

REFLECTIONS ON THE LEGACY OF PROF. DR. SÜHEYLA ARTEMEL

Memory, Literary Studies, and Prof. Dr. Süheyla Artemel

Prof. Dr. Mediha Göbenli (Yeditepe University)

Memory is not only recollecting the past for the present, but it is a special form and style of seeing, and the determinant of that process is consciousness. The continuity of memory is given by both cultural structures and rituals which have become traditions. *Ars memoriae*, the art of memory, is a technique for strengthening the memory. It started with the science of rhetoric and the techniques of memorizing (mnemonics in Greek) in the ancient world, which used the principle of *loci et imagines*: first places (*loci*), then images were memorised. Frances Yates's *The Art of Memory* highlights the intellectual power of memorising as a part of writing or acting, and was a groundbreaking work for studies of *ars memoriae*: "The art of memory created a world of images, which certainly left its mark on the creative works of art and literature" (91). Memory ("the remembering consciousness") is comparable to the metaphor of a flash that enlightens our memorizing consciousness, as underlined in Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History": "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really 'was. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (247).

While the interest in memory and remembrance goes back to ancient times, modern memory research was made in the late 19th century, in the fields of medicine, psychology, and philosophy: In France, with Henri Bergson, Pierre Janet and Theodule Ribot, and in Germany with Hermann Ebbinghaus as key figures in memory discussions; the 1880s and 1890s were later called the "golden age of memory research" (Nalbantian, 6). In recent years many books have been published on the relationship between memory and literature. Bergson and his student Maurice Halbwachs (who coined the term "collective memory"), and Aleida and Jan Assmann (who coined the term "cultural memory"), are among the most influential names in 20th and 21st century memory studies.

Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* captures the literary representation of historical truth through the mimesis of literature. The subject of the book is the interpretation of reality through literary representation or 'imitation', covering a span from the ancient epics of Homer to the modern

novel of Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust. According to some literary historians, this book is “the only literary history we have” (Geoffrey Hartman 1980: 235). It was also written during Auerbach’s exile in Istanbul, in which he played a part in the development of Western literary studies in Turkey, and which also influenced the development of our own department of English Language and Literature.

In spring 2010, the co-founder of our department, Prof. Dr. Süheyla Artemel, gave a lecture at the Goethe Institute in Istanbul, in which she stated her ideas about education and her vision for the department as follows:

“After I had become Professor Emeritus at Bosphorus University in 1997, I started to work on the establishment of a department of English Language and Literature at the newly founded Yeditepe University. [...] With the help of a team that also included the poet and author Cevat Çapan, we developed a curriculum that had the aim to study literature from a universal and comparatist perspective. We further aimed at providing students of the department with a multidisciplinary education in a wide range of cultures and literatures. Our students have the opportunity to specialize in English Literature, Comparative Literature, or Drama. From the beginning, our team included specialists both in English literature, as well as those who were experts in German, French, Spanish and Italian Literature. Our model is reminiscent in many aspects of the one used by Leo Spitzer and Erich Auerbach for the establishment of the department of Western Languages and Literatures at Istanbul University. Our team includes professors, editors, and assistants who were at least partly educated in this tradition at Istanbul University, Robert College, or Bosphorus University. Our department conveys knowledge not only about English Literature but moreover about history and literary theory, modern critical theory, classical literature, Western literatures, German literature, comparative literature, the languages and literatures of the Eastern European countries, the psychology of literature and philosophical and socio-historical methods of interpretation. In the areas of comparative literature, text interpretation, and theory of literary criticism, Erich Auerbach’s works have a prominent place. This ensures that our students grasp the idea of modern literature and look at the cultures and literatures of the world from a broad perspective.” (79)

Since the Department of English Language and Literature at Yeditepe University was founded, it has included more than 30 instructors from various countries – Turkish, British, American, Romanian, and German – and diverse academic backgrounds. An important role has always been given to world literature, comparative literature, critical theory, and philosophy. This interdisciplinary approach, based on the comparatist structure introduced by Spitzer and Auerbach at Istanbul University, gives our department a broad perspective that is unique among Turkish programs of English literature.

Treating literary works within a broad perspective means to analyse each text not only with reference to its linguistic characteristics but also in the light of the literary, cultural and historical traditions of which it formed a part. Thus, I shall conclude with my own interest in the interrelationship between memory and literature, which was first aroused thanks to *The Aesthetics of Resistance (Die Ästhetik des Widerstands, 1975–1981)* by the German-born Swedish citizen Peter Weiss. In this monumental three-volume novel, Weiss aimed to achieve and shape a collective and historical memory through art and literature. He reads works of art (from Gericault, Delacroix, Picasso, Goya, etc.) and works of literature (from Kafka, Mayakovski, Mann, Brecht, etc.) as Mnemosyne, “the mother of the arts” (memory), as documents of the relations between the oppressor and the oppressed, whereby a historical moment is caught and made eternal. Starting with the Pergamum friezes, which were taken from Turkey to Berlin, Weiss uses visual arts and literature as documents for re-writing a non-official history against hegemonic political and cultural formations for empowering resistance.

“All art, he went on, all literature are present inside ourselves, under the aegis of the only deity we can believe in, Mnemosyne. She, the mother of the arts, is named Memory. She protects what our knowledge contains in all achievements. She whispers to us, telling us what we yearn for. Any man who presumes to cultivate, to castigate these stored assets is attacking us ourselves and condemning our powers of discernment. Sometimes I am repelled by art historians who while raising an index finger forget all about the multivalence of every single work, but those who apply restraints based on political considerations know nothing about the essence of art. By smashing images, burning books, fighting against disagreeable views, they present themselves as member of the Inquisition.” (65)

Weiss's methodology is comparable with what Walter Benjamin has called "brushing history against the grain" (248). We need more research in our own field of literary studies on memorialisation, against the forgetfulness of history. Through the remembrance of the past and recollection of knowledge concerning life experiences, the aim is to shape and achieve a historical consciousness, in the hope of a better future.

Works Cited

- Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*. Edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zorn. Random House, 1999.
- Hartman, Geoffrey. *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today*. Yale UP, 1980.
- Nalbantian, Suzanne. *Memory in Literature: From Rousseau to Neuroscience*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Vialon, Martin. "Exil – Literatur – kulturelle Gegenwart in der Türkei: Suheyla Artemel, Müge Sökmen und Saffet Tanman im Gespräch mit Martin Vialon." *Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung. Jahrbuch 2010*. Wallstein Verlag, 2011.
- Yates, Frances. *The Art of Memory*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966.
- Weiss, Peter. *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, translated by Joachim Neugroschel. Duke UP, 2005.