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Reminders to the body

Review

Sven Kramer, *Die Folter in der Literatur. Ihre Darstellung in der deutschsprachigen Erzählprosa von 1740 bis 'nach Auschwitz'*. [Torture in Literature: Representations in German-language Literature from 1740 to "after Auschwitz"], München, Fink, 2004.

For many years, torture was a topic that played no more than a marginal role in public discussions, but recently, this situation has changed fundamentally. The creation of “camps” in Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere, publication of the images of torture in Abu Ghraib, or discussions in Germany about the “Daschner case” are signs of a new actuality of the issues raised by torture that attracted the attention of the public. What we are now witnessing is presumably not so much the renewed appearance of torture in Western culture—an encounter with a reincarnation of a historical phenomenon that was believed long-dead—as instead an appalled moment of awareness about the on-going actions of authorities in constitutional democracies. If we are to give credence to Amnesty International’s annual reports, torture continues to be not only a widespread, systematic hegemonic practice but is also a persistent problem of Western culture: “torture accompanies the process of civilization” (Kramer, 2004: 42). But how is torture defined politically? In the broadest sense, as delineated in the 1948 UN convention, torture is “Any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person ... when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity” (United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, adopted 10 December 1984). Thus, two elements play a central role in defining torture; “first, inflicting severe pain or suffering, and second, public officials as perpetrators (Kramer, 2004:15).

Torture is not only one of the most extreme forms of political practice; it is also one of the most extreme experiences that a person can be subjected to. Améry expressed this as follows: “Whoever is overcome by pain through torture experiences his body as never before. In self-negation, his flesh becomes a total reality. And he adds: “But only in torture does the transformation of the person into flesh become complete.” Pain is the “emotion-anticipating [*gefühlshahnende*] path “to death. Torture lets “experience our own death” (Améry: 631). So it is rather astonishing that the phenomenon of torture—unlike, for example, trauma—has hardly been addressed in cultural studies, aside from a few exceptions such as Elaine Scarry’s monograph *The Body in Pain* (1992).

Withstanding and being overcome

Literary scholar Sven Kramer has filled this gap with his comprehensive and most readable study on *Torture in Literature*. Kramer is especially interested in the imaginary dimension of torture as it is coded in literature. Working from an approach grounded in discourse analysis, his main concern is not so much the question of what torture is, but rather what historical processes in the representation of torture can reveal about the practice of torture. Examining works from the late eighteenth century into the post-modern period, Kramer offers an analysis of German language literature dealing explicitly with torture that refers to a rich material base and is precise in its details. Extensive individual case studies within the text focus on key authors such as Hoffmann, Tieck, Kafka, and Améry. In all of these sections, literary discourse on torture is contrasted with legal and political discussions.

Kramer's perspective is predominantly historical and his interpretative framework involves close readings of the texts. Changing representations of the tortured individual and the tortured person's experience of withstanding and being overcome are key topics in the study. This focus points to two issues: the notorious question about the relationship between body and mind in the highly charged, violent context created by torture, as a state defined by pain (body) and consciousness (mind) and the issue of subject constitution, as a violent process that can only be mediated socially.

The author recognizes the seminal role of the passion of Christ. In the Christian tradition, pain is not only justified by virtue of the promise of salvation; suffering is, in fact declared to be essential. Etymologically, pain (frz. *peine*) is closely linked to punishment (lat. *poena*). In the *imitatio Christi*, pain and suffering become redemption. A central element of Christianity's mysticism of suffering is the assumption that suffering with Jesus is accompanied by a spiritual experience of being closer to God. Experiencing and overcoming pain as a means of killing one's own negative existence (of the body) leads to the spirit's emergence from the dead body as God. The passion of Christ, like torture, is organized around a *telos*, which consists of human beings' transformation into divine beings. Literature (perhaps most of all the texts of Franz Kafka) must be credited with pointing out this phantasmic system and the economy of violence with which it is connected. In Kafka's work, the description of torture is equated with the describing-to-death through torture. Torture as a process of representation and creation is thus shifted to the center of the genealogy of culture.

Fissures in the subject

By applying a systematic perspective, Kramer arrives at the following typology and diachronic characterization: Whereas in the pre-Enlightenment period the "resistant individual" cannot be subjugated by bodily pain, since he/she finds the strength to resist (and meaning) in God, this source of strength dwindles with the rise of secularization. And increasing valorization of the subject towards the end of the eighteenth century is accompanied by the assumption that rationality and will control individual behavior, but the experience of torture (as a negating form of violence) simultaneously undermines this assumption. The subject is increasingly overpowered by his/her bodily-experienced feelings of powerlessness and isolation; broken by torture, the individual remains permanently an invalid. At the same time, the literature of the romantic and decadent periods grasps death-evoking pain in its erotic reference as a radical opportunity for self-discovery (as self-negation). This fissure that splits the subject is radicalized by the thanatological experience of the two world wars and the Shoah. The Other of the body is responsible for reversing the hierarchy of the mind and the body, through the experience of its own mortality. The dimension of the imaginary is irretrievably destroyed through the invasion of reality. Torture testifies to this: that the freedom of the imaginary—as the core of the subjective—cannot withstand the premonition of death and is thus destroyed under its reign. However, this process creates the possibility of "perceiving traumatization in all its sustainability. Only where it was no longer necessary to pay service either to the legal discourse about ascertaining the truth or to the heroic discourse inspired by Christianity about overcoming the state of being overcome could the image of the defenseless, irreversibly overcome victim be imagined." (Kramer, 2004: 488)

In summary, Kramer's study is to be warmly recommended as a volume characterized by an impressive richness of source materials and by precise attention to detail, which offers a comprehensive survey of literary representations of torture in German language texts of the period. As such, it is a unique work of scholarship. Kramer succeeds in dealing sensitively with this difficult topic and his interpretations are discreet and low-key. Theoretical deductions and

references are, for the most part, avoided. This might perhaps be considered a weakness of the book—although one should not criticize the study for lacking something it does not purport to offer. What remains unclear, however, is what representations of torture have to tell us about torture itself. In this respect, the study falls behind Scarry’s theoretical options; Scarry always situated “the problem of suffering” within the framework of the relationship between “creation” (production) and “resolution” (antiproduction). For Scarry, torture (and war) are presumptive, overwhelming usurpations of the act of creation. Creation itself, however, leads to a process in which phenomena become increasingly unreal; in war, this process is merely perpetuated and reversed. Torture and war are strategies of substantiation (a repossessing embodiment of the supplement). But the interpretive option that results from this insight is this: as the speed of the cultural process of immaterialization increases, the sanctions brought to bear against this immaterialization in the form of war, torture, and illness (as reminders to the body) become more and more severe. Sven Kramer might have trusted his readers to be up to dealing with a few such theoretical subtleties.

Translation from German by **Paula Bradish**

Short biographical note

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