"Me, Who Got into the Text, Me, Who Became the Text"

Encounter of fact and fiction in contemporary Turkish autobiographical writing

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Paranın Cinleri (The Djinns of Money), a book by Murathan Mungan, is a collection of autobiographical essays first published in 1997.[1] It begins with Mungan's account of a childhood memory: At the age of three or four, little Murathan develops a great passion for deer. As he is constantly talking about these animals, his father reaches a point where he can't bear the situation anymore. He leaves their house in Mardin, a town located in the southeast of Turkey close to the Syrian border, for the nearby mountains to catch a deer for his son. When he comes back with the animal, the family builds a cage for him under the stairway of their house. Little Murathan is delighted by this new and beautifully-eyed guest and every morning goes to visit the deer and to look at him with affection. After a while, his family secretly sets the homesick deer free again and puts a stuffed deer in his place. Little Murathan doesn't realize the difference and goes on visiting and admiring his beloved deer every day.

Murathan Mungan, born in Istanbul in 1955, is one of today's most renowned Turkish literary figures.[2] In this anecdote, he skillfully picks up the problematic relationship between reality and fiction, time lived and time remembered, which makes up the sub-textual level of his book. He shows here how a subjective viewpoint can form and change reality: The deer, although replaced by a stuffed animal, remains the same in the perception of the boy. The stuffed deer, which is perceived as a living one, is a parable for the remembered life; while the person remembering perceives the events of his or her past as real, they have in fact changed over time and have become a kind of fiction.

Can a person refer to himself as "I" when writing about the past since the past "I" has little or nothing to do with his current "Self?" Is it really feasible to record our past objectively? Doesn't the act of writing down our memories and the passing of time each hinder our ability to give a true account of our own life? Isn't our selective way of remembering the past an obstacle to the production of an autobiographical text which aims to grasp the Self in all its complexity? These questions, which Murathan Mungan raises in his texts (Mungan 1999: 86), concern many of the writers of literary autobiographical texts in Turkey today. One

1 I refer in the following as "Mungan 1999" to the 4th edition.
2 For his life and work, see TBEA 2001/2: 571-572.

of the significant characteristics of Murathan Mungan's texts, as well as of other autobiographical texts of Turkish authors written in the last two to three decades, is a new awareness of and interest in the possibilities and limitations of "writing the Self."

As a general trend of contemporary Turkish literature, we can observe that autobiographical texts are becoming in a sense more like novels, and novels more autobiographical. Due to a new interest in postmodern literary experiments that allow all kinds of intertextual and metafictional games, Turkish writers frequently use autobiographical elements as modules in their fiction. For instance, in Leylâ Erbil's latest novel *Cüce* (The Dwarf), published in 2001, the writer enters the text by using her own signature as a name for one of her main characters.[3] Autobiographical elements are also part of the postmodern metafictional games of novelists like Orhan Pamuk or İhsan Oktay Anar, who give little hidden hints to their own life stories in their texts. Other authors, like Metin Kaçan who became known by his debut novel *Ağır Roman* (A Serious Novel) in the early 1990s, even owe their popularity–at least partly–to the declared connection of their fiction with their own lives. This can go far beyond the borders of good taste and moral acceptance in Turkish society. In Spring of 2003, Hasan Öztoprak, an author who had been previously known as a literary critic, was sharply criticized for his public announcement revealing the relation between his debut novel *İmkânsız Aşk* (Impossible Love) with his own life. What made his case especially scandalous, however, was that he publicly "outed" a famous young Turkish novelist claiming that she was the woman whom he had depicted in his book as being the one who "destroyed" his marriage.[4]

The hybrid character of autobiographical texts which places them somewhere into the wide space between fact and fiction is in Turkish sometimes expressed through the term "*anı-roman*." In my opinion, to translate this term as "autobiographical novel" does not do service to the Turkish phrase. This is mostly due to the fact that the emphasis in *anı-roman* is still on the autobiographical, as the authors partly fulfill the conditions of Lejeune's "autobiographical pact" between author, narrator, and reader while using their real names as signatures. But what is alluded to in this term is the fictional character of remembrance: The experiences of the author-protagonist related in the text *may* or *may not* be based on reality. The *anı-roman intentionally* leaves a question mark on the "truth" of the related text, thus putting the text somewhere in the space between autobiography and novel. A good example of this can be found in Adalet Ağaoğlu's book *Göç Temizliği* (Migration Clean-Up), first published in 1985.[5] Ağaoğlu, born in 1929

3 Erbil, Leylâ 2001: *Cüce*. Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları.

4 For two examples concerning the discussion in newspapers, see "İmkânsız aşk mı intikam romanı mı," *Hürriyet*, 27 February 2003, and the commentary of the writer Perihan Mağden entitled "Teşhir iptilası," *Radikal*, 02 March 2003.

5 I refer in the following as "Ağaoğlu 1995" to the 2nd edition.

and one of the most distinguished female novelists of Turkey, emphasizes in her book already on the title page that this is an *anı-roman*, alluding to the fact that there is a certain impossibility of remembering life in a "true" way. Further, she clarifies this in her book by relating how she discussed her memories with her mother, brothers, and aunts: Many things that she remembered as facts, they remembered as happening completely differently. While Adalet remembers her father once beating a neighbor, her mother says that she had stopped him before the fight broke out and persuaded him to come into the house. While Adalet remembers that the boxes of oranges her father brought from his journeys to Istanbul were locked up in a cupboard, and the children of her family were only allowed to take one at a time, her brother remembers that he had once eaten all the oranges within a few days and even had given them as presents to his teachers and friends. And while Adalet romanticizes the story of her Aunt's kidnapping by her future husband, her aunt persists that "I never in my life fell in love" and that she didn't go with her kidnapper of her own free will.

From these stories and others, Ağaoğlu concludes:

> It is impossible to write about the Self. For, first of all, writers can't write about their Yesterday's Self. They'll always try to load their Yesterday's Self onto their Today's Self. They will constantly look for hints in their Yesterday's Self, which confirm their Today's Self, and if they don't find them, they'll create them. For this reason, like events of the past, a person connected to these events, this certain time, and their relationships with the people contemporary to this time, also change their appearance. (Ağaoğlu 1995: 25; translations are mine)

Ağaoğlu goes on and claims that it is also impossible for a person to write about his or hers Today's Self:

> While they claim to be writing about themselves, they are either removing themselves and instead narrating the person they long and want to be (we have many examples of this), or they are judging themselves more than necessary, and questioning themselves more than they deserve, and they even find themselves guilty (we have few examples of this)... (Ağaoğlu 1995: 25; translations are mine).

The question of to what extent a fixation of the Self through a text is fiction, is also asked by other authors. They all refer to the multiplicity of the Self, to the changes it goes through in time, and to the impossibility of remembering the past and of perceiving the present in an objective way. The poet İlhan Berk emphasizes in his autobiography *Uzun Bir Adam* (A Tall Man), first published in 1982,[6] that he had no childhood at all, while later on in the text he goes on to declare that he could write 1,000 pages about his childhood. Berk, born in 1918, comes from a poor family in the provincial town of Manisa in the Aegean region. His father left his mother when he was still very small, and he grew up under difficult conditions with three brothers and two sisters. Despite this, as the

6 I refer in the following as "Berk 1997" to the 3rd edition.

only child of his family to finish school, he later became a schoolteacher teaching French and an ambitious poet. Berk remembers his childhood as a very unhappy one due to his father's absence, the much-closed environment in which he grew up, and the very poor conditions under which his family lived. His resorting to reading and writing, he says, is strongly connected to his unhappiness as a child–writing, for him, was a way that he could *shape his life* –so much, that text and author, fantasies and real events, fiction and fact, finally intermingle and become one. The last sentences of his autobiography underline Berk's understanding of his identity: "I see myself like this–me, who got into the text, me, who became the text." [7]

Contrary to İlhan Berk, the novelist Orhan Pamuk, born in 1952, remembers in his autobiography *İstanbul: Hatıralar ve Şehir* (Istanbul: Memories and the City), first published in 2003, his childhood in an Istanbul middle-class family as a very happy one. He writes, however, in constant awareness of the deceiving tricks of memory. For instance, while he remembers his childhood relationship with his elder brother as being highly competitive and somewhat abusive, his brother and mother proclaim that he has invented these memories for the sake of a good story:

> Years later, when I reminded my brother and my mother of all these fights and violence, they treated me as if I had, as I used to do, constructed a striking and melodramatic past for myself in order to be able to write something interesting. They were so convinced that I finally shared their opinion and thought now, too, that as usual my fantasies had had a stronger influence on me than life. Therefore, the reader who reads these pages should keep in mind that I sometimes miss the right measure, and that I sometimes–just like the unlucky paranoiac who is aware of being ill but cannot get rid of his hallucinations–cannot escape my fantasies. However, for a painter, not the realism of things is important but their shape, and for a novelist, not the sequence of events is important but their arrangement, and for a memoirist, not the truth of the past is important but its symmetry (Pamuk 2003: 275; translations are mine.

The "symmetry of the past," according to Orhan Pamuk, is for the writer of an autobiographical text even more important than "truth" itself. Aware of the fact that any kind of universal truth is inaccessible for the individual who is limited through time and space and is therefore only able to see the world in the cutout fragments of a personal lifetime, the writer of an autobiography has to construct his or her past and give it a distinctive shape, a personal symmetry. Orhan Pamuk's personal symmetry as described in his autobiography is shaped to a large extent by the close interweavement of his biography with his hometown, the city of Istanbul. As already indicated by the title of his book: *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, Pamuk sees the geography of Istanbul, its architecture and its history, as a border place between east and west, as crucial for his life experiences and his identity as a Turkish writer. Perhaps more than any of the other authors men-

[7] "Böyle görüyorum işte kendimi, bir yazıya vurmuş, bir yazı olmuş beni" (Berk 1997: 99)

tioned here, Pamuk mixes elements of his real life into his fiction. The city of Istanbul, where Pamuk–with an interruption of three years when he stayed in New York–has lived ever since his childhood, is not only the place that forms his autobiographical "symmetry," but also the central place in Pamuk's novels. Streets that Pamuk lived or still lives on and houses he knows usually form the locations where the action takes place, and the author seems to find a special pleasure in placing himself or members of his family as figures into his texts.[8]

In the beginning, I discussed Murathan Mungan's memoir of the stuffed deer. It is a complex memoir as it confronts the reader with doubts on several levels: Mungan himself raises doubts on the ever-possibility of truth through his parable on the interchangeability of fact and fiction through time. But what makes us sure that he does this by telling us a "real" event of his childhood? A reader who has read some of Mungan's works knows that he uses the figure of the deer frequently in his fiction. So, couldn`t this memoir be completely fictional, just being invented "for the sake of a good story," just as Orhan Pamuk confesses to do sometimes? However, as all the above-mentioned authors agree that a narration of the "truth" is inaccessible for an autobiographical writer, the question of whether Mungan`s autobiographical story sticks to the facts is the wrong question to ask. Important is, as Orhan Pamuk puts it, the ability of autobiographical writers to form with the help of their fantasies a symmetry of their past, to give their lives a shape through their fiction.

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[8] As, for instance, in his historical novel *Benim Adım Kırmızı* (My Name is Red) from 1998 where he, his brother, and his mother form a family in which the two children are constantly quarreling and competing for the love of their mother, just as described in his autobiography.