

Vüs'at O. Bener: A Political Author*

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Abstract

In this article, I examine modernist author Vüs'at O. Bener as a political author. Focusing on the figuration of “sick” and “schizoid” subjects in his novels, *Buzul Çağının Virüsü* (1984) and *Bay Muannit Sahtegi'nin Notları* (1991), as well as some of his shorter texts, I assert that these texts probe the question of subjectivity as a question of health by challenging both in form and content the distinction between inner world and exterior world, individual concern and collective concern, private history and public history. The appearance of the act of writing in these texts as an impasse, but at the same time as a way-out, having not only personal but also political significations, I further argue, is a symptom of this problematization of subjectivity. I ultimately aim to show that Bener's texts provide productive cases to rethink the relationship between literature and politics in the contexts of both Turkish modernism and “third-world literature.”

Key Words: Vüs'at O. Bener, subjectivity, delirium, literature and politics, Turkish modernism

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Vüs'at O. Bener: Siyasal Bir Yazar

Öz

Bu makalede modernist yazar Vüs'at O. Bener'i siyasal bir yazar olarak inceliyorum. Bener'in *Buzul Çağının Virüsü* (1984) ve *Bay Muannit Sahteg'inin Notları* (1991) romanlarında ve bazı daha kısa metinlerinde beliren “hasta” ve “şizoid” özne kurulumuna odaklanarak bu metinlerin öznellik sorununu bir sağlık sorunu olarak, iç dünya ile dış dünya, bireysel dert ile kolektif dert, özel tarih ile kamusal tarih arasındaki ayrımı hem biçimde hem içerikte sorunsallaştırarak irdelediklerini öne sürüyorum. Bu metinlerde yazı eyleminin yalnızca kişisel değil siyasal anlamları da olan bir çıkmaz ama aynı zamanda da bir çıkış yolu olarak belirmesinin bu öznellik sorunsallaştırmasının bir semptomu olduğunu savunuyorum. Nihayetinde, Bener metinlerinin edebiyat ve siyaset ilişkisini Türkçe modernizm ve “üçüncü dünya edebiyatı” bağlamlarında yeniden düşünmek için üretken vakalar sunduklarını göstermeyi hedefliyorum.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Vüs'at O. Bener, öznellik, sayıklama, edebiyat ve siyaset, Türkçe modernizm

Whistling a song, *Meryemo* in its lyrics, and again there's a mirror, was it banned on the radio, not at the police station, just as washing my face with soap, the door was whumped. I hate it! That rattle of castanets fills me with goosebumps. The pure spermed Spanish, tight like a bow, the holy animality brought down with perfidiously stabbed blades to their strong necks, and now on top of it, a firing squad in the rose-like downy heart of *Federico Garcia Lorca*. . . . They announced their budgets. Fifty-two billion dollars or even more, so-and-so billion rubles, francs, sterling, dinars, yen, florins, riyals, kroner. . . . Fat-cat, exploiting states, pitting the “oppressed” nations against each other, inciting the bigotries and dictate-freaks of the countries they turned into gun markets, hence the innumerable names of the currencies toppling zeros over commas, that they strangle the babies-in-arms, slaughter the nimble boys, the flower-smelling girls, the peasants toiling and moiling, producing, the workers, the enlightened minds, the warm-hearted mothers and fathers, the grandmothers and grandfathers hoping for happy deaths will be used to destroy humanity in the name of humanity, created as brothers, sisters, lovers, and friends since their ancestors *Adam* and *Eve*, to destroy freedom in the name of freedom, is that so! Blow the trumpet of *Israfil*, enough! You, the lad, suffocated with mirage, expecting delicate *Purcellian* poems from me, I look at you—you with your bleeding eyes! . . . My aunt answered the door. (Bener, 2014, p.50-51)

This long passage is from *Virus of the Ice Age* [*Buzul Çağının Virüsü*; hereafter *Virus*], the 1984 novel of Turkish modernist author Vüs'at O. Bener. Still relatively understudied in his home country and almost absolutely unknown to a non-Turkish reader,¹ Bener is an avant-garde figure from the post-1950 experimental episode of modern Turkish literature, who has been praised by his few readers for his unbridled narrations of the chaos of individual life through a style marked with unruly use of language.² A prolific writer, Bener produced short stories, poems, plays, and in 1991 another novel named *Notes of Mr. Muannit Sahtegi* [*Bay Muannit Sahtegi'nin Notları*; hereafter *Notes*], oscillating between different literary genres such as diary, memoir, autobiography, and “Künstlerroman.”³

Mindful of radical moments such as the above passage, where language is intensely exposed to the subject's inner life, Orhan Koçak (2004) argues that neither “stream of consciousness” nor “interior monologue” suffices to categorize Bener's texts, which are “free from the illusion of a pure and monolithic subject even when register-

¹ Compared to his well-translated contemporaries such as Oğuz Atay of *The Disconnected*, Yusuf Atılgan of *Motherland Hotel*, Bilge Karasu of *Night*, and Leylâ Erbil of *A Strange Woman*, Bener is an almost absent figure in world literature, having only a couple of stories in English translation.

² Bener self-reflexively talks in many an interview about a certain “wrestling” [*boğuşma*] with his maternal language: “We have wrestled with language a lot” (Kavas et al., 2004, p.137); “I started in a very strange manner to wrestle with language terribly [in *Virus*]” (p.150-151); “I never stopped wrestling with my language as I regard it as my enemy” (Yalçın, 1992, p.12). Though I am only tangentially interested in this question here, Bener's politics of language demands further critical attention.

³ The question of how to categorize his texts has always confused Bener's readers, who are aware of many autobiographical allusions in the texts. Orhan Koçak's (2004) question reflects this crisis well: “Is Bener presenting his own life as a fiction in the form of an autobiography, or is he writing a fiction that resembles an autobiography?” (p.26). Other critics have tried to answer this question, arguing that Bener's texts “that are almost entirely written in the first-person singular signal a primary source, a life that precedes the work” (Gürbilek, 2004a, p.34) or exemplify “fiction drawing on autobiography” (Gümüş 2004). According to Reyhan Tutumlu (2010), *Virus* should be categorized as “autobiographical novel” (p.138) and *Notes* as “memoir-novel” (p.140). Jale Parla (2015) registers *Notes* as “Künstlerroman” in her study on the author-figures in the modern Turkish novel (p.10). To my knowledge, Bilge Ulusman's (2016) reading of *Notes* stands as one single rejection of the autobiography thesis. I want to accentuate that I am not interested in forging another discussion on how autobiographical Bener's texts are. However, in the face of numerous allusions to his life and especially after Tutumlu's (2010) meticulous studies, it is hard to disregard a uniquely autobiographical aspect in Bener's texts.

ing the invasion of subjectivity” (p.19). Koçak suggests that Bener’s texts are rather governed by an “inner conference” [*iç konferans*], or a “civil war” [*iç savaş*], where the subject “tos and fro between different emotional and moral positions within himself (A, A1, A2, An) without believing any of them completely . . . but always by gauging them and feeling their weights” (p.22). A similar suggestion has been made by Bilge Karasu (1999), who, as early as 1952, writes that there is an “economy of ‘I’” (p.46) in Bener: “The thinking ‘I’s eliminate the little incongruities of the speaking ‘I’s” (p.47). Karasu adds that Bener employs the same “economy of ‘I’” in all of his stories, where the thinking ‘I’ appears to be a “pessimistic” and “schizoid” subject (p.47). Bener’s texts, other readers have noted, are marked by “the dissociation of personality” (Gümüş, 2000, p.13) or “the monologue of the ‘I’s” (Tutumlu, 2010, p.76), and display a conversation between the remembering subject and the remembered subject (Şen, 2016, p.30).⁴ Commenting on Bener’s thematization of sickness, Nurdan Gürbilek (2004a) suggests that Bener’s subjects endure “not only a mental collapse, but also a malfunctioning body,” as evinced by the countless drugs and diseases narrativized in his texts—a list that includes “high blood pressure,” “intestinal rumbling,” “carbuncle,” “bronchiectasis,” “emphysema,” “glaucoma,” “paranoia,” and “dipso-mania” (p.42). In an attempt to come to terms with this state of mental and bodily collapse, Bener’s texts, Gürbilek maintains, “relativize the subject by splitting the ‘I’ into opposing poles” (p.45).

However thought-provoking they are in regard to Bener’s question of subjectivity, these critical readings are somehow marred by a tendency Fredric Jameson would call “psychologizing.”⁵ The ac-

⁴ See Şen (2017) for a condensed version of her reading of Bener.

⁵ Challenging the “distinction between cultural texts that are social and political and those that are not” (Jameson, 1981, p.20), *The Political Unconscious* criticizes modes of reading revolving around “notions of personal identity” for being “essentially psychological and psychologizing” (p.60). Jameson suggests that “only the dialectic provides a way for ‘de-centering’ the subject concretely, and for transcending the ‘ethical’ in the direction of the political and the collective” (p.60). This methodological emphasis on “the political and the collective” resonates with his essay “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” (1986), to which I will return later. Here, Jameson’s challenge takes a culturally specific form and targets “the subjectivizing and psychologizing habits of first-world peoples” (Jameson, 1986, p.76). It is also here that we read a useful elaboration of what he

knowledge of a distinct modality of subjectivity in his texts notwithstanding, an over-emphasis on individual (and autobiographical) experience, accompanied by little to no attention to its political repertoire, has led the readers to approach the politics in Bener's text at best as a background to the plot.⁶ Crystallizing this tendency, Reyhan Tutumlu (2016) writes, "While he occasionally referred to the social circumstances of his era, Bener was primarily interested in representing the individual's inner world, portraying alienation, contradictions, inner interrogations, and fears and anxieties experienced" (p.44).

In this article, I will challenge this presumed hierarchy between "the individual's inner world" and "the social circumstances" in Bener's texts. Rather than narrativizing a self-contained, isolated inner experience, I suggest that the divided "I" in Bener's texts opens up a question of *health* that radically calls into question the split between inner and exterior worlds, individual and collective concerns, private and public histories, to the extent that literature's capacity to communicate this amalgamation of histories will also be questioned. I argue that the concern for politics, history, or collectivity in Bener's texts is not immaterial but rather immanent to the mental and bodily experience of the "sick" and "schizoid" subject, which is the very material of literature. Since Bener's subjects are often if not always author-figures, we will also see that the immanence of the political to the personal will render the problem of writing a thornier question. Koçak (2004) says that in Bener's works, "the question 'why write' is the work's own question" (p.23)—it is my aim to show that this is a

means by "the dialectic"—which highly informs the methodology of my article: "When a psychic structure is objectively determined by economic and political relationships, it cannot be dealt with by means of purely psychological therapies; yet it equally cannot be dealt with by means of purely objective transformations of the economic and political situation itself, since the habits remain and exercise a baleful and crippling residual effect" (p.76). As I will discuss toward the end, some critics have argued that this dialectic method was not adequately at work in Jameson's discussion on third-world literature.

⁶ Bener's readers, such as Gümüş (2000) and Tutumlu (2010), have pointed out politics in Bener's works as part of their plot analyses. Koçak (2005) has gone one step further by suggesting that Bener's works map out the history of post-1945 Turkish socialism (p.123). Şen (2016), on the other hand, has raised the possibility of reading *Virus* as a coup d'état novel (p.154).

political question. In the end, I will argue that the politics in Bener's works has the potential to pose a challenge not only to the paradigmatic reading on the politics of Turkish literary modernism but also to what is expected from what has canonically been theorized as "third-world literature." To substantiate this argument, I will benefit from Gilles Deleuze's understanding of literature and health, which can enable us to discover various facets of the political in Bener.

A necessary caveat: By arguing that Bener is a political author, that his texts are political, I am *not* arguing that his politics always has the right answers. Nor do I argue that the politics exposed in his texts on many fronts such as gender and sexuality is unproblematic. I do argue that the inner realm in Bener's main subjects—who are almost always heterosexual male subjects—is always implicated in the political. However, as Bilge Ulusman (2016) has discussed in the case of *Notes*, these subjects are violently ignorant about the principle "the personal is political" when it comes to their approaches to, relationships with, and representations of women. What Gabriele Schwab (1994) has argued in her reading of Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* for the Deleuzian subject thus holds true for Bener's "sick" and "schizoid" subjects as well: "Deleuze's and Guattari's schizosphere is a decidedly masculine sphere" (p.265).

World-Historical Deliriums

Recognized as one of the most demanding texts written in Turkish,⁷ *Virus* is a novel composed of seventy-three unnumbered fragments that narrate an almost forty-year life episode of Osman Yaylagülü, a bureaucrat-lawyer-writer navigating between different

⁷ Notice various superlative degrees conferred upon *Virus* so far: Semih Gümüş notes in 2005 that *Virus* is "the most arduous [*çetin*] text" he has met since the beginning of his writing career (Gümüş 2005). To Koçak (2005), it is "the most arduous love story in our language after *Hüsn ü Aşk*" (p.122). Enis Batur (2004) contends that *Virus* is "one of the most ingenious examples of our literature" and may baffle "the ready-made reader" (p.63). *Virus*, Yıldız Ecevit (2005) notes, is one of "the extreme examples of the pursuit of form in the 1980s" (p.20). Notwithstanding this recognition, not every reader has celebrated the text's density. Füsün Akatlı cynically discredits *Virus* by saying, "The one and only weight in Bener's novel is on the 'difficulty' of deciphering the writing. Nothing else counts" (quoted in Tutumlu, 2010, p.53).

cities of Anatolia. Fragments from Osman's life go back and forth not only in spatiality but also in temporality from the 1940s to 80s and occasionally superimpose the events of his life and the event of writing. The course of narration is also interrupted by love letters inherited from Osman's unfinished, "arduous" love affair with a married woman nicknamed Viola. Osman appears in *Virus* as the protagonist to whom a narrator refers as *he* or *you*, as the narrator who uses the first-person singular, and ultimately as the writer of the book, who, in a fragment that revolves around one of his meetings with Viola, writes, "Timing errors, wanderings between the first-person singular and the third-person singular. Tee-hee!" (Bener, 2014, p.147). This chaos is coupled not only with a use of language that forces the limits of syntax and grammar to the extreme but also with an unabating flow of Osman's inner speech, whereby his inner experience is transparently reflected into writing. In a letter sent to Viola, he asks a question that I thus think best captures the literary problem *Virus* encapsulates: "How can we capture inner dialogue?" (p.58).

What I quoted from *Virus* in the beginning is worth specific attention because it gives a politically loaded answer to this question. Notice the distance between two successive moments that express exterior details, between "*the door was whumped*" and "*My aunt answered the door.*" What is exposed in the distance is an intense flow whereby Osman's *inner* dialogue turns into a politico-economic negotiation that can only be contained in writing. What Osman tries to capture here is the murdering of Spanish poet Lorca, colonialism that exploits "the 'oppressed' nations," capitalism that creates "gun markets," the mass killings that "destroy humanity," and ultimately a counterfeit discourse of "freedom." In another passage, Osman's inner dialogue produces an equally intense contemplation on world history, simultaneously passing through "the crisis in the Middle East, Israeli attacks, Afghan refugees, the Falkland *show* of England, the Palestinian genocide, the mass graves unearthed in Algeria, the Iran-Iraq war, ASALA murderers . . ." (p.206).

To "decipher" the "difficulty" of such moments, we can refer to Gilles Deleuze, as I think what we read here well echoes his con-

ceptualization of “delirium.”⁸ A keyword in Deleuze’s challenge to the tradition of psychologism that conventionally boxes the subject/author into their private concerns, “delirium” names a politically charged limit-experience of subjectivity, whose passage in the creative act, not in the clinical practice, promises “health.” A provocative elaboration of “delirium” is to be found in *Anti-Oedipus*’s (1983) critique of Sigmund Freud’s analysis of “the Schreber case.” Analyzing Daniel Paul Schreber’s *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* as a case study, Freud holds the view that Schreber’s delusions are informed by his sexual desire forcibly directed from his father and his brother at his physician and God—which, to Deleuze and Guattari, is nothing but “to reveal in the crudest fashion the inadequacies of an Oedipal psychoanalysis” (p.89). Freud, argue Deleuze and Guattari, removes a constitutive political and historical content from Schreber’s deliriums, which are indeed crowded with “the Jesuits,” “the Germans,” “the Slavs,” “a girl defending Alsace against the French,” “the Aryan gradient,” and “a Mongol prince” (p.89). “All delirium,” they thus note, “possesses a world-historical, political, and racial content, mixing and sweeping along races, cultures, continents, and kingdoms” (p.88). In “Schizophrenia and Society,” the 1975 text that can be read as a condensed *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze writes that what produces delirium is “an overflowing of history; it is universal history set adrift. . . . Delirium is composed of politics and economics” (Deleuze, 2006, p.26). “We ‘délire’ about the whole world,” says Deleuze in his posthumously broadcasted conversation with Claire Parnet, “about history, geography, tribes, deserts, peoples, races, climates.” He then adds: “when I referred to literature not being someone’s little private affair, it comes down to the same thing” (Deleuze and Parnet, 2011).

In *Essays Critical and Clinical* (1997), his last published book, Deleuze attempts to analyze this almost essential relationship between delirium and modernist literature.⁹ “Literature is a health,” he

⁸ In French, Deleuze’s original language, the term is “*le délire*.” Different translators have rendered the term into Turkish differently: “*hezeyan*,” “*sayıklama*” or “*sabuklama*.”

⁹ Although his writings usually refer to ambiguously generic notions of “literature,” “author” or “writer,” as his careful readers note, “Deleuze restricts himself . . . to a largely modernist canon” (Buchanan and Marks, 2000, p.4). This is a very interesting gesture, especially considering the fact that Deleuze has canonically been categorized (and discredited)

writes, suggesting that authors experience delirium not as a pathological stage but as a politically significant curative and creative process by exhausting the possibilities of language (lv). “Literature is delirium,” we read in the introductory essay titled “Literature and Life,”

but delirium is not a father-mother affair: there is no delirium that does not pass through peoples, races, and tribes, and that does not haunt universal history. All delirium is world-historical, “a displacement of races and continents.” Literature is delirium, and as such its destiny is played out between the two poles of delirium. Delirium is a disease . . . whenever it erects a race it claims is pure and dominant. But it is the measure of health when it invokes this oppressed bastard race that ceaselessly stirs beneath dominations, resisting everything that crushes and imprisons, a race that is outlined in relief in literature as process. (p.4)¹⁰

A fast forward to late Bener will be promising here, as one of the short pieces published in his 2001 work *Trap* [*Kapan*] is entitled “Delirium” [“Sayıklama”]. Following a free-floating talk, the unnamed speaking/writing subject of “Delirium” embarks upon a series of negotiations: “Inner interrogation shouldn’t be taken superficially. It should be mauled and riddled with holes” (Bener, 2001, p.37). We then read what happens when he acts upon his own instructions: “Cruelties, slaughters? Isn’t it wrong? . . . When put into action, anger turns into revenge, lynching, and despotism. . . . The plethora of murders. . . . How to explain the war? Individual resistance has no meaning” (p.37-38).

Under the influence of this inner interrogation, which carries him to a radically anti-individualistic interrogation, the subject could not help but ask: “Am I mad? I won’t be able to decide. Others may

under a loosely defined rubric of “postmodernist theory.” For a reading that exemplifies this attitude, see Eagleton (1985).

¹⁰ Deleuze’s (1997) theorization of delirium in literature as having two poles, “a delirium of domination” and “a bastard delirium” (p.4), is important for a political reading of Bener. As I have already demonstrated, one can find in Bener’s texts references to “ASALA murderers” or “the heroic nation that poured the enemy into the Mediterranean” (Bener, 2010, 38) that perpetuate a certain nationalist discourse, on the one hand, and remarks as challenging as “the Palestinian genocide” as well as a series of impersonal allusions to some wars and massacres, on the other. Bener’s politics seems to be “played out between the two poles of delirium” as well.

come to that conclusion, but I won't be able to agree with that decision." After this resistance to a possible clinical judgment, he starts to narrate his actual treatment by a female [*hatun*] "mental health practitioner," who "had recourse to the method of therapy [*sağaltma*] by drugs." Unsatisfied, the subject says, "I wish I could be tricked by her. I wasn't. . . . To think of myself as separate from myself, to derange the nervous system, has nothing to do with therapy, I suppose" (p.39).

We will remember this enigmatic sentence later, but what I want to emphasize now is the fact that Bener's texts, while "registering the invasion of subjectivity" (Koçak, 2004, p.19), indeed register a whole other politico-economic problem. I find this politics of inner life in Bener's texts challenging, especially because the critical establishment in Turkey has never canonized his texts as political texts, nor has he had any desire to be categorized under the rubric of "*engagé*" literature. "It is crucial that what I write not amount to a message," he says in an interview (Öztürk, 2005, p.47). The assumption that Bener's literature qua modernism is apolitical, however, has upset the author himself more than anyone. "Some have hated my works," he says in the same interview: "Oh my, such objections then! This man has no commitment [*angajman*] to certain idols or doctrines! Nor does he have a political opinion! Some have said so" (p.46). In another interview, the reproachful Bener says that there is negligence toward "what he writes," as his works have been criticized for involving "pessimistic characters" and having "no political concern" (Karabulut, 2005, p.106). In response to the interviewer's observation that proponents of social realism have considered him to be "a failed storyteller," he adds: "They are committed [*angaje*] to the 'revolutionary art' to this extent" (p.107).

These words of Bener demand that we have recourse to the tradition of critical thinking that examines the relationship between literature and politics. One of the most prominent thinkers from this tradition, Theodor W. Adorno (1980) suggests that "the notion of a 'message' in art, even when politically radical" means nothing but "an accommodation to the world" (p.193). In his 1965 essay "Commitment" ["*Engagement*"], where he quarrels with Jean-Paul Sartre and Bertolt Brecht, Adorno attempts to discover "what the shock of

the unintelligible can communicate” in a politically significant way (p.180). He argues that formally undecipherable works of modernists such as Franz Kafka and Beckett, but not Brecht’s didactic and cathartic plays, constitute genuine political art. While in committed works “political reality is trivialized: which then reduces the political effect” (p.185), autonomous works of art, Adorno claims, “explode from within the art which committed proclamation subjugates from without, and hence only in appearance” (p.191).

Perhaps the most incisive moment of Adorno’s defense of the politics of modernism is the following pronouncement: “This is not a time for political art, but politics has migrated into autonomous art, and nowhere more so than where it seems to be politically dead” (p.194). *Virus* and “Delirium,” written by a modernist and autonomous author deemed politically dead, seem to be already corroborating Adorno—but now I want to focus more squarely on Bener’s question of subjectivity as a political question, to show that politics has migrated into his “economy of ‘I’” (Karasu, 1999, p.46) as well.

Political Enunciations

A question of subjectivity indeed lies at the heart of language, insofar as we follow Émile Benveniste (1971): “Language is possible only because each speaker sets himself up as a *subject* by referring to himself as *I* in his discourse” (p.224). However, the relationship between language and subjectivity is more complicated, as proved by the experience of the subject’s narration of themselves. The utterance of “I,” while presumably constructing subjectivity in language, simultaneously deconstructs it, as it inevitably gets caught in the tension between the subject narrating themselves and the subject being narrated by themselves, between “the subject of enunciation” (*le sujet de l’énonciation*) and “the subject of the statement” (*le sujet de l’énoncé*). Terry Eagleton (2007) presents a thorough exploration of this problem, stating that “the actual speaking, writing human person, can never represent himself or herself fully in what is said: there is no sign which will, so to speak, sum up my entire being” (p.147). He further elaborates this incongruity in relation to Lacan’s challenge

to the Cartesian subject: “To make this point, Lacan boldly rewrites Descartes’s ‘I think, therefore I am’ as: ‘I am not where I think, and I think where I am not’” (p.147). Perhaps this Lacanian motto has found its most succinct expression in one of the writings of Roland Barthes (2001). “I cannot write *myself*,” Barthes paradoxically writes, “What, after all, is this ‘I’ who would write himself?” (p.98).

Another problematization of the Cartesian cogito is to be found in Bener’s 1979 short story entitled “Cry a While, Descartes” [“Biraz da Ağla Descartes”]. The characters of this story are an unnamed speaking/writing subject (the “I” of the story) and his “morose” and “tight-lipped” friend named Descartes, whom he addresses in his inner speech: “*Cogito Ergo Sum*, say it again if you didn’t forget” (Bener, 2015, p.236). Friends from school, both the subject and Descartes are now soldiers. Strolling through İstanbul’s İstiklal Street, the former tries to convince the latter to go to a brothel—displaying one of the many heteromasculine and homosocial scenes in Bener’s works. The subject’s question “Shall we try?” carries the nonchalant Descartes to some meditations: “Would I understand if I try? . . . Can I think while trying? Or can I try while thinking?” (p.237-8).

While Descartes struggles with indecision, the tension between the friends further culminates. “You’ve found an easy way, my friend,” says the subject, “thinking for the sake of thinking. . . . There must be a law for that too, I suppose. You keep thinking.” In response, Descartes shares his own advice for his friend: “Think. Prove your existence to *yourself*.” Unimpressed, the subject utters his challenge to the Cartesian cogito: “Humph! I think therefore I am not, okay! . . . Only if we could enter that street” (p.240).

They eventually do enter the street—only to be captured by military officials: “The war is at the door. That filthy mustache called *Hitler* will soon get us into trouble. . . . Put those bastards in prison!” (241). The story ends with a captivating sentence:

“Never mind, after all the captain is right...”

“About what?”

“About the filthy mustache.”

Always remain in my mind like this, Descartes, please, goodbye, but also cry a while, if you want.” (p.242)

To the best of my knowledge, no critic has so far attempted to read this story—except the author himself. In the same interview where he discloses his ideas about commitment, Bener speaks of “Cry a While, Descartes”: “What is emphasized in this story is when fascism, about which one should truly worry, began” (Karabulut, 2005, p.113). Why, one wonders, did the autonomous artist Bener select a conversation in which the Cartesian modality of enunciation is challenged as the appropriate ground for a literary discussion on the history of fascism?

To search for an answer to this question, I will have recourse to *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986), where Deleuze and Guattari famously declared that “the enunciation is always historical, political, and social” (p.41). One of the most productive arguments of this book centers on the keyword “diabolical,” which the duo borrows from Kafka himself. According to Deleuze and Guattari, what Kafka alludes to when he speaks of “the diabolical powers” that “brush up against the doors” is not his personal or familial issues as often assumed “but the American technocratic apparatus or the Russian bureaucracy or the machinery of Fascism” (p.12). It is in response to this capitalist-bureaucratic-fascist machine that Kafka has employed “the literary machine” that “vacuums up in its movement all politics, all economy, all bureaucracy, all judiciary . . . *diabolical powers that are knocking at the door*” (p.41).

This word will appear in the book’s discussion on Kafka’s “perverse, diabolical utilization of the letter” as well: “The letters pose directly, innocently, the diabolical power of the literary machine” (p.29). Trying to understand how letter-writing functions in Kafka’s universe, they suggest “for the moment” to differentiate “a subject of enunciation” and “a subject of the statement . . . (even if *I* speak about *me*)” (p.30). According to Deleuze and Guattari, what makes Kafka’s letters functional is the havoc they play with this distinction. “It is this duality,” they note, “that Kafka wants to put to a perverse or diabolical use. Instead of the subject of enunciation using the letter to recount his own situation, it is the subject of the statement that will take on a whole movement . . .” (p.30).

This versatile deployment of the word “diabolical,” in turn, suggests that Kafka’s challenge to the Cartesian enunciation was politically informed and responded to the political dangers he saw approaching—bureaucracy, capitalism, and fascism. Now it will be interesting to remember that Bilge Karasu, decades before Deleuze and Guattari’s book on Kafka or the publication of “Cry a While, Descartes,” suggested that in Bener’s texts, “The thinking ‘I’s eliminate the little incongruities of the speaking ‘I’s.” Karasu’s very early diagnosis of Bener’s “schizoid” modality of enunciation is as shockingly illuminating as it is inattentive to its political repercussions. This critical lack, so it seems, has been transcended, to quote Jameson again, “in the direction of the political and the collective” not by any other reader but Bener himself, who expresses his question of subjectivity as a political question most laconically in his discussion on fascism.

And now the sentence “To think of myself as separate from myself . . . has nothing to do with therapy,” embedded in a world-historical delirium on “the war,” too, starts to become politically significant. The question that remains unanswered is, what constitutes “health” if neither Cartesian selfhood nor medicine is of use as a “method of therapy”? *Notes* will show that Bener’s answer is literature—an answer which will never be left unproblematized.

Writing, an Impasse

Strings from *Schönberg* on the radio, out of spite. To heal [*sağaltmak*], not to scatter. You’ve been doing well, drawn to be a physician [*tabipliğin tutmuştu*]. Well, taping the fair copies of what you have written in the old days was enough; what happened? Please, don’t stop, shake yourself off. . . . It’s no go, right? (Bener, 2010, p.11)

Departing from such scenes of inner interrogation, which are often framed by tough negotiations on sickness and health, his readers have drawn attention to a discontinuous movement in Bener. They have pointed out the mutual existence of “a principle of con-

tinuity” and “a principle of dispersion” in his modernist aesthetics (Koçak, 1991, p.82) or a “tense conversation” between optimism and pessimism that constitutes the quintessence of his literary style (Gürbilek, 2004a, p.36).

Perhaps this tense conversation has found its nest nowhere more palpably than in *Notes*, a novel composed of diary notes penned by a sick and old man named Muannit Sahtegi, whose name performs an explicit double movement: “mule” and “not genuine” (Tutumlu, 2016, p.47), or “obstinate” and “counterfeit.” A retired bureaucrat who is also a jaded writer (like *Virus*’s Osman Yaylagülü),¹¹ Mr. Sahtegi decides to rewrite the diary notes he took years ago while also taking new notes.¹² The entries in *Notes* cover the 1970s and 1980s, portraying the predicaments, oscillations, and fears of its recorder as well as his relationship with his adopted daughter Fatoş. In *Notes*, the acts of remembering, recording, writing, and rewriting seem to take place simultaneously despite temporal marks, and neither the reader nor the diary-writer could capture the time exactly.

What I want to focus on in Mr. Sahtegi’s oscillation between healing and scattering, though, is its ability to constitute a treatise on literature’s abilities. Throughout *Notes*, Mr. Sahtegi constantly notes how, why, and what he is unable to note. As a symptom of this unease, he extensively problematizes his writing paraphernalia. Not only does he mess with “the ballpoint pen” that hurts his fingers (Bener, 2010, p.32) or about “a *Scheaffer* fountain pen” that he “hesitates to use” (p.35), he constantly gets into trouble with his “typewriter” (p.12-13).

¹¹ Gümüş (2000) suggests that the characterizations of Osman Yaylagülü and Mr. Sahtegi not only resemble each other but also constitute “an integrated personality to which Vişat O. Bener too bears a resemblance” (p.58), further confirming the autobiography thesis.

¹² This juxtaposition of (re)viewing and (re)writing (“taping the fair copies of what you have written in the old days”) should remind us of Samuel Beckett’s play *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1984), where “a wearish old man” (p.55) listens to what he recorded on his tape recorder some thirty years ago, comments on what he hears and eventually makes a new record: “Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that. . . . What’s a year now? The sour cud and the iron stool” (p.62). We know that Beckett was an inspirational figure for Bener: “I sometimes do such stupidities as comparing myself to Samuel Beckett” (Kavas et al., 2004, p.152).

What is worth noting is that *Notes* always frames this problematization of writing with the same question: "Shall I continue or stop?" (p.23). On "a lethal, suicidal morning," a similar question haunts Mr. Sahtegi: "You went astray Mr. Muannit Sahtegi, don't do that. While saying that it is writing, not speaking, that will save you . . . What, how, why save?" (p.9). This question, however, will take its most provocative form when he starts to mull over the curative potentials of writing. Reflecting upon how he had been criticized for being too much into himself, "too much self-pitying," Mr. Sahtegi revisits his tense oscillation between healing and scattering: "Creations are to endure the otherwise inappeasable starvation of the sick body [*hasta yapı*] that continually remembers his childhood joylessness, so to say! Self-consolation, in other words. The Consoler's consolation will save, huh! Save what?" (p.61).

It is as if Mr. Sahtegi is being "obstinate" not only with some readers of Bener who find his works too individualistic but also with the Freudian notion of creative writing here. In his presentation "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," Freud (1989) suggests that a creative writer's fictionalizations are reminiscent of a child's games: "instead of *playing*, he now *phantasies*" (p.438). Regarding literature as "a continuation of, and a substitution for, what was once the play of childhood," Freud writes: "A strong experience in the present awakens in the creative writer a memory of an earlier experience (usually belonging to his childhood) from which there now proceeds a wish which finds its fulfillment in the creative work" (p.442).

It is not only Mr. Sahtegi who is unsatisfied with this reduction of the creative act to a mere effort to appease some childhood anxieties. Deleuze (1997) also refuses to comply with "this infantilization or 'psychoanalization' of literature" (p.2), arguing that "the writer as such is not a patient but rather a physician, the physician of himself and of the world" (p.3). According to Deleuze, the question that bothers the writer, who "returns from what he has seen and heard with bloodshot eyes and pierced eardrums," is not how to come to terms with childhood neuroses, but "What health would be sufficient to liberate life wherever it is imprisoned by and within

man, by and within organisms and genera?” (p.3). The burden of this question, Deleuze maintains, renders literature “an enterprise of health” (p.3).¹³

But a critique of psychologism must entail a nuanced perspective on the political. *Notes* gives us important clues that Mr. Sahtegi indeed returns to his typewriter “with bloodshot eyes and pierced eardrums.” “I am suffocated by my little, poor troubles,” he writes on this diary—but it is not hard to detect irony here, as he effortlessly juxtaposes his personal and public concerns through the same problematization:

I should make some decisions. For one thing, I shouldn't neglect my food so much. My lower teeth are pulled off. I'm weak. Rain or shine, I must keep writing a few lines. Otherwise, I will go off the rails. Terror, a habit of daily life—increasingly no more startling. (Bener, 2010, p.79)

One of the most charged manifestations of Mr. Sahtegi's struggle with and resistance to bodily and mental collapse, this moment also crystallizes the radical entanglement of questions of subjectivity, politics, and the act of writing in Bener. It is true that Mr. Sahtegi is too much into himself, yet *his self* is already loaded with a negotiation on “terror.” His “notebook” that is “crowded with selfish inconsistencies” (p.41) is indeed crowded with many such politico-economic negotiations, which prosaically document history or further amplify irony as in the following cry: “No need to impose restrictions on nuclear powers. Big bosses, I beg you, please press your red buttons. Let this multi-degeneracy, for which we are all responsible, end” (p.24).

¹³ The question of how health manifests in literature seems to have loomed large in Deleuze's thinking. One of the most exciting appearances of this question in his philosophy is a 1988 interview, where he shares his prefiguration of *Essays Critical and Clinical*: “I've dreamed about bringing together a series of studies under the general title 'Essays Critical and Clinical.' That's not to say that great authors, great artists, are all ill, however sublimely, or that one's looking for a sign of neurosis or psychosis like a secret in their work, the hidden code of their work. They're not ill; on the contrary, they're a rather special kind of doctor. . . . The artist or philosopher often has slender, frail health, a weak constitution, a shaky hold on things: look at Spinoza, Nietzsche, Lawrence. Yet it's not death that breaks them, but seeing, experiencing, thinking too much life” (Deleuze, 1995, p.142-143).

Despite the difference in tone, this cry resonates with Osman's call, "Blow the trumpet of *Israfil*, enough!" The reason why we should remember *Virus* at this very moment, however, is another sentence: "You, the lad, suffocated with mirage, expecting delicate *Purcellian* poems from me, I look at you—you with your bleeding eyes!" The intertextual allusion here must be to Henry Purcell, the 17th-century English composer known for his subtle and soft songs. Let us remember that we read before this sentence an intense negotiation on universal history crowded with dead bodies. To write like Purcell—Osman says, how possible is this now? How can I write, what can I write, in the face of this history? *Why write*, if I am aware of the ineffectiveness of what I write vis-à-vis exploitations, pogroms, and murders?

Nevertheless, one must also see that this political "impasse" eventually leads to an uncomfortable yet forceful embrace of the act of writing as a "way out."¹⁴ Although writing is more a question than an answer, the delirious subject writes "Delirium," the divided "I" writes "Cry a While, Descartes," Mr. Sahtegi writes *Notes*, Osman writes *Virus*—some of the most "arduous" texts written in Turkish. Responding to the readers who have found her writing style intricate, Judith Butler (2002) suggests that "style is a complicated terrain, and not one that we unilaterally choose or control with the purposes we consciously intend. . . . Moreover, neither grammar nor style are politically neutral" (p. xviii). Maybe it is on this complicated terrain that we too should understand not only the reason why Bener's "sick" and "schizoid" subjects are most often author-figures who write their inability to write but also the political significance of Bener's "wrestling" with language: In the face of this history, I cannot write "*Purcellian*" poems—Osman Yaylagülü, or Bener, says, I can only write *Virus*.

¹⁴ My use of these terms is, of course, informed by Deleuze and Guattari (1986), who ceaselessly refer to the situations where Kafka "invents a way out of this impasse" (p.10), but also Lauren Berlant (2011), who conceptualizes "the ordinary as an impasse shaped by crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on" (p.8).

Coda: The Politics of Turkish Modernism Revisited

After passing through these moments in Bener's texts where the questions pertaining to subjectivity, politics, and writing are radically interwoven with each other, it will be hard not to see that Bener is "primarily," not "occasionally," interested in "the social circumstances" (Tutumlu, 2016, p.44). But Bener will constitute an even more interesting case to ponder the relationship between literature and politics if we consider the fact that he is inevitably a Turkish author and his text a "third-world text"—the fact that he read Beckett, but Beckett did not read him.

For justifiable reasons, the history of Turkish modernism has been written as the story of an aesthetic experience oscillating between "Eastern" and "Western" or traditional and modern cultural registers. Revolving around the keywords "aporia," "crisis," or "belatedness," this paradigm, under the pens of prudent critics, has promisingly shown that aesthetic experience is contingent upon historical and geographical differences, and modern Turkish literature is no exception in this regard.¹⁵

¹⁵ In her thought-provoking essay "Dandies and Originals: Authenticity, Belatedness, and the Turkish Novel," Gürbilek (2003) presents a very useful recapitulation of this discourse in Turkish literary and cultural criticism. Attempting to deconstruct what she calls "the criticism of a lack, a critique devoted to demonstrating what Turkish society, culture, or literature lacks," she first acknowledges the historical conditions that prepared the ground for this reading habit: "A whole set of social-economic-cultural reasons are at work here: a society that is 'belatedly modernized,' a system of thought that has come to accept its insufficiency before a modern one presuming to be superior, and a culture that has adopted an infantile role when confronted by foreign modern ideals. What the Greek scholar Gregory Jusdanis calls 'belated modernity,' what the Iranian scholar Daryush Shayegan describes as 'a consciousness retarded to the idea,' what the Turkish scholar Jale Parla explains by a sense of 'fatherlessness' and what the Turkish critic Orhan Koçak discusses within the framework of a 'missed ideal' are all related to the traumatic shifting of models generally discussed under the heading *Westernization*. This cultural context forced Turkish literary criticism toward being an anxious effort of comparison programmed to discuss from the very start the deprivation, insufficiency, and shortage of its object: Turkish literature" (p.599-600). A very similar critique of this internalized lack has been suggested in regard to modern Arabic criticism by Abdelfattah Kilito, who notes that "the reader of an Arabic text soon connects it, directly or indirectly, to a European text. He is necessarily a comparatist, or we could say a translator" (quoted in Young, 2013, p.686).

I see Nergis Ertürk's (2011a) survey of Turkish modernism as a good indicator of this paradigm.¹⁶ Identifying the "positive and negative Turkish desire for Europe" as its key instigator, Ertürk argues that Turkish modernism "cannot be understood independently of this Occidental social imaginary" (p.247). After tracing this imaginary in Yahya Kemal, Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, and Peyami Safa, who strived for "a *traditionalist* modernism" (p.248), and passing through modernist innovations in Nâzım Hikmet's poetry and the First New, she situates a radical break in the 1950s, pointing out "a remarkable turn in the poetry of the İkinci Yeni (Second New) poets and the novels of Oğuz Atay and Orhan Pamuk" (p.248). She acknowledges this novelty brought about by these post-1950 writers in political terms as well by drawing attention to "the political distance they placed between themselves and the state" (p.255).¹⁷ Despite this autonomy, to Ertürk, what informs the politics of this novelty is still the nation's perennial East-West divide. Following Meltem Ahıska's definition of Occidentalism as "a device 'through which those in power consume and reproduce the projection of the "West" to negotiate and consolidate their hegemony in line with their pragmatic interests,'" she contends that "the broken languages of postwar Turkish modernism have registered the violence through which that hegemony was consolidated" (p.255-256).

Ertürk convincingly shows that the politics of Turkish literary modernism, in its traditionalist, committed, or autonomous forms, is inevitably trapped in the nation's cultural aporia, if not for other reasons than because "the canonical texts of Western European

¹⁶ For Ertürk's most comprehensive analysis of Turkish literary modernity, see her groundbreaking study, *Grammar and Literary Modernity in Turkey* (2011b).

¹⁷ A similar periodization has been suggested by other Turkish critics as well. Koçak (2011) has stated that "the arts and literature" in Turkey had to wait until the 1950s to gain "a certain autonomy" from "the political sphere" (p.406). What is worth specific attention is Koçak's attention to "the opening out onto inner world" (p.407) as the distinctive sign of this autonomy. Jale Özata Dirlikyapan (2010) has argued that modern Turkish short story witnessed a rupture in form and content in the 1950s and, to borrow from the title of her work, "broke its shell." Burcu Alkan and Çimen Günay-Erkol (2016) have pointed out that "new approaches developed in literature and the novel in the 1950s," and the novelists started to tend towards "individualism and existentialism" (p.xix).

¹⁸ For a condensed discussion of her usage of the term "Occidentalism," see Ahıska (2003).

modernism continue to serve as a rich source of new critical openings in and onto Turkish literature” (p.248). However, her emphasis on the “uneven transnational history positing Europe as the object of desire” (p.248), insofar as it is formulated as the *only* possible conundrum Turkish modernism can react to, runs the risk of glossing over the possibility of other *transnational* political imaginaries in modern Turkish literature. Between Atay and Pamuk, the canonical writers whose works well dramatize the nation’s “cultural schizophrenia,”¹⁹ lies a very interesting yet largely neglected modernist experiment in Turkish fiction, forged by Leylâ Erbil, Sevim Burak, Karasu, Atılğan and Bener among others,²⁰ whose modernist works embody political registers that surely relate to²¹ but also significantly transcend the “tale of the tribe” (quoted in Jameson, 1987, p.26).

It is by no means accidental that here I remember Jameson’s theorizing on the urge of the “third-world text” to produce “national allegory,” which he defines as “the coincidence of the personal story and the ‘tale of the tribe,’ as still in Spenser” (Jameson, 1987, p.26). In his long-debated essay “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” Jameson argues that literary texts produced in the third-world—the countries “which have suffered the experience of colonialism and imperialism” (Jameson, 1986, p.67)—perform a “very different ratio of the political to the personal” (p.69). According to Jameson, even the “seemingly private” third-world texts necessarily blur the “split between the private and the public, between the poetic and the political” thanks to their urge to present singular characters and their stories “in the form of national allegory” (p.69).

¹⁹ As already mentioned by Gürbilek, Daryush Shayegan has been a prevalent reference point in the discussions on the oscillation of Turkish literature and culture between the East and the West. For the whole conceptualization of “cultural schizophrenia,” see Shayegan (1992).

²⁰ Speaking of Sait Faik, “but rather Vüsat O. Bener and Bilge Karasu,” Yusuf Atılğan, Tahsin Yücel, Leylâ Erbil, Adnan Özyalçınır, Tomris Uyar, and Kamuran Şipal, Koçak (1991) has called this experience in Turkish literature “modernism proper” [*asıl modernizm*] (p.141).

²¹ One such relation in Bener is to be found in Mr. Sahtegi’s ironic discourse: “Don’t shave your hairs with razor or depilatory. Let them grow copiously and westernize. I should also eat *pastırma* and stink. Everybody should faint at the smell of sweat with *pastırma*. . . . We would get used to it and develop” (Bener, 2010, p.25).

To Jameson, the individual story in the third-world is thus always already mediated through “the national situation” (p.65).

While Jameson's theory has been criticized by many critics, most famously by Aijaz Ahmad (1992),²² for eventually reproducing the already problematic cultural stereotypes, it sparked a lively debate in Turkish literary criticism as well. Testing Jameson's theory in some major works of the modern Turkish novel, Sibel Irzik (2003) contends that the Jamesonian national allegory needs “complication, and even, in a certain sense, reversal and irony” (p.555).²³ Irzik's readings of the works of Adalet Ağaoğlu, Tanpınar, Atay, and Pamuk show that these authors subvert “the compulsion to allegorize” (p.556) even when they comply with it. This analysis leads her to the conclusion that “a dialectics of the public and the private” (p.564), rather than an unproblematized transfiguration of the individual into the national, may provide a more comprehensive grasp, also regarding modern Turkish literature.

Another acute critique of Jameson in regard to modern Turkish literature has been proposed by Gürbilek (2004b), to whom Jameson's thesis fails to see “the painful, restricting, and inhibiting process” that informs the politics of third-world texts (p.180). What I see as the most incisive point in her critique of Jameson, however, is Gürbilek's warning against the trap of nationalism that critics of Jameson may fall into. If we want to disprove Jameson's thesis, she claims, it suffices to consider the third-world texts “that hardly relate to ‘national allegory,’” such as “Bilge Karasu's *The Garden of the Departed Cats*, Vüs'at O. Bener's *Notes of Mr. Muannit Sahtegi*, and Leylâ Erbil's *The Dwarf*” (p.174). Gürbilek, however, is not satisfied with such an attempt, as she captures here a resentful national ego that celebrates

²² Among many points Ahmad (1992) makes in response to Jameson is his suggestion to “replace the idea of the nation with that larger, less restricting idea of collectivity” and to “start thinking of the process of allegorisation not in nationalistic terms but simply as a relation between private and public, personal and communal” (p.15). See Szeman (2001) for a critical attempt to situate Jameson's framework of (national) allegory within his larger project of “social and political criticism” from a postcolonial vantage point. I would like to thank the anonymous referee for drawing my attention to Szeman's article.

²³ Irzik argues that “Turkey fits Jameson's characterization of Third World countries” because “it has clearly not recovered, economically or culturally, from its contact with the capitalist West” (p.555).

its long-awaited access to “a poetics independent from the public, an inner world separate from the fate of the nation, and modern texts that have registered this world” (p.174).²⁴

While presenting Bener as a possible rebuttal of Jameson’s theory, my aim is *not* to argue that Turkish authors have the ability to create authentic texts that are independent of the political. On the contrary, my aim throughout the paper has been to show the politics of Bener’s modernism. While fully embracing Irzik’s and Gürbilek’s critiques of Jameson, my reading of Bener poses a different challenge to his thesis. I think Jameson is justified in his emphasis on the political but faulty in his *delineation* of this politics in third-world literature. It is true that Bener’s texts, as third-world texts or basically as modernist texts, debunk the split between the public and the private—but they do so not merely in reference to *national* anxieties or complications but on an impersonal and world-historical plane that passes over national borders. What Bener’s “sick” and “schizoid” subjects register is the dead body of Lorca, some children waiting to be killed, some cruelties, slaughters, and wars, Hitler’s fascism, terror in Bayrampaşa, nuclear armament or Palestine—an immense politico-economic plateau that transcends “the national situation” (Jameson, 1986, p.65).

This, in turn, does not show that Turkish authors, Middle Eastern modernists, third-world intellectuals, peripheral avant-gardes too produce works of literature that are autonomous from the political, but that their autonomous works too “‘délire’ about the whole world” (Deleuze and Parnet, 2011)—possibly to the detriment of their market value in the West.²⁵ “To prevent the imprisoning of Third World literatures in the national or the sublime,” Hülya Adak

²⁴ For an illuminating discussion of the Turkish reception of Jameson’s theory in relation to the methodologies of comparative and global literary studies, see Adak (2008).

²⁵ While thinking so, I am following Robert J. C. Young (2013), who notes that “Western accounts of contemporary world literature tend to celebrate novels that present stereotypical or assumed microcosmic portraits of non-Western societies . . . catering to Western preconceptions about the Middle East or the ‘Muslim world’” (p.686) as well as Saliha Pakar (2001), who argues that many remarkable works of modern Turkish literature, considered “not Turkish enough,” have failed to meet “the academic or more general expectations of British and American readers and publishers” (p.623).

(2008) has suggested, “. . . global literary studies could juxtapose multiple perspectives on (Third World) literature” (p.21). It is my contention that we could focus on “the political and the collective” (Jameson, 1981, p.60) to explore such potentials for literary reception and criticism.

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