Narratives of Collectivity and Autobiography in Latife Tekin's Works

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> I was born in 1957 in the village of Karacafenk, near the town of Bünyan in the province of Kayseri. I started school as soon as I learned to walk. The school was the men's living room in our house. I learned to read and write as I played with the jinn under the divans. Jinn and fairies used to live under the divans in Karacafenk. I spent my childhood among them, secretly joining their community. I went to see their homes, their weddings, and learned their language, their day games and night games. My father used to work in Istanbul. I forget now who told me that my mother was a strange woman with a broken heart. She was literate, sewed, gave injections, and knew Kurdish and Arabic. She used to enquire from the gypsies that came to the village about places and people unknown to me. Her searchings for her past were the first pains that touched my childhood. My father used to come back from Istanbul with sacks full of money and gathered the villagers. Our house was full of strange gadgets, magic metals. I had no idea of their use…
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> In 1966 I came to live in Istanbul. It felt like a sharp pain that split my childhood. Unfulfilled dreams tore apart the people I grew up with. My father quickly became working class, then gradually fell into unemployment. Three brothers worked on construction sites. I finished high school, slipping away like a trembling shadow from seven brothers and sisters. I paid the price of moving away from fear and loneliness to go to school: subjected to a thousand denials and pressures, I was incredibly shaken. I fought hard to keep up with the city and was badly bruised. During my struggles I fell apart from those that I grew up with. But I resisted in order not to lose my own values, my language, and the constant and passionate love that those people bore me. This book is my reward from the people I grew up with for my resistance (Tekin 1996: 9-10).

This is a quotation from Latife Tekin's introduction to the first edition of her first book, *Dear Shameless Death*. Saliha Paker includes it in her introduction to her and Ruth Christie's English translation of Tekin's second book, *Berji Kristin: Tales from the Garbage Hills*. Tekin's account of the background and the ultimate meaning ("This book is my reward…") of her first step into authorship contains fairly clear indications of the type of relationship between fiction and autobiography that I want to explore in this paper. What I would like to establish about this relationship is that the autobiographical element in fiction is not a matter of whether or to what extent fiction reflects the author's life as it is already formed before the fiction. It is a matter of complex negotiations of authenticity and authority carried out within and around the fiction, by the author, her readers, and critics. The connections that are made between the author's life and her work influence not only the reception of the work, but also the production of later works. Latife Tekin is an interesting case in point because her early work was

strongly shaped by a claim of authenticity and a challenge against literary norms, both the claim and the challenge deriving their main force from references to the life of the author, especially her class origins. The later work, on the other hand, reflects an attempt to grapple with the autobiographical fact of having written the earlier books, of having indeed become an author, and what this means in the context of the life surrounding the fiction.

Tekin's introduction and her similar statements about her background and the sources of her creative practice are widely quoted in the introductions and on the back covers of her books as well as in much critical writing about her work. There seems to be a widespread tendency, when Latife Tekin's work is in question, to provide the customary biographical information about the author in the form of a first-person narrative. It is as if there were something about this author's life that resists external description, something that is accessible and expressible only in the form of the author's own testimony. This testimony typically transports the language and the imagery of the work to the description of the life, establishing a seamless continuity between the life and the work and effecting a mutual authorization between the two: "Jinn and fairies used to live under the divans in Karacafenk. I spent my childhood among them, secretly joining their community." The implication is that the life behind the work has become accessible only, and for the first time, through the language of the work, while the language of the work is the very form in which that life was experienced in the first place.

In her own introduction, Paker emphasizes Tekin's use of fantasy as a means of "reconstructing an individual experience that was authentic and indigenous" (Tekin 1996: 9). In his preface to the same work, John Berger claims that *Tales from the Garbage Hills* is about language, "not because Latife is a postmodernist or a structuralist, but because she is familiar with the lives lived on the garbage hills. She knows deeply how nick-names, stories, rumors, jingles, gossip, jokes, repartees constitute a kind of home, even the most solid home, when everything else is temporary, makeshift, illegal, shifting, and without a single guarantee" (Tekin 1996: 7). "Authentic," "indigenous," "familiar," "knows deeply"… These characterizations hint that the language and forms of Tekin's narratives about "home" are authorized by a special knowledge, an inside view of what has so far been excluded from and inaccessible to literature. In more qualified, somewhat more tentative terms, Latife Tekin agrees. In a 1987 interview, for instance, she says:

> I want somehow to claim poverty as mine. It is something like being without alternatives. Of course, my insistence on poverty has something to do with the fact that poverty is my past. But at the same time, I want to reverse many things that have been said about poverty. And for this, the only source I can cite is my own life, what I have written, my own past. Only by beginning from there can I persuade people, or myself. . . You know how a poor person is one that does not exist, one that lacks so many things. Well, how do these people who lack many things live while lacking many things, how do they carry themselves in this world, all these interest me deeply. But these are never included in all that is written, all that is said about poverty (Tekin & Savaşır 1987: 140).

In view of this autobiographical discourse accompanying Latife Tekin's entry into the Turkish literary scene and conditioning the reception of her work, it seems surprising at first that the first two novels have hardly any of the formal features of autobiographical fiction.[1] But the narrative forms of both *Dear Shameless Death* and *Tales from the Garbage Hills* result quite directly from the *specific type* of autobiographical claim that motivates Tekin's writing: the claim that she articulates through the notion of poverty. This is a claim to a communal voice, to a form of writing that preserves the oral cadences of a communal language and the utter lack of stability and authority in that language (c.f. Gürbilek 1999: 40). This claim to communality is further supported by and reflected in the political meaning that Tekin initially attributed to writing and authorship. She envisioned her own writing as part of a collective political act through which large numbers of excluded and defeated voices would for the first time find literary expression. Once again, her life, this time not the world of her childhood, but her positioning of herself outside the literary establishment, would be the basis of continuity between her work and its political context:

> I was not a university graduate or anything; I didn't know how to use a typewriter, and I was also raising a child. All this made it easy for people to identify with me both while I was writing and after the book came out. A sense of "if she is doing it, we can also do it." As for me, I imagined a commonness of emotion, an identification, almost a relationship of representation between my generation and myself, and between the poor in general and myself... It was as if I was becoming known, and I was speaking, not as an author, but as one of them (Tekin & Savaşır 1987: 134).

In a somewhat paradoxical way, then, Tekin's self-definition as having been indelibly marked by poverty, and her self-definition with reference to a past of political activism served to establish autobiography as an authorizing, external context to narratives of collectivity that resist the shape of autobiography. The impersonal narrative voice and the strict avoidance of interiority in *Dear Shameless Death* and *Tales from the Garbage Hills* are among the most obvious signs of this resistance. Even when these narratives contain individual life stories, they prevent them from exerting any real pressure on the impersonal rhythms of habit, ritual, tradition, rumor, and survival. They do not permit the establishment of temporal or spatial boundaries–the differentiation of the past from the present or the future, of the inside from the outside, the private from the public. Like the collective lives they describe, these narratives are deprived of an ability to accumulate change in the form of growth or development, and to register lack in the form of desire or mourning. A single tense inflects them, stringing together actions and events instantaneously slipping away into an unpossessable past (c.f. Gürbilek

[1] Gürbilek 1998 has drawn attention to the fact that these two novels avoid the use of a narrating "I" as well as other signs of an individual perspective or style.

1999: 39-40). They are blind to the spaces outside the immediate locations of these actions and events, almost resisting the very possibility of perspective, of a view from some outside point. Because having, recounting, presenting a life story is a form of appropriation that is precluded by the condition of poverty, and because every act of authorship is inevitably an act of self-authorization, Tekin's early narratives attempt to disavow authority and appropriation by concealing their own written and autobiographical character.

While citing her life as the source of her writing then, Latife Tekin seems to have erased every trace of this citation *as* a citation. She seems to have sought the voice of collectivity in a kind of innocence achieved by avoiding the consciousness of autobiography as a literary form. This innocence is protected by the refusal to register the bifurcated temporalities, voices, and selves of autobiographical writing–the divisions between acting and seeing, remembering and inventing, the past of living and the present of writing, the authority of experience and the vulnerability of confession.

At the end of *Dear Shameless Death*, when Dirmit's emergence as a writer both triggers and compensates for the death of her mother, the possibilities and the horrors of laying a claim to a life through writing are already apparent. Poetry comes to Dirmit as a sort of madness. She hears voices, climbs on roofs, and looks at the members of her family with unrecognizing eyes. This is what Latife Tekin describes in her account of her own life as "slipping away like a trembling shadow from seven brothers and sisters." But this trembling shadow is not cast over the book as a whole because Dirmit's alienation from home is contained by being described in the language of home (cf. Gürbilek 1999: 40). The conversations she carries out with clouds, stars, and the snow, are not, after all, a very far cry from her mother's intimacies and bargains with the jinn, God, and Azrael. Yes, the final pages of the letter she writes to her family soar over the city and remain unread by them. Her brother whispers to the city with tears in his eyes: "What has my sister written about me?" But the writing of the letter in six days and seven nights is much like writing a charm that reconnects Dirmit to her mother. It is because Dirmit plays strange games with black dots that she is able to see her dead mother put up a good fight against the demons of hell and wreak havoc in the other world. Both the sadness and the humor of this ending resonate with Latife Tekin's statement about her writing as resistance to rupture: "During my struggles I fell apart from those that I grew up with. But I resisted in order not to lose my own values, my language, and the constant and passionate love that those people bore me. This book is my reward from the people I grew up with for my resistance" (Tekin 1996: 10).

But rupture is both the subject and the style of Tekin's third and most autobiographical novel, *Night Classes*, and I believe that it is prepared and shaped to a large extent by a trauma of authorship. Tekin has been very explicit about this trauma. She has referred to the publication of her highly acclaimed first novel as

a tragic break from her past and the occasion of a nervous breakdown. About the process of writing it, she says, "there was rather a painful aspect to it. A feeling as though I was exposing the people among whom I had grown up. A kind of loss of dignity" (Tekin & Savaşır 1987: 135). She seems to be angry with people for liking her book: "People's greed for written texts, their greed for aesthetic forms was unsettling, frightening" (Tekin & Savaşır 1987: 136). In the same 1987 interview, as the author of three books, she says:

> Today, authorship, like all other professions, is a position that demands peculiar privileges, a peculiar form of power. But I still define myself, try to define myself as a poor person. This requires having been unable to internalize a sense of power, just like having been unable to internalize a sense of possession. A demand for a privilege because of what I do embarrasses me. Moreover, in my case, there is a doubling of the problem: By defining myself as an author, I end up demanding a privilege because I speak of poor people, because I describe their pains. It is as though I become an authority on and above them (Tekin & Savaşır 1987: 133).

In *Night Classes*, autobiography becomes a means of resisting this position of authority. This time, Tekin deliberately marks her text from within as autobiographical, to the point of introducing it in a parodic tone, as the "pale memories and breathtaking confessions of a young militant" (Tekin 1986: 9). Her political past enters and disfigures the narrative not only as the scar of a defeat, but also as a rupture between herself and her class, a betrayal of the people she had grown up with. This has naturally been widely commented on, but it has been interpreted in rather narrowly political terms. Most critics read the novel as a reaction against a particular form of leftist politics, alienated from the masses, authoritarian in its hierarchies and its repression of individuality. Some, like Yalçın Küçük, who included it in his list of "*küfür romanları*," the post-1980 novels of blasphemy against the left, have seen it as a condemnation of politics altogether.

What I am suggesting instead is that *Night Classes* is a much more general problematization of claims to know and represent, to speak for and about lives that have been condemned to silence. The novel's protagonist Gülfidan has a love hate relationship with the secret organization she joins, partly because she feels that she has gained acceptance by *using* her life story and her origins, putting them into circulation as a means of clearing a space for herself. This is not very different from Tekin's perception of her acceptance into the position of authorship: "By defining myself as an author, I end up demanding a privilege because I speak of poor people, because I describe their pains." Gülfidan's first meeting with the women's branch of the organization at the beginning of the novel is like a primal scene of turning one's life into an object to be presented to others by shaping it as an authentic story:

> When they asked me who I was, I hung the picture of a sensitive bird into the eyes of forty women. Silently and tenderly, I bent the bird's neck to one side. "I come from a home where the women are alone," I moaned… To the curious gaze of forty women, I brought out into daylight a private picture hidden in my memory. Those who were

> gathered in the night room bent breathless over the fading silhouette of a young woman crying over her bleeding finger in a stone kitchen. I told them how my mother with coal black hair had cut her fingers with a knife hundreds of times during her life, and how she had cried as she wrapped colorful pieces of cloth around her bleeding fingers, holding one end tight between her teeth (Tekin 1986: 15).

Gülfidan answers the question of who she is by telling them what kind of home she comes from. She reaches into her memory, uncovers a hidden, private vision, and makes it public in the presence of strangers. She turns her mother into a picture and offers the picture to the curious gaze of the women. This, of course, is what happens when one writes about one's life, and it reads very much like a specific description of Latife Tekin's writing of *Dear Shameless Death*: a woman who defines herself through a past of poverty, writing a story woven around the picture of a mother. The shame and self-irony in this description point at the crack that the writing has opened within the teller of the story.

In *Night Classes*, autobiography flows into the narrative through this crack. All the fragmentations, dislocations, and vulnerabilities of autobiographical writing that had been kept out of the first two novels come back with a vengeance. Not only does the narrator say "I," but she does so in a cracked voice. Time and space become fragmented as Gülfidan's past and present keep invading each other and her unconscious erupts into her public persona. Interiority comes into existence as a space in which one can get lost. The female body, of which we had only glimpses in the earlier books, emerges both as a claim for autonomy and as the scene of violation. Gülfidan describes herself as a militant who has "forced her body to experience sexual love with slogans" (Tekin 1986: 92). This sense of a fall into words, experienced both as love and as violation, also brings a woman's fear of writing into the foreground. But at the same time, the narrator characterizes the writing of the text as her giving birth to her second child, thereby claiming a specifically female form of authority over it.

Night Classes is autobiographical not because it offers some form of a representation of Latife Tekin's life as it exists outside the writing. It is autobiographical because through and around it, Tekin renegotiates the relationship between her life and her writing as well as her authority over her writing. A sentence uttered by the split narrator of the novel seems to be a particularly apt description of all such autobiographical negotiations: "Oh my life, you were never mine" (Tekin 1986: 56).

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