

Pre-workshop comment

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I would like to address the question of cultural memory by focusing on two main issues that crystallize both the promise and the problems of this notion, and then consider what literature and literary/cultural studies might have to contribute to a further elaboration of the same notion. The two issues are the relation between history and memory, and the problematics, logical, psychological, and political, of assuming the existence of such a phenomenon as collective memory, an assumption without which the notion of cultural memory would make little sense.

Looking at both the academic and the popular cultural scene today, the relation between history and memory seems to have been settled: As opposed to history, which is scripted by the 'victors' as the objective truth of the past, memory is claimed as an awareness of the constructedness of the past and as a means of enabling the silenced and oppressed to have a voice about that past. As Thomas Laqueur points out in his introduction to a special issue of *Representations* titled 'Grounds for Remembering': 'Memory as a public enterprise, the collection of memoirs, the making of oral histories, the mining of folklore for nuggets of a usable past, the preservation and study of the material culture, the stuff of everyday life are all part of an impulse to make the past more democratically accessible, to make it more inclusive'.

However, as others (such as Kerwin Lee Klein writing in the same issue) have also cautioned, there is much to be skeptical about the easy opposition our present culture of remembering and testimony seems to posit between history and memory. The notion of memory is treated as grounds for authenticity and as immune to questions of the distinction between fact and fiction in ways which simply bypass the central critical questions of history and historiography. It also valorizes the emotional/ideological bonds and group identities that are formed through claims of shared memories. The concept of trauma often has a central part in this process. Though extremely useful in exploring the limits and possibilities of the representation of the past, especially in literature, the concept of trauma can also be the basis of a discourse of mystification fascinated by the 'unsayable' as a transhistorical, even sacred phenomenon.

These problems concerning the valorization of memory in academic and popular discourses arise, in part, from the insufficiently examined notion of collective memory. What does it mean to remember collectively? Can we talk about collective memories without implicitly assuming some kind of a 'group mind'? The uncritical transition from the individual to the collective level is especially conspicuous in psychoanalytic approaches, but not limited to them. I believe it is intimately connected to the disarticulation of the political in the present neoliberal cultural atmosphere where collectivities have become imaginable primarily through such terms as trauma, identity, heritage, shared/repressed memories, while the phenomena of economic and political conflicts both within and among different collectivities receive little attention. In my research on Turkish *coup d'état* literature, for example, I have been observing, both in literary and critical accounts, an almost automatic assumption that the corporeal and psychological wounds inflicted by state violence can be subsumed under the category of trauma, with hardly any consideration of *for whom* these events were traumatic and for whom a relief, and of the divisions and conflicts among the victims themselves.

I believe that literary and cultural studies, in addition to providing the textual skills necessary for treating texts, objects, bodies and spaces as cultural documents, can be crucial in moving away from an uncritical celebration of memory and testimony to a critical consideration of regimes of memory. Such a consideration should involve an awareness of the politics of memory as a public enterprise that can be hegemonic as well as counter-hegemonic in specific historical contexts. It should also

develop some sense of accountability in relation to memory instead of bypassing the issue through the comfortable postmodern assertion of an all-subsuming fictionality. Literature has much to teach in this respect, since literary texts are particularly complex cultural documents where memories are both constructed and deconstructed, where 'unrepresentability' is represented, where a sense of truth emerges through fiction and the confession of fictionality, and where constructions of shared pasts and collectivities are both effected and problematized.

Position paper

Remembering Violence and Revolt: Turkish *Coup d'état* Novels

I am interested in how literature remembers or fails to remember political events in specific social circumstances. In asking this question in the context of the Turkish sub-genre of 'coup d'état novels', I consider two consecutive waves of these novels, the first one in the seventies, following the coup in 1971, the second one following the coup in 1980 and extending until today; in each case, I shall focus on how these novels represent what it meant to revolt against the system, what kinds of subjectivities & collectivities were produced in this process, and what counted as a tellable life story, an intelligible career path of political activism.

As one would expect, there are many similarities between these two groups of novels following the two coups which were both violent state responses to growing leftist opposition. The strong corporeality of language and imagery, the conception of memory as experience 'written on the body,' so to speak, the tension between the personal and collective articulations of desire and action, the emphasis on writing as remembering and giving a voice to the victims are the most easily observed among these similarities. But there are also important differences in theme, style, tone and narrative structure, which I believe are more interesting from the viewpoint of memory studies. The differences between these two groups of novels can be attributed, at least in part, to the radical change in the cultural atmosphere in the 1980s.

As a traumatic event that was bound to leave indelible marks on Turkish people's, and especially the intelligentsia's, collective memory, the military coup of 12 March 1971 found prompt reflection in the literature of the 70s. Most of this literature was produced by authors who were generally sympathetic to the left and who had had different degrees of actual or emotional involvement with the youth activism that had preceded the coup. The predominant focus of this literature was victims and victimization, especially as it found concrete reality and expression in narratives of torture. In the authoritarian statist political and cultural atmosphere of the period, narratives of torture asserted the innocence of the victims while nationalism provided them with an acceptable life-story pattern: the persecuted leftists were in fact devoted to the founding principles of the republic and were trying to save the people from corrupt rulers. This discourse of nationalism and victimhood enabled sympathy, even identification with the victims, while disarticulating the political through failing to acknowledge the agency of the political actors and the challenge their political project presented.

The 1980 coup was distinguishable from the previous one not only in degree, but also in more qualitative ways. In addition to wiping out the opposition in much larger numbers and by even more violent means than the previous one, the military rule following the 1980 coup also engineered permanent legal and institutional changes which made a radical economic restructuring possible. Under the conditions of minimal resistance that the military regime created, and under the civilian governments that followed, the economy was liberalized and Turkey was rapidly inserted into the

neoliberal global economy. Nurdan Gürbilek describes the resulting cultural atmosphere in the following terms:

It was on the one hand a period of rejection, denial, and repression, on the other hand a period of opportunities and promises in which people's desires and appetites had been stimulated with unprecedented intensity. On the one hand was Turkey whose right to speech was taken away, a country that was shut up, on the other, a 'talking country' that offered new channels, new contexts to speech. In terms of institutional, political and human costs, the 80s were one of the heaviest periods of recent history, but at the same time, a period of lightening up and liberation, of being freed from political burdens... For a brief historical moment, political repression and the glitter of shop windows, the horror of war and the cultural rise of the provinces, torture and the call to individuality, the obligation to be silent and the appetite to speak shared the same stage. (*Vitrinde Yaşamak* 9)

The compelling examples of September 12th literature that are not blind to their own roots in this simultaneous silencing and incitement to speech, defeat and liberation, incorporate that knowledge into their texts in the form of a love-hate relationship with their own literariness. They dramatize in different ways the paradoxes of literature in an atmosphere where political opposition and literature find themselves in the same position of irrelevance and futility in the face of market forces and the disintegration of everything in the nature of a public sphere. The absence of a language that literature shares with the public and in which the experience of September 12th could become tellable is registered in these novels as the disintegration of narrative form, a guilty obsession with the powers and impotence of writing and language, and reiterations of the impossibility of coherent life stories. In the 70s, when literature looked at the left, it saw innocence. There was a story it could tell in terms of innocence, the story of good intentions brutally punished. After 1980, when literature, like everything else, turned away from the left and looked at *itself*, it saw guilt. Its own story seemed to be the only one it was capable of telling, and it became tellable through the confession of guilt: the guilt of not bearing witness, the guilt of not having found the language with which to do so, but also the guilt of having found a new freedom, a new visibility in the environment created by political repression, the guilt of a narcissism made possible by the retreat of the political.

I find this socio-economic context of the painful divorce between literature and experience important because without the recognition of such a context, this divorce is too quickly attributed to the unrepresentability of trauma. In both literary and critical accounts, there is an almost automatic assumption that the corporeal and psychological wounds inflicted by state violence can be subsumed under the category of trauma, with hardly any consideration of *for whom* these events were traumatic and for whom a relief, and of the divisions and conflicts among the victims themselves. Traumatic loss of referentiality is, of course, a fundamental dimension of coup d'état literature and symptoms of trauma are traceable in many of its thematic and formal features. But an exclusive focus on the notion of trauma in this political context carries the danger of implying a psychic wound more or less uniformly shared by the entire society *and* the literature that constitutes its inhibited memory, when the issue is precisely the impossibility of any such sharing either within society or between social experience and literature.

The uncritical transition from the individual to the collective level is especially conspicuous in psychoanalytic approaches, but not limited to them. I believe it is intimately connected to the disarticulation of the political in the present neoliberal cultural atmosphere where collectivities have become imaginable primarily through such terms as trauma, identity, heritage, shared/repressed memories, while the phenomena of economic and political conflicts both within and among different collectivities receive little attention. The ways in which literature records and also fails to record political opposition in these two groups of novels point at how remembering, through literature as

well as other forms, is not solely – or even primarily – a relation between the past event and the present moment. It is much more a matter of the present context and available repertoires, patterns, strategies of memory. Consequently, even where such traumatic events as violence, torture, repression are concerned, trauma is not the only cause of failure to remember. Revolt, opposition, struggle are not traumatic in themselves, but they become distorted in cultural memory or simply impossible to record when the present cultural atmosphere makes them irrelevant, simply unimaginable in collective terms.