

## Fire and Death in Western Imagination

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**F**ind the themes of self-immolation and fire sacrifice particularly thought-provoking. I am not a sociologist, nor an anthropologist, let alone a specialist of Eastern civilisations. As a historian, when I wrote the daring synthesis *La mort et l'Occident de 1300 à nos jours* ("Death in the Western World from 1300 until today"), I respected the temporal and spatial limits of my area of expertise, and you will not read about self-immolation and fire sacrifice there. But do not believe that these practices that we are discovering today in the West did not raise essential questions in the history of mankind and the connection of man with his body and fire.

I will not try to sum up in a few sentences the thousand-year old history of death, funerals and burials in the West. Let me start with a few images that belong to our cultural background but that are fading into oblivion. Who remembers the phoenix, this mythical bird and unique member of its species which, according to the 19th French dictionary *Le Littré* was said to live in the Arabian deserts for several centuries and only showed itself once, when it came to burn itself and be reborn: "Herodotus is the first writer who talked about the phoenix... Horapollo said that when the Egyptians wanted to represent the soul, they painted a phoenix because, among all animals, this bird was the one that lives the longest." The phoenix, like the unicorn and other mythical animals, still fascinated and maintained its status in the medieval bestiary: "Fenix is a bird in Arabic and there is only one remaining in the world" (Brun Latini, *Tres*. P. 214). The phoenix went from being represented on knights' coats of arms to the TV commercials of our childhood where it was used to sell frying pans. Now, our children only mention it when referring to La Fontaine's fables, in which Master Crow tells the fox "You are the Phoenix of this forest." What a sad fate!

Greek mythology relates how Heracles, who had been betrayed by his wife Deianira and who wanted to escape the terrible suffering caused by the poisonous tunic of Nessus, had built a funeral pile of trees on Mount Oeta and sacrificed himself in the flames. Through that process, he was able to attain immortality, since Zeus made him marry Hebe—the goddess of peace—and consequently allowed him to escape his mortal condition. Can we consider this legend a found-

ing myth, just like the myth of the bird that is reborn from its ashes? Heracles was never imitated and his final destiny did not become an example like Prometheus, who did not jump into the fire, but stole it for the benefit of mankind. However, there are examples of funeral pyres in Homer's stories, and they are dedicated to heroes who died in glory—Patrocles and Achilles were burned in a parade bed, surrounded with precious objects, a sacrifice that can include other people, captives, or relatives. This is a practice that is also known in other ancient civilisations, or in some more recent and exotic cultures. It exists in our ancient heritage, and archaeologists are now exploring its remains. However, for ordinary men in our countries, it is the burial of the body that prevailed in Greco-Roman antiquity, as shown by the graveyards of Athens or the tombs at the gates of Rome.

This does not mean that fire is absent from our memories; it is on the contrary recalled by many sources, like in the Bible (i.e. the Hebrew people in the furnace). Is it imprudent or caricatural to consider that Christianity represents an obvious and fundamental change after Nero threw the crucifixes of hundreds of Christians into the fire in Rome? May it be too obvious? This change had already started in the Judaic tradition, which emphasised the respect of the dead (see Tobit under the walls of Babylon who insisted on a burial for his fellow citizens although it was prohibited).

What Christianity essentially added to those traditions is the eschatology of resurrection that entails the integrity of the body. We should not be mistaken: "dust to dust" only refers to ashes when language is being misused. You need bones to conceive the resurrection of the dead at Doomsday. This vision of Ezekiel was reused in medieval iconography and afterwards. In the 15th century, there still were French and English exegetes who debated the possibility of having a crowd of people risen from the dead in the valley of Josaphat—and in what state, young or old? Some think they could be in their thirties, the age of the Christ. Even though they do not represent popular beliefs exactly, those naïve questions did appeal to the masses. The young Maxime Gorki was questioned by a humorous pope: "How does one recognise Adam and Eve in that crowd? Because they won't have a navel."

The integrity of the body, or at least what remains of it after the tribulations of the last passage, still represents a strong aspiration, and the whole history of funeral practices as centuries went by—from the bare shroud to the locked coffin with more and more clothes on—is evidence of its powerful appeal in the West. The images of the good death emphasize it—from the satisfied recumbent effigies in the Middle Ages, to the death of saints in iconographic representations. This is a story that I have told—and I am not the only one—by refer-

ring to the tribulations of the body that is shown or hidden, but in any case preserved. Suicide is however considered a bad death—the bodies of the dead are dragged on the roads; as well as condemnation—their ashes are scattered as nothing must remain.

One should now consider the research of anthropologists and folklorists who describe how suicide practices differ considerably from one area to another. In some places, people hang themselves, in other places, people jump into wells, etc. In this repertoire, self-immolation is not well-represented.

One of the reasons may be that it is associated with hellish punishment. You may say that Christian hell, which replaced the river Styx in Antiquity, is not specific to the Christian faith and you may be thinking about a rich variety of hells from other religions. But in the belief and imagination of Christians, the two places mentioned by Saint Augustine (and there are only two places) are represented on the tympana of churches and cathedrals with the image of the flames of hell contrasting with heaven.

It might not be such an obvious consideration; and without embarking on a story of hellish flames that would lead us too far from the topic, I will allow myself to briefly mention my research on the images of purgatory. Purgatory is this soft substitute for hell (because one can get out of it) and it has constantly been re-invented from the 13th to the 15th century: the purgatory as a prison, the lake purgatory (*de profundo lacu*), the hellish purgatory, whose definition *ne varietur* was given by cardinal Bellarmine at the council of Trent in the 16th century *communis sententia theologorum est vere esse ignem*.

Although purgatory in its representation until recently has been the great vessel of hope for the mourners, as the deceased stay there for some time, death in fire—an anticipation of hell—represents the ultimate torture of the other world. It is the most dreadful ending as it entails the scattering of ashes and therefore the loss of any hope.

It is a punishment in the hands of the mighty, the sovereigns, the monarchs and the churches. I will not give a speech on the comparative history of tortures as this would lead us too far, but one cannot but notice how the fear of fire pervades popular thought.

However, one may have an objection: without using well-worn clichés of a ‘popular religion,’ as a form of resistance against the violence of the terrorist pressure of the mighty, it is nevertheless possible to refer to fire as a positive symbol in bonfire days, during Saint John’s festival or other religious and secular celebrations. This bonfire does not exclude death as revealed by the old woman’s pyre at the end of winter in Mediterranean traditions (one can think of Fellini’s *Amarcord*). The old woman’s dummy that is burned with the remains of winter is the image of the rejected past, of the darkness of winter,

while longing for the light of spring. One can also mention the tradition of executing effigies in front of urban mobs. This special treatment is given to loathed characters, tyrants and ministers, Concini or Mazarin, without taking their high status into consideration. In Paris, during the revolution in 1789, the pope's dummy was burned in the garden of the Palais-Royal as he had condemned the civil constitution of the clergy. After jubilation, loathing is expressed with fire. One cannot deny then that fire, and particularly death in fire, is related to the devil in the collective imagination; a devil that takes in some traditions the shape of a black cat that people burn.

So much so that fire has become the most dreadful form of individual and collective punishment in Western history: from the Albigensian crusade in the 13th c. with the fire of Montségur to the repression of the Waldensians of Luberon in the 16th c. It gives the image of a collective holocaust in which women sometimes jumped away into the fire to escape the worst.

From the Cathars to the heretics at the end of the Middle Ages, with the examples of John Hus, Thomas Münzer during the peasant war, or Michel Servet in Geneva, a figure has materialised, that of a character dead in fire... because of others.

This character is ambivalent. He is on the one hand a subject of loathing because of his devilish acquaintances, but, on the other hand, he is sometimes seen as a martyr. And this leads us to Joan of Arc, burnt as a witch in Rouen by the English and their French allies, but whose demeanour undoubtedly made her a saint and a martyr for a part of the crowd, as well as for some Englishmen who left saying: "We have burnt a saint."

But this is an exception, and not the rule that was to prevail from the end of the Middle Ages to the beginning of the Modern Era. From the 15th century through to the middle of the 17th c. (despite some prior instances) is the period when the witch hunt in Europe and North America developed and became prominent along with phenomena of possession in certain areas—in some nunneries and communities of villagers. Witches were burnt, as well as the sorcerers that bewitched them under the influence of the devil, in all social circles including the elites. Among the magistrates in the houses of parliament that Robert Mandrou studied in a famous thesis, it was decided to stop burning the possessed as they were now considered insane. It took some time before this attitude prevailed among the ruling classes. The image of a pyre would continue to be associated in literature and in popular clichés with the Inquisition as it occurred even at a late period in Spain and Portugal (in the 1780s).

In Voltaire (see *Candide*) and in the work of many authors of the Age of Enlightenment, the march of the sentenced people wearing

the sanbenito, accompanied by penitents, radically deprecates the saving flames while Hell declines (*The decline of Hell*, by Walker). This decline was forecast by the "merciful doctors" (Locke, Newton), who refused to believe in eternal punishment, at the turn of the 17th and 18th c.

As the authors of the Age of Enlightenment condemned the foundations of fanaticism and superstition, a modern reading drew the attention of those that I used to call the "primitives of ethnography." Travellers and philosophers who read them—after Montaigne, who paved the way—discovered the existence of other civilisations. Their interest for those civilisations is ambivalent, somewhere between love, hate and incomprehension, often adopting the 'cold approach' of the man of science, as Stendhal called it. However, following the path of Diderot and of those who popularised Bougainville's and Cook's travels, these discoveries were associated with barbaric practices, tinged with appalling strangeness. Bernardin de Saint Pierre, a native of Bourbon Island in the Indian Ocean, discovered the practice of self-immolation by Indian widows, who threw themselves into the fire so that they would not survive their husbands. Was it a spontaneous act or were they forced by the conventions of their families? People wondered about those practices that seemed barbaric... This theme was re-used by Jules Verne in *Around the World in 80 days*, in which Phileas Fogg became the providential saviour of a woman who was to become his companion, an ecumenical reconciliation between the French and the English and a representation of the superiority of their common civilisation.

In the neoclassical imagery by the end of the 18th c., heroic suicide as it is staged and performed reveals the predominance of standards from the Antiquity, from Socrates to Cato the Younger before being represented in the revolutionary or national acts in the 19th c. When the last Montagnards—the "Crétois"—during the French Revolution were under arrest by decree after Thermidor (eleventh month in the French republican calendar), they gave each other a knife and stabbed themselves as if they felt the need to show that they were still free to choose—a final gesture of freedom that nobody could deny. The same situation occurred with Gracchus Babeuf during the Vendôme trial.

What was the status of self-immolation in the society that was built in the 19th century? Although Marat had prophesied that "Freedom is born from the fires of sedition," it is only metaphoric fires that were seen during the revolutions, in the same way as the repression replaced the pyre by the so-called 'cold' guillotine on the opposite side.

While the hellish fire was slowly losing ground in the people's psyche in a century of mirages, the secularisation of the fear of fire was not a global phenomenon. As long as the traditional society was still alive, fire was feared—at a material level as fires were more common in villages than today—but also in the collective imagination, in which it symbolised latent or hidden subversion. Despite the invention of firework, fire is still frightening. In the villages in Ile-de-France (the Paris region), when a beggar knocks at the door of a rich farmer, if he is rejected, people say that he will “light the fire”, and the rich man must understand the threat. That is why in some later texts (Anatole France), policemen were said to confiscate pipes and lighters. Beware of the fire!

The fire of rebellion can be found one last time in a very symbolic fashion during the Paris Commune in 1871. Paris burnt, but who were said to be guilty? The “fire-raisers,” significantly—those bad ladies from the common society, as if they were the daughters of the old witches, which shows the recurrent association between women and the dark side of the concept of fire.

People died on barricades, like the deputy Baudin in 1851, after Napoleon III's coup, always remembering Robespierre's words “I am giving you my memory, it is precious and you shall defend it.” One can clearly see the difference between this way of giving a testimony to set a good example and call for posterity on the one hand and self-immolations on the other hand. Revolution does not call for suicide, be it heroic or not, and one can remember Lenin's hostile comment on Paul Lafargue and his wife's suicide: “a revolutionary has no right to decide over his life.”

The different forms of collective protests, from rioting to the breaking of working tools, demonstrating, barricading or going on strike, do not include the sacrifice of the body in their gesture repertoire, or at least not this kind of sacrifice.

The 20th century was a time of revolutions and wars calling for mass mobilisation and a new awareness of social classes and it not only introduced new ways of thinking but also new practices displaying non-Western influences, although they sometimes spread with some delay. Although Gandhi's doctrine of non-violence was obviously presented as an alternative solution, other ideas were at first dominant in the conflicts and wars of the 20th century, as well as for the long-term social evolutions. Two examples stand out today from that “tragic 20th century” according to Eric Hobsbawm's merciless review.

One is not so dramatic: the increasing popularity of cremation, which started a century and a half ago. One is dreadful: the invention of the crematorium in extermination camps during the Second World

War. The history of cremation is a large subject on its own and from our perspective it can be summarised by the disappearance of this fear of total extermination in fire that had been connected to the Christian belief of the preservation of the remains in the hope of resurrection.

In the 19th c., the concept of 'earth to earth' is rediscovered and illustrated by the very diverse practices of modern cremation, whose popularisation has been spectacular in Europe and in America since the Catholic church stopped prohibiting it.

The crematorium is no longer frightening, maybe a little as the different ways of dealing with the ashes—scattered, kept in an urn, above the fireplace, at home or in a cemetery—may be signs of uneasiness.

The other historical experience is the trauma of the Shoah: it haunts us with its images of horror, kept aside for some time. "Unbelievable", as an American friend of ours said one day. Today that experience is an essential subject in the teaching of memory.

We are living in a transitional period, and people question the forms of both collective and personal protests. One does not need to dwell on the first one, although revolutions that were said to be over yesterday are given a new impetus today. But the helplessness of collective protests, be they revolutionary or institutionalised in our Western societies, leads us to consider individual means of expressing revolt, frustration and despair. This leads us to wonder about suicide and its explosion today, as noticed in certain social circles and professions.

Then one will wonder about the intermediary and substitutive forms of collective protest. Some are "peaceful" like the practice of hostage taking, a non-fatal threat on the others' bodies, and some are violent like terrorism, which attacks those bodies directly.

And then one will reflect on individual or semi-collective forms of protest that go beyond anonymous and obscure suicides such as hunger strikes, suicide threats (running to jump into the void for instance). But just behind those cases, there is, beyond the expression of despair, a sort of call for collective consciousness.

One can feel that self-immolation is on a higher level. It is a testimony with no hidden hope, no explicit call for the world above, be it religious or secular (like in Robespierre's quote: "I am giving you my memory, it is precious and you shall defend it."). But here the specialists of Buddhism will certainly correct my ignorance.

In any case, the paradox for Western societies remains that these new practices, and their specific forms, present a striking contrast with the present mindset that tends to promote the preservation of the remains. One can think about the graveyards of the Spanish and

Kosovo wars where people prospected and searched for human relics, while Hungarians specialise in the practice of reburial.

At the same time and maybe due to these practices, the reading of the body has changed in our Western societies. "Don't touch my body," suggests a whole array of modern attitudes: the refusal of an organ transplant, of intense therapeutic care or even of abortion is puzzling. How in the current context can we understand the appearance and dissemination of self-immolation as an extreme means of individual protest in the West?

As François Furet put it, in a place where the revolution is said to be over, where strike is not getting anywhere at a collective level, when a hunger strike seems to be a last desperate resort, is self-immolation the "final transgression," as I said heedlessly in a recent interview? By its spectacular and disturbing characteristics, does it represent the ultimate call in a situation with no apparent solution?

It is sometimes associated with the discovery and appeal of Far-Eastern spirituality in our societies, and we will have the opportunity to talk about it in this symposium, but this explanation seems too easy, at least phrased in this way. It does not seem to be enough to justify the choice of this practice that is so unfamiliar or even contradictory to the historical legacy of our imagination.

It is now related to the Arab spring and the "historical awakening" that has been taking place for two years. It is true that the isolated epicentre of what is not yet an epidemic was Tunisia—the leader of this movement from the East to the West—but one should not say too much about the meaning of these ongoing episodes of unrest.

After many cautious comments on historical facts, something common when you ask a historian to give a presentation, I am driving myself into a corner: why, after a Tunisian street vendor, did a French teacher of mathematics with a normal profile and no secrets choose self-immolation to express her anguish?<sup>1</sup> People will blame the media. Well, they are an easy target!

This is where my reflections led me and then I went to cinema and had a revelation. An English film is now exploiting a niche market, or rather two of them: exoticism and the end of life. It is the story of English couples who in order to escape the high residential fees for old people's homes on their island, answer an attractive service offer on the Internet from an Indian hotel. It is the guaranteed success of the fanciful encounter of two civilisations, the clichés of today's India and its colourful folklore. Each member of the group reacts to this

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<sup>1</sup> On October 13 2011, a mathematics teacher attempted a self-immolation in Béziers (Southern France). See [http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2011/10/13/une-enseignante-essaie-de-s-immoler-a-beziers\\_1586\\_885\\_3224.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2011/10/13/une-enseignante-essaie-de-s-immoler-a-beziers_1586_885_3224.html).



new experiment differently. One of them is gay and dies of joy after reencountering his Indian partner that he first met in his youth and the latter gives him a thoughtful posthumous reward in return—an Indian style funeral. The English group find themselves meditating with emotion before their friend's pyre. This is some idea: exporting our senior citizens (or at least a happy few) to a place where our trivial cremations can receive some spiritual enhancement via a return to our roots.



