

Thinking of memory and postmemory narratives in vulnerable times¹ /

Pensando as narrativas memoriais e pós-memoriais em tempo de vulnerabilidade

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ABSTRACT

Based on an inventory of the contributions from theorists who thought about memory and the complex representation of the past, we aim to discuss the role of narration and fiction as mediators in the interpretation of the lived experience. The reliability of the reconstruction of the past is called into question, leading us to reflect on the notion of testimony and the issue of truth inherent to it. To compare official memory and individual narratives is necessary in order to oppose authoritarian metanarrative discourses to a more polyphonic history, which seeks to achieve the understanding and overcoming of traumas. We will also see how the theoretical reflection concerning the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories offers some tools for the interpretation of the so-called postmemory generation works. Based on these considerations, and given the global health crisis that places us in the position of vulnerable witnesses of a catastrophe, we are led to reflect over the future from a retrospective look into the trauma.

KEYWORDS: memory; postmemory; literary narrative; writing of trauma; testimony.

RESUMO

A partir de um levantamento da contribuição de grandes teóricos que pensaram a memória e a complexa representação do passado, buscamos discutir o papel da narração e da ficção como mediadoras na interpretação do vivido. A fiabilidade da reconstrução do passado é posta em causa, o que nos leva a refletir sobre a noção de testemunho e a questão da verdade a ele inerente. Cotejar memória oficial e narrativas individuais faz-se necessário a fim de se contrapor discursos meta-narrativos autoritários a uma história mais polifônica, que enseja a compreensão e a superação de traumas. Veremos também como a reflexão teórica a respeito da transmissão intergeracional de memórias traumáticas oferece ferramentas para a interpretação de obras da chamada geração pós-memorial. A partir dessas considerações, e diante da crise sanitária mundial que nos coloca em posição de testemunhas vulneráveis de uma catástrofe, somos levados a refletir sobre o futuro a partir de um olhar retrospectivo do trauma.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: memória; pós-memória; narrativa literária; escrita do trauma; testemunho.

1 Introduction

To narrate life is an act of memory; which is, in turn, according to Henri Bergson, a remnant of images that influence our perception of the present to the point of overlapping it, enriching the lived experience through the acquired experience (BERGSON, 1965). When we look back into the past in light of the present, memory emerges as a glimpse of remembrances and sensations which come into existence when they are transformed into stories, bringing forth what was also denied.

Subject of reflection for great names of philosophy and literature, memory and its writing are the topic of the volume 9 of *Letras Raras Journal*, which aims at continuing the reflection

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about the possible forms of writing the past, taking into consideration its traumatic and intergenerational dimension in a scope of narratives mostly contemporary. How to (re)write and what to tell about the past? What is the role of memory in the reconstruction of what has been experienced and has already been lost? Which are its parts of truth and which of fiction?

Being symbolical systems of collective and individual memory representation, history and literature are narratives which enquire the past through their materialization, regardless of method. Either by striving to get closer to facts or to bind them off with the power of imagination, both propose a resignification of the past through its discursive reorganisation (HUTCHEON, 1991). Thus, the past is not restricted to the factual, but is characterized by the manner in which events affect the individual.

War of memories, according to François Dosse², or obsession for the past, as Henry Rousso understands the representation of the “duty of remembrance” imperative, the different versions that we might have of what happened and its lingering onto the present may slip both into an overflow of memory and into an empty memory. Between the Holocaust as a matrix and negative memory (ROUSSO, 2016) and the amnesty laws as impeded memories (RICOEUR, 2000), where to situate and what is the role performed by memory and postmemory narratives? There are epistemic discourses about the past in movement, from history to literature in this memory paradox that 21st century societies restore when they exacerbate memory by crystallising it through civic memories and rituals, or when they deny it through some methods that prevent societies from purging the traumatic past –,

Having an overflow of memories or not, the comprehension and lingering of the past into the present demand the chaotic flow of life to be transformed into narrative. If life is a potential story in search of a good narrator, it is so because our human existence, and not only biological, exists only when we transform it into a comprehensible story, once it is told. Nothing is motionless in the story in which we are narrators; the facts are constantly reinterpreted in light of a dialogue between the individual time and the historical and cultural dimension in which we are inserted, thus, forming our narrative identity, as Ricoeur (2008) has defined. For the French philosopher,

² In his study “L’histoire à l’épreuve de la guerre des mémoires” (“History put to the test of the war of memories”) (2008), the historian and epistemologist François Dosse points out to the competition of memories lived in the current times between politicians, who try to impose to historians the manner in which memory must be transferred, and some historians who demand the right to oblivion and to not transfer the past. Among the two perspectives, Dosse places himself next to those ones who believe in an enrichment of history by the contribution given by multiple memories (such as the ones from women and disqualified social groups) (DOSSE, 2008).

fiction functions as an undeniable mediator in the interpretation of the lived events, since the past only exists because it is told.

Therefore, this paper aims at drawing the discussions of all texts presented in this issue on the view of memory thinkers and over the complex representation of the past; then, we seek to discuss the role of narration and fiction as mediators in the interpretation of the lived experience. The reliability of the reconstruction of the past is called into question, leading us to reflect on the notion of testimony and the issue of truth inherent to it. To compare official memory and individual narratives is necessary in order to oppose authoritarian metanarrative discourses to a more polyphonic history, which leads to the understanding and overcoming of traumas.

2 Narrating the past and overcoming the trauma

This issue enquires the corpus of contemporary fictional works that have as a common point the translation of a painful memory into a literary narrative, sometimes hidden or removed – from collective memory or official history, and that must be elaborated. Alongside the problematizations that history and law have to face in order to identify the “truth” of historical facts, some papers emphasise the protocols demanded in fiction or in history, with the purpose of using testimony in all its forms (orality/writing), functions, contents, transmissions (formal or informal), and the place it occupies at the construction of collective memory, besides taking into account the value and the validity for its receivers.

Referring to the introduction of the testimony into literature, Jean-Louis Jeannelle (2004) affirms:

The testimonial model is thus found in a series of antagonistic options, taken to the extreme: systematically requested and collected by our societies concerned in maintaining the traces of the past, it appears to be the very place of challenging the unspeakable, the unfathomable; an essential social vector of conviction, it is the object most exposed to suspicion, deliberately radicalized in case of negationism; despite the status of factual narrative and the importance granted to it, given the requirement of referential suitability, it is invested with great aesthetic potential, in some cases situated at the limits of fiction, presented both as a threat and as a source of renewal. (JEANNELLE, 2004, p. 90, own translation)³

³ “Le modèle testimonial est ainsi pris dans une série d'options antagonistes, tendues à l'extrême: sollicité et recueilli de manière systématique par nos sociétés soucieuses de préserver les traces du révolu, il apparaît comme le lieu même de la confrontation à l'indicible, à l'insondable; vecteur social essentiel de la conviction, il est l'objet le plus exposé au soupçon, radicalise de manière délibérée dans le cas du négationnisme; en dépit de son statut de récit

Beatriz Sarlo (2007, p. 17), in turn, states that “there is no witness without experience, neither is there experience without narration”, inasmuch narration would have the capacity to create a new temporality for the experience.

If it may be given to fiction the function of mediation between the continuous course of events and the meaning we can give to our lives – given the pre-narrative quality of the human experience –, to fiction may also be assigned new ways of narrating the past, which compete with the official discourses and in accordance with the “ex-centric” (HUTCHEON, 1991, chapter 4) national voices. As Maurice Halbwachs (1997) asserts, if each individual memory is a point of view about collective memory, the presentification of the past would be even richer if presented by a multiple perspective concerning the same historical event. As the past did not pass, its discourses bring us, through its traces in the present (HUTCHEON, 1991), the becoming (CERTEAU, apud DOSSE, 2008). To what extent do the individual memories weave the collective memory, or, at least, assist it in the recovery of a past many times hidden? To which extent do the familiar and individual memories, though fictionalized, enquire and contradict the official narrative?

As Hutcheon (1991, p. 60) reminds us, “the process of narrativization has come to be seen as a central form of human comprehension, of imposition of meaning and formal coherence to the chaos of events”. In fact, whether about the nation, or concerning the private domain, through some historical or fictional perspectives, memory testimonies are discursive constructions around the inherited traces that can only be differentiated by the manner in which we choose to tell them. To oppose and elucidate the official memory through individual narratives means to challenge authoritarian metanarrative discourses by providing room for history that is more polyphonic and opened to the “ex-centric”.

Based on the above, thus, it has been noted there is a need to an exercise of the memory, which could be seen as a possibility to overcome the whole traumatic experience. In psychoanalysis, for an event to cause some trauma, it is necessary that the subject feels threatened in their own existence, incapable in the face of reality. The horror of the real would block the mechanisms that would give a psychic dimension to the lived experience. Alongside, the subject would be able to brush aside the traumatic experience through repression. As a

factuel et de l'importance qu'on y accorde à l'exigence d'adéquation référentielle, il est investi d'un grand potentiel esthétique, se situant dans certains cas aux limites de la fiction, présente à la fois comme une menace et comme une source de renouvellement”.

consequence, it would be noted some impoverishment of the affected psyche that, given the trauma, sees itself incapable to establish affective relationships and to web connections among facts.

Thereby, due to a traumatic experience, thoughts and affections would be shaken. Once the functions of linking, symbolising, and elaborating are repressed, they are replaced by the painful repetition of the traumatic act and mental images related to them. Deprived of the natural psychic movements, the subject does not see another alternative, but the death drive (FREUD, 1992), with the inclination to restore a state prior to the horror, in order to reduce the psychic tension in which the person would be plunged.

Moreover, the psychoanalytic theory explains that, contrary to the neurotic conflict, the traumatic experience leaves the subject with no voice, incapable of translating the lived experience into discourse, and then turns itself into a destroying experience whose only exit is self-destruction. What the paralyses of essential psychic mechanisms derived from a trauma perform individually, totalitarian regimes tend to obtain collectively: where it lays a reduction of the spontaneity in favour of an order in which the repetitive overrides the evolutionary with the resulting control of the creative movements, an obstacle to the autonomy of the subject is inevitably imposed. Not surprisingly, dictators are devoted to military parades and express aversion to artists and writers, who defy any kind of censorship and control. Art as a whole, and literature in particular, as the verbalization of thoughts that refuse to be silent, shows the exit door to the deadly dynamics which handcuff the subject victim of a trauma.

It is a fact that the articulated language, as well as art, are remarkable and specific signs of human beings. It is important to highlight that all creative processes depend on the capacity of the psyche to symbolise and to elaborate what constitutes the memory of a culture, or what was hidden by its own culture, in a relation and reorganization of the representations of affect and of the elements from exterior reality. If these mechanisms are found imprisoned to a post-traumatic state, their natural creativity will be inhibited or even blocked.

Creativity has a complex relation with life and death drives. On one hand, if creation demands some emptiness in order to be expressed, on the other hand, it nourishes from a work of psychic elaboration which implies a dynamic of connections, associations, and symbolisations, whose support is the life drive. The trauma, which serves to the death drive, has an anticreative effect. To put on the blank sheet of paper some traces of pain that are scratched, erased, and rewritten makes writing the best way of overcoming that pain, since the ambiguity of trauma is

inherent to its own condition: the fact may be difficult to be named, nevertheless, it needs to be exposed. In the absence of the legal “plaster” of judgement (FELMAN, 2014) that would repair the trauma caused by a gloomy past (dictatorial, in case of Brazil, prevented by the Amnesty Law of 1979), contemporary fiction seems to want to open up space for this kind of memory discourse in all its respects.

Considering that all memories have their portion of imagination or fiction, and that the narrative which allows to convey that is inevitably a textual construction, the issue of the authenticity of facts, their retransmission and their accuracy is even more sensitive when they involve a non-personal memory, i.e. an intergenerational or transgenerational one. If memory narrative thematises oftentimes more incisively the failures of memory than the facts themselves, what must be said when memory is inherited from parents and grandparents, or even silenced by them? And, above all, how do literary narrative and theory deal with this second-hand or indirect memory?

The American comparatist Marianne Hirsch coined in the 1990s the concept of “postmemory” in order to analyse how artists in the subsequent generations to the Holocaust represent the traumatic experience of their ancestors. Being herself daughter of Romanian Jews, survivors of Nazi concentration camps, and finding herself in the position of indirect witness, her postmemory theory is aligned to a subjective turn of human and social sciences (SARLO, 2007, chapter 5).

If in *Family Frames: Photography, Narration and Postmemory*, Hirsch had already pointed to the possibility of applying the concept to “other second generations” (HIRSCH, 1997, p. 22), based on *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, this possibility materialises through her own proposal of working with “connected histories”, that is, “in dialogue with numerous other contexts of traumatic transfer that can be understood as postmemory” (HIRSCH, 2012, p. 18). Among the examples given by the author are African slavery in the American continent, the Vietnam War, South African Apartheid, Rwandan genocide, and Latin-American dictatorships. By relating different historical and national contexts with, on one hand, a similar mechanism of memory transfer and, on the other hand, the vertical transmission among generations with the horizontal intergenerational or affiliated transmissions, Hirsch gets closer to the concept of “multidirectional memory” developed by Michael Rothberg (2018). Considering this dialogic perspective and the generational structure of memory

transmission anchored in different forms of mediation, Hirsch defines postmemory in the following way:

‘Postmemory’ describes the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experience they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. (HIRSCH, 2012, p. 5)

This definition places in the foreground the relation between generations mediated by oral narratives, images and texts, all media venues that, according to Hirsch, are highly projective because full of affection. Thus, the imagination which allows inter, trans, and intra generational identifications responsible for mnemonic transmissions are also at risk of overflows, especially because they are prone to identification and projections. That is what Hirsch qualifies as “the dangers of postmemory” because when one tries to take images of the present in order to understand the past they can be transformed into “memory frames”, that is, frames in which “we project present, or timeless, needs and desires and which thus mask other images and other, as yet unthought or unthinkable concerns.” (HIRSCH, 2012, p. 42).

Postmemory narratives have embodied these theoretical concerns. For being highly self-reflexive, their narrators and characters are very often blended into just one subject who recollects the memory heritage, whether it is verbal or not, and frequently only constituted by silence. By representing this transmission of highly metatextual genres such as the autofiction, for instance, postmemory literature enquires the limits between reality and fiction in its own act of narration.

In the same standpoint as Hirsch, novelist, historian and sociologist Régine Robin (2007, p. 399) underlines that the postmemory works of art do not seek to recover an untouched “pure past”, but, on the contrary, constitute a space of transition in which the past is re-lived and “re-experienced”. Thereby, the second generation enquires the official version of the national past by making urgent narratives to emerge, and which break the national discourse and require new interpretations in light of archives and family history that, as Margarida Calafate Ribeiro and António Sousa Ribeiro (RIBEIRO; RIBEIRO, 2013, p. 29) state concerning the memory of the Portuguese Colonial War, “remains confined to the private forum and incapable of obtaining

resonance in the realm of the public memory”. In turn, Catherine Coquio (2015, chapter 2, second part), also departs from Marianne Hirsch’s concept to approach the machinery of the “relaying of witnesses” or “witness of witness” in a society that suffers from an “ailment of truth”, according to her.

Through a sociological approach, Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley (2012, p. 121-122) contribute to the study of the memory transmission at the same time (horizontal) and along the time (vertical) with the concepts of “mnemonic imagination” and “memory community”. The first would allow the passing between different generations, and also from the private realm into the public one through the artistic activities of second or third generations. From art, temporary “memory communities” as well as communities, made up of continuous negotiations and of “highly shared” memories would emerge.

Conclusion

The issue **Narrativas memoriais e pós-memoriais (Memorial and post memorial narratives)** was prepared before and during the global health crisis due to Covid-19. The call for publication was launched in an already fragile moment, during which the authoritarian wave in Brazil pointed to the importance of memory and postmemory narratives, but it was still at a time in which we could not suspect the world would not be the same in a matter of months. The conclusion of this issue coincided with the peak of the crisis, firstly in France, where we are situated, and subsequently in Brazil. The expression “vulnerable times” comes from Marianne Hirsch (2014) and evidently refers to the pre-Covid-19 period, in which the catastrophes were already countless, but not experienced in global scale simultaneously and by similar impacts – obviously taking the socioeconomic differences among countries and groups into account. Hence, if vulnerability derives from the very human condition, Hirsch adds that it is mostly an economic, social, and political imposition. In that sense, she proposes to open a temporal perspective which is more porous and oriented to the future and based on the retrospective look into the trauma. Thus, a better knowledge of vulnerability – either shared or produced – may open a “space of interconnection as well as platform for responsiveness and for resistance” (HIRSCH, 2014, p. 337).

To think about memory, its textuality and its transmission in a moment of isolation and anguish becomes, in our opinion, an urgent affair. After all, the exceptional present context

situates us immediately in the situation of witnesses of a catastrophe. But the situation of isolation, on the other hand, impacts the very memory of what we experience by the sensation of non-distinction between working time and leisure, between days and nights, which tend to be confused.

In the face of this situation, the French philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin enquires about what citizens and public authorities will retain from the lockdown experience: “Only one part? Or everything will be forgotten, anaesthetized, or transformed into folklore?” (TRUONG, 2020, p. 29, own translation). A group of historians, archivists, and sociologists led by the historians Myriam Piguet and Caroline Montebello, from the University of Geneva, seeks to interfere promptly in the global pandemic memory through a manifesto which appeals to institutions, to public authorities and also to citizens, to keep the records of this event so as to “highlight ‘minuscule lives’, usually invisible, but that are part of the great history and human sciences”⁵ (PIGUET, 2020, own translation).

Narratives of lockdown, photographs, videos, electronic mails, hospitals’ records, testimonies, interviews and press articles, among many other documents would all form a broad archive of the global pandemic. The manifesto reminds that “memory construction is never neutral”, which may “overrepresent or silence some groups”, after all it is “dependent on the traces left by contemporaries and afterwards maintained in archives”⁶ (PIGUET, 2020, own translation). This is the very state of mind with which we reflect upon memory and postmemory narratives.

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⁴ “Une partie seulement? Tout sera-t-il oublié, chloroformé ou folklorisé?”

⁵ “mettre en lumière des ‘vies minuscules’, d'ordinaire invisibles, mais qui participent à la grande histoire des sociétés humaines.”

⁶ “tributaires des traces laissées par les contemporains, puis conservées dans des fonds d'archives.”

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