps even out of world-historical time. In this sense, the event has come to an end. It has come to an end for him who will henceforth have to exist as a mere “I.” Thus, he can only have an interiorized memory of the event which he will have locked up in his own personal past. Yet in another sense, the event has neither vanished into the past nor extinguished itself in the preserve of interiorized memory. Instead, a memory of fidelity is already at work in his desire to speak as if the past were dead. Memory of this sort, Derrida (1986: 58) explains, does not try to revive the past as it was, which is nothing but a retrospective projection from the present, but rather entrusts it to the future by leaving behind an inscription. What if there were a memory of fidelity that far from leaving behind a trace, it demanded the destruction of the trace itself? He was afraid of leaving a trace that would have inscribed or revealed difference in the very presence of the present event. Even if he might not have wanted to leave a trace, this could have happened just by itself, unintentionally, when words started falling from his lips. For it is only in the act of reading and interpreting (“remarking upon the trace” if
you will) that the trace could be grasped retrospectively as being the trace of this or that by unknown others in different contexts and future scenes. Once he started speaking, he knew that he would not be able to control his words which could have ended up being injurious to those whom he still felt obligated to protect despite the fact that he had broken his first promise to them. He wanted his words to have no effect, neither on the present nor on the future. If he were not going to remain silent this one time, he wanted to make sure that his interlocutor listened to him as if he were a mere “I” recalling a dead past, which nonetheless, she might add, rendered his present still-born, haunted by the past, alive in death. All he had was an individual voice; he lacked the capacity to be heard for the political organization guaranteed the becoming audible of voice. He wanted to remain as an individual voice; he did not want his voice to carry itself over into other times and spaces. He had stopped giving so he did not have a right to speak as an “I” as if it were a “We.” He could start to “speak” again when he would speak as death since it was impossible to reciprocate the gift of life except by taking upon himself a similar death.

There was in fact, something surprising in the incoherence of his thoughts, accidentally betrayed and always vaguely expressed. Usually at the most important moment he would break off and relapse into silence or turn to another subject. He started to talk about the exhibition on martyrs that too place in Ş.’s house in Küçükarmutlu which hosted most of the death fasters including her outside the prisons. In order for the

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189 Death fasters distinguish their act from the isolated and sporadic insurrections of the common convicts in Turkish prisons or the detainees in Guantánamo Bay. From this perspective, isolated selves cannot supply their voices with an echo, and it is the function of the political organization to make that voice audible and meaningful by stamping it with its publicly recognized name. For this difference between individual and collective voice concerning the subjects of the crowd, see Rosalind Morris, “Giving Up Ghosts: Notes on Trauma and the Possibility of the Political from Southeast Asia,” positions 16:1, 2008, pp. 250-251.
house to bear witness to the state’s brutal assault in November 2001, it was left in its ruined condition. When I mentioned that it was a museum of an extraordinary kind, Ç. responded that all houses in Küçükarmutlu were museums for everyone had a keepsake from the militants who stayed the night over perhaps never to return. A cigarette lighter, a hair band, a pen, any small thing that they forgot behind, he told, became a relic. He added right afterwards that his other sister had visited Behiç Aşçı at his house and that she had made a gift of one of the handkerchiefs, handkerchiefs of victory, that her fallen death faster sister had embroidered five years ago. He next asked me whether I understood the meaning of such an act. When I looked at him perplexedly, he winked and grinned as though to say that she had solicited him to die. The death fasters had made gifts such as handkerchiefs, cards, framed photographs with their names signed and many more as a token of their love and as to be remembered. That their surviving families ask for reparation for their other gift, “gift of death” (Derrida 1995) by relaying those tokens attests to what Gayatri Spivak (2002: 14) describes as “the violent production of the precarious subject of reparation and responsibility”. Dying for the other can indeed be hurtful and indiscreet precisely because it can arrogantly ask for gratitude towards the “gift of death” one cannot not accept. One can never measure up to the immensity of this gift. Thus, the disproportion inevitably transforms the experience of responsibility into one of guilt. Ç. confided in me that he would one day perform an act of feda by way of suicide bombing an important figure of power. Would he do that in order to absolve himself for wanting to live and because that meant living at the expense of the other under such conditions? He is certainly not the only one who recklessly crosses through this aporetic condition of existence over and over.

IV.

As our meeting was coming to end, I asked Z. about her sister. The prison administration had abducted her sister from their three-person cell to take her to the hospital where the doctors had tried to dissuade her after a decision which would have been read as a mark of real free choice, choice of freedom, but she rejected medical intervention, so they brought her back and placed her in a single-person cell. Z. and the others petitioned to be moved to her cell, but they allowed for a single person, and that was how Z. ended up becoming the sole person attending to her sister on the death fast.

“Face to face,” she said, “separate from other friends”: “One looks at her as if she might die any moment. One wants her not to die. One wishes for the resolution of the conflict. To watch your sister, your comrade wasting away, dying is so difficult that one prefers to die in her place, that is, if one had a right to choose.” Z. herself was on the death fast in 1996 and she attended to other death fasters in the past, but sharing one’s sister’s death locked up in a cell with no one else was different. “In a sense”, Z. explained, “you become a single person.” She had to eat. She had to eat because she needed to take care of Fatma, but every time she ate Z. remembered her sister and choked on the food. She could not share every feeling with her for she was going towards her death. Sometimes she did not want to speak to her, but wanted to speak about her with other friends who were not there. It is as if she wanted to drive away death by killing her sister in speech. She wanted to kill the death that gagged her by referring to her sister in the third person who, according to Benveniste (1998: 229), is a non-person. She wanted do so in order to be able to speak again.
When Fatma was released from the prison, she continued her death fast outside at Behiç Aşçı’s house. Her family did not want her to continue outside the prison. Z. was relieved that her sister was finally able to talk to their family in person and convince them. For their relatives and neighbors had started to lay the blame on Z. for not dissuading her sister. She disclosed that they would ask her reproachful questions: “How can you stand it? She’s dying everyday. Do you want her to die?” The non-compromising attitude of the state turned the Fatma’s closest kin and loved ones into murderers who were forced to make the decision to watch her slowly wasting away. And perhaps revealed too the deadly power that the fasters fatedly embodied and reflected back on their close circles saturating them with the mirror images of the principal author of destruction.

When Fatma finally died, Z. found herself surrounded by a void: “You look for her. I took care of her close to a year. I attended to her daily. There was something that I did for her every single day. Now she is no longer there.” She was infuriated with those who forced them into making such difficult decisions. She called attention to the fact that it was them above everyone else that wished for these deaths to come to an end and added in a helpless tone: “Let no one die and if someone has to die, let that person be me one says. That choice is such a choice.”

In the next chapter, I turn to those who did not even have the “choice” to die for they were thrown into an emptiness where they did not stop dying if only because they had to start living over, again and again, indefinitely.
Chapter VI
Sovereign Lapse

The death faster takes a stand, and in taking and maintaining his or her stand, secures a territory whose borders are marked out by his or her face, pose, and speech that are the essential traits of a speaking subject, an “I” who imposes him or herself. He or she strikes a willful pose by refusing to eat, and in doing so, by suspending his or her relations with the other since food, like language, is originally vested in the other—one always eats from the other, for the other, and with the other—and for this reason, the death faster fills the space, though he or she is the most vulnerable, at the expense of the other.191

Not that the death faster does not seek to engage with the others who are welcomed or for that matter unwelcomed in his or her territory. With a proselytizer’s belief in the power of communication even it will be to little purpose, he or she does not tire of speaking his or her own concern with family, visitors, doctors, and even soldiers, and yet he or she still stands out with the solitary but sovereign presence of an “I” because it is death that opens the death faster from within him or herself to the future—his or her territory is coextensive with his or her own time. The death faster’s essential territory is not his or her body which is always already in time and is thus de-limited by other bodies, but it is rather his or her life-death whose limit is within itself, that is to say,  

191 Strictly speaking, the Death Fast is not a “total” fast since the death fasters still continue to “eat” in a certain manner though their diet is restricted to water, sugar, salt, and vitamin B1. That the constituent elements of their diet were purchased from the prison commissary with the exception of B1 which was provided by the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey bespeaks the inextricable relation with the other, and even with the hostile other. Though the authorities exploited this fundamental dependency to cast aspersions on the act by accounting for the longevity of the death fast with secret eating on the part of the death fasters, they neither discontinued the selling of these items to the death fasters nor interdicted the delivery of B1 to the prisons. To the contrary, they expanded the prison commissary list to include different kinds of sugar and candy unlike the military regime of the early 1980s which had stopped giving sugar and salt to the prisoners months before the 1983 and 1984 Death Fasts to preempt its hoarding for later use.
the death faster’s territory is his or her own time which is given in his or her irrevocable and inalienable relation to death. It is this time proper—how can time be proper to a mortal being and yet doesn’t the “I” itself presuppose this originary temporalization?—he or she safeguards against the hostile other insofar as the political efficacy of the death fast depends on the very protection of its ontological structure which I have earlier identified as *différance* or the movement of deferral or difference between life and death which gives rise to a seemingly pure possibility (see Chapter 1). For the death faster keeps in reserve one and at the same time both his or her ability-to-live and ability-to-die and in doing so, gives time, though a limited period of time, to the political agencies to decide. He or she does not leave to these agencies the decision concerning his or her life and death, that decision belongs to the death faster and to him or her alone, he or she forces them to make a *political* decision by exposing them to his or her posthumous power of judgment, the becoming murderer of the agencies of decision, as it were, with the death faster nearing his or her death. The death faster’s power of judgment (which is distorted by the very same rule as a self-threat or the threat of the organizational command to its own members) maintains its force however only on the condition that the death faster remains to be in sovereign possession of his or her time. Accordingly, political agencies of decision, instead of responding to their political demands, overtake the time of the death faster, by arrogating the decision concerning life and death, and they do so by deploying against the death fasters the invasive medical technique of forced feeding (not by tube, but by intravenous feeding) which does not realize one of the possibilities, life, at the expense of the other, death; to the contrary, it negates both possibilities with the result that the death faster, though he or she may resume the act upon reawakening and
many decide not to after a series of resuscitations which are long and torturous, has already lost the integrity of his or her act whereby neither his life nor his death belongs to him or her any longer. This vitiation of the integrity of the act begins gravely to compromise the possibilities of the Death Fast too inasmuch as forced feeding thwarts the Death Fast in its ends, which is neither the necessary survival nor death of the death fasters but the inscription of their demands into the political space, by reducing its eventness to the eventuality of life or death.

This political neutralization derives its possibility however from prior impossibility to the extent that it ultimately relies upon the ruination of the ontological structure of the death fast which is always already, before any intervention of the other who still waits for the death faster to lose consciousness, a self-ruination that is in fact inherent in its structure itself inasmuch as it is brought about by nothing other than the to and fro movement between life and death, the pendulum of “auto”-affection, which thrusts the death faster outside him or herself only to restitute him or her as other but as the other of the same until he or she no longer has time. This is arguably why, though they follow the events happening in the world outside them with great attentiveness, nothing happens on the death fast, there is nothing to intuit as an event except the passage of time and time is only a name, as Derrida writes (1973: 85; 1982: 55), for the “possibility of the impossibility” of self-sameness, a becoming-the-other-of-the-same. This endless movement of temporalization, though it sustains the “I” and thus his or her act while transecting it through and through, comes to an end for the death faster with the ineludible loss of consciousness whereby he or she will no longer be “the other-as-the-same,” no longer a “self,” but an opening in and of itself where the inside opens upon the
outside to lose itself in the interval of difference between them. He or she will have
become a mouth without a face, a mouth which belongs to no one.\textsuperscript{192}

This indeterminate descent, a descent from self-presence into self-absence, marks
the closure of the event for the death faster whose impassive body is hauled away in
chains from prison infirmaries to state hospitals where it becomes a space of decision,
and it is the detour through a calculated decision to refrain from precipitate action within
this medical domain that alone allows the state to alter the opening of the event into the
opening of the death faster to the acts of others insofar the secession of the state gives rise
to a proliferating division of the agency of decision and has as its paradoxical outcome an
ungovernable series of encounters between doctors, families, and political organizations
over the mute body of the death faster where the political bleeds into the ethical. Who
decides? And how does one decide? How does one relate to this mouth without a face
and how does one do so especially when “it” still speaks from this non-place? Is it heard
or not? And if it is heard, how is it heard by different ears?

\textit{Unheard Mouth that Speaks}

02.03: Blood Pressure: 120/105; Pulse: 90. Temperature: 37.5. Sleeping.
02.05: Stronger heart beat.
02.16: Faster but weak pulse
02.20: Pulse 94, weak heart beat.
02.26: “Did you sleep well?”
02.27: “Every word, every word and letter has a great, a great meaning today.”
02.27: “Do you have anything to say to me?”
02.28: “Hold on now. Where are we, what are we going to say, is not clear yet.
What is there to say?”

\textsuperscript{192} With the phrase “mouth without a face,” I invoke Jean-Luc Nancy’s figuring of the opening or openness
of Dasein with the non-figure of “buccality,” “mouth” as an originary opening before becoming the mouth
of a speaking subject. For thoughtful readings of Nancy’s buccality, see Peggy Kamuf’s “Bèance” in \textit{The
“Eating Well: The Calculations of the Subject,” Jacques Derrida also questions the valorization of the face
in sacrificial humanisms including that of Heidegger and Levinas and offers instead “orificiality” as a
metonymy for the relation to the other.
02.30: He drank some water. “Do you want some more water?” He was able to drink the water from the medicine dropper only in two or three swallows.
02.31: “I could pull together neither here nor there. Since I don’t know this area well, I haven’t pulled it together yet.”
02.35: Moaning, unintelligible murmurings… “Isn’t it the last meeting?”
02.45: Aggravation of moaning. He swings his arms right and left… “In front of the mirror…where the Ceyhan river is.”
02.50: He began to hiccup constantly and as he hiccups, water comes out of his mouth.
02.55: Blood Pressure: 127/92; Pulse: 108; Temperature: 37.2
03.10: There is no answer to any question. There is no reaction to the question “Do you hear me?”
03.15: He’s sleeping, his eye lids are moving, he takes deep breathes which are interrupted by short ones intermittently.

Though it adopts the form of a testimony, (it was published as a part of a collective memoir of the 1996 Death Fast)\textsuperscript{193}, the narrative of T.’s dying nevertheless, and at the same time, is a clinical chronicle through and through, one that observes and inscribes T.’s encounter with death in its different chronological phases without any pathos as if it were a laboratory experiment, but the anonymous chronicler (we only know that he is an attendant and the attendants of death fasters are detached and stalwart figures who are responsible for protecting the death faster) desists to meditate on his own gaze that manifests its object (which may equally well be, as Foucault (1973) has shown in the \textit{Birth of the Clinic}, a subject), as a mouth that still opens beyond language, occupying a space that is one and at the same full of words and empty of them, strangely loquacious and silent.

The subject of this quasi-clinical gaze listens to inscribe, inscribing the event with a strange automaticity as though it may only be experienced in the past by reading this record, and he begins to “see” rather than hear T.’s words as if he were already a dead

\textsuperscript{193} Ulaş Osman Yılmaz, \textit{Ölümü Yenenleri Kimse Yenemez}, pp. 56-57.
voice with the result that he absolves himself of the burden of responding to the
unanswerability of T.’s speech.

What was T.’s relation to words? He was speaking “spontaneously,” they wrote.
Were they his words or were he quoting, so to speak, without the quotation marks? That
they still understood his words did not mean that he heard them. Did T. intend any
meaning? Or did they make his words say what he has never said? Should his remarks be
taken literally, symbolically, or merely as a symptom of something else, of his comatose
state for instance? Such questions, though there was an insuperable distance between T.
and his deathbed attendants, simply do not appear in the memoir, and instead T.’s
attendant (or attendants) asserts, in a passage inserted between these quasi-clinical
observations that rehearses much that is familiar to readers of these memoirs, T.’s
delirious speech was itself a testimony to the very truth of his commitment despite and,
one might add, because of his non-self-presence:

As he lost his capacity to speak, increasingly unintelligible sentences and words
began to come out of his mouth accompanied by arm and hand gestures. And yet
despite his unconscious state, one saw from his speech the strength of his
attachment to the revolution and his complete integration with the organizational
duties in the depths of his consciousness. In the final stages of the death fast when
childhood events often re-surface in consciousness, T.’s murmurings were
intimately occupied with the revolution and the organization until the very last
moment. (emphasis added).

That there were allusions to specific places, dates, and people in T.’s delirious
speech which, explicitly or implicitly, beckoned to personal events and endeavors that
pertained to the broader history of the organization proved persuasive enough to suspend
the unanswerability of T.’s speech—an unanswerability which one would think would be
exacerbated to the extent that T. is on the point of disappearing and cannot be questioned
on the meaning of his parting words—and yet the words spoken by T. are accorded privileged and even revelatory status insofar as truth speaks through them. Truth animates the words with a volitional consciousness “who” testifies to his own truthfulness and does so in absentia because, we are told, a perfectly converted consciousness is unconscious, the subject who allows the truth to speak is always already spoken through.

For all its apparent exceptionality, the narrative of T.’s dying is however far from an isolated one, for one thing it opens a citational frame by drawing, in an understated yet knowing way, on the eye-witness narratives of their leader’s death in the 1984 Death Fast who had, as death approached, found himself fighting in the Battle of Stalingrad (he had in fact asked for his gun) and in fact by the end of the 1996 Death Fast this “warring to death” had become a far more commonplace experience. For this reason, the succeeding generations of death fasters found themselves impelled to have a similar experience, and as R. readily conceded on behalf of the death fasters, they even prepared themselves for such a dramatic encounter with death, perhaps searching, even unbeknownst to themselves, for their own historical setting and character. Perhaps, this should not be surprising, because all relation to death partakes of the false, the fictitious, the fictional: “Death,” as Blanchot writes (1982: 155), “is its own imposter.” One always dies as someone else because there is no true death as such.

There were, of course, many death fasters whose dying words have disappointed such heroism. Their deathbed attendants recount privately for instance that, as death fasters lapse into speaking in a voice not their own, they may make whimsical requests with a puerile persistence, or instead of resolutely refusing any food, as their duty and
responsibilities demanded, they may begin, entirely out of character, speaking of food, with the result that, on these occasions, one strives to assuage the death faster as if he or she were an intemperate child or simply turns a deaf ear. No sooner the frivolity and unreliability of this speech—it’s outbursts are always told as a diverting anecdote, embarrassing and laughable at the same time—confirms the disappearance of the death faster and announces the arrival of someone else than he shows himself, instead of the faithful devotee of the cause, to be in the grip of his own phantasms which are at best impertinent to the historical event lest they cause it harm by consenting to a medical intervention for instance. At that limit, it is no longer the death faster who is in control of his destiny, and his attendant refuses to acknowledge any of the demands expressed in this speech as his and begins, henceforth, to guard the death faster himself against the other(s) living in him, and he does so by having recourse to memory, by summoning the last words of the death faster before unconsciousness into the present to deaden this other speech. Had the attendant not remembered, that is, had he not kept his promise to the death faster, he would have heard this speech like the medical doctors do—the nonsensical utterances which endow the doctor with the power of intervention. The death faster who does not respond to the interrogative questions of the doctor, though he may still speak, is already no one because speech without intentional consciousness is not deemed to be language by the medical ear; it is words become mere sounds ringing hollowly the knell of the living subject who needs to be restored to consciousness by immediate action if only to hear the death faster express his or her refusal to receive medical treatment in his or her own words.
In 1996, of course, neither the prison guards nor the gendarmes (military force charged with outer security measures) could enter the wards to remove the death fasters to the prison hospital; and it was that very failing on the part of the authorities that had enabled the organizations to govern the space between the possibility of living and the possibility of dying. The organizational command of the wards put the death fasters in the double and concomitant position of placing themselves at one and the same time under the jurisdiction of the organization, the law of identification, while also relying upon the communal care, bond of comradeship. In this earlier prison setting, the death fasters belonged to the community and were given, by that belonging, both the duty to persevere to the end and the constancy of care to do so in the all-enclosing presence of the community. Accordingly, the fate of the death fasters were entirely bound to the momentous decisions of the organization as regards the vicissitudes of the Death Fast, and it is no exaggeration to say that the inaugural teams of death fasters were destined to die inasmuch as political agencies of decision almost always sought to defeat the Death Fast by consuming the energies of the organizations by a categorical refusal of their demands at the outset. Under such circumstances, the individual death fasters who changed their minds were condemned, for falling short of their task, to a solitary existence whereby the exuberant attention of their comrades were withdrawn at once and unhesitatingly for they had kept to their lives at the price of the lives of others. Such a betrayal, of themselves and their comrades, was deemed to be carnivorous, “the one who drinks (one “drinks” soup in Turkish) soup is in fact drinking our blood,” because it called forth, hollowing out as it did the sacrificial death at the center of the Death Fast, more deaths in order for their devotedness and resolution, concealed and unregarded, to
come to any proof, which in turn explains why the attendants, in spite of themselves, let the death fasters die in those instances where they could have been saved to live longer. The attendants were indeed extremely faithful to the death fasters, so much so, that they tended to the death fasters a considerable time, accompanying them through the twists and turns of dying in order then, when it too came, to relinquish them to death with the result that the they had to undergo a certain experience of the im-possible, the necessity and the injustice of the decision to let the death faster die, which comes into view in a brief encounter recorded in the same memoir, a peculiarly truncated—limited—entrance of a third person who, though he interrupts this death scene, is bound to remain an observer still.

Accosted by a physician as part of the group of physicians affiliated with the Association of Turkish Physicians (TTB) which provided medical supervision and advice at the request of the organizations, T.’s attendant is faced with the aporia of a proposal that calls upon him to consider the prolongation of T.’s respiration. Such an aporia, he insists without taking the time and thinking through his refusal, is the price as well as the condition of political action as such.

When they came, I was sitting at the bedside of Comrade T.. He had lost his consciousness days ago, and the cooling in his hands and feet had moved up to his elbows and knees. They examined him with great care. A little later, one of them returned to say that he wanted to talk to me. One day before, T.’s epiglottis had slipped into his throat and the prison doctor who happened to be there had turned him over and pulled it back to allow him to breathe again. The doctor who wanted to talk to me had heard about the incident. “We could make an external intervention which would allow him to breathe from his throat,” he said. Medical interventions which do not involve medication like heart massages are generally acceptable. T. was living with the power of his heart and only his heart at that moment. The interests of the action, and T. had devoted himself to it, he had even proposed to cut the water and sugar, necessitated the refusal of the doctor’s
proposal. Such an intervention will not have brought him back to life. I knew this. Nonetheless…one of the most difficult “No”s in my life came out of my mouth.\textsuperscript{194}

T.’s attendant’s apparently easy resolution of the aporia rests on the double allusion, first, that the only proper goal of medical intervention is the delaying of death but T.’s death is already here; and second, that were he alive T. himself would have made the same decision—hadn’t he wanted to cut the water and sugar?—T. had already made an offering of his life. Thus, fidelity to T. and the political act are purchased only by infidelity to the still living; and the purity of death is at the price of turning aside from the impurity of dying. T.’s attendant affirms T.’s sacrifice, he must sacrifice him one more time to make his act legible as sacrifice for the first time, by maintaining intact the subject at the expense of the living, but by doing so silently justifies too his own decision which runs the risk of resembling an act constituting murder lest T.’s sacrifice be recognized as sacrifice. The two exigencies, that of T.’s sacrifice and that of sacrifice of T., do not exist in isolation from each other; to the contrary, they belong together as the very condition of each other’s possibility. The sovereign act of offering on the part of T. and its repeated affirmation by his attendant cannot of course be performed except on condition that death itself be a possibility and it is this possibility which may be said both to follow and precede the sacrificial act that forcible feeding rendered inoperative in 2000.

\textit{The Executioner in Absentia}

Throughout the late 1980s and 1990s the hunger strikes of the political prisoners had confronted each and every new government as a refractory administrative and

\textsuperscript{194} Ibid., p. 74. The government conceded to the demands of the organizations the morning after T.’s death. I was told in 2006 that his sister was still furious with the organization because of the terribly short interval of time between his death and the agreement.
political problem. But only rarely during that period had the political and administrative authorities explicitly referred to forced feeding and it was not until January 6, 2000, when the tripartite protocol between the Ministries of Justice, Interior, and Health signaled an important new departure in the penal regime, that they began to address forced feeding at all directly and in detail.195 The highly contentious protocol enabled the wardens to petition the High Public Prosecutor for an order authorizing the removal of prisoners from the wards for forced feeding in the prison infirmaries or hospitals. That the authorities were drawn to intervene in the hunger strikes increasingly in this way was an indication not only of the urgency of new penal measures, but it was also a harbinger of the prison operation, an operation which was a brutal and integral part of the penal transformation and which had succeeded in separating the hunger strikers from the protection of the political collectives, eventually leading to their isolation in the hospitals.

The use of forced feeding, though it was already adopted as a legal measure against hunger striking, placed itself at the center of public debate during the negotiations with the death fasters, and the political authorities mobilized the language of law in the service of nullifying the force of the Death Fast by forced feeding. For this reason, it is worth examining here the legal argumentations which constituted the grounds for the forced feeding of the death fasters.

Judges and criminal law jurists (Feyzioğlu 1993; Soyarslan 1990; Taşkıın 2005) did not contest the legitimacy of hunger striking by drawing an analogy from the outset, one already evoked in the public debate, between suicide and hunger strike. Instead, they conceded that the hunger strike was an act of protest that expressed, much like speech and writing, a set of demands with the aim of drawing attention to them and having them

195 For the full text of the protocol, see http://www.cte.adalet.gov.tr/mevzuat/protokol/saglik.pdf.
accepted, and as a result they indeed recognized it as the lawful exercise of the right to free expression and communication of thoughts and opinions, a fundamental constitutional right secured under Article 26. They rather called into question the legitimacy of the hunger strike as a means by subordinating its legal ends to the temporal end of the act, that is, the possibility of death whereby it became indistinguishable from suicide: “Can an act which gives rise to death considered to be a legitimate means of the exercise of the constitutional right to expression of thoughts? To answer this question in the positive or the negative, a preliminary question needs to be resolved. Does the individual person have the right to death? Does the fundamental right to life include its opposite, that is, the right to death, the right to put an end to one’s life?”(Feyzioğlu 1993: 16). The right to life was inalienable and it was for this reason that the individual person did not have a constitutional right to death, and yet this decisive statement threatened to become circuitous unless the prefix in- of inalienability was to be understood here, however implicitly, not as a mark of affirmation but one of privation: the right to life was inalienable in the sense that it could not be freely alienated by the individual person him or herself. Thus, the unconditional denial of the right to death which these jurists have developed in their arguments relied upon the repudiation of the proprietary concept of the right to life, and in fact the proprietary concept of right itself, and brought into view a legal subject who was not a subject of property, and who could not freely alienate or withhold his or her life or body as if they were legal possessions, and as a consequence, this legal subject lacked personal sovereignty, if by this we mean the power over life and death. For this legal subject was a subject of duty and responsibility whose autonomy and self-determination was limited by his or her responsibilities and duties to society: “Article
12/2 of the Constitution mandates that the fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals include duties and responsibilities to society, family, and other persons. The individual person has responsibilities to society as much as to him or herself and for this reason does not have absolute power of disposition over his or her life.” (Soyarslan 1990: 279). Since there was no relationship of ownership between this legal subject of duty and responsibility and his or her life and body, the hunger strike devolved into an unlawful, if not criminal, “abuse” of the right to life and security and well-being of person upon posing a threat to the life and body of the individual hunger striker. Under such circumstances, the hunger strike corresponded to an act of “self”-violation, a violation of his or her life and body on the part of the hunger striker, and it imposed upon the state the defense of the life and body of the hunger striker against him or herself. Understood in this way, the intrusive act of forced feeding was not considered an unjustified infringement of the freedom of the person but a “legitimate defense” to the extent it was the forcible repulsion of an unlawful and violent attack of the hunger striker against his or her person (Taşkıın 2005: 57).

Though the law appeared to preserve the life and body of the individual person against his or her own act, it may well be argued that it in fact preserved the “right to life” itself and in doing so it preserved the law and the political sovereignty which was responsible for preserving the rights themselves. In this way, the excess of right over law, the irreducibility of the assertion of right to the rule of law, was subdued by overwriting the fundamental and inalienable right to life itself as an obligation: “Though there is no legal rule which turns the hunger strike into a criminal act, be that as it may, since a hunger strike which has gone beyond the limit of endurance would result in death, and
this would mean the relinquishing of the right to life, it should thus be concluded that this act is against the law” (Feyzioğlu 1993: 19).

Thus, the jurists concurred that the law was bound to take into consideration the consent of the hunger striker until there was a risk of serious and permanent physical debilitation or imminent death in which case artificial feeding and medical treatment would be administered by the doctors regardless of the consent of the hunger striker. In fact, the jurists put permanent physical debilitation on a par with death on the grounds that the constitution did not recognize the right to harm one’s physical being and authorized the doctors to intervene even without waiting for the comatose state, arguing that the risk of death and permanent damage might exist prior to the comatose state. As far as the prison doctors and personnel and doctors at state hospitals were concerned, the jurists imposed upon them forced feeding as a public duty. Were the doctors to refuse administer forced feeding, the government had the legal right to take action against them for breach of duty since they were bound to administer forced feeding not only by virtue of their public office but also by the general duty to rescue an injured person.

Despite the threat of taking criminal action against doctors and prison personnel for “neglect of duty,” the government did not order its appointed doctors in prisons and state hospitals to forcibly feed a conscious and competent death faster but it did force them to make a decision about the life and death of the death faster, and it did so by endowing the doctors with the discretionary power to resuscitate a comatose death faster. In making the decision not to concede to the demands of the death fasters, the government had in fact already executed the death faster—a comatose death faster, as the death fasters well knew, is an already executed death faster—but by imposing upon the

doctors the decision to let die or make live a comatose death faster, the government delegated to them its own role of the executioner. Confronted with this decision, an individual doctor could only have escaped this role of the executioner by delegating it further to others, another doctor or a family member who would undersign the final decision—and it was almost always a decision for intervention.

Though the death fasters themselves did not recognize a difference between “medical intervention” and “forced feeding” and they used them interchangeably to mark the homologous violence of medical intervention insofar as nonconsensual artificial feeding also violated the integrity of their act of refusal and exploiting as it did their unconsciousness to contravene their advance instructions refusing treatment, the government officials and jurists put all their efforts into differentiating nonconsensual artificial feeding from forced feeding proper.

Forced feeding was not deemed to be a medical procedure but merely a method of nourishment which could be administered by any prison personnel without necessary medical training. It involved the use of physical restraints, coercion and force, and as the government officials and jurists conceded, it was denounced by the World Medical Association’s Declaration of Tokyo on Torture (1975) and Declaration of Malta on Hunger Strikers (1991) as “a form of inhuman and degrading treatment.” But despite the negative terms by which they characterized forced feeding, there is every reason to suppose that the government abstained from deploying such a forcible method because of its impracticability. The government would be hard put to find doctors who would be willing to participate in forced feeding, a procedure itself fraught with medical complications and death. And considering the high number of death fasters, how likely
was it that the government would find as many doctors? And in view of the active resistance of both the death fasters and their attendants—even the removal of a death faster from the prison cell to the prison hospital was a demanding undertaking—would the government be able to contain the much certain disorder in prisons and hospitals?

Medical intervention, on the other hand, as defined by the officials, was the resuscitation of a death faster, who had lapsed into a comatose state, by intravenous feeding to prevent his or her imminent death and permanent debilitation, and in this sense, the official definition indeed adhered to the definition of artificial feeding in the practical guidelines of the Declaration of Malta on Hunger Strikers (1991). Though the Declaration, while referring to this emergency situation, had acknowledged that the urgency of the decision may imply breaching the duty to respect the autonomy of the hunger striker, it had not released the doctors from responsibility by deciding in their name; it had in fact left the ultimate decision for intervention to each individual doctor.

But what is it, one may ask, about the violence being done to the integrity of death fasters by medical intervention that distinguishes it from the violence of forced feeding itself? For what justifies the recourse to medical intervention is not so much the absence of violence, which is seemingly suspended by the unconscious state of the death faster (there is still use of physical restraints to preempt the death faster from pulling out the catheter that delivers the nutrients to the blood stream upon awakening to consciousness), but rather the emergency status of the intervention itself which, as Taşkın (2005: 106) wrote (somewhat reiterating Feyzioğlu’s arguments), is only administered to protect the death faster from imminent death and permanent debilitation. However, with regard to

\[197\] For the full text of the Declaration of Malta on Hunger Strikers, see http://www.legislationonline.org/documents/id/8591.
the life it was supposed to save, the medical intervention was far less effective than the justification of its violence required. For as the death fasters expressed in their bitterly scathing words, to the contrary, the medical intervention at this stage resulted in nothing else but permanent debilitation lest death, and to that extent the act of preservation turned retrospectively into an act of execution and the act of saving became an act of punishment. The implications of this reversal are serious ones for doctors for they show with what ease medical intervention may be inverted and take on the mantle of a different type of violence, a greater violence committed on behalf of the death faster but against him or herself, and for this reason alone the organizations accused the government-appointed doctors of intentionally disabling and even killing the death fasters. There was no evidence whatsoever that the doctors in prisons and state hospitals had administered artificial feeding without the proper dose of vitamin B1, and the doctors affiliated with both the Association of Turkish Physicians and the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey, the only doctors that the death fasters trusted and entrusted themselves to their care, did not in fact corroborate these accusations, confirming instead that the doctors who were not even remotely sympathetic to the death fasters had sought their aid in administering the proper form of treatment at the onset of unconsciousness. Yet as far as the organizations were concerned, the doctors were always already guilty insofar as they did not take responsibility for the consequences of their act because, and this is the decisive and yet implicit ground of their accusations, the act of intervention itself a priori absolves the doctors of responsibility—they could always claim that it was too late.

It was to acknowledge the violence of medical intervention and to call upon the doctors to take their own share of responsibility that the Association of Turkish
Physicians (TTB) had sought to put an end to the debate on medical intervention and had done so in a summary fashion by contending that the doctors had the “duty” to comply with the World Medical Association’s ethical principles and practical guidelines adumbrated in the Declaration of Malta on Hunger Strikers (1991) at the risk of being reprimanded by the Association for professional misconduct. And though the Declaration had a much more equivocal language concerning the application of the Ethics Code, TTB’s spokespersons insisted that the Declaration had left the doctors with no other course of action other than abiding by the decision of the hunger striker, and on the occasion that the doctors found themselves incapable of performing their “duty” for “reasons of conscience”, TTB maintained matter-of-factly, they were given the right to refer the hunger striker to another doctor as stipulated in Article 4 of the Preamble of the Declaration. TTB’s reading of the Declaration did not allow the individual doctor to decide except to decide not to decide, so to speak, and compelled the Association’s opponents to contest its univocal reading. If one reads the Declaration with an eye towards ambiguity, as TTB’s opponents did, there are signs that the Declaration does not, as TTB represented it, unambiguously decide in favor of duty in the name of the doctor.

The Declaration, as we have broached in passing above, describes the unresolvable contradiction dividing the doctor’s encounter with a comatose hunger striker as a contradiction between two competing obligations, two principles, between “moral obligation” and “duty”, between “the principle of beneficence,” the respect for the sanctity of life, and “the principle of autonomy,” the respect for the autonomy and dignity of the patient, and far from reconciling this differend by a just decision, the Declaration only affirms it in the “free decision” of the doctor, a decision which is free to the extent it
is laden with responsibility. In fact, the Declaration allows the doctor to decide not once but twice, and the two decisions are separated by an interval of time, the first one before the hunger striker who is still a speaking subject, the second and the final one before the comatose and yet still living being. The first trial of the doctor, as TTB reminded those who found themselves in a moral impasse, is to decide whether he or she is “capable” of abiding by the hunger striker’s decision or not (and in this sense, the doctor is always already in a passive position); the second one renews the same decision at the risk of a double infidelity to both the hunger striker and the doctor him or herself for the doctor remained to be the doctor of the hunger striker only by promising him or her to abide by his or her decision. To decide anew, as the Declaration announced to its addresses, also meant remembering the first decision; and in both cases, to remember that one had made the decision not to withdraw:

When the hunger striker has become confused and is therefore unable to make an unimpaired decision or has lapsed into a coma, the doctor shall be free to make the decision for his patient as to further treatment which he considers to be in the best interest of that patient, always taking into account the decision he has arrived at during his preceding care of the patient during his hunger strike, and reaffirming article 4 of the Preamble of this Declaration.

Instead of appealing to an obligation or duty on the part of the doctors, then, the Declaration places them before an essential and solitary responsibility, which is the responsibility to decide both for the hunger striker and in relation to themselves.

That TTB justified its categorical refusal of intervention by a parsimonious reading of the Declaration is evident and yet it may be argued that if the Association

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198 Article 4 of the Preamble reads: “The ultimate decision on intervention or non-intervention should be left with the individual doctor without the intervention of third parties whose primary interest is not the patient's welfare. However, the doctor should clearly state to the patient whether or not he is able to accept the patient's decision to refuse treatment or, in case of coma, artificial feeding, thereby risking death. If the doctor cannot accept the patient's decision to refuse such aid, the patient would then be entitled to be attended by another physician.” For the full text of the Declaration of Malta on Hunger Strikers, see http://www.legislationline.org/documents/id/8591.
sought to impose upon the doctors the duty to act in conformity with a professional code of ethics, it was solely in order to refuse all complicity with the violence of the state, a violence which, crucially, the government had even declined to acknowledge as such by claiming it to be purely an ethical judgment on the part of the doctor. There is reason to suppose that the categorical refusal of intervention on the part of the Association was a reaction to the public debate about the Death Fast which had devolved into a single but divisive question about the best interests of an unconscious death faster, whether the advance instructions of the death faster could be overridden by the decision of a doctor for medical intervention on the grounds of the principle of beneficence. But as TTB’s President, Dr. Füsun Sayek, forewarned the doctors of the consequences of medical intervention, it was already too late to save the hunger striker in a comatose state, and the individual doctor who decided to overrule the decision of the death faster would only be responsible for the bodily and mental impairment of the death faster, and in most instances for his or her death.  

More importantly, in an interview, at a time when—TTB argued—the deadlock in negotiations had imposed a tacit resignation and the real political debate had become stifled beneath a hollow and oppressive consensus on the necessity of medical intervention, Metin Bakkalcı, the Vice President of TTB, contended that the political agencies of decision were drawing the doctors into the quagmire only to deflect political decision and called upon them to perform their own duties instead of obliging the doctors to make an ethical decision.  


At the very point TTB was evidently seeking to break out of the violent politics of both the state and the organizations, its categorical refusal of medical intervention was misread—and there was of course always that risk—as endorsing a mode of violence, that far from interrupting a violent politics, appeared merely to propose a mirror image of that politics. Its name got associated with murder and the Association was pronounced guilty of deciding for death against life, and in doing so sacrificing life for a political end, and thus TTB ended up appearing in the eyes of the public as simply an exponent of the political violence of the death fasters.\(^{201}\)

But if TTB’s endeavors to interrupt this violent politics failed, it was not because the Association, in its impatience to justify non-intervention, had become liable to be contaminated by the very violence it claimed to challenge, but because it had forced the doctors to respond to the contestation that came from the other. For their categorical refusal had bound the decision of the doctor by duty but “duty” did not operate in TTB’s discourse as a term which simply designated a course of action required by office or law, but a binding relation to the other—in this sense, TTB’s emphasis on “duty” attested to the impossibility of a free decision because the decision of the doctor was always already bound by the decision of the death faster.

TTB’s grounding of the ethical decision of the doctor in the political decision of the death faster ultimately relied on an untenable conception of the complete autonomy of the death faster. TTB argued for the autonomy of the death faster by ascribing to a liberal understanding of the doctor-patient relationship that put the principle of patient autonomy over that of beneficence, and for this reason alone its categorical refusal of intervention

was bound to founder for the liberal notion of the proprietary subject underlying the very same principle would provide the grounds for the decision in favor of intervention. The collective form of the Death Fast—and doesn’t the proprietary subject inevitably undermine the grounds for collective action and political action in particular by opposing the self to the other?—made many doctors question the autonomy of the death fasters. They had serious doubts that the death fasters had made their decision freely and without influence (and they psychologized this subject of desire by accounting for its insistence by “peer pressure”) and some among them went so far as to conclude that the death fasters were deprived of their right to decide their own fate under the coercion of the organizational command with the result that they felt justified in resuscitating a comatose death faster against his or her advance refusals because in resuscitating they were restoring to death fasters their right to life and self-determination. TTB’s own affiliate doctors themselves, though the organizations had solicited for their medical supervision and advice, addressed the difficulties of ascertaining the “true intention” of the death fasters owing to the lack of privacy and indirect communication with the death fasters. They were not able to have one-to-one conversations with the death fasters since their attendants accompanied them at all time during the consultations. Dr. Hulki Forta, the board member of the Association who was responsible for the direction and management of the activities of the Association pertaining to the Death Fast, alluded to the same worry in our conversation. He admitted that he had talked more with the attendants than the death fasters themselves during the prison visitations, and added that he did not always know whether the attendants were reporting to him the communications of the death fasters.

202 In fact, the Declaration also stipulates that the hunger strikers should be protected from coercive participation and if need be removed from the company of other strikers.
faster or those of “a third party” with the implication that the interference of the organizational command was making it impossible to have a doctor-patient relationship with the death fasters. This is to say that even those doctors, who were least susceptible to the propagandist representation of the death fasters as hostages in the hands of the organizational command, still had reservations about the autonomy of the death fasters.

A great number of the doctors for intervention, though they drew attention to the necessity of private communication, daily clinical observation, and recording of the advance instructions of the death fasters in opinion pieces and television interviews, did not in fact have a doctor-patient relationship with the death fasters. They could have encountered with a comatose death faster only in an emergency room and even the possibility of that encounter depended on their working at a state hospital where the death fasters were transferred upon losing consciousness in prison.

It may be said that the most difficult task devolved upon the prison doctors who had to oversee the wasting away of the death fasters in their care until the beginning of the comatose state. Prison doctors, though merely agents and functionaries of the state, had influence upon government officials, and the management of the prison, and as the forensic doctor, Önder Özkalıpçı, described them to me, they were somewhat like provincial doctors who had the confidence of the townspeople, but a confidence which came with a concomitant responsibility that would make any misdeed on the part of the doctor a cause for disrepute. In this sense, the non-anonymous if not confidential relationship of the prison doctors with the death fasters could hardly allow them to make a medical intervention against the will of the death fasters, and indeed the prison doctors in Bayrampaşa Prison Hospital had made known clearly and officially that they would
not administer forced feeding under any condition by sending a petition to the Ministry of Health. For this reason, the Ministry of Health, far from facilitating a doctor-patient relationship, ruined the possibility of any relationship at all by circulating doctors and medical staff from one prison to another every month. As a consequence, the death fasters strictly refused to be examined by these newly-appointed doctors in prisons, and in fact they considered them their enemies who watched out for the signs of unconsciousness to administer forced feeding. In such circumstances, the duty of the new prison doctors did not go beyond passive monitoring and dissuasive speech and after one or two deaths that occurred before they could intervene they were soon faced with the realization that on these terms they could not do anything at all and petitioned the Ministry to replace their daily visits with a weekly one for they no longer wanted to watch the death fasters dying in their care.

Doctors affiliated with TTB, as their decision for non-intervention became the object of attack and accusation by other doctors, underwent a similar passivity with the difference that they were unable to withdraw from the circular, empty obligation of attending to the death fasters for they were solicited by the death fasters themselves, and for this reason TTB’s affiliate doctors perhaps had the most traumatic experience among doctors. The Ministry of Health had allowed them to enter the prisons in early December (December 3-14) during the negotiations with the organizations, and they had used this occasion to collect the medical records and advance instructions of the death fasters.\textsuperscript{203} They would subsequently make public the records and instructions of the death fasters to

\textsuperscript{203} That the government had wanted to share out responsibility for the imminent deaths was plain in the easy and hasty access given to doctors affiliated with TTB—was related to me by Dr. Hakan Gürvit, the neurologist whose collaborative work with Emel Gökmen on the Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome had prepared well in advance both the death fasters and the Association against medical complications during the Death Fast in 2000.
give evidence to the truth of their fasting against the falsifications of the Ministry of Health. Some two months after the prison operation, as they prepared to attend to death fasters in various prison infirmaries and hospitals with the permission of the government that had quarrelsomely reproached them for their decision of non-intervention, they found themselves embarking on what was to be a new phase. They would make a greater effort than everyone else to make the death fasters live by employing, instead of the stern and yet artless procedure of forced feeding, their skills and knowledge, and find that the proximity to the death fasters would make it not more, but less possible.

A death faster suffered from muscle spasms and tremors, Dr. Önder Özkalıpçı related to me, and he discovered that his troubles were caused by potassium deprivation. A truly critical state, he could have died from a cardiac arrest. And because he believed that the varied diets of the death fasters were a sign of their clinging to life—and indeed the death fasters had adjusted the declared diet according to their personal needs—he did not desist to persuade the death faster to take potassium salt since salt was already a part of their diet. But it transpired that even to tirelessly endeavor to find possibilities of prolonging the life of the death faster without doing violence was still to be caught in the act of executing the living as well as being judged for it by both the authorities that had given them permission to enter the prisons and the organizations that had sought their medical supervision. In a second conversation, he related another incident emphasizing the equivocal attitude of the prisoners whose confidence could easily turn into suspicion towards TTB’s doctors and regard into accusation. A death faster had died as a result of the natural course of self-starvation, and he had gone into the cell to deliver the dreaded news. The prisoners in the cell, notwithstanding all Dr. Özkalıpçı’s care, attacked him,
throwing whatever they could find at hand, and storming at him with vengeance, “you’ve killed her.” Death was the death faster’s posthumous power of judgment over the other which was as scrupulous as it was unforgiving and it did not make a distinction among its witnesses.

As he talked disquietedly of his own experience in the hospitals from which the anticipated arrest and thus the futility of the care had eventually withdrawn him, Dr. Hakan Gürvit evinced lament in his allusions to the paralysis of this non-violent other who was equally subjected to the judgment of death. He had been in charge of the death fasters in Kartal Prison and had made constant extended visitations until the June of 2001. That he could neither make them live nor let them die had given him the greatest distress and even made it, at times, impossible for him to continue but he had born the burden with patience and resilience until his patients, the death fasters on the first and second teams, had begun to die one by one, and he then had to abandon, in spite of himself, his commitments to take care instead of the survivors suffering from the Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome. The proximity to the death fasters had enclosed the TTB’s doctors in an impossible resignation and it had forced them to acquiesce to the deaths not because of but in spite of their commitment to non-violence, leaving them with no exit.

For the prison doctors there was one option remaining. The prison doctors eluded the responsibility to decide by exercising their right of withdrawal and they did so, according to Dr. Hulki Forta, to the point of abusing it insofar as they did not defer the decision for medical intervention to another doctor but rather they made their decision for medical intervention through the other doctor. This is how they did it: They transferred
the semi-comatose death faster from the prison infirmary or prison hospital to the emergency rooms of state hospitals where the receiving doctor, by virtue of the medical emergency which demanded urgent and decisive action, administered artificial feeding. Though the Death Fast was in the papers, and though the medical records and the advance instructions of the death fasters including the TTB booklets giving detailed information about the proper administration of artificial feeding were supposed to be transferred with the death faster and signed by the transferring prison doctor, the prison doctor transferred the death faster in his care without ensuring that the doctor taking over the care of the death faster receive the medical records and the advance instructions to enable him to make his own decision. Accordingly, the seeming withdrawal of the transferring prison doctor licensed the receiving doctor to administer artificial feeding as if the death faster in his care were only an anonymous, comatose patient in an emergency room, and in this manner relieved both the transferring prison doctor and the receiving doctor from the responsibility of making an intervention against the will of the death faster. Were the receiving doctor confronted after the medical intervention, he could always have justified his decision by claiming that he did not maintain a doctor-patient relationship with the death faster; and that the advance instructions of the death faster were not handed over to him at the time of the transfer; and that he could not have been sure that the death faster still refused medical treatment on account of the impossibility of communication in the comatose state.

In most instances, though not all, the death fasters pulled off the catheter after regaining consciousness. These death fasters who still persisted in fasting were taken back to the prison cells—at least during the first months after the operation, roughly until
the spring of 2001. Though the long and burdensome transfers operated to weaken and
dissolve their resolution, these death fasters counted themselves fortunate because they
left the unfavorable conditions of the hospital to be attended by their comrades in the
cells. The death fasters, since Bayrampaşa Prison Hospital was the only prison hospital in
the country and this hospital could not itself provide the necessary treatment in the final
phases of the death fast, had to stay in makeshift wards of the state hospitals which, if not
precisely unwholesome, were nevertheless inadequate for the medical care of patients
prone to pneumonia and other infections. Though these patients had to stay in intensive
care units, as Dr. Özkalıpçı communicated, the makeshift wards were usually in the
dilapidated basements or abandoned wards of the hospitals, and though they needed
private nurses who would move them periodically to prevent pulmonary aspiration and
bedsores and help them cleanse themselves, the medical treatment and care did not go
beyond mere artificial feeding. The death fasters were left all by themselves and the
medical staff of the hospital (nurses and rarely doctors) came only three times a day to
change the artificial feeding tube.

After the first series of deaths in the spring of 2001, the prison doctors began to
transfer the death fasters to state hospitals before the comatose state (and Istanbul, they
might first be transferred to Bayrampaşa Prison Hospital from the various prison
infirmaries and then from there to a state hospital depending on the condition of the death
faster), and these death fasters continued their fasting under medical monitoring and
under complete isolation inasmuch as the hospital infrastructure and space allowed for
such a practice. For this reason, though a stern regime of individual isolation was in
practice in some hospitals such as Kartal Training and Research Hospital in Istanbul, group isolation was much more common.\(^{204}\)

While isolating the death fasters—leaving them with their own violence—the authorities took steps to admit first-order kin, only and only them, into the very same space of isolation—leaving them alone together with the familial other. In this way, they not only assigned the families the task of taking care of the death fasters, but one and at the same time deployed the affective attachment of the families against both the death fasters and the families themselves by exposing them to each other. The authorities had already allowed for one-hour daily visits in Bayrampaşa Prison Hospital beginning in early April, and they had done so to add to the sources of dissuasive power over the death fasters for the families had begun to send letters to the government giving permission for involuntary medical treatment of their children. Semiha, both a mother and comrade who worked in TUYAB (The Union for the Relatives of the Arrested), accounted for such a conduct on the part of families by arguing that most families had withdrawn from the struggle after the prison operation because they had lost faith that the Death Fast would succeed in doing away with the new prison regime.\(^ {205}\) She communicated their reasoning to me speaking in their voice: “We knocked on every door, we got beaten up by the police, and yet look what happened? Our children were still put into the F-type prisons.” Convinced though they were of the futility of their children’s struggle, families were also

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\(^{204}\) In fact, group isolation had already begun to operate in the Bayrampaşa Prison Hospital where the death fasters and the injured from the Istanbul prisons were brought after the prison operation. The group isolation functioned here on the basis of a distinction between those death fasters who were still on the fast, those who were no longer on the fast, and those who had resumed fasting after admitting to having made a mistake by accepting medical treatment.

\(^{205}\) TUYAB (The Union for the Relatives of the Arrested) is an umbrella family organization that brings together the relatives of prisoners affiliated with outlawed leftist organizations except those of DHKP-C and TKEP/L.
aware of their limited powers of persuasion and for this reason, they had strived to gain time for their children by giving permission to the authorities against the will of their children. Medical intervention would at least make their children live longer and perhaps give them time too to reconsider their decision.

The subsequent and long-term admission of the familial attendants into state hospitals, though it also sought to harness the mistrust and despondence of families by inserting them into this space of decision, it had a purpose beyond that of disencumbering the doctors of full responsibility. According to Semiha, it had only added to the malevolence of the authorities for they had turned her own child into their instrument of torture and had done so by withdrawing from this scene.

Our admission into the hospital was pure coercion. They let us attend to our children to make us watch them dying. Our hands were tied and we were watching our children dying. It is a veritable torture, is there anything more painful than this?

The authorities deflected the accusatory violence of the death faster off themselves by interposing the familial attendant, and the isolation was the condition for the concentrated form of this violence which exposed the mother to the accusatory violence of her own child.

Semiha stayed in Kartal Training and Research Hospital for two months until the discharge of her daughter as a consequence of the new governmental practice of suspending the sentences of the death fasters on the grounds of their deteriorating health. During the first month, Semiha and her elder daughter were taking turns to take care of the younger daughter. After the first month, the elder daughter announced that she did not feel equal to the task and could not stay there any longer lest “she commits suicide,” and
Semiha had to take over the full care of her daughter all by herself. She had to stay in her daughter’s room at all times which meant that she had to eat and drink in front of her fasting child. The windows of the room were covered with thick and dark curtains and she was not allowed to look outside the windows. The doors of the room had to be kept open and fluorescent lights were on for twenty-four hours for the surveillance of the soldiers who were keeping guard outside the door and in the hallway. She could not even go to the bathroom for cleansing or washing dishes without the company of soldiers since they did not want any of the attendants to see each other.

The regime of isolation in the hospital made it impossible for the familial attendants to retain a reserve and a distance from the violence which submitted them to the violence of the death fasters. They had to suffer through the death fasters—they could not look away—and they could neither suffer for them by fasting in their place—they had to take care of the death fasters—nor suffer together with others—there was no outside of the mise-en-abyme of accusatory violence, which demanded of its victims that they admit their guilt and undersign the decision for the medical intervention.

**A Different Kind of Punishment**

As far as the death fasters were concerned, forced feeding functioned only as a punishment, a punishment that was thereby infinitely at odds with its ostensible aim of preserving their lives against them. For forced feeding did not grant them an extra lease of “life” by making them live; to the contrary, it gave them death in increments and was thus deemed equivalent to torture. This is why the death fasters made strenuous efforts to keep the purity of the act itself, on the hand by precipitating and on the other by deferring death and yet only a very few managed to survive or die without being subjected, not
once but repeated times, to artificial feeding. In these instances, though there are very few exceptions, repeated resuscitations became utterly a matter of indifference, and the death fasters ended up abandoning the act with an acquiescence as though they had long ceased to notice and feel rage at such occurrences which however bore within them the ruins of a subject:

I was never afraid of death. I wanted to die too in this act, but the mental suffering and torture of medical intervention broke me in. They were forcibly hooking up the IV line, and I was pulling it off when I came to my senses, and then they were forcing me to keep the IV line, and I was putting up a fight against it…to live through the same process over and over again has consumed me.

But more than this torturous delay of death, the death fasters in 2000 were beset with a genuine fear of bodily and mental impairment since they lived in close quarters with the survivors of the 1996 Death Fast who could only get by in the prison with the aid of their comrades.

Once-valiant fighters to death, the survivors now suffered from *Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome*, an irreversible damage of the brain brought about by the depletion of thiamin, vitamin B 1. An unavoidable phase in the fatal course of self-starvation, when the death faster does not incorporate the vitamin supplement into the diet, the depletion is disproportionately aggravated by artificial feeding administered without the proper dose of additional B1 for the remaining storage of thiamin in the body is used up in the processing of the sugar in the intravenous infusion—the gift become poison.206

The protective effects of the vitamin B₁ supplement (both against precipitate death and improper artificial feeding) were not known in 1996, and by a fateful turn of events, the survivors had fallen into unknown depths of degradation and abjection by the hands of their own comrades who had rushed to administer the initial intravenous feeding in the wards upon the news of the agreement with the government before the death fasters were taken to the hospital emergency rooms, and in this sorry process, they had even prevented, albeit inadvertently, a number of healthier death fasters from surviving the act unimpaired.

In 2000, a group of neurologists from Istanbul University Çapa Hospital headed by Emel Gökmen and Hakan Gürvit, who had already been part of the group of doctors affiliated with the Association of Turkish Physicians visiting the prisons in 1996, and who had followed up the survivors of the death fast in 1996 after their treatment at the Istanbul University Çapa Hospital over a year-long medical monitoring in Bayrampaşa Prison, initiated a public information campaign with the collaboration of the Association of Turkish Physicians and the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (TIHV) to raise awareness of the essential function of B₁ in preempting the Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome with the purpose of saving a new group of death fasters from becoming invalid like their counterparts in 1996.¹⁰⁷ Emel Gökmen and Hakan Gürvit together with Erdoğan

¹⁰⁷ The Association of Turkish Physicians educated the prison doctors about proper artificial feeding and established a pilot center in Bayrampaşa Prison. It had also prepared two booklets and sent them to all the hospitals and affiliate doctors of the association. Basing itself on the study of Gökmen and Gürvit, the first booklet provided the doctors with the necessary information on the monitoring of the death fasters and their proper medical treatment. The second booklet which proved to be controversial informed the doctors about the principles of professional ethics concerning hunger striking and practical guidelines for action. This booklet was based on the World Medical Association’s Declaration of Malta on Hunger Strikers. The Human Rights Foundation of Turkey organized the delivery of pure B₁ (in tablet and ampoule form) to prisons, state hospitals and families. There was no unmixed form of B₁ in Turkey and the death fasters needed very high doses of the vitamin, the pure form of the vitamin was brought in suitcases from Europe by volunteers.
Ozkalıpçı, a forensic doctor affiliated with the Human Rights Foundation who had performed the first autopsies of the death fasters in the country after the Death Fast in 1984, made representations to persuade the organizations to use B 1. They enjoined the organizations to recognize that the protection of the resistance depended upon their self-protection. According to these doctors, the organizations, and especially DHKP-C among them, were still deeply critical of B 1 because they thought that B-1 functioned merely to compromise the only binding force of the Death Fast, as was already in evidence in the falsifications by the government and seemed prepared to disregard the use of B 1 to defend the resistance itself. The doctors contended that the refusal to use B 1 in the belief that aspersions of the government might thereby be proven wrong was absolutely disastrous, and would serve in fact only to precipitate deaths. For their part, they promised the prisoners that they would take on the responsibility of informing the public about the proper functions of B 1. Though they recognized that there was always the risk that their endeavor to publicize the necessity and benefits of B 1 might itself be inverted into just another threat of violence against the death fasters, since it was always possible that a hostile other could also use this medical information to harm the death fasters, and for this reason alone, the doctors argued, it was all the more urgent for them to use B 1 because it would protect them against improper artificial feeding.

Though the death fasters accepted to take B 1 in 2000 for self-protection and though the proper termination of the death fast was public knowledge among prison doctors and those at state hospitals at the time, the death fasters in 2000 still concluded that they plainly ran the risk of becoming an invalid because of their close contact with the 1996 survivors who were afflicted with the Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome.
The strange affliction manifested itself in the ataxic gait of the survivors and some could not even walk on their own due to a vertiginous imbalance, and when it was not restricted to a “pure” Wernicke’s disease and it hardly ever was, it assumed the form of an enduring amnesia, Korsakoff’s psychosis, which did not only cover with oblivion indiscriminate parts of their past, but more troublingly, dispossessed them of the presence of the present by making it impossible to recover the alterity of the past by means of retention—they could not recognize people they have met, places they have been, conversations they have held, emotions they have felt across an indefinite lapse of time though they had the sensation of having seen, having been, having spoken, having felt—the past did not return as a present or more properly speaking, the past returned but to immure the present in its absence. The presence of the absence of the past made of the present a repeated opening to time and space which did not give itself as a world but as a world always already at its ending whereby awakening to consciousness was experienced more as a perpetual recapitulation of death than a rebirth. A punishment, in I.’s words, much more iniquitous than a death sentence:

They [the authorities] thought that they could end the Death Fast with medical intervention and especially with improper medical intervention. If you die, it serves my purpose, but if you don’t die and become like this, it serves my purpose even better. I am not killing, I will not kill, I will not let you die, but I will make it much worse than dying. You’re going to die everyday, every time you wake up, you will be born again. It is something for someone to die once, it is completely something else to be born again and die again every single day. The same thing starts over and over again.
I dis-appear: The Mad Return Writing the Diary of a Death Faster

Unlike the fallen fasters who escaped death by the perpetuation of their proper names within the perenniality of the political collectivity, İsmail Hakkı Sadiç appeared to be an embarrassing and out-of-place figure that was neither living nor dead. Yet what he may be found to offer, within the confines of his journal, was another name for death.

Lacking the sublime splendor of the dead, he was driven by a guilty solitude to bring to a closure his act interrupted by forces outside and beyond his will, but he was more than ever incapable for he had sunk into an inescapable void which covered with oblivion the most basic facts. For how long has the death fast been going on? What were their demands? When did he end his fast? Was he the only one in this condition? Did he ever want to resume fasting? Did they allow for it? He did not remember. His comrades’ answers momentarily dispersed the darkness enveloping him like a flash of lightening leaving behind the same trail of questions.

İsmail Hakkı Sadiç begins the preface to his journal published under the title Hazy Light [Puslu Aydınlık] (2001) by quoting himself proclaiming a crime that has left him as a trace in effacing all traces of its violence. This crime that has irreparably rendered him incomplete and in search of his self, is a theft of memories:

Who am I? My name is İsmail Hakkı Sadiç. I’m a person who has been on the death fast for 120 days in Edirne F-type Prison where I was transferred after December 19. I’m a Human Being whose memory [hafıza] has been effaced, and who has been robbed of his past and his memories [anı] marked by happiness, hope, fear, love and hatred. I’m a Human Being who is forever bound to live in the Moment [An] and who comes to life and dies yet again every single day as a result of forced medical intervention. (1)

He has lost his past. He has lost something that he had already lost, but he feels that he has lost himself as if he were dead for he has become an empty consciousness of
time only marking the return where things become both what they are and other than what they are, and dis-appear.

Awakening to consciousness, Sadiç bears witness to the fragility of his link to the world. His awakening always occurs as an awareness of the overwhelming force of an unknowing repetition. He does not know what he is repeating, but he knows that he is repeating.

I don’t know today’s date. It is as if I have awakened for the first time today. It is as if I’m seeing this place, my friends for the first time, but it is also as if I’ve seen and known them before. (24)

All that takes place takes place, so to speak, with quotation marks, both as a vestige and as an alteration of itself. This perpetual recurrence turns each person or event into a version of another. Each event, it seems, is like a memory or a premonition that is full of meaning only to the extent that it is simultaneously empty of all meaning.

When he begins to feel completely undone by this strange force which plays havoc with states of consciousness like “first time” and “again” by making things happen for the first time as already past, Sadiç decides to keep a journal to establish a series of reference points which will allow him to ground himself in this present without present. Yet what begins as an unyielding exercise in memorization, ends as a memorial for forgetting. Unaware of the risks of writing, he is gradually led astray from his task.

The journal opens with a litany of proper names which might as well be read as a death toll from a war. In his first entry which is undated, Sadiç writes about the condition of his comrades. Next to each proper name, he jots down whether they are living or dead. And if living whether they are still continuing to fast or not. He features his name among
the rest as an “I” fallen into the anonymity of a third person: “Ismail Sadiç =terminated his hunger strike” (5).

In the following entry, from which time is still absent, Sadiç recounts his awakening to consciousness at a hospital where he had apparently been taken for medical intervention upon losing consciousness. Finding himself hooked up to an IV line, Sadiç takes it off without delay. A comrade sitting on a bed near the windowsill tries to stop him alleging that the death fast has come to an end for them as a result of the medical intervention. Sadiç refuses ardently and maintains that they are obliged to recommence fasting upon regaining consciousness. If he were to take off the IV feed, his comrade assures him, the authorities would enchain Sadiç to bed and transfer his comrade to another ward presuming that he has forced Sadiç to resume fasting. In this way, Sadiç would hinder him from taking care of a third comrade who is lying unconscious in the next bed. Instead of betraying his cause, Sadiç betrays his comrades, and as the first comrade anticipated, he ends up being chained to his bed and having an IV forcefully reinserted. The journal entry closes with his awakening from sleep to realize that the first comrade has indeed disappeared leaving him alone with the third one still lying unconscious. In insisting on my cause, Sadiç seems to be saying, I lost my one and only witness who could have testified to my fidelity. In fact, no one could possibly watch the death fasters constantly, day and night, and so no one could produce firsthand evidence that their fast had really been rigorous and continuous. Only the death fasters themselves could know that. They are therefore bound to be the sole spectators of themselves. And Sadiç knows deep down that he could not have stayed true to his cause for he is living. That the narrative leaves unsaid the facticity of his survival unveils the scene of fidelity
as a scene of betrayal. More important, the veracity and the sincerity of the narrative remain in suspense until a certain event has taken place that makes the future into the point from where the past, seen in retrospect, gains the value of truth. As Sadiç questions himself: “If it has really happened in this way, why don’t they want me to resume death fasting? Why don’t they give me permission? Why don’t they trust me?” (9)

As the desired event fails to take place, Sadiç returns to the ambivalent scene to write it over and over again. Though with each new repetition, it becomes not more but less recognizable. What has been narrated in the definite past tense comes to be narrated in the inferential past tense. Implying possibility, doubt and uncertainty, the inferential past tense is used in Turkish whenever the speaker has not been an eyewitness to the past events. If his re-inscription of the events at the hospital disappears Sadiç, where he was, it simultaneously causes him to appear where he is not, by representing him at a distance from himself.

He is writing in order not to forget. Every time he writes, he also reads. Every time he reads his writing, he becomes conscious of himself as other. The act of writing is from the first divided by the complicity between writing and reading. Yet this mutual implication of writing and reading takes a very different modality here because of the irremediability of the gap between Sadiç the writer and Sadiç the reader. Sadiç the reader recognizes but cannot identify with Sadiç the writer. This division brings about a striking transformation in his relationship to himself. He now begins to feel he is quoting himself endlessly as if he were a copier of his own writing.

I do not remember having written this, but I do remember having read something like this. Is it because I have read it that I am writing it? Is it because I do not know what to write that I keep writing what I have read? Do I do this all the time? (40)
His writing is in the form of a series of repetitions or recurrences in which to advance is always already to return. Repetition here functions as both compulsion and failure and writing then becomes an insistent repetition of that which by definition it cannot say. It becomes unreadable. Like an image which startles the eye, the very materiality of his repetitive writing manifests nothing except that he cannot forget that he is forgetting.

Even I cannot read what I have written. Why is it then that I keep writing so blindly and inattentively? Or am I scribbling on this blank sheet of paper just to kill time, to forget. Do I really remember these things? Or do I not want to remember them? (42)

As he realizes that there ceases to be any escape from this vacuous accumulation, Sadiç starts to question his own intentions. Perhaps he is writing to forget rather than to remember. Or even worse, he is perhaps pretending to forget in order to evade his responsibilities to his comrades surreptitiously. Now, though, the compulsion to repeat takes on a more violent, less forgiving dimension, and while on one level, Sadiç forfeits any control over the words he still takes to be his, he is also compelled, with this endless repetition, to entertain the thought that it demands of him. There is no remedy for him but death. Thus, he desires nothing else but to die on the death fast.

While the journal ends without ending, writing and its temporality startlingly shifts with the letters in the appendix. The temporality of writing in the journal belongs, in fact, neither to past nor to present nor future, but rather to another time, in relation to which, time itself is continually beside, outside, or beyond itself. In stark contrast to the journal, Sadiç’s letters to his comrades bespeak of an unwavering faith in a future as a
moment of deferred ending. He imagines the times when cemeteries will have been converted from places of mourning into schools wherein people will have learned from the epitaphs. His hallucinatory notes will then have acquired a historical value for future generations. To this temporal alteration is added even greater and more astounding intensity as Sadiç affirms life with all the force he can muster in view of this dream about the future that he shares with his comrades. His desire for death then transforms into a desire for immortality.

Yes, comrade. I manage to stand upright, to keep living because of this dream. And with this dream, I gather the force to collect myself together to go down for another run on the track. And I will do this. And I will do this. And I will do this. I will run again. I will run again. I will run again. I will once again capture time inside me, and take it between my hands. I will once again master time. I will once again capture time inside me, and take it between my hands. I will once again master time. (68)

After

G. still insisted on the inescapable necessity of the Death Fast in 2000 and it was evidently hard to imagine that any of her comrades could have thought otherwise. At any event, as far as G. was concerned, there seemed little reason why she should want to regret her decision, though they had paid an exceedingly high price as a result of the flawed organization of the Death Fast, anymore than in 2000 she might have wanted in principle to question the organizational command that had excluded in advance all other possibilities of political action. But though this had the effect of precipitating a massive number of them headlong into the Death Fast and G. asked in retrospect whether the Death Fast had to be organized as a collective act to such a degree, the organizational command had arguably proven itself to be far less equipped in providing the conditions
for the death fasters to maintain a uniform, unvarying regimen that the collective nature of the Death Fast had required of them.

This unacceptable inconstancy had severely affected the whole of the first and second teams who were able to take vitamin B1 only intermittently, for 20 days or a month at the most without interruption, because the delivery of the vitamin to prisons was cut off following the prison operation. The implications of this imprudence were serious ones, to the extent that these teams had the highest number of death fasters, and this was surely one reason why their members had succumbed to premature brain damage which could have been averted by taking appropriate action under the circumstances.

This restrained yet also deeply indignant imputation of negligence to the organizational command was a symptom of the larger crisis affecting G.’s life in the present which had to do with the strained relationship—both interdependence and disparity that still bound the survivors to the organization. Indeed, G. conceded, the organization had offered the greatest assistance in returning them to everyday life by opening Yaşam Evi (House of Life) barely one month after the discharges from prison. She had been just a visitor at the House because her family, living in Istanbul, had been taking care of her since her release shortly after the forced termination of her hundred-and-thirty-five-days-long death fast. G., overindulged by her family, had felt that their effusive but no less solitary attention had required her to take a distance from this “smothering atmosphere.” “My family,” she said, “was mistaken. They thought that I would get better if they fed me and put me to bed. The separation from home, from my mother and father, was the most effective cure for me.” She expatiated on the gratifications of visiting the House, and though she was able to make the scene once or
twice a week, “there was, as though, a cut between the two atmospheres,” she said, “my feelings and thoughts used to change the moment I arrived at the House as if I were making a new beginning.” There was something delightful and enjoyable about performing their home exercises together that had gotten easier and easier until she was able to walk on her own. It was the same with eating together—they were not able to prepare their own meals but they could help with setting the table and cleaning afterwards whereas her mother would not even let her put an empty glass on the tray. She had also developed her poor speech by partaking in the daily routine of reading newspaper articles to each other. There was much chance of coming into contact with others at the House too if only because it had become a gathering place for old and new acquaintances who were coming in twos and threes one after another to offer their services to them, and G. had personally got to know quite a few herself in all her months there.

She had continued to share the life at the House—this well-regulated and diligent life—with dear old comrades, doing exactly what they did month after month. At first she had rather liked being in close proximity with them, but after being there for two years, she could not say she enjoyed it anymore because it was a proximity based solely on illness which closed them off to the world, as if there were no need for them even to go outside or speak to others. They had a great deal of resolve about them—though, granted, without their even being aware of it, that resolve was being increasingly satisfied by treatment, to the point where it had become, as it were, a substitute for the political duties to be fulfilled out in the world, a kind of “false” occupation.

Immediately after recuperating her bodily autonomy—she could walk with a walking stick out there in the world—G. wanted to return to “active duty.” The thing was,
as she told me one day, they had begun to “regress” under the celebratory embrace of the comrades and in a year or two it was all over with such attention, and then she had suddenly come to see that they had fallen outside the political scene. Her constitution was not exactly the strongest true and she would be lying were she to claim that she was capable of all efforts and activities—she moved slowly, spoke in a garbled and impeded manner, and forgot repeatedly. Yet there was no reason she should have filled her world with the treatment, and nor did they have the right to send her from one interview to another, from one film shoot to another, without asking of her opinion as if her health hardly qualified her for any other role but that of a witness. And who better to perform this role, she implied, than an ailing survivor whose only relation to the organization was through her witnessing? And who, in every essential aspect, could have been just any one of them?

She had found a keyboard at home and started to practice touch-typing, devotedly, with the ambition of type-setting for their newspaper. Gone now were the days of armed struggle, even those of unionizing in the textile workshops, all of which had occupied her early years in the organization before going into prison. Though she could no longer take part in active political duty, she thought that she could have daily and first-hand knowledge of the politics of the organization, familiarizing herself with the positions on current issues by taking up this task in the newspaper. Her expectations did not correspond to their decision nonetheless which frustrated all the hopes she had cherished for her return to active life, and she understood only too well the connection between the decision and her poor health. After all they had chosen, instead of her, another ailing death faster that distinguished him—to his advantage—from G. with the greater bodily
debilitation, making in “frigid objectivity” the matter-of-fact point that the severity of her malady, above and beyond personal considerations, was the reason behind her elimination. His health did undoubtedly far surpass her own and it was quite conceivable that they may have found her “defects” prejudicial to the efforts and activities of the organization, and yet G. still demanded an explanation for the decision and drafted a letter to this effect. The letter, perhaps more damagingly, was never answered, and in opposing only a hollow silence to all her questions, the organizational command—after granting her an exceptional status in the Death Fast—had totally disregarded G. as if she were not an equal at all, refusing to acknowledge her as an addressee even. And that was what enraged her, “this was the moment she had really lost it,” in the same way she had been enraged that day in the film shoot, when she had realized that the organizational command was taking utter license with their illness, the illness that embodied her being and that she shared with the others. She would not have been assigned to the task but for her crutches—the organizational command had chosen her for the interview only to exploit the exhibitional value of her crutches which accentuated and enhanced her condition as though she were a mere “mannequin.”

Her anger was heavy-laden with disappointment, doubt, and fear which had spilled over into boundless uncertainty about herself. Up to that moment G. had preserved her individual self-respect, though the reserve and brooding silence of the organizational command had caused her to be visited by periodic doubt, but now she looked at herself with their eyes and realized clearly and distinctly, as doubtless they did too, that she was an invalid:

Okay, I’m thinking of doing this, but will I be able to do this or not? Will I be able to take a position there? Will I be able to take up this task in this activity?
After a while, you start picking at yourself. From then on, you don’t say that the people around you are doing this to you. You start saying, “I’m like this, I couldn’t do this or that. Or I won’t be able to do this.

They had an attendant comrade who accompanied them everywhere, taking them to their treatment at the Human Rights Foundation and overseeing their daily programmes at the House. He would help them walk in the streets and attend social gatherings, always introducing G. and her ailing comrades as death fasters. This was the title he used emphatically, though not Praisingly, not in the sense in which they had learned to understand it during the struggle, it had little to do with the distinction and honor that they had attached to the word. For he would never present himself as a death faster, though he had been one, unless someone in the group identified him as being one of them. That he preferred to remain inconspicuous had made it clear that the title death faster, which had normally served as a title of honor and distinction, was cast in an entirely dark light now, which was absolutely appalling—it had turned into a stigma underwritten by medical dictum:

Even if you rip at the walls with your fingernails and say you want to do something, even if you believe that you’re capable of doing a certain task, at least up to a certain level, there is a stigma (yafta) which sticks to you. You are damaged in one way or another, and there is a medical name for this damage. The most important thing about it is that it is brain damage. It sticks to you like a stigma in one way or another because you cannot recover from it.

Further, two weeks ago, she had learned from her sister that everybody shunned her like the plague during the first two years of her release from the prison; for whenever their comrades invited her sister to an activity and she wanted to bring along G., under the circumstances, and in order to avoid unnecessary troubles and public attention, they had compelled her sister to leave her behind as G. used to shout in the streets, though at
separated intervals of time, and fall down too when a loud sound made her lose her
balance. For G. the belated news from her sister was too much—she clenched her fists—
the disregard of the organizational command had already weighed on her stilling her
desire to rise above her disease; it had made her susceptible to interludes of self-doubt
that had slowly, remorselessly, grown worse. But this, that her own comrades did not
want her around she had not expected to hear from her sister; it made her see the entirety
of the world in the sign and image of her illness. Nothing could come out of her efforts to
make progress but the futility of such a proceeding because “nobody finds you self-
sufficient, they do not make long-term plans with you.”

Nothing, not even her survival of the operation and death fast, had been more
exacting than her relations with her comrades, family and people in the streets, this
distress was exacerbated by the amnesia afflicting her, but no less than by the experience
of the outside world after five years of imprisonment, and G. remembered neither the
outside world, nor herself, though she had to inhabit both; she had left them in the past:

I am aware that I am not the old G.. I feel so differently but I don’t remember the
old G.. But the ones who look from the outside tell me that I am still like the old
G. “Your reactions are those of old G.,” “You haven’t changed that much,” they
tell me. But I don’t have it. I don’t remember how I used to react to things in the
past. Based on what they tell me, I say, ‘Huh. Hmmm. That’s how old G. used to
respond, that’s how I used to think under these circumstances.’

People around her attributed to G. a self-sameness and imagined that the ill G.
was, as it were, the old G. who had to bear the agonies of an ill one, but nothing was
further from the truth. As far as G. was concerned, the old G. had already died and she
related to it as if it were a mere name which survived its bearer—and wasn’t it a fact that
the old G. could not die completely because people were ever ready to lend her a hand in
remembering it with a wealth of anecdotes and narratives that elicited more of an acquiescence than inquisitiveness, an indifference than exhilaration on the part of G.? But they were not in the faintest degree interested in the future of G., or rather a common future with her, “nobody ever makes long-term plans with you,” she repeated again and again. In her hopeless and circumscribed state that went nowhere beyond itself—she showed her crutches—how could she give form to the new person that had come into being? A new G. who was always already dispossessed of the future, she was suspended in a present between the past and the future which, as she figured it, was a passageway which did not give way to a passing. She was waiting there for some decisive event to happen:

It is as if we are on a subway platform or in a waiting room, neither our before, nor our after is clear. We’re waiting in that corridor. One day when we fully remember our past or ourselves, our before, when we become capable of making a decision about our future, about what we will be doing, how we will be situating ourselves in the future, it seems like we will step out of that corridor. But I don’t know myself when and how we will come out of this corridor.
Conclusion

Who or What Survives?

Like any conclusion, this one also has a prospective as well as a retrospective dimension. The Death Fast was addressed here both as political violence and as something more than political violence which could still be named as political violence but also exceeded that name and stood, as it were, beyond the violence of the political.

Infidelity, it seems, is an unavoidable condition of all critique, and yet to respond faithfully to the death fasters, I suggested, one must pursue their own language to the limit, in order to draw forth this something or someone that carries the Death Fast outside and beyond itself and confounds political conviction, and affirm thus the difference of the Death Fast from itself. A critique that opens the Death Fast to its own difference is a form of fidelity which is necessarily couched in infidelity.

Derrida (2002: 289) has observed that Kritik of violence for Benjamin means primarily having the “diacritical” power to choose, discriminate, decide between different forms of violence. But what is it, one may ask, about the destructive violence of the kind affirmed by Benjamin, that distinguishes it from the violence of law? To this question Benjamin provides in fact only an opaque answer; for what justifies the revolutionary recourse to violence in Benjamin’s text is neither the ends of this violence, which necessarily turn it into an act of foundation, nor its effects, but the relation of this violence to the present. Benjamin makes it evident that his critique is concerned precisely with the relation of violence to the subject and to the social, the relation of violence to the subject as a relation to the social, not in the mode of founding, but rather in that of an opening which destroys nothing but the permanence of identity. Benjamin’s resolve to
overcome an instrumental and a productive concept of violence represents an effort to think violence as an event whose very eventfulness consists in the opening of the social that both determines and is determined by the opening of a petrified subject onto the social: a new, unprecedented, and one may add unrecognizable, subject born in and by the transformation in the order of social relations.

Accordingly, a critique does not deserve the name for Benjamin unless it enables one to judge violence differently and otherwise than the courts of law, including those who invoke the codes and rhetoric of law in other guises. That is to say, the critique itself has to ignore, suspend, erase, displace, and alter the instituted protocols of readability of violence; and it may be argued that this is what gives the demonstrative power, exemplary force to the pedagogical violence by which Benjamin communicates the violence of this (self)-transformation. The task of the critic of violence, in Benjamin’s terms, is to disrupt the languages and signifying orders of violence, languages which have frozen (and thus decayed) into a mere code of the community, by turning the critique itself into an inseparable part of the event that the critique does not represent but puts into play insofar as the possibility of language—response to that which lies beyond the code—is itself on this condition.

The work of the critic of the Death Fast begins in a political space overdetermined by the sacredness of life, and despite the uncontrollable political equivocation inherent in the word “life,” contending ideologies are agreed in their avowed intention to protect the inviolability of life. Rather than a decision between rivalrous forms of life, such as “individual” or “communal”, the question of politics may perhaps best be described as the question of the decision between a life enclosed within itself, isolated not only from
what can injure it but from what can come to its rescue and allow it to endure in time and a life open to the Other which takes the risk to leave itself behind and in the process gives rise to other than itself. In other words, between a sacrifice which measures life against life and a sacrifice which gives life to life, or between a community of sacrificial reproduction and a community exposed to its own difference.\textsuperscript{208} And it is clear, as witnessed by the notion of sovereignty underlying the Death Fast from the outset, that the thinking of community is here decisively coded by the concept of sacrifice that embalms life in the ideal image of death.

This is why it is all the more bewildering that those who speak, if not in the place of death fasters, on their behalf, impose the burden of responsibility on an exterior collective subject whose political judgment, as it were, is dangerously bound by moral judgment concerning the life of the death fasters. A responsible critic, if a non-violent critique is impossible, refuses to arrogate the power of moral judgment since this subjective act of judgment recoils upon itself and provokes its own judgment, a sentence which only pronounces the identity of the subject of judgment: murderer or brother. Such at any rate is the implication behind the insistence of the organizations on the necessity of declared positions, and though the organizations emphasize the primacy of their political values over life, they cannot not adopt as their own the vocabulary of the state for they also accuse their adversaries in the name of the inviolability of life, and it is this double strategy of affirmation and negation of life that governs their moral legislation of the Death Fast. For the sacrificial execution of life, if it is not recognized as sacrifice, reverts to murder; and the addressees who do not suspend the undecidably illicit action by recognizing the Death Fast as a sacrifice in their own name become de jure murderers.

\textsuperscript{208} “To sacrifice,” Blanchot (1988:15) writes, quoting Bataille, “is not to kill, but to abandon and give.”
That one has to decide and to decide quickly between the injustice of law and the legitimacy of their demands, between the secret violence of the carceral regime and the truthfulness of the death fasters lest the addressees themselves be adjudged as guilty by the mourners of the silent, dead body of the death faster, however, leaves little space of intervention for the critic who is struck by the rift between the space of dying and political space borne by the death faster.

The awareness of the rift between the space of dying and political space, between the endurance of the death faster and the duration of the political act—the distinction that one might thematize as the difference between ethics and politics—requires of the critic that she attends with vigilance to the anonymity of life which links—without linking—the two spaces. For any act of linking between the two spaces is dependent on what one might call a condition of originary de-linking. On the one hand, such a condition implies the possibility, indeed, the necessity of linking in general, without which there would be no meaning or sense available to political discourse at all. On the other hand, if what presides over the linking of the two spaces is a principle of originary de-linking, it follows that the link between the space of dying and political space can only ever be a secondary or derived one; with the result that every linking necessarily remains precarious and arbitrary, subject to endless multiplication and revision, or writing. The death faster, in his or her resistance to naming, bears witness to this rift whose very purpose is to challenge the adequacy of linkages rather than confirm their authority.

This is why, I responded, within my own writing of the Death Fast, to the inculpating question, insistent demand, and pressing urgency at heart of the Death Fast, by displacing the critical gaze from the political space to the space of dying, from the
dialectic of politico-juridical sovereignty to the event, from the symbolics of martyrdom to the remnants of the Death Fast who clung to life outside time and sociability. This anti-anamorphic gaze—to the extent that it deformed the image of beautiful death—necessarily broke with the demand for the disclosure of truth, since death never yields itself to a single truth, but to a truth that is always other, and attended instead to the question of testimony. The testimony of the death fasters, insofar as testimony is precisely that which is “untrue” in the radical sense of not being subject to values of truth and falsity, allowed the opening of a relation to the Other beyond the barriers of languages encrusted with formulas, mannerisms, and stereotypes, including both the language of the organizations which functioned like a password, more a mere marker of identity than a language, and the languages of the Right and the Left which echoed, albeit differently, the official language of the state in its tick-like reaction. For the Left also lacked that “momentary suspension of disbelief” which is necessary to hear the Other. On one level, such an approach may be criticized as naïve, but as Derrida (2002) says there is no social bond without this elementary faith, “without an ‘I believe you,’ without an ‘I believe’,” naivety here is better read as an uncertain name for the act of commitment to the Other that originates in the very rupture of community, an act of commitment to the death faster who strikes as a disruptive force, as difference, that makes language possible, before he or she becomes a sign—and it does not matter whether he or she functions as a sign of the violence of the state or the power of the organization—in which, as Benjamin insisted, the violence of language and language of violence bleeds into each other.

209 Indeed, Roland Barthes (1989: 68) defines the mythic as the “density of idiolect”. 
To respond to the death faster as Other—and does not all language come from the Other?—the dissertation overemphasized the scandalous disproportion between human loss and political gain, which was more symbolic than real. And yet to overstate the political defeat was not to give credit to the instrumental logic of politics, but, beyond such instrumentality, to think the improductivity of the Death Fast in relation not to the political and juridical order, but to the event which was indifferent to a future judged as success or failure. In this respect, my own political conclusions take their distance from the assessments of both the organizations and their leftist critics that, despite their seeming opposition, are indeed reverse images of each other in that they both measure the success or the failure of the event by its end results as though the event could only become recognizable as a work of death.

On the Left’s reading, the prison movement had suffered a heavy tactical defeat, one which was greatly exacerbated by the investment of the entirety of its forces into the Death Fast.²¹⁰ This massive investment in the Death Fast at the expense of other forms of prison struggle had premised itself upon the impossibility of protecting self-dignity and honor in the F-type prisons, and by that very token had identified the physical fact of confinement itself, notwithstanding the noncompliance of the prisoners, with political submission which had in turn necessitated fending off the attack with a single and definitive counter-attack at the price of a high number of deaths. The insistence of the organizations on the Death Fast, from the perspective of the Left, had resulted in the disastrous expenditure of their forces. Aside from the deaths of one hundred twenty two

militants, they argued, the socialist movement would be preoccupied with attending to the survivors with physical and mental impairment which meant ultimately that the movement would be diverted from its pending political tasks unless the organizations relegated a great measure of the burden to the families, and such a course of action would in turn damage irreparably the ties with the families.

The expansion of the Death Fast after the prison operation, instead of a temporary retreat that would have obligated the political authorities to account for the deaths of thirty-two prisoners, the argument of the Left continued, had lent credibility to the public image of the state as a protective power that made all the effort to keep the death fasters alive, and this had led inexorably to the incrimination of the organizations, families, and other supporting groups for the ensuing deaths by the political authorities who had simply looked to the withering of the Death Fast with a deadly intransigence. Accordingly, the insistence of the organizations had served not to raise the hopes of the masses, but merely to exacerbate their despair by showing the state to be unwilling and inflexible in the face of such heroic perseverance and what this implied for the politics of the future was that the Death Fast had consumed the efficacy and the significance of the hunger strike as a political means rendering it inoperative for the foreseeable future.

But the Left called into question, in the strongest possible terms, not only the political logic and effectiveness of the full commitment of the organizations to the Death Fast, but also explained it in a much more far-reaching way as both the cause and the effect of the severance of the prison struggle from other political and social struggles. The prison organizations had missed the political moment—the risk and chance of the contingent event occasioned by the concomitance of the economic crisis with the penal
transformation—to augment the rising protests by strengthening their weak ties to the working people. Throughout the winter of 2001 and into the spring, the public protests against the economic crisis had expanded from the industrial workers to the public employees on the one hand and on the other to the small shop-keepers and craftsmen, and though the prison movement had sought to extend itself towards other struggles by including the abrogation of the Anti-Terror Law and the State Security Courts within its list of demands, they had subordinated the material interests of the working classes to the immediate demands of the prisoners. True, the prison struggle had attempted to win over the working classes and the Kurdish people to its cause by proclaiming that the F-type offensive was an offensive equally against them, and yet this claim had not gone beyond mere agitation-propaganda insofar as it was based on the rebuttable presumption that the military and the political authorities had attacked the prisoners to coerce the working people into submission by destroying their vanguards who safeguarded their hopes with exemplary defiance and perseverance in the prisons. From the Left’s perspective, the vanguardism of the prisoners was not a true and actual vanguardism, but a fictive and at best a potential one and it was the endemic inability of the organizations to confront this issue that had given rise to the Left’s critique of the Death Fast, which they saw as a movement motivated more by wishful thinking than by proper understanding of political realities, and blinded to the unpalatable truths by their obstinate belief in their role as vanguards. Indeed, the F-type attack against the prisoners was itself a structural effect of precariousness of the ties with the working classes and their representative political organizations, and this was why the victories in the past struggles for rights in prisons had shown themselves to be partial and temporary which had only resulted in the physical
debilitation of the prisoners, and the political and administrative authorities had employed this war of attrition to pernicious effect by delaying the medical treatment of the prisoners after long-term hunger strikes. Thus, according to the Left, the brutal implementation of the penal regime of isolation was itself rendered possible by the confinement of the prison movement within itself, and it was largely the withdrawal of the organizations from politics, and the illusive nature of the vanguard war adopted by them in prisons, that lay behind the scandalous negligence of the Death Fast. In their regard, the Death Fast, if not exemplary, was arguably no exception to the “narcissistic” manner of politics adopted by the organizations and the Left also castigated the organizations for their voluntarism in having firmly established self-sacrifice as a “norm”—a norm which had erased the distinction between sacrificiality and mere killability—with the result that the organizations, being enclosed within themselves, like brotherhoods (tarikat) and sects (mezhep), had become enthralled with death.211

Violently polemical and full of rhetorical reversal, this is a critique in which the representation of the Death Fast seems to be finally indistinguishable from the rhetoric of the state officials. It is true that this hostility to the organizations on the part of socialist workers parties (Labor Party (EMEP), Socialist Power Party (SIP), and Freedom and Solidarity Party (ÖDP)) was hardly unexpected, for it was entirely consistent with their divergent, dissymmetrical political discourses throughout the whole of the preceding

decade; no one was surprised, therefore, least of all DHKP-C, which could only think of accusing the workers parties of being fearful of the violence of the state.  

Admittedly, this view of the Death Fast was not shared by all sections of the Turkish Left. Ömer Laçiner, in Birikim, for instance, though still deeply critical of the solipsistic closure of the illegal organizations as such, sought to give a sociological explanation. On his reading, 1980 was a watershed for the socialist struggle in Turkey; for in September that year the military coup had crushed the socialist movement and by the early 1990s, to all intents and purposes, the majority of the leftist groups had abandoned the armed struggle they had been pursuing, at different intervals, since the beginning of the 1970s, in favor of legal party and union activities. The post-1980 divide between legal parties and illegal organizations, though they pretended differently to their addressees, argued Laçiner, corresponded to a social divide which had partitioned the society into two irreconcilable camps. The illegal organizations recruited their members largely from disaffected youth in poor neighborhoods, who, sick and tired of the dejection and contempt of society, had turned to armed struggle in the desire to overcome what they saw as their entrapment in a state of “non-being” (hiçlik); indeed alongside their deep-seated anger, disgust with polite society, and hatred of police, what mainly

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distinguished these youth was their readiness to undertake violent acts that demanded of them their own self-destruction.

Though understandable, Laçiner argued, in the context of a capillary and yet invisible social confinement, this mode of violence had nonetheless severely hollowed out the role of armed struggle within liberation and socialist movements. Armed struggle here no longer targeted critical centers of infrastructure and key figures of authority in order to effect a political hiatus; it instead concerned itself only with the mere auxiliaries of power in murderous revenge with policemen, and in this respect, the organizations had constrained armed struggle within a certain political, ideological and existential closure, a closure in relation to which violence had begun to operate as a simple posture of negation, a negation which only negated their state of exclusion. So, however much this mode of violence was legitimized as a defense of the future of the people against the repressive violence of the state, it did not go beyond a mere revolt and, what is more, it was a revolt against the entire society as though the cause of their ignominy and misery could be attributed to everyone and no one. And though Laçiner went on to argue that this posture of revolt reached its apotheosis in self-destruction insofar as the purity of the act decidedly depended on the willed embrace of death, he was still obliquely critical, by his very sociological emphasis, of at least some of the analysis put forward by the

214 In her reading of the Death Fast, Banu Bargu (2008) radicalizes this posture of negation to the point of affirming it as an act of absolute refusal. However, the purity of this refusal is arguably far less radical than her analytic requires. To the extent that the violence of refusal, by interrupting politics, offers itself up as the foundation and beginning for a new politics, it inevitably always already forms part of that new politics; the act of revolt turns retrospectively into an act of foundation and the act of refusal becomes an act of assertion. What at one stage may be construed as a pure interruption of politics, then, necessarily runs the risk of turning out to have been only an impure episode in politics.
socialist workers parties. For he suggested that the failure to think of the question of social transformation except in terms of the act of refusal and to conceive of violence not in relation to the transformation of social relations, as a Marxist politics would do, but by recourse to that, despite the strenuous efforts of the organizations to make it appear otherwise, it was difficult to understand in any other way than a mere “reactivity”, was itself the symptom of a social and political predicament. On the one hand, Laçiner rightly pointed out that the violent, visceral act of refusal was the consequence and the sign of the incapacity of the organizations to command the economic and techno-scientific machinery that had pushed a large section of the population into the margins of society only to stifle them beneath a rigid and oppressive surveillance; and on the other, what was clearly at stake here, in Laçiner’s view, was the future of a socialist politics which had lost its “creative and critical impetus.” Thus, the question that came to dominate the whole of the thinking with regard to the Death Fast, beyond the legitimacy or illegitimacy of its violence, on the part of the Left, was the more radical question of the survival of a decaying or even a dead politics. Indeed, it was clearly to reinforce this point, though it had to be voiced more discreetly than ever before, that the Leftist critics of the Death Fast misrepresented idealization as a fetishization of death and it may be argued that they were in a certain respect right to confound ideality with death insofar as death is another name for the mere reproduction of the code of community.

215 It is also important to note here that there are serious allegations against the leading organization of the Death Fast that it was subcontracted by the intelligence services in the war against the PKK (Workers’ Party of Kurdistan). Such collusion with centers of power of course seriously casts into question the discourse of the organization that attributes a great value to the absolute, categorical refusal of the political order. This is not to say that the purity of political action is not a much more complex question at the level of the individual.
This dissertation, though responding still to the same question, took a very different approach. What I defended in the dissertation was not a dialectic of negation and affirmation, death and freedom, but a persistently double logic which found in the very movement of the Death Fast the simultaneous constitution and dissolution of the community. Accordingly, I dramatized how the death faster, in exposing him or herself to his or her “own” inappropriable death, far from recollecting him or herself in an imaginary wholeness, remained imprisoned within his or her act of opening with the result that the sovereignty of the subject gave way in my representation to the radical dissolution of the subject. In this, of course, I was doing nothing extraordinary, save perhaps to demonstrate the paradox of a sovereign posture which gave rise to an existence without a past and a future endlessly repeating a vanishing present. And this accentuation of the rupture in inheritance was admittedly a form of hyperbole, but an affirmative one, which exaggerated the destructive force of the Death Fast to make a discreet gesture towards an emergent subject: “Someone”, in the words of E., who “can imagine another way of struggling against the system, imagine another way of being, imagine being somewhere else.” Unrecognizable to him or herself, belonging to no language and nowhere, he or she is still in search of a community, and it is in response to this infinitely distant and infinitely close “someone”, that Writing of Death, after all, was written, in the nameless name of a being-with to come.
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