statuS Quaestionis

language text culture

18 (2020)

SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

statuS Quaestionis

language text culture

18 (2020)

SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

Status Quaestions è uno spazio di scambio interdisciplinare e interculturale. Rivista semestrale, che prevede un numero di letteratura uno di linguistica – entrambi monografici con una sezione miscellanea – , SQ è specialmente interessata agli studi comparativi e interculturali, a questioni metodologiche e agli studi di linguistica e traduzione.

Direttore responsabile: Emilia Di Rocco
Status Quaestionis. Language Text Culture
https://ojs.uniroma1.it

Questa rivista utilizza Open Journal Systems 2.4.8.3,
che è un software open source per la gestione e la pubblicazione
di riviste online, sviluppato, supportato e distribuito gratuitamente
da Public Knowledge Project con licenza GNU General Public License.

Rivista telematica scientifica della Sapienza Università di Roma
iscritta al n. 143/2019 del Registro Stampa del Tribunale Civile di Roma

Electronic ISSN: 2239-1983

Tutti i contributi pubblicati nella *Sezione monografica* e nella sezione *Varia* sono sottoposti al processo di *double-blind peer review*.

INDICE | TABLE OF CONTENTS

SEZIONE MONOGRAFICA

Narrating World War II. Transcultural Articulations of Postmemory in Literature and Other Media

a cura di Alice Balestrino e Paolo Simonetti

Miscellanea

Recensioni

statuSQuaestionis
language text culture

SEZIONE MONOGRAFICA

Narrating World War II. Transcultural Articulations of Postmemory in Literature and Other Media

a cura di Alice Balestrino e Paolo Simonetti

statuS Quaestionis
language text culture

Alice Balestrino
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Paolo Simonetti
Sapienza Università di Roma

Introduction. Narrating World War II: Transcultural Articulations of Postmemory in Literature and Other Media

The Second World War is generally regarded as "the most transformative event in world history since the Industrial Revolution," a major cultural, political and socio-economic divide retrospectively considered "the most pivotal event of the past two or three centuries" (Zeiler-Dubois 2013, 1). In his 2017 book, significantly entitled *The Second World Wars*, American historian Victor D. Hanson talks about WWII in the plural, since "no supposedly single conflict was ever before fought in so many diverse landscapes on premises that often seemed unrelated." Most importantly, WWII is by far the deadliest conflict in human history, "a giant, planetwide entropic pulse that converted whole cities to rubble and some fifty-five million living humans into corpses" (Immerwahr 2019) – a truly global military and ideological confrontation involving national and transnational groupings of people engaged in different contexts and battlefields around the world.

Among the many atrocities perpetrated during the war period, the Holocaust is generally considered WWII's – if not history's – blackest hole:[1] the systematic extermination of Jews and minority groups perpetrated by Nazi Germany has

[1] According to Phyllis Lassner, "although the Holocaust [...] was an integral part of World War II, we rarely see their respective literatures shelved or catalogued together" (2009, 179). It is certainly true that the so-called Final Solution requires to be studied as an event in its own right, but, on the other hand, there is always the risk of underestimating other equally horrific war actions, such as the destruction of whole cities through firebombing, the mass killings of troops, civilians, and resistance fighters in the various battlefields and areas of the front, as well as the atrocious consequences of the nuclear detonations.

come to epitomize the dismal social, cultural, and ethical disruptions brought about by a conflict that engendered a fracture in the formal and aesthetic codes of Western culture. How to comprehend such an inconceivable and unprecedentedly traumatic event – something considered utterly unrelatable and unrepresentable – through traditional narrative structures? This question is imperative since the "once familiar features of our civilization, [...] the Western Civilization which the occurrence of the Holocaust has made all but incomprehensible" seem to be no longer valid and, hence, the Western philosophical and artistic articulations need to be reformulated (Bauman 2008, 84).

From Theodor Adorno's famous statements about the impossibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz onwards, a number of scholars have challenged the very possibility of narrating and memorializing the Holocaust. In his seminal essay *Heidegger and "The Jews,"* Jean-François Lyotard defines Auschwitz as "the unthinkable, time lost yet always there, a revelation that never reveals itself but remains there, a misery" (1990, 23), something that "cannot be represented without being missed, being forgotten anew, since it defies images and words" (26). He remarked that representation inevitably distorts reality, showing how the dynamics of testimony and memorialization, remembrance and forgetting, are more complex than what may initially seem:

> Whenever one represents, one inscribes in memory, and this might seem a good defense against forgetting. It is, I believe, just the opposite. Only that which has been inscribed can, in the current sense of the term, be forgotten, because it could be effaced. But what is not inscribed, through lack of inscribable surface, of duration and place for the inscription to be situated [...] cannot be forgotten, does not offer a hold to forgetting, and remains present "only" as an affection that one cannot even qualify. (26)

Nonetheless, as Lyotard concludes, "one cannot escape the necessity of representing," but "it is one thing to do it in view of saving the memory, and quite another to try to preserve the remainder, the unforgettable forgotten, in writing" (26).

In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur deals with "the enigma of the past" – "the enigma of the presence of the absent, an enigma common to imagination and memory" (2004, 8) –, asking how it is possible to re-present the past, that is, to present it *again*, now, to the benefit of those who were not present. Testimony functions as a transitory structure between memory and history, but the act of narration adds the ambivalent element of language to the reconstruction of the past; moreover, the reliability of any testimony depends on

the fiduciary relation established between the witness (or storyteller) and its public, thus engendering an opposition between truth and falseness that immediately becomes an opposition between confidence and skepticism. In the case of those who survived the concentration camps there is a further problem, since "the experience to be transmitted is that of a inhumanity with no common measure with the experience of the average person" (175), to such an extent that Ricoeur envisions a "crisis of testimony" (176). In the end, it seems that historical truth is doomed to remain suspended, postponed, plausible, probable, debatable, and so continuously re-tellable and re-writable.

Furthermore, it is often difficult to reconcile the role of memory as a private, subjective, inner experience with its collective, social and public dimension, to the point that eventually "history drifts into the twilight of invention, becomes a product of human imagination, and comes about as a 'web of imaginative construction'" (Steinmetz 1995, 98-9). The role of imagination has been critically addressed with reference not only to the relationship between history and personal recollections, but also in regard to the entanglement of Holocaust testimony and Holocaust imagery; the latter can be understood as a way for those who were not victims to sympathize and even identify with the trauma of the witnesses, thus becoming, as Lillian Kremer framed it, "witness[es] through the imagination" (cf. Kremer 1989).[2] From these tensions, another contradiction intrinsic in the comprehension of the Holocaust emerges: its simultaneous "uniqueness and normality" (Bauman 2008, 84), a cognitive and hermeneutic disruption that also defines WWII as a whole.

Among so many disruptions, language figures prominently. The war's frightful complexities refused to be reduced to conventional storylines and structures, requiring more experimental modes of representation. In the fields of literary studies, this destabilization marked a breakthrough: from the alienation typical of the modernist period – characterized by existential *ennui*, the sense of absurdity and the fragmentation of the self mostly related to the process of mass-urbanization as well as to the shocking experience of the Great War –, Western culture shifted to the "self-questioning, postmodern uncertainties about all theories, narratives, and representation of life" (Stevenson 2004, 448) that characterized the second half of the twentieth century. The challenge posed by WWII to inherited forms of representations led to a willingness to resist, deny, or exaggeratingly stress even the most experimental modernist techniques; or, in

[2] The notion of "witnessing through imagination" and its controversial implications have been greatly debated by, among other Holocaust scholars, Norma Rosen and Michael Bernstein.

other cases, to a total disruption of conventional narrative structures based on realism, chronology, plot-coherence, and linearity. Postmodernist fiction addressed the issue of representability by creatively responding to these anxieties, to the extent that many intellectuals and critics[3] have posited WWII as the inaugural event of the postmodern age. Taking his cue from Virginia Woolf's famous statement about the change of human character "on or around December 1910," Ihab Hassan suggested that "postmodernism began 'in or about September 1939'" (1987, 589), while Steven Best and Douglas Kellner most directly nominated "August 1945 as the beginning of the postmodern adventure since it marked the end of European fascism, the advent of the Atomic Age, and the acceleration of an arms race that intensified the co-construction of science, technology, and capitalism" (2001, 59-60).

Moving to a more private dimension, war – especially a "total war" such as WWII – figures as a liminal, traumatic occurrence in the psyche of those who experienced it; as Gabriella Gribaudi argued, the life-stories of individuals affected by the war are split into a "before" and an "after" completely different from each other – a psychological fracture that forces them to rearrange their own existence in the function of the war. Trauma is by definition "a shocking event that proves unassimilable to consciousness, gets repressed or lost in memory, and presents itself symptomatically in various disruptive ways unless brought to the surface and confronted" (Cohen 2007, 375-6). No wonder that after WWII trauma studies emerged as a thriving discipline in the literary field, since the notion of trauma is a crucial, if ambivalent, critical category for the interpretation of cultural productions about wars and other shocking occurrences: "Trauma, as a paradigm of the historical event, possesses an absolute materiality, and yet, as inevitably missed or incompletely experienced, remains absent and inaccessible" (Crosthwaite 2009, 1).

Clearly enough, as Alessandro Portelli noted, "memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings" (1998, 69); after WWII, the discipline of oral history – the collection through recorded interviews of memories, comments, and personal reconstructions of eye-witnesses who experienced some events of the past – has given voice to groups of people who might otherwise have remained on the margins, unheard and hidden. In preserving the original voices of interviewees and in interpreting their opinions about historical facts, oral history challenges traditional historical representations

[3] Among them: Jean-Francois Lyotard, Ihab Hassan, Walter A. Davis, Andrew J. McKenna, Mark C. Taylor, Robert Eaglestone, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner.

in still other ways, while at the same time it discloses further issues related to the process of historical reconstruction. In fact, as Portelli aptly recalled, though oral testimonies of witnesses are registered on recorded tapes, "it is only transcripts that are published" (64), so that while approaching these texts we should be aware of the inevitable loss of crucial details, such as "the tone and volume range and the rhythm of popular speech [that] carry implicit meaning and social connotations which are not reproducible in writing" (65). The inability to cope with traumas for those who participated in the war is reflected in their linguistic inability to provide a significant representation to unrelatable experiences; on the other hand, our inability to directly access an event such as WWII leads to an increasing gap between the generation who witnessed the war and the so-called "generation of postmemory."

Marianne Hirsch famously called postmemory "the relation that 'the generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors [...], transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (2012, 5). The generation of postmemory, or postgeneration, cannot but feel a psychological sense of belatedness (sometimes linked to a confused sense of guilt) towards a war that is accessible only through mediated experience, but that nonetheless strongly affects us in both emotional and cultural ways.

In fact, today WWII continues to affect our imagination, though we are only able to experience it through narratives and reconstructions that participate of the models of representation and temporality devised from different disciplines, such as literary and cultural studies, psychoanalysis and trauma studies, visual studies, communication and media studies, etc.:

> As time moves away from WWII, memory takes on a different quality as it becomes transformed from direct witnessing and the resulting testimonials to archival and mediated forms of remembering that carry the responsibility of firmly embedding the Holocaust [and the other events of WWII] in the cultural memory of later generations. (Bayer 2010, 116)

In this sense, the postgeneration carries the ultimate responsibility of "witnessing through imagination," and so, inescapably, through a continuous re-mediation.

One could even say that today WWII has become an "iconic event," because its mass-mediated and commercially conveyed iconography plays a crucial role in

the construction of shared collective cultural memories.[4] As a consequence, the artistic, literary and mediatic representations of WWII are constantly subject to reconsideration in the light of changing cultural needs and interests. Apart from fictional and historical reconstructions, nowadays we can only materially access WWII through the consultation and the analysis of historical documents, the perusal of testimonial objects and memorabilia, by listening to recorded stories and interviews – all material accessible through controlled and often restricted fruition in public museums and private archives or collections:

> Whereas testimonials and the content of postmemory are highly individual, memorial sites, museums and medialized commodifications invariably run the risk of removing if not sublating the actual events to an abstract level, making the confrontation with them emotionally less powerful and thus less effective. (Bayer 2010, 117)

The iconography of WWII and its collective scope, as well as its commercial impact, necessarily define every memorial endeavor undertaken by the postmemorial generation. This is what Rothberg identifies as "the contradictory position of the post-Holocaust artist" (2000, 2), who feels caught between the responsibility of being faithful to the traumatic reality of the event and the pervasiveness of the twentieth-century entertainment culture for which WWII has become also a commodification.

The concept of postmemory, hence, indicates a transmission and a mediation of memory not only in temporal, but also in cultural terms. On the one hand, there is a "sense of living connection" with the "personal/familial/generational" past; on the other, the exposure to the Holocaust iconography and the WWII mass culture that constitute "a set of conventions" by which postmemories "were no doubt shaped" (Hirsch 2012, 1; 4). Within this multitemporal and multimedia context, postmemory can easily broaden its scope "from familial to affiliative structures of transmission" (23); a shift that introduces more complex questions about the poetics and politics of postmemory. As a matter of fact, Hirsch's analysis is in a continuous dialogue with a number of "other contexts of traumatic

[4] Patricia Leavy calls "iconic" any event "*that undergoes intense initial interpretive practices but also becomes mythic within the culture through its appropriation into other political or social discourses and its eventual use within commercial culture.*" According to Leavy, such iconic events are also "used to sell products, spin ideology, and legitimate war [...], as the subject matter of film and television and [...] embedded in products for sale including memorabilia and a range of everyday commodities;" they "are repeatedly rewritten, remembered and used as organized tools to talk about *other* events and *other* social issue," and so come to "serve as vehicles by which a range of ideas and social meanings are communicated to society" (2007, 3; 4. Italics in the original).

transfer [that] can be understood as postmemory" (18), and in so doing it addresses intersecting and multifaceted histories.

Finally, postmemory conceives of and represents memory as not only a remembrance that comes belatedly after (post-) an event that one cannot have experienced, but also as a creative narrative negotiation between two or more subjects that is inevitably trans-generational, multi-medial, inter-disciplinary. Interdisciplinarity in particular lies at the center of postmemorial thought; in her work, Hirsch examines novels, comic books, films, personal photos, archival images, and disparate artworks, and she does so within a transnational and comparative framework. Similarly, Rothberg provocatively claims that the Holocaust was "an 'interdisciplinary' project," and hence "is best approached through interdisciplinary means," even though, once again, the very "interdisciplinary approaches to the Holocaust are riven by a series of seemingly irresolvable contradictions: between the event's 'uniqueness' and its 'tipicality,' its 'extremity' and its 'banality,' its 'incomprehensibility' and its susceptibility to 'normal' understandings" (2000, 3).

Building on the "inter-" and "multi-" approaches to postmemory, this volume is framed within a multidirectional dimension that implicitly follows Rothberg's idea of "a series of interventions through which social actors bring multiple traumatic pasts into a heterogeneous and changing post-World War II present" (Rothberg 2009, 4). All the articles in this issue of *Status Quaestionis* stem from papers presented at the international conference "Past (Im)Perfect Continuous. Trans-Cultural Articulations of the Postmemory of WWII," hosted by Sapienza Università di Roma and the Centro Studi Americani in Rome on June 26-28, 2018. Other articles, also developed from papers presented at this conference, have been gathered in a volume that will be soon published by Sapienza Università Editrice. The conference was part of a three-year research project on the postmemory of WWII in European and American literature, cinema, and popular culture, coordinated by Giorgio Mariani and funded by Sapienza Università di Roma. The main scope of the research was to promote and enhance intellectual exchanges on the multiple narratives of WWII within an interdisciplinary framework, while also pondering on the potential of postmemory as an effective methodology for dealing with the psychological, cultural, and artistic aftereffects of the "total war." The ensuing debates brought forth several critical questions that culminated in the engaging and thought-provoking discussions of the 2018 conference. We decided to further this stimulating intellectual discourse in a more structured and analytical venue,

allowing the speakers to widen the scope of their papers in order to establish an ongoing dialogue with each other.

Therefore, in selecting and presenting the contributions we privileged a transnational and interdisciplinary overview that dwells on the question of what bearing witness to, remembering, recounting, and representing WWII means in 2020 for the so-called postgeneration. Other crucial issues tackled in the essays include: is the position of the post-Holocaust (and postmemorial) artist still contradictory? What are the ethical controversies and the representational limits that postmemorial authors face? What are the implications of artistically dealing with a massively iconized and commercialized event such as WWII?

The first section of the issue, "Postmemory and the Novel," focuses on a number of literary devices employed by writers to narrate the postmemory of WWII through one of the most traditional (and widespread) literary forms of the Western world: the novel. By being witnesses through their own imagination – that is, witnesses "by imaginative investment, projection and creation" (Hirsch 2012, 5) rather than by actual presence and remembrance –, the literary authors taken into consideration challenge the aesthetics of WWII representation and, consequently, its ethical code. In particular, the role of fiction in these texts is debated as controversial and yet constitutional of postmemorial recollections. Indeed, fiction seems to simultaneously mark and bridge the distance between autobiographies, memoirs or "truthful" texts (as Charlotte Delbo calls her own recollections in *Auschwitz and After*)[5] of the first generation of witnesses, and the more decidedly imaginative postmemorial works.

In this sense, Paolo Simonetti contends that hybrid forms of autobiographical writing, such as the fraudulent survivor's autobiography and the counterfactual memoir, can be considered postmemorial works too, as his analysis of Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* and Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* shows.

Along similar lines, Alessandra Crotti scrutinizes the partially autobiographical, partially fictional novel *Kalooki Nights* by Howard Jacobson. In this text, the postmemorial endeavor is carried out by a controversial entanglement of tragedy and comedy through the juxtaposition of the dramatic history of the Jews and the Jewish propensity to satire.

Daniela Henke's examination of Christoph Ransmayr's *Morbus Kitahara* explicitly addresses the postmemorial dilemma of faithfully representing

[5] "I am not sure that what I wrote is true. I am certain that it is truthful." This is the epigraph to Delbo's first volume of her trilogy *Auschwitz and After,* 1946-1965.

someone else's experiences without appropriating them, by resorting to three narrative cornerstones that can be traced back to Jean Amery's autobiographical and philosophical work: intertextuality, body narration and the usage of direct speech.

The use of fictionality as a metacommentary on processes of commemoration is investigated by Tom Vanassche in Laurent Binet's *HHhH* and Yannick Haenel's *Jan Karski,* French novels whose critical discourses are still riddled with screaming silences about collaboration and colonial violence.

Pilar Martínez Benedí reads Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* as an operation of multidirectional memory by paying special attention to the fictional literalization of the abolitionist metaphor that plays out in the novel. Thus, the underground railroad system becomes an affective vehicle that ties together different memories in a communal project of public remembrance.

Finally, Alessandra Pellegrini De Luca offers a political and ideological reading of postmemory as the transgenerational and cultural mechanism modulating the transmission of the memory of the Italian antifascist Resistance during the second half of WWII. Through an overview of novels published in different post-WWII historical moments and of other cultural instances, her analysis proves that the unexperienced time of the Resistance was appropriated by some through a displacement of contemporary stories and political issues.

The second section of this issue, "Postmemory and Other Literary and Artistic Representations," interrogates the representation of the postmemory of WWII in media other than traditional narrations, or through an original juxtaposition of literary and non-literary artifacts. This multimedia approach expands the cultural breadth of the relationship between postmemory and imagination and problematizes even further its aesthetic and hermeneutic codes by examining the imaginative investment of the authors through innovative re-articulations and reformulations of the concept of postmemory in Europe and the US.

Nicola Paladin analyzes two war comics, Garth Ennis' *Bloody Mary* and Kieron Gillen's *Über,* whose representational modes and narrative strategies clearly belong to the postgeneration, based as they are on a multi-layered imagination of WWII: in these comics, details acquired from historical records become inevitably contaminated by visual tropes that are typical of contemporary popular culture.

The imaginative interaction with historical documents is also central in Alice Balestrino's essay on Jonathan Safran Foer's "book-sculpture" *Tree of Codes*, a postmemorial, performative tribute to Bruno Schulz's collection of short stories

The Street of Crocodiles. The focus on the author's and the reader's generative agency allows for a reflection on the vacancies intrinsic in postmemorial works.

The multimedia framework is key in Tommaso Gennaro's considerations on the disruption of the traditional understanding of time brought about by WWII. The alteration of space-time coordinates is closely connected to the in turn distraught conceptualization of the human body, as shown by the analysis of literary works by W.G. Sebald and Mathias Enard when they are juxtaposed with artistic endeavors by Louis le Brocquy, Claudio Parmiggiani and Roman Opałka.

The relationship between artistic language and human body in the representation of postmemory is investigated by Carla Subrizi, who focuses on the transgenerational character of Louise Bourgeois' cycle of installations *Cells.* These works can be defined as "bridge images," in that their function is to unite distant individuals or different situations within a similar genealogy of pain.

The materiality of the bridge between the generation of eye-witnesses and the generation of postmemory is dealt with by Fabio Simonetti, who concentrates on the role played by testimonial objects in the multifaceted dynamics of memory transmission. In particular, the essay examines from different angles the memory and postmemory of the Allied liberation and the consequent occupation of Italy in the years 1943-1947 by selecting and "reading" a series of objects preserved in the Imperial War Museum in London.

Marco Malvestio interrogates the postmemory of the evacuation of Dunkirk in three popular movies: *Atonement, Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour,* paying specific attention to the ways in which these narratives oscillate between propagandistic rhetoric and a problematization of the memory of war. His essay shows how postwar generations have appropriated the cultural memory of Dunkirk as a way of restaging an ideal of Britishness, and at the same time as a controversial attempt to update it.

The final contribution is once again firmly grounded in a multimedia and multidirectional outlook. Elia Romera-Figueroa considers the song "Justo" by Spanish singer-songwriter Rozalén, together with the documentary that was released with it, *Conversaciones con mi abuela,* as an intergenerational dialogue on traumas connected to the Spanish Civil War. This analysis contends that the concept of "voiced postmemories" produces not only trans-generational but also transnational connections.

Our primary objective in editing this collection was to provide readers with an overview of transcultural articulations of WWII in literature and other media as diverse as possible. These contributions offer patterns of profitable dynamics that go beyond competitive logics of remembrance and manage to create a

transnational, intercultural, intersecting, and multidirectional dialogue between different memorial subjects and histories. The variety of approaches and standpoints taken by the authors of the essays bears witness to the intellectual drive of scholars working on WWII in different geographical and cultural areas to be active participants in a common, constructive debate that may concur to reformulate the aesthetic and ethical codes of WWII in the twenty-first century.

We are aware that the essays presented are instances of a wider and potentially much more heterogeneous discourse about the representation of WWII and, more broadly, of narratives about war and trauma. However, we believe that this selection aptly reflects a number of compelling research questions that inform the current intellectual discussion on postmemory; hopefully, this selection may lay the groundwork for further investigations of the cultural relevance of WWII, and it is with this aspiration in mind that we edited the present volume.

Bibliography

Bauman, Zygmunt. 2008 (1989). *Holocaust and Modernity.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bayer, Gerd. 2010. "After Postmemory: Holocaust Cinema and the Third Generation." *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* Vol. 28, no. 4: 116-32.

Best, Steven, and Douglas Kellner. 2001. *The Postmodern Adventure: Science, Technology, and Cultural Studies at the Third Millennium*. London: Routledge.

Cohen, Samuel. 2007. "The Novel in a Time of Terror: *Middlesex*, History, and Contemporary American Fiction." *Twentieth-Century Literature* Vol. 53, no. 3: 371-93.

Crosthwaite, Paul. 2009. *Trauma, Postmodernism, and the Aftermath of World War II*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Delbo, Charlotte. 1985. *Auschwitz and After.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Gribaudi, Gabriella. 2005. *Guerra totale. Tra bombe alleate e violenze naziste. Napoli e il fronte meridionale 1940-1944*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.

Hanson, Victor D. 2017. *The Second World Wars. How the First Global Conflict Was Fought and Won*. New York: Basic Books.

Hassan, Ihab. 1998 (1987). "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism." In *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology*, edited by Paula Geyh, Fred G. Leebron, and Andrew Levy, 585-95. New York: Norton.

Hirsch, Marianne. "An Interview with Marianne Hirsch." Columbia University Press. https://cup.columbia.edu/author-interviews/hirsch-generation-postmemory

Hirsch, Marianne. 2012. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Kremer, Lillian. 1989. *Witness through the Imagination: Jewish American Holocaust Literature.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Immerwahr, Daniel. 2019. *How to Hide an Empire. A History of the Greater United States*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Lassner, Phyllis. 2009. "Life Writing and the Holocaust." In *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II*, edited by Marina Mackay, 179-93. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Leavy, Patricia. 2007. *Iconic Events. Media, Politics, and Power in Retelling History*. London: Lexington Books.

Lyotard, Jean-François. 1990. *Heidegger and "The Jews."* Trans. by Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Portelli, Alessandro. 1998. "What Makes Oral History Different." In *The Oral History Reader*, edited by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, 63-74. London and New York: Routledge.

Ricoeur, Paul. 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Trans. by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.

Rothberg, Michael. 2000. *Traumatic Realism. The Demands of Holocaust Representation.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Rothberg, Michael. 2009. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Steinmetz, Horst. 1995. "History in Fiction – History as Fiction: On the Relations between Literature and History in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries." In *Narrative Turns and Minor Genres in Postmodernism*, edited by Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens, 81-103. Amsterdam, Atlanta (GA): Rodopi.

Zeiler, Thomas W., and Daniel M. DuBois. 2013. "Introduction" to *A Companion to World War II. Vol. 1.*, edited by Thomas W. Zeiler and Daniel M. DuBois, 1-10. Malden (MA): Wiley-Blackwell.

statuS Quaestionis
language text culture

Paolo Simonetti
Sapienza Università di Roma

Inventing (Post)Memory, Writing (Non)Fiction: Jerzy Kosinski, Philip Roth and the Legacy of World War II

Abstract

In this essay, I argue that Marianne Hirsch's definition of postmemory might be extended to hybrid forms of autobiographical writing such as the fraudulent survivor's autobiography and the counterfactual or uchronic memoir. To that effect, the essay deals with Jerzy Kosinski's controversial first novel *The Painted Bird* (1965) and Philip Roth's uchronia *The Plot Against America* (2004) as peculiar types of postmemorial works. Though both writers experienced the war during their childhood and their texts were written at a great remove from the war-period, these works can be considered World War II novels since they register and represent the war as a central, traumatic event. Kosinski's and Roth's recollections of the wartime period in their novels are so distorted, manipulated, and fictionally imagined (if not utterly invented) that they share the same "oscillation between continuity and rupture" typical of the postmemorial narratives described by Hirsch.

In her groundbreaking book *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012), Marianne Hirsch defined postmemory as a powerful and very specific form of memory implying an emotional connection to a past that is not directly experienced, but rather "shaped by stories we had read and heard, conversations we had had, by fears and fantasies associated with persecution and danger;" these experiences "*seem* to constitute memories in their own right," but they are actually "mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (2012, 4).[1] Though Hirsch explicitly linked the term postmemory to the "generation after," focusing on "intergenerational acts of transfer," the concept might be extended to other hybrid forms of

[1] As Marianne Hirsch herself declared in an interview published on the website of the Columbia University Press, she first used the term "postmemory" "in an article on Art Spiegelman's *Maus* in the early 1990s," but since then she has been "trying to define and refine it, on the basis of personal experience and [her] reading and viewing of the works of writers and artists of what we might think of as the 'postgenerations.'" She further defined the concept in her 1997 book *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, and again in her essay "The Generation of Postmemory," published in Poetics Today in 2008.

autobiographical writing, namely, the fraudulent survivor's autobiography, and the counterfactual or uchronic memoir. These types of narratives imply what S. Lillian Kremer aptly called, after Norma Rosen's 1974 definition, "witness-through-the-imagination" (Kremer, 8; Rosen, 58): they describe an experience that occupies a transitional ground between personal involvement, secondary testimony, and fictional re-enactment and re-invention.

The aim of this paper is to read Jerzy Kosinski's controversial first novel *The Painted Bird* (1965) and Philip Roth's uchronia *The Plot Against America* (2004) as peculiar types of postmemorial works. Roth and Kosinski were born in 1933, the very year of Hitler's rise to power. Both writers experienced the war during their childhood – Roth in the relatively safe Jewish neighborhood of Weequahic in Newark, New Jersey; Kosinski in the more dangerous Polish countryside; even though they never saw active combat and their texts were written at a great remove from the war-period, both works can somehow be considered World War II novels since they register and represent the war as a central, traumatic event. The Second World War made a lasting impression on Roth and Kosinski, so it is safe to assume that their lives, as well as their careers as writers, were shaped by it.

In "The Ruthless Intimacy of Fiction" – Roth's eightieth birthday address that now stands as the closing speech at the end of a long and prolific career, delivered at the Newark Museum on March 19, 2013 – the writer described August 14, 1945, the day Imperial Japan surrendered in World War II, as "the most thrilling day of [his] young American life," because "[b]etween December 1941 and August 1945, an American child didn't just live at home, in the neighborhood, and at school," but "also lived within the ethos of a tragic catastrophe that was global" (2017, 391-2). In another speech, delivered on November 20, 2002, Roth talked about "the shaping paradox" on which his identity as a Jewish and an American writer was founded, linking it to the experience of the war: "[O]ur innate provincialism *made* us Americans, unhyphenated at that, in no need of an adjective, suspicious of any adjective that would narrow the implications of the imposingly all-inclusive noun that was – if only because of the galvanizing magnum opus called World War II – our birthright" (334).

As for Kosinski, in a 1988 speech he stated that his perceptions of the war "are very varied" since he "was twelve years old when the Second World War ended," but "[a]fter a war like that, you are, in many instances, much older than the typical twelve-year-old and, in many others, much younger" (2012, 181). Talking about the repercussions of the war on his life and his fiction, Kosinski remarked

that "[n]o movie can re-create it. No teacher can evoke the image of it. The reality is far beyond the scope of what Americans can imagine," even though he, as a novelist, is "much more aware of it now than [he has] ever been" (182); he concluded by stating that the war "was complex in every conceivable way" (185). This is probably the reason why, in *The Painted Bird* as well as in *The Plot Against America*, Kosinski's and Roth's recollections of the war are so distorted, manipulated, and fictionally imagined (if not utterly invented), that they share the same "oscillation between continuity and rupture" that was typical of the postmemorial narratives described by Hirsch.

Jerzy Kosinski came from Poland to the United States in 1957, nearly penniless, and published his first novel, *The Painted Bird*, in 1965 (he had already published two books on collective behavior under the pseudonym Joseph Novak: *The Future Is Ours, Comrade: Conversations with the Russians* in 1960, and *No Third Path* in 1962). The narrative appears as a first-person account of a six-year-old boy who was entrusted by his parents to the care of a family during the war in order to ensure his survival. But the boy's foster mother unexpectedly dies, and he is left alone to roam the villages of Eastern Europe, desperately trying to stay alive. Though in the book the narrator is represented as virtually stateless, the fair-haired uneducated and superstitious peasants consider the dark-haired boy a Jew, a gypsy, or an evil spirit, and subject him to all kinds of violence, brutalities, tortures, and sadistic practices. For instance, he is forced to hide in a pit full of human excrements, and after the experience he becomes mute; then he is hanged by his wrists from the ceiling and left at the mercy of an aggressive dog, and later on, he almost freezes to death underneath a frozen lake.

The Painted Bird was greeted as one of the most imposing novels of the decade; it was translated into several languages and soon became a bestseller in Europe and a cult book in America, a major work of Holocaust literature. What gave more relevance to the work was the crucial fact that it was generally considered autobiographical: an impressive, exemplary testimony of the traumatic effects of war on the author. Critics compared *The Painted Bird* to Anne Frank's diary and Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum*. Elie Wiesel, the famed Holocaust survivor, reviewed it in "The New York Times Book Review," in a praising article entitled "Everybody's Victim," where he wrote: "It is as a chronicle that *The Painted Bird* [...] achieves its unusual power." Apparently, Wiesel's initial response to the novel was lukewarm, but Kosinski himself went to him and

confessed that the book was essentially autobiographical.[2] According to Wiesel, *The Painted Bird* is "[w]ritten with deep sincerity and sensitivity, [...] transcends confession and attains in parts the haunting quality and tone of a quasi-surrealistic tale;" he concludes the review stating that what happens to the boy because of his dark complexion is so absurd that "could as easily not have happened at all. Or, which is the same, it could have happened to anybody, everywhere" (31 October 1965).

In fact, the events Kosinski narrated in his book never happened to him. Years later, it came out that during the war he lived in hiding under a false name and identity (his real name was Lewinkopf) with his parents, who "went into hiding, living as Christians under assumed names" (Franklin 2017), and that they had conveniently adopted a blonde, blue-eyed boy who could pass for a gentile, in order to disguise their identities. In 1982, a cover story published in *The Village Voice* challenged details of Kosinski's biography and accused him of being a liar, a plagiarist, an agent of the CIA in disguise, and a literary fraud who used ghostwriters for writing his fiction. The renowned critic Jerome Klinkowitz wrote an article significantly titled: "Betrayed by Jerzy Kosinski." By then Kosinski was a bestselling author (his second novel, *Steps*, won the National Book Award), an eccentric media celebrity, a film-maker (he co-wrote the screenplay of the movie adaptation of his famous novel, *Being There*), an actor, and a famous polo player. For a period, he was also president of the American branch of PEN, the international writers' association.

Notwithstanding this, the sentence was irrevocable, even though, paradoxically enough, Kosinski himself was an actual survivor: he was accused of using the dramatic events of the Second World War to create a fictional past and a fake identity for his persona, and this eventually ruined his career. Journalists, scholars, and critics began to make all kinds of allegations: that Kosinski wrote *The Painted Bird* in Polish and asked someone to translate the novel into English; that it was plagiarized from popular novels written in Polish; most of all, that the book could definitely not be called a Holocaust Memoir. In an "Afterward" written in 1976 for the second edition of *The Painted Bird*, Kosinski answered those critics who claimed that he had "exploited the horrors of war to satisfy [his] own peculiar imagination," as well as those who "insisted that, given the raw materials of war-torn Eastern Europe, anyone could concoct a plot overflowing

[2] At least according to what James Park Sloane wrote in an article published in 1994 in *The New Yorker*: "At the time of Kosinski's suicide in 1991, Wiesel said, 'I thought it was fiction, and when he told me it was autobiography I tore up my review and wrote one a thousand times better'" (Sloane 1994, 46).

with brutal drama" (Kosinski 2015, xx-xxi), by vindicating the difference between fiction and autobiography:

> They wanted to cast me in the role of spokesman for my generation, especially for those who had survived the war [...]. Facts about my life and my origins, I felt, should not be used to test the book's authenticity [...]. Furthermore, I felt then, as I do now, that fiction and autobiography are very different modes. Autobiography emphasizes a single life [...]. A fictional life, on the other hand, forces the reader to contribute: he does not simply compare; he actually enters a fictional role, expanding it in terms of his own experience, his own creative and imaginative powers. (xiii-xiv)

However, this defense was ultimately useless. In the end, Kosinski's reputation was ruined, and he committed suicide in 1991. In a sense, he became indeed everybody's victim – victim of a greater, universal trauma, linked not exclusively with the war, but most of all with his (self-imposed?) role of witness.

In *The Painted Bird*, as well as in other novels, Kosinski asserted the fictional nature of all remembrances; his book opens a gap, a deep divide between facts remembered and facts recreated, imagined, invented – as ultimately all facts are when they are re-presented on paper. Drawing on the ideas he explored in his "Notes of the Author on *The Painted Bird*," Kosinski stated that a fictive event is "neither an actual event nor totally a created fiction with no base in experience; it is an event as fiction [...] both illusory and concrete," so that

> The remembered event becomes a fiction, a structure made to accommodate certain feelings. Without these structures, literature would be too personal for the writer to create, much less for his readers to grasp. There is no art which is reality; rather, art is the using of symbols by which an otherwise and unstateable subjective reality is made manifest. [R]emembering is the automatic process of editing. (2012, 90)

If this sounds familiar, it is because Primo Levi, the famous Italian writer who survived Auschwitz and who committed suicide in 1987, reflected in his books on the same mechanisms that falsify memory in conditions of trauma and in case of interference from other competitive memories. In *I sommersi e i salvati* (1986) he wrote about the shame or guilt that coincided with reacquired freedom, a shame linked to the awareness that "i 'salvati' del Lager non erano i migliori, i predestinati al bene, i latori di un messaggio," but that in fact "sopravvivevano di preferenza i peggiori, gli egoisti, i violenti, gli insensibili, i collaboratori della 'zona grigia', le spie" (Levi 2003, 63). Following this reasoning, Levi concluded that "non siamo noi, i superstiti, i testimoni veri" (64), because, in a sense, the true witnesses are only the dead; those who survived are all somehow impostors.

Furthermore, the content of Kosinski's novel poses another problem. According to Thomasz Mirkowicz, the Polish translator of *The Painted Bird*, Kosinski admitted that in writing his book he drew heavily on a postwar Polish text, a compilation of accounts by Polish children who survived the war hiding in forests and bunkers during the German occupation, published in Cracow in 1946 and translated into English in 1996 as *The Children Accuse*. According to Sue Vice, who confronted the texts, nowhere did Kosinski plagiarize material from his source; it seems that he used the Polish text, especially the section entitled "In Hiding," as a background for his imagination and a supplement to his own experience (2000, 73). In the end, we can infer that the cruel experiences narrated in the book are indeed *true*, or at least verisimilar, though they did not occur to the author. Moreover, when he was a child, Kosinski was certainly traumatized by his experience of surviving the war in Poland, and his false identity was initially more a necessity than a literary impersonation. It is reasonable to think that his later disguises and multiple identities were also a result of that original trauma.

In an essay significantly called "Why Do We Believe Primo Levi?", Mario Barenghi wrote that in *Se questo è un uomo* "the criterion of truthfulness [...] cannot consist of conformity between the autobiographical account and an event that is intrinsically shapeless, lacking in form" (Barenghi 2013, 16), such as the experience of the Lager. On the contrary, "the equilibrium that characterizes Levi's masterpiece is the product of a narrative strategy based on a precise economy of memory" (26). Barenghi concludes that "the main reason why Primo Levi is credible is that, in his cognitive endeavor – the *conditio sine qua non* for his testifying – the facts don't add up" (40). Contrary to what one could think, the level of fictitiousness of his work is what made it credible. Klinkowitz himself stated that Kosinski's voice had "an intensity which imparted to everything he said an aura of truth and authority" (158). He was, simply put, a great storyteller.

Storytelling and remembering rely on similar practices: they both arrange confused and juxtaposed images in an ordered structure. Kosinski's guilt – what critics described as his mortal sin – was that he felt that his own experiences of the war period were not enough to make a good story, or at least to serve as an exemplary narrative by a World War II effective survivor; they were factually insufficient to convey the fullest trauma of the times. So, he felt the need to write a novel and present it informally as an autobiography. According to Timothy Neal, "Kosinski was aware that in order for his work to be sufficiently valued he had to appear as a testifying witness, not as an artist" (2010, 433-4). So, the construction and exploration of trauma bind Kosinski to both Holocaust witnesses and (more closely) the generation of postmemory, because though he

was in some sense present in the place and time, his account exceeds his own experience. In Neal's words, "postmemory testimony is a legitimate form of what became fraud" (436) in the case of Kosinski.

What would have happened if Kosinski had told the true story of his World War II years? We can only imagine a reaction like the one Philip Roth describes in his memoir *Patrimony*, subtitled "A True Story" and published in 1991, only three months before Kosinski's suicide. In the book, Roth's father invites a friend of his for dinner, Walter Herrmann, a survivor of two concentration camps who came to the U.S. in 1947. Herrmann is writing a book about his wartime experience and wants Philip Roth to introduce him to a publisher. Before presenting the scene in *Patrimony*, Roth mentions his friend Levi and his books about the Holocaust, so that the reader expects Herrmann's to be a similar memoir, full of tragic and painful experiences. Instead, it turns out that Herrmann's account of how he survived the war hidden in Berlin before being sent to Auschwitz is actually the account of the sexual intercourses he had with the different women who protected him. With a mischievous smile, he tells Roth: "My book is not a book like Elie Wiesel writes [...]. I couldn't write such a tragic book. Until the camps, I had a very happy war." It is significant that before showing his manuscript, Herrmann shows Roth and his dining companions what the narrator calls "the credentials entitling him to write his book" (1991, 213): first, the number tattooed on his wrist testifying his stay at Auschwitz; then the identification papers issued to him by the Germans; and finally, as an "additional certificate of validation" (214), the wrapping of a pack of cigarette on the inside of which he had penciled a tiny letter from Auschwitz to his mother.

These 'testimonial objects' should serve to attest to the truth of his account. Nonetheless, after the dinner, when his father asks Roth what he thinks of Herrmann's book, the writer describes it dismissively as "a pornographic best-seller about the Holocaust." His father replies, not so humorously: "Maybe it'll be a best-seller like *Portnoy*" (220), stressing the connection between Herrmann's memoir and Roth's famous (and irreverent) work of fiction. Incredible as it may appear, it seems that Walter Herrmann actually exists, though Roth used a different name to describe him, and that he published his memoir in 1996. The fact that it did not have any success at all demonstrates that, in the end, Herrmann's credentials were not enough to make his story credible, or interesting.

Growing up in Newark, New Jersey, Roth's exposure to the war was considerably less acute and traumatic than Kosinski's. Yet, he remarked several

times that his conscious memories really began with the war. His 2004 novel, *The Plot Against America*, provides an alternative history of the United States during the war years: in Roth's version of the past, pro-Nazi famous aviator Charles Lindbergh becomes President in 1940 instead of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and the nation remains neutral during World War II. Roth's uchronia is a mediated reinvention of the author's relatively safe childhood in a fictional (but all too plausible) context of menace and violence, as he himself describes it:

> At the center of this story is a child, myself at seven, eight, and nine years of age. The story is narrated by me as an adult looking back some sixty years at the experience of that child's family during the Lindbergh presidency. (2017, 340)

The incipit of the novel reads: "Fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear," thus presenting *The Plot Against America* as a fake memoir of a traumatic experience. Nonetheless, immediately after this sentence, the narrator states: "Of course, no childhood is without its terrors" (2004, 1), giving the narrative a wider, universal meaning, and virtually framing the novel as a Bildungsroman.[3] Clearly enough, the sense of menace comes not exclusively from the newly elected president or other historical or subjective circumstances, because it is a "perpetual" fear. When the uchronic element is introduced in the narrative, it is already turned upside-down, since the character/narrator wonders whether he "would have been a less frightened boy if Lindbergh hadn't been president or if [he] hadn't been the offspring of Jews" (1). The narrator imagines what would have happened whether Lindbergh had not been elected (imagining our own reality as a uchronia) and whether he himself hadn't been a Jew (a fact that remains undifferentiated in the alternative history). Roth makes it clear that fear comes from two factors: one fictive (Lindbergh's election) and one real (the character's Jewishness), echoing the twofold structure of the novel as uchronia/memoir.

In *The Plot Against America*, Roth makes a literary operation that is equal and opposite to Kosinski's in *The Painted Bird*: he puts his real self as a child and his real family in a fictitious historical context, so that the resulting book is a peculiar mixture of memory and invention. When he was writing the novel, Roth had to reinvent himself as a child, in an attempt to recover a childhood that was twice lost, because it never existed. Moreover, there is a discrepancy of perception

[3] In a similar way, at the very beginning of *The Painted Bird* Kosinski's narrator states in a brief introductory remark that the book's six-year-old protagonist "was sent by his parents, *like thousands of other children*, to the shelter of a distant village" (2015, 3, my italics).

between the 1943 boy who experiences the uchronic events, and the present, adult self who is telling the story. If we add the distance of memory to the dual perspective offered by every uchronia – where history as it is told by the narrator overlaps with history as we remember it – then we have a mediated account of the sort described by Hirsch as "a triangulated look with which we engage images of childhood vulnerability in the context of persecution and genocide" (Hirsch 2012, 156). This is the reason why Roth called his novel "a kind of false memoir." Such a complex structure required a significant mnemonic effort, as the author himself confessed:

> It took a certain amount of trial and error before I figured out how to let the boy be a boy while at the same time introducing through the adult's voice a mediating intelligence. I had somehow to make the two one, the mediating intelligence that discerns the general and the child's brain that degeneralizes the general, that cannot see outside the child's own life and that reality never impresses in general terms. I had to present a narrative in which things are described both as they happened and as they are considered through hindsight, joining the authenticity of the child's experience to the maturity of the adult's observations. (2017, 340)

Roth's idea is very similar to Kosinski's, especially when he states in the same essays that "[l]iterature is manipulated to serve all sorts of purposes, objectives public and private, but one oughtn't to confuse such arbitrary applications with the arduously attained reality that an author has succeeded in actualizing in a work of art" (343). A different kind of reality lurks throughout the pages of his uchronia: though the events depicted are clearly and overly not true, neither are they completely false. Narrating this story helped the author discover, for instance, that his father's notorious stubbornness, in a different historical situation could be described as a form of resistance, defiance, or even as a sort of heroism.

We could say that the children who are protagonists of Roth's and Kosinski's novels are the authors' 'postmemorial alter-egos,' because they are personally related to the writers' actual experiences in (and of) the war, while at the same time they share a sense of "belatedness" towards World War II that connects both narratives to Hirsch's notion of postmemory. What *The Painted Bird* and *The Plot Against America* have in common is their authors' sense of inadequacy and belatedness toward their own experience of the war. The question they indirectly pose in their works is the same question asked by Paul Crosthwaite in his book *Trauma, Postmodernism and the Aftermath of World War II*: "How to perceive and commemorate a conflict whose effects on the self and the wider world are so palpable, but which one did not in fact live through?" (2009, 6, 7) – or, as we

have seen, not experienced in its fullness? Maybe it is impossible. Maybe, as Theodor Adorno famously stated, writing literature after such an atrocity as the Holocaust is barbaric. Yet *The Painted Bird* and *The Plot Against America* manage to deal with the unrepresentable, the unbelievable, the meaningless, in original artistic ways. As Kosinski stated: "Only by being imaginative toward your own life, perhaps by perceiving yourself as a character in a drama, can you make it meaningful" (2012, 1). Forty years later Roth stated that in writing his novel he "tried to turn the epic back into the disaster as it was suffered without foreknowledge, without preparation" (2017, 345); in other words, to restore history to its original unpredictability. Inventing one's self in history, inventing an alternate history around oneself, may be the only way to represent the unrepresentable.

Bibliography

Barenghi, Mario. 2013. *Perché crediamo a Primo Levi? Why Do We Believe Primo Levi?* Torino: Einaudi.

Bravo, Anna. 2014. *Raccontare per la storia. Narratives for History*. Torino: Einaudi.

Crosthwaite, Paul. 2009. *Trauma, Postmodernism and the Aftermath of World War II*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Franklin, Ruth. 2017. "Jerzy Kosinski's Traumas, Real and Invented." *The New Yorker*, March 27 2017. www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/27/jerzy-kosinskis-traumas-real-and-invented.

Hirsch, Marianne. 1997. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Hirsch, Marianne. 2008. "The Generation of Postmemory." *Poetics Today*, vol. 29, no. 1 (Spring): 103-128.

Hirsch, Marianne. 2012. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hirsch, Marianne. "An Interview with Marianne Hirsch." Columbia University Press. https://cup.columbia.edu/author-interviews/hirsch-generation-postmemory.

Klinkowitz, Jerome. 1983. "Betrayed by Jerzy Kosinski." *The Missouri Review*, vol. 6, no. 3 (Summer): 155-171. *Project Muse*, DOI: 10.1353/mis.1983.0003.

Kosinski, Jerzy. 2015 (1965). *The Painted Bird*. New York: Grove Press.

Kosinski, Jerzy. 1995 (1992). *Passing By. Selected Essays, 1962-1991*. New York: Grove Press.

Kosinski, Jerzy. 2012. *Oral Pleasure. Kosinski as Storyteller*. Compiled, transcribed, and selected by Kiki Kosinski; edited by Barbara Tepa Lupack and Kiki Kosinski. New York: Grove Press.

Kremer, S. Lillian. 1989. *Witness Through the Imagination. Jewish American Holocaust Literature*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Levi, Primo. 2003 (1986). *I sommersi e i salvati*. Torino: Einaudi.

Neale, Timothy D. 2010. "'...The Credentials That Would Rescue Me:' Trauma and the Fraudulent Survivor." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 24, n. 3 (Winter): 431-448.

Rosen, Norma. 1974. "The Holocaust and the American-Jewish Novelist." *Midstream*, vol. 20 (October): 54-62.

Roth, Philip. 1991. *Patrimony. A True Story*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Roth, Philip. 2004. *The Plot Against America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Roth, Philip. 2017. *Why Write? Collected Nonfiction 1960-2013*. New York: The Library of America.

Sloan, James Park. 1994. "Kosinski's War." *The New Yorker*, 2 October: 46.

Stokes, Geoffrey, and Eliot Freemont-Smith. 1982. "Jerzy Kosinsky's Tainted Words." *The Village Voice*, 22 June: 41-43.

Vice, Sue. 2000. *Holocaust Fiction*. New York: Routledge.

Wiesel, Elie. 1965. "Everybody's Victim; *The Painted Bird*. By Jerzy Kosinski." *The New York Times*, 31 October: BR5.

Paolo Simonetti teaches Anglo-American literature at "Sapienza" Università di Roma. His research areas include the works of Herman Melville, the reconfiguration of historical events in postmodernist and contemporary American fiction, the language of comics and its formal connection with non-graphic literature. He is the author of a book on conspiracy and paranoia in the works of Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Paul Auster (*Paranoia blues*, Aracne, 2009), as well as the editor of the complete works of Bernard Malamud in Italian for "I Meridiani" Mondadori. He has published extensively on literary theory, detective fiction, adaptation theory, post-9/11 literature, and on authors such as Hawthorne, Nabokov, Hemingway, Coover, Plath, Pynchon. He collaborates with "Il Manifesto" as a literary critic and has recently edited the second and the third volume of the novels by Philip Roth for "I Meridiani" Mondadori.

statuS Quaestionis
language text culture

Alessandra Crotti
Sapienza Università di Roma

The Return of the Shakespearean Jester: Postmemory and the Modes of Remembrance in Howard Jacobson's *Kalooki Nights* (2006)

Abstract

The tight matrix of death and laughter at the heart of Howard Jacobson's *Kalooki Nights* (2006) is firmly rooted in the carnivalesque modes and tragic form of *Hamlet*. There is, I will argue, a striking affinity between Jacobson's post-memorial novel and the Shakespearean tragedy: the return of the Ghost, with its demand for revenge and remembrance, may be read as an embodiment ante litteram of the anachronistic movement of postmemory. In overt contrast with the etiquette of tragedy, Yorick's skull re-emerges from the earth of the graveyard and, a fool in the midst of a tragic tale, 'carnivalizes' Shakespeare's play; similarly, all sorts of carnivalesque imageries envelop the postmemorial themes and tales of *Kalooki Nights*. Moreover, the return of the Shakespearean jester, amplified in *Hamlet* through jesting, puns and wordplays, mirrors the way in which the past re-emerges, carnivalized, from the rich and ambivalent textual soil of Jacobson's novel.

"Hilarious" according to the Sunday Telegraph and "Heartbreaking" for the Observer, Howard Jacobson's novel *Kalooki Nights* (2006) is a darkly funny tale of the British post-generation; in it, the experience of postmemory is modulated by a Jewish literary and memorial tradition in which tragedy and comedy intertwine under the sign of Yorick, the Shakespearean jester. *Kalooki Nights* is partly autobiographical – born in 1942, Jacobson grew up in post-war Manchester, safe from persecution and deportation, far away from marches and concentration camps. However, he belongs to a generation – the post-generation – for which the dim knowledge of the Holocaust was ubiquitous, resting on inherited memories of the Shoah, parental stories and stolen photographs often acquired during childhood.[1] Through the voice of his hero, a Jewish cartoonist

[1] Young Jews in post-war Britain read of the Shoah on newspapers and books, in particular Edward Russel's *The Scourge of the Swastika* (1954). Extremely popular amongst young Jews, the book was often forbidden by parents. As a consequence, for Jacobson and his peers the

living in 1950s Manchester, Jacobson keeps posing the same question, today still relevant to second-generation writers and artists: "is it permissible [...] to evoke laughter in response to the Holocaust?" (Montresor 1993, 126); and, if relying on the comic mode to discuss the Holocaust is indeed permissible, how? In what form? By what means?

Jacobson is often (and with good reason) associated with Philip Roth on the basis of their common challenge to the "Holocaust etiquette" (Des Pres 1988, 218). According to Terrence Des Pres, such etiquette, which is the etiquette of tragedy, demands that "the Holocaust shall be approached as a solemn, or even a sacred event, admitting of no response that obscures its enormity or dishonours its dead" (218). And yet, comedy – a dark comedy, but comedy nonetheless – envelops Jacobson's, like Roth's, texts, characters and imagery. However, rather than as a British Philip Roth, Jacobson prefers to think of himself as a Jewish Jane Austen,[2] thus acknowledging his debt to the English literary and artistic tradition in which the moods and modes of his novels are firmly rooted.

Max Glickman, the protagonist of *Kalooki Nights*, resorts to "the drawing of the comico-savage sort" (Jacobson 2006, 33) proper to a long tradition of British pictorial satirists, first amongst them William Hogarth – "Adorno famously said that, after the Holocaust, poetry wasn't a good idea. He never thought there was need to include cartoons in that proscription" (33), Max muses. On the other hand, Jacobson looks back to the literary tradition of the English Renaissance discussed at length by Mikhail Bakhtin:[3] "laughter," he writes in *Rabelais and his World* (1965), "is just as admissible in great literature, posing universal problems, as seriousness. Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter" (1984, 66).

Laughter, but always rooted in tragedy. Such apparent contradiction in terms is partly clarified in light of the Shakespearean trace that travels across Jacobson's literary production – in William Shakespeare, Jacobson claims, he found his credo as a writer (1997): not in the comedies or in *The Merchant of Venice*, contrarily to what one may expect, but in *Hamlet*, a tragedy. To be more specific,

memory of the Holocaust came to elicit anxiety, but also the kind of morbid fascination that accompanies anything that is forbidden.

[2] See, for example, Janet Maslin's review "Jewish Funhouse Mirror Is Alive and Not So Well," *The New York Times* (20 Oct. 2010).

[3] Jacobson acknowledges his debt to both William Shakespeare and Mikhail Bakhtin in his history of comedy *seriously funny: From the Ridiculous to the Sublime* (1997). On Bakhtin and Shakespeare see, for example, Phyllis Gorfain's essay "Towards a Theory of Play and the Carnivalesque in *Hamlet*" (1998) and Maria C. Laudando's recent "Da Falstaff a Yorick. Il corpo e il fantasma della *vis* comica shakespeariana" (2019).

in the space of tragedy, in the graveyard where Hamlet, holding Yorick's skull, challenges the old (and dead!) court jester:

> Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chop-fallen? Now get you to my lady's chamber and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come. Make her laugh at that. (V, i, 183-9)

1. Carnivalizing the Holocaust

In "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" (1937-8), Bakhtin identifies a "tight matrix of death and laughter" (1981, 198) common to some of the most important works of Renaissance literature: in Rabelais, of course, but also in Cervantes, Boccaccio, and Shakespeare, "in the Falstaff scenes, the cheerful gravediggers in *Hamlet*, the cheerful drunk porter in Macbeth" (198). An equally tight matrix of death and laughter governs the narration of *Kalooki Nights* – here, the tragic and the comic mode intertwine in the tale of the British post-generation, represented by Max and his peers, Manny Washinsky and Errol Tobias. Memories of the Shoah permeate their childhood, turning them into inadvertent recipients of a painful past, foreign and yet their own:

> By the usual definitions of the word victim, of course, I wasn't one. I had been born safely, at a lucky time and in an unthreatening part of the world, to parents who loved and protected me. I was a child of peace and refuge. Manny too. But there was no refuge from the dead. For just as sinners pass on their accountability to generations not yet born, so do the sinned against. 'Remember me,' says Hamlet's father's ghost, and that's Hamlet fucked. (Jacobson 2006, 5)

And there, in the midst of a postmemorial novel, is *Hamlet*. However distant, the transgenerational trauma at the heart of Shakespeare's play is clearly in conversation with the Hamlet-like devotion to the Ghost that, for Jacobson's generation, were the victims of the Holocaust, the "Jews of Belsen and Buchenwald crying out to be remembered" (5). Their cry is reminiscent of the call of the Shakespearean Ghost - "Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me" (I, v, 91). Such a request for remembrance is embraced as a dictum by Hamlet and the post-generation alike – "Now to my word. It is 'Adieu, adieu, remember me.' I have sworn't" (I, v, 91); "Then I heard the wailing, centuries old" (Jacobson 2006, 48). In either case, (post)memory will turn into a curse or, in Jacobson's words, a "death-in-life grip those slaughtered five or more million had on our imaginations" (48).

In a recollection of his childhood years, Max confesses how, against their parents' wishes, young children in Manchester used to play concentration camps in an old bomb shelter; the main topics of their conversations were the Holocaust, Hitler, Nazi commanders, torture, death. In this way, the history of the Shoah became a source of morbid fascination and, in time, developed into an all-consuming obsession enveloping all aspects of Max's, Manny's and Errol's adult lives – their tastes, habits, jobs, relationships. So much so that Manny, the protagonist of the main (and most disquieting) episode of the novel, gradually loses the ability to distinguish his own past from that of the victims of the Holocaust: possibly associating the overbearing demands of his Orthodox Jewish parents to the Nazi authoritarian regime, Manny gasses his mother and father to death in their bed – "Side by side, holding hands, was how I imagined them. Like a devout Christian couple engraved in cathedral brass" (48).

In retrospect, the image of the gassed bodies of Manny's parents lying motionless on a bed looks alarmingly like a staged, small-scale Holocaust. It also recalls the stage in *Hamlet*: "the patriarchal system of revenge," writes Phyllis Gorfain, "leaves a stage of slain bodies for Fortinbras to manage and a responsibility for Horatio to tell Hamlet's story" (1998, 155).[4] Manny's old friend and confidant, Max is left – much like Horatio – with the responsibility to tell a story of revenge and murder: after Manny's release from prison, a film production company asks Max to rekindle their old friendship in order to produce a drama based on "the only Jewish double homicide in the history of Crumpsall Park" (Jacobson 2006, 29). However, Manny's crime is only the latest chapter of a much longer (and bitter) tale – "I was the fruit of Five Thousand Years of Bitterness," says Max, "which meant that I was heir to Five Thousand Years of Jokes" (29). *Five Thousand Years of Bitterness* is also the title of Max's comic book history of the sufferings of the Jewish people, in a way a mise en abyme of *Kalooki Nights*.

Conceived by Max and Manny in the old air-raid shelter, such early elaboration of postmemory in the cartoon mode contains the germ of the dialogue between tragedy and comedy underpinning Jacobson's novel. The dark tint of Max's humour may be traced back to the Jewish propensity to satire, but also to the English pictorial tradition: "English culture called. If not the English comic book, then the English cartoon. Moralistic. Suspicious. Dour. Savage. Reductively ribald" (29). In turn, Jacobson's deathly humour and the

[4] Manny does not die at the end of the novel. After his release from prison, he suffers, however, a social death: he decides to change his name to Stroganoff, thus losing his identity and his place in the Manchester Jewish community.

carnivalesque character of his prose owe much to Shakespeare's tragedies, and *Hamlet* in particular – "In world literature," Bakhtin writes, "there are certain works in which the two aspects, seriousness and laughter, coexist and reflect each other, and are indeed whole aspects, not separate serious and comic images as in the usual model drama. [...] the most important works in this category are, of course, Shakespeare's tragedies" (1984, 122).

In this light, the King's jester of *Hamlet* is a true representative of the Shakespearean use of the carnivalesque in dramatic tragedy. Dug out of the earth of the graveyard with a "dirty shovel" (V, i, 100), Yorick re-emerges from Hamlet's past, material, earthly and grotesque. He is a highly ambivalent figure, "a fellow of infinite jest" (V, i, 179), the fool in the midst of a tale of tragedy. Through Hamlet's recollections, the skull evokes several of the "many outward carnivalesque aspects" attributed by Bakhtin to Shakespeare's drama: "images of the material bodily lower stratum, of ambivalent obscenities, and of popular banquet scenes" (1984, 275), images of life and death, laughter and sorrow, the dinner table and the graveyard, comedy and tragedy.

In *Kalooki Nights*, the "essence of the grotesque" (Bakhtin 1984, 62) has the shape of the "fine satiric lines," the "angry lines of satire," the "visual jokes" (Jacobson 2006, 239) drawn by Max – even Hitler cannot escape the omnivorous force of Max's cartoonery; he is turned into "a disembodied moustache screaming 'Heil!' and banging on about the Final Solution' (239). In this connection, it is worth remembering that the narration of Jacobson's novel is in the hands of "a man of comedy and exaggeration" (239), Max: thus, seen through the eyes of a cartoonist, the world of *Kalooki Nights* inevitably exhibits the exaggerated lines of caricature – Max's exaggeration, caricature, and distortion are translated verbally into oxymoron, paradox, hyperbole, verbal caricature, puns, word plays[5] akin to those uttered by the Shakespearean gravedigger. All sorts of carnivalesque imagery – appetites, low, animalistic instincts, music, etc. – merge with postmemorial themes and tales. At the British Museum, Max and Manny come

[5] The silence of Max's parents on the Shoah come to be known as "lampshade moment[s]" (Jacobson 2006, 119), a clear reference to Ilse Koch's unspeakable means of torture; Max's string of invariably Aryan-looking wives become incarnations of Ilse Koch – "for erotic purposes I divided women, and had from a very early age, into vegetarians and meat-eaters. Ilse was a meat-eater. Vegetarians I took no interest in" (119); one of them, wishing to buy a Mercedes, accuses Max of refusing on the basis of its German origins: "So to prove Germany wasn't a problem I relented, or she relented, and we bought a Volkswagen Beetle. Had a Mercedes been a problem for me on German grounds, then a Volkswagen would surely have been a greater one. Linguistics partly. [...] 'If you look at the hubcaps on a Volkswagen [...] you'll see that the VW makes a swastika" (119).

across the statue of the Egyptian god Bes, "the dwarf fertility god – smirking, naked, phallic, prancing, laden with musical instruments" (239); they see "a squatting baboon with a penis the size of a cartoonist's pencil, a jeering hippopotamus-headed god, another jackal, a turtle, a second inebriate Bes clanging his cymbals" (239). Errol is a collector of pornographic materials about the Holocaust; Max, in turn, fantasises about Ilse Koch, turning her into a grotesque dominatrix: he draws "a caricature of Ilse Koch *à la* Hank Jansen in full riding gear and with swastikas on her saddle inspecting a line of naked Jewish prisoners with hard-ons" (239), the Holocaust equivalent of Yorick's ancestor, the old satyr of folklore.

Thus, just as Yorick 'carnivalizes', so to speak, Hamlet's tragedy, *Kalooki Nights* portrays a carnivalized Holocaust. Clearly, Max's/Jacobson's cartoonery and Shakespeare's tragic method share the same ancestry: folk festivals and humour, clownish motives, Carnival forms, Medieval parodies, table-talk and feasts, the "logic of crowning and uncrownings" (Bakhtin 1984, 275) which regulated Medieval feasts. "The medieval feast," Bakhtin explains, "had, as it were, the two faces of Janus. Its official, ecclesiastical face was turned to the past and sanctioned the existing order, but the face of the people of the marketplace looked into the future and laughed, attending the funeral of the past and present" (275). A similarly double-faced tension between past and future, comedy and tragedy regulates both *Hamlet* and *Kalooki Nights*; such tension is reflected in the polarity between the Ghost/victims of the Shoah and Yorick/Max.

On the one hand, the Shakespearean Ghost – "Armed at point exactly, cap-à-pie, / Appears before them, and with solemn march / Goes slow and stately" (I, ii, 200-2). His body is immaterial, "majestical," "as the air, invulnerable" (I, ii, 200-2). He embodies the first half of Janus' face, turned to a past of murder and tragedy. By virtue of his status - "King, father, royal Dane" (I, ii, 200-2) – the Ghost embodies "the serious aspects of class culture," which, according to Bakhtin, "are official and authoritarian. They are combined with violence, prohibitions, limitations and always contain an element of fear and of intimidation" (1984, 90). A similar God-like status is attributed to the victims of the Shoah and, with them, to Channa and Selick Washinsky: "Gassed, they had joined the sacred millions, [...] the righteous by virtue of victimization" (Jacobson 2006, 49-50). In a similar way, submitting to the grandiose demands of inherited victimhood,[6] the post-generation runs the risk of becoming impervious to the

[6] In fact, turning briefly to Jean-Paul Sartre (1946), while the weight of memory (or postmemory) does not deny facticity and the relation to the past, however foreign, it most

comic mode: indeed, tragedy – and, specifically, a tragedy devoid of hybridity – tends to enhance grandiosity by erasing human complexity, thus reducing the victim to an impermeable, one-dimensional entity – tragedy, prince, hero, Jew. This way, Max and, with him, the post-generation are condemned to share Hamlet's (and Manny's) destiny - "Under the body of his father, a boy lies" (50).

On the other hand, Yorick – a "whoreson dead body," "a mad rogue" (V, i, 166, 173), a human relic, skeletal, material, grotesque. He embodies the nourishment of comedy: eating, drinking, sexuality, the Greek satyrs with their engorged penises, stomachs, horns and tails, Dionysus, clowns, jesters, table talk, the "system of degradation, turnovers, and travesties" (Bakhtin 1984, 82) of Carnival. Similarly, Max is a fool, a "dick-artist" (Jacobson 2006, 253), immoral and blasphemous. While always in overt contrast with the prevailing mood of the novel, his deathly cartoonery, as Jacobson's back comedy, answers to an inner necessity of the post-generation, the need of the irreverent and disordering power of laughter which, as Jacobson notes in his *seriously funny* (1997), "reminds us of our inexhaustible capacity to evade the burden of sympathy and the compulsion to suffer" (137).[7] Thus, Max's and Yorick's skeletal faces are turned to the future: it is, in other words, precisely by recalling the beastly, earthly nature of victims, from the past or the present, – in overt contrast with the God-like status in which they are entrapped – that the post-generation may eventually escape Hamlet's destiny: "Had you made a bit of room for Bes in your heart, Manny," Max considers, "who knows – you might not have had to play the Holocaust around and around in your head, or stutter into your fingernails, or gas your parents" (Jacobson 2006, 281).

2. The unearthing of Yorick

The return of the Ghost and the unearthing of Yorick in *Hamlet* may be read as ante litteram representations of the anachronistic movement of postmemory

certainly denies transcendence, eventually rendering Hamlet and Jacobson, together with his peers, victims without perpetrators.

[7] Des Pres too underlines how "since the time of Hippocrates [...] laughter's medicinal power has been recognized, and most of us would agree that humour heals" (1988, 218); and later, "a comic response to calamity is often more resilient, more effectively equal to terror and the sources of terror than a response that is solemn or tragic" (218). Similarly, Joost Krijnen argues that "comic displacement goes hand in hand with the healing power of laughter, and so, the comic mode is also a progressive force that enables life to continue, a force that resists the vicious circle of traumatic fixation" (2016, 71).

(Hirsch 2012): the Ghost is the bearer of a history of violence, treason and murder, he embodies a foreign and fatal past that re-emerges (quite literally) in the present; on the other hand, the unearthing of Yorick's skull becomes the medium whereby comedy, amplified by the gravedigger's jesting, sneaks into Hamlet's tragedy.

Hamlet What man dost thou dig it for?
Grave. For no man, sir.
Hamlet What woman then?
Grave. For none neither.
Hamlet Who is to be buried in't?
Grave. One that was a woman, sir; but rest her soul, she's dead.
(V, i, 126-132)

Through the multifarious power of comedic jesting, the unearthing of Yorick turns the Shakespearean graveyard into a "playground of mimicry and revolution" (Gorfain 1998, 159). In fact, Gorfain writes, "punning and other figures of speech [...] encapsulate the patterns of both cyclicality and broken linear forms which together constitute *Hamlet*'s carnivalesque modes and tragic form" (159).

If the return of the Ghost sets into motion "the unilinear trajectory of death and loss [of] formal tragedy" (159), the unearthing of Yorick is the matrix of a different movement, opposite to the linear consequentiality of tragedy: the cyclical motion of comedy and Carnival, linked with the change of time and seasons, "with the procreating act, with birth, renewal, fertility, abundance" (Bakhtin 1984, 95),[8] with the system of crowning and uncrowning, a time in which "the jester was proclaimed king" (95); in fact, in light of the Carnivalesque imagery that crosses the play and bursts to life in the graveyard, the skull of the Shakespearean jester might be read as the grotesque counterpart of the Ghost of the noble King. Funded on the "alliance of linear consequence with cyclical carnivalesque" (Gorfain 1998, 158), the plot of *Hamlet* heads, death after death, towards a tragic ending with the Ghost on the lead; yet, the unearthing of Yorick – whose black laughter resonates throughout the play in the form of wordplays and puns – brings back comedy, offering Hamlet the victim and *Hamlet* the play a way out of the grandiose demands of tragedy.

Jacobson's novels follow a similar path: while his characters keep listening to their fathers' fathers' ghosts and inevitably head towards tragedy, comedy finds its way, taking up residence in the tragic space of postmemory. Its anachronistic

[8] Bakhtin stresses how such motion is proper to Shakespeare specifically; he writes: "this pathos of radical changes and renewals is the essence of Shakespeare's world consciousness" (1984, 275).

movement is mirrored, at the level of form, in the extremely troubled chronology proper to *Kalooki Nights* – like Max, Jacobson is never "at the mercy of linear narrative" (2006, 221) and the past, both historical and fictional, resurfaces in the present: people from the past invade the daily lives of the protagonists and the present of the narration is filled with allusions to the previous pages of the novel – words, images, people traverse the text, often evoked by a single word, a sound, an image, an ironic wink to the reader. One example: in the attempt to rekindle his friendship with Manny, Max hosts him in a little annexe next to his house: "He took the keys from me without meeting my eyes. Then he asked whether he would need change for the gas meter" (221). In such context, the gas meter is doubly charged with tragedy: historically, due to the memory of the gas chambers, and fictionally, as a consequence of the murder of Manny's parents. Yet, its sudden and grotesque return elicits laughter, black and splenetic, which successfully deflates its acquired tragic connotation by reminding the reader of its triviality.

Moreover, the anachronistic movement of postmemory is, quite surprisingly, not prerogative of *Kalooki Nights*, but a constant feature of Jacobson's literary production. This means that that postmemory is, together with Shakespeare's carnivalesque modes and tragic form, present formally in each of Jacobson's novels. His *Shylock is my Name* (2016), for example, starts in a graveyard in twentieth-century Manchester, where the protagonist, Simon Strulovitch, stands by the grave of his dead mother. Next to him, Shylock mourns his wife, Leah. Then, shifting momentarily to Strulovitch's past, Jacobson writes:

> He was shopping with his mother in a department store when she saw Hitler buying aftershave. [...] Back home he made a joke of it to his father.
> "Don't cheek your mother," his father told him. "If she said she saw Hitler, she saw Hitler. Your Aunty Annie ran into Stalin on Stockport market last year, and when I was your age I saw Moses rowing on Heaton Park Lake."
> "Couldn't have been," Strulovitch said. "Moses would just have parted the waters." (2016, 4)

"The time is out of joint" (I, v, 196), Hamlet would say – Shylock is about four hundred years old, Moses is still alive and kicking, and Hitler buys aftershave in 1950s Manchester. Words, images, people from the past resurface in the present, unearthed like Yorick's skull and endowed with a new comedic connotation. In this way, comedy fights abstraction by answering to the reader's suspicion that the gas meter is not grand at all; it brings back human earthliness, reminds of Manny's daily, innocent need of gas, Hitler's need of aftershave to cut his infamous moustache. One by one, the words made unholy, people, objects,

things made too holy regain complexity. And in such a manner, everything becomes strikingly similar to Yorick's skull.

3. Conclusions

"Hard to get people to laugh at the Holocaust" (Jacobson 2006, 119) – Max's words echo Hamlet's challenge to Yorick (which is also Jacobson's credo): *make her laugh at that*, he dares the old jester, make her laugh at death. Max lives in a culture of political correctness that demands the cartoonist (and the novelist alike) to be morally strong, to either represent the Holocaust with tragic reverence or to *stay shtum* about it, as his father used to say – "Everything allowable so long as it's tremulous. Cartoon? Fine, just keep the cartoonery out. Just keep it sweet, and substitute a watercolour wash for any angry lines of satire. Wan is how they like it today, pastel-genteel, or comical in the cute sense, faux naif" (119). However, Max and Jacobson rise to the challenge, facing the watchmen of the Holocaust etiquette and deadly laughter resonates across *Kalooki Nights*.

But in what capacity? The answer comes, once again, from the Shakespearean jester – following his example, Hamlet turns "mad in craft," he puts on his well-known "antique disposition" (III, iv, 190), a masque of seeming zaniness that gives him the freedom to derogate those in power – "fools, madmen, poets, carnival maskers and players gain immunity, for the ludic frame licences speech as insequential" (Gorfain 1998, 162). As a cartoonist, Max – and, through him, Jacobson – calls upon the same kind of "insanity plea" (162); he wears, in other words, the mask of zaniness common to the fool and the cartoonist: after all, as a Jew and a cartoonist, Max fits in "the paradigm of Otherness into which theatre, fools, carnival and other forms of licence also fit" (162).

In doing so, he is free of disrespecting the Holocaust etiquette and to promote the same Carnivalesque "fine revolution" (V, i, 89) invoked by Hamlet in the graveyard. The Renaissance witnessed, according to Bakhtin, to the "gradual disappearance of the dividing line between humour and great literature [...];" as a result, "the lower genres begin to penetrate the higher levels of literature" (1984, 98); similarly, in *Kalooki Nights* tragedy becomes, as Jacobson likes to say, comedy's rightful home – the dinner table *in* the graveyard, laughter *in* sorrow, life *in* death. Fed by the tragic experience of postmemory, Jacobson's multifarious comedy promotes renewal, rebirth, regeneration, revitalization and eventually renaissance, lifting the burden of seriousness and sacredness put upon second-generation writers and successfully breaking the hierarchy of genres

inherent to Holocaust writing. Nothing is unlaughable, nothing is stable or certain, and with Yorick, the Shakespearean jester, on the lead, *Kalooki Nights* becomes a testimony to Jacobson's faith in the healing power of laughter.

Bibliography

Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, edited by Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1984. *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Des Pres, Terrence. 1988. "Holocaust Laughter." In *Writing and the Holocaust*, edited by Berel Lang, 216-233. New York and London: Holmes and Meier.

Gorfain, Phyllis. 1998. "Towards a Theory of Play and the Carnivalesque in *Hamlet*." In *Shakespeare and Carnival. After Bakhtin*, edited by Ronald Knowles, 152-176. New York: Macmillan Press Ltd.

Hirsch, Marianne. 2012. *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Jacobson, Howard. 1997. *seriously funny. From the Ridicule to the Sublime*. London: Viking.

Jacobson, Howard. 2006. *Kalooki Nights*. London: Vintage, Penguin Random House.

Jacobson, Howard. 2011a. *The Finkler Question*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Jacobson, Howard. 2011b. *Whatever It Is, I Don't Like It*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Jacobson, Howard. 2012. *Zoo Time*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Jacobson, Howard. 2014. *J*. London: Vintage, Penguin Random House.

Jacobson, Howard. 2016. *Shylock is my Name*. London: Hogarth, Penguin Random House.

Krijnen, Joost. 2016. *Holocaust Impiety in Jewish American Literature. Memory, Identity, (Post-)Postmodernism.* Leiden, Boston: Brill Rodopi.

Laudando, Maria C. 2019. "Da Falstaff a Yorick. Il corpo e il fantasma della *vis* comica shakespeariana." In *William Shakespeare e il senso del comico,* edited by Simonetta De Filippis. 145-169. Napoli: UniorPress.

Montresor, Jaye Berman. 1993. "Parodic Laughter and the Holocaust." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981 -) 12: 126-133. jstor.org/stable/41206185?seq=1

Sartre, Jean-Paul. 2007. *Existentialism is a Humanism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Shakespeare, William. 2008. *Hamlet/Amleto*, trans. Nemi D'Agostino. Milano: Garzanti Editore.

Von Bernuth, Ruth. 2016. "How Foolish is Jewish Culture? Fools, Jews, and the Carnivalesque Culture of Early Modernity." In *How the Wise Men Got to Chelm. The Life and Times of a Yiddish Folk Tradition*. New York: New York University Press.

Alessandra Crotti has recently completed a Ph.D. in English Literature at Sapienza University of Rome. Her thesis deals with the reception of the Affaire Dreyfus in British literature and culture, with a focus on the role of the Affaire in the birth of the British spy novel, in the elaboration of Ford Madox Ford and Joseph Conrad's theory of literary Impressionism and in James Joyce's Ulysses and Finnegans Wake. She has also published on the legacy of William Hogarth in Howard Jacobson and on the presences of eighteenth-century cultural life in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*.

statuS Quaestionis
language text culture

Daniela Henke
Albert-Ludwigs-Universität i.Br.

Commemorating the Unexperienced: The Strategical Function of Jean Améry's Memories in the Postmemorial Novel *Morbus Kitahara* by Christoph Ransmayr

Abstract

The article examines the novel *Morbus Kitahara* by Christoph Ransmayr from the viewpoint of the postmemorial dilemma: how to commemorate someone else's experiences that are relevant for one's own identity without appropriating them? The article argues that this novel shows an awareness for the sublime character and sanctity of Holocaust testimonies, while at the same time demonstrating strategies to solve the dilemma. Intertextuality, body narration and the usage of direct speech are the novel's three cornerstones that constitute an attentive manner of commemorating what was not directly experienced. The key reference point that the novel provides for postmemorial remembrance is its connection with Jean Améry's autobiographical and philosophical works.

1. Introduction

One of the challenges of postmemorial articulations – especially within the realm of fiction – is the matter of illegitimate usage of other subjects' experiences.[1] This applies in particular to Holocaust Commemoration. The question as to who is authorized to fictionalize Holocaust history and under which preconditions is still one of great relevance. On the other hand, there is a broad consensus that the Holocaust must remain a key part of our cultural memory (Assmann 2013, 12). Achieving this aim without others besides witnesses commemorating and transmitting it seems to be difficult. In what follows, I will read Christoph Ransmayr's 1995 novel *Morbus Kitahara* as a variation of a fictional postmemory utterance and analyze the novel's strategies for commemorating the unexperienced. Marianne Hirsch defines postmemory as a "relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those

[1] The notion that stories can be one's property that might be forbidden for others to fictionalize is prominently described and criticized by Norbert Gstrein (2004).

who came before" (2012, 5). More precisely, it is a relationship to historical events that is characterized by a "deep personal connection" (1997, 22). Against this background, the following impressions that Ransmayr describes, in an interview, as the start for writing his novel are to be considered as a 'postmemorial moment:'

> Ich bin an einem Ende des Traunsees zur Schule gegangen, und am anderen Ende war der Steinbruch von Ebensee, ein ehemaliges Außenlager von Mauthausen. [...] Das Thema war seit frühesten erzählerischen Zeiten für mich da und hat mich beschäftigt, bedroht. [...] Ich habe mit all dem gelebt – mit dem Steinbruch, mit allem, was dort geschehen ist. Das ist mir alles erzählt worden. (Löffler 1997, 213)

> I went to school at the edge of the lake *Traunsee*. On the other side there was the stone quarry of *Ebensee*, a former satellite camp of Mauthausen. [...] The topic has haunted me since my earliest days as a narrator. I have lived with all that – with the quarry and with everything that happened there. All of it was told to me. (my translation)

There lies a dilemma in the collision between this empathic involvement that might – and does – stimulate the desire to commemorate the unexperienced and its arguable illegitimacy. The fact that it is a descendant of the perpetrators' nation who has a postmemorial connection to the victims' experiences even increases this situation. It relates to a general unbalance in the field of Holocaust remembrance in the former perpetrators' countries such as Germany and Austria – an unbalance that lies in the tendency to identify with the victims rather than with the perpetrators (Jureit 2010, 19-45).[2] Ransmayr's novel shows three strategies to solve this dilemma of postmemory. These are based on testimonial memory, body philosophy, and textual representation.

The story of *Morbus Kitahara* is about the regressing civilization and society of a mountain village in a counterfactual historical scenery after World War II. The village is called 'Moor' and is located right next to a quarry and a lake called 'Blind Shore' that used to be a wartime concentration camp. The place described in the novel refers to Ebensee, which is mentioned by Ransmayr in the interview, albeit this reference works without any real name being used. The plot is based on the following idea: what would have happened if there had been no Marshall

[2] Admittedly, this tendency is nuanced differently in those two memory communities. Austria adhered to the self-perception as Hitler's first victim for a long time and this still influences its relationship to the past. Meanwhile, in Germany, approximately since the late 1960s, a culture of memory has arisen that is supported by political and societal institutions and is primarily oriented towards the Shoah. On the basis of many examples Ulrike Jureit (2010) points out that this victim-orientation permanently threatens to turn into a seemingly absolving identification with the victims.

Plan, but instead a plan of revenge condemning the perpetrators to return to preindustrial times? The idea is associated with the name of Henry Morgenthau, known as the finance minister under the Roosevelt administration who demanded (rather than actually elaborated) that revenge plan (Greiner 1995, 169-176). There are three main protagonists in the novel. The first one, Bering, the son of the local blacksmith, a veteran, represents the generation of the perpetrators' descendants. The same is true for the second protagonist, Lily, the daughter of an alleged war criminal, who went missing when a bunch of victims took revenge during the chaotic times after the war. Lily herself is a black-market operator, who does business with soldiers of the occupying forces as well as with the village population. The third main character is Ambras, a survivor of the concentration camp. After the war, Ambras is employed by the occupying forces as the administrator of the quarry and the village. Ambras is to be considered as a representative of the Holocaust victims and therefore a representative for those who had experienced what can hardly be commemorated by those who did not – even though "these experiences were transmitted to the latter so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right" (Hirsch 2012, 5) – that is to say, to the postmemory generation that Ransmayr belongs to. Hence, I will focus on this character for the purpose of shedding light on postmemorial narrative strategies.

2. Intertextuality I. Adopting Jean Améry's Torture Experiences

One of the most expressive parts of the plot is the narration of Ambras being tortured. But instead of inventing this figure's suffering, the text adopts Jean Améry's memories of being tortured, which are the subject of his essay *Die Tortur* (in English: *Torture*) (Henke 2018, 240-245). Améry himself was an Austrian Jew who escaped to Belgium and joined the resistance movement there. He then was captured in 1943, tortured by the Gestapo, and eventually deported to Auschwitz. He survived and was liberated from Bergen-Belsen in 1945. In his texts, he deals primarily with these experiences and how they affected him as a human being. With regard to the torture he endured Améry writes:

> Im Bunker hing von der Gewölbedecke eine oben in einer Rolle laufende Kette, die am unteren Ende einen starken, geschwungenen Eisenhaken trug. Man führte mich an das Gerät. Der Haken griff in die Fessel, die hinter meinem Rücken meine Hände zusammenhielt. Dann zog man die Kette mit mir auf, bis ich etwa einen Meter über dem Boden hing. Man kann sich in solcher Stellung oder solcher Hängung an den hinterm Rücken gefesselten Händen eine sehr

kurze Weile mit Muskelkraft in der Halbschräge halten. [...] Das in einem einzigen, engbegrenzten Körperbereich, nämlich in den Schultergelenken, gesammelte Leben reagiert nicht, denn es erschöpft sich ganz und gar im Kraftaufwand. Nur kann dieser auch bei physisch kräftig konstituierten Leuten nicht lange währen. Was mich betrifft, so mußte ich ziemlich schnell aufgeben. Und nun gab es ein von meinem Körper bis zu dieser Stunde nicht vergessenes Krachen und Splittern in den Schultern. Die Kugeln sprangen aus den Pfannen. Das eigene Körpergewicht bewirkte Luxation, ich fiel ins Leere und hing nun an den ausgerenkten, von hinten hochgerissenen und über dem Kopf nunmehr verdreht geschlossenen Armen. Tortur, vom lateinischen torquere, verrenken: Welch ein etymologischer Anschauungsunterricht! [...] Aufheulend vor Schmerz ist der gewalthinfällige, auf keine Hilfe hoffende, zu keiner Notwehr befähigte Gefolterte nur noch Körper und sonst nichts mehr. (2002, 72-74)

In the bunker there hung from the vaulted ceiling a chain that above ran into a roll. At its bottom end it bore a heavy, broadly curved iron hook. I was led to the instrument. The hook gripped into the shackle that held my hands together behind my back. Then I was raised with the chain until I hung about a meter over the floor. In such a position, or rather, when hanging this way, with your hands behind your back, for a short time you can hold a half-oblique through muscular force. [...] All your life is gathered in a single, limited area of the body, the shoulder joints, and it does not react; for it exhausts itself completely in the expenditure of energy. But this cannot last long, even with people who have a strong physical constitution. As for me, I had to give up rather quickly. And now there was a crackling and splintering in my shoulders that my body has not forgotten until this hour. The balls spring from their sockets. My own body weight caused luxation; I fell into a void and now hung by my dislocated arms, which had been torn high from behind and were now twisted over my head. Torture, from Latin *torquere*, to twist. What visual instruction in etymology! [...] Frail in the face of violence, yelling out in pain, awaiting no help, capable of no resistance, the tortured person is only a body, and nothing else beside that. (1980, 32-33)

It is the same method of torture that was applied in Ambras' case in *Morbus Kitahara* as the following quotation shows.

'Wenn du einem Wächter in die Augen gesehen hast', hatte Ambras [...] gesagt [...], 'bloß in die Augen, verstehst du [...] das [...] und viel weniger konnte genügen, damit es *schaukeln!* hieß, *du meldest dich nach dem Appell.* Und dann hast du die Minuten zu zählen begonnen, bis sie dich endlich unter den Baum geschleift haben. Dort werden dir die Arme auf den Rücken gedreht und mit einem Strick gefesselt, und du beginnst wie die meisten vor dir und die meisten nach dir in einer solchen Not um Erbarmen zu schreien. Und dann reißen sie dich an diesem Strick hoch und schlagen auf dich ein, damit du pendelst – und du, du versuchst dich schreiend und um Himmelswillen und mit aller Kraft in irgendeiner Schräglage zu halten, damit um Himmelswillen nicht geschieht, was geschieht: Dein eigenes Körpergewicht zieht dir die gefesselten Arme hoch und immer höher, bis du mit deiner Kraft am Ende bist und dir dein furchtbares Gewicht die Arme von hinten über den Kopf reißt und die Kugeln aus den Pfannen deiner Schultergelenke springen. Das macht ein Geräusch, das du, wenn überhaupt,

nur aus der Metzgerei kennst, wenn der Schlachter einem Kadaver die Knochen auseinanderreißt oder ein Gelenk gegen seine Beugerichtung bricht, und das hört sich bei dir nicht viel anders an. Aber dieses Krachen und dieses Splittern hörst du ganz allein, denn alle anderen [...] hören nur dein Geheul. Du pendelst in einem Schmerz, von dem du niemals geglaubt hättest, daß man ihn empfinden kann, ohne zu sterben, und du heulst mit einer Stimme, von der du bis zu diesem Augenblick nichts gewußt hast, und niemals, niemals in deinem Leben wirst du deine Arme wieder so hoch über deinem Kopf haben wie in diesem Augenblick. [...].' (1998a, 174-175)

"If you looked a guard in the eye," Ambras had said [...] "just looked him in the eye, you understand... [...] all that and a great deal less could suffice for him to say, 'Swing! Report after roll call.' And then you began to count the minutes until they would finally drag you out under the tree. "Once there, they twist your arms behind your back and tie them with a rope, and, like most of those before you and most of those after you, you are in such anguish you start screaming for mercy. And then they pull you up by the rope and slap at you to start you swinging – and you, you scream and try with all your strength and for God's sake to hold yourself in some sort of slanted position, so that for God's sake it won't happen. But it happens – your own body weight steadily pulls your bound arms higher and higher, until you have no more strength and your own terrible weight yanks your arms up behind your head and rips the ball joints of your shoulders out of their sockets. The sound it makes is one that you know, if at all, only from the meat market, when the butcher rips the bones from a carcass or breaks a joint by bending it the wrong way – it doesn't sound all that different with you. Except you alone hear the cracking and splintering, because all the others – [...] all the others can hear only your howls. You dangle there in pain you would never have believed anyone could feel without dying, and you howl in a voice that until that moment you knew nothing about, and never, never in your life will your arms ever again be so high above your head as at that moment". (1998b, 140-141)

As the passages of the two texts show, Ransmayr's first strategy to solve the enunciated problem of postmemory is intertextuality. Not only is Amery's authentic report reproduced in detail, but Ambras, too, commits suicide at the end of the novel, just as Améry did after announcing and justifying it in his essay *Hand an sich legen* (1976); (English translation: *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death,* 2005) (Henke 2018, 254-256). Only by intertextually referring to someone who is legitimized to commemorate because of his autobiographical experience of torture, and thus relating to this person's mental world, does Ransmayr justify the defeatist determination of his tortured figure to die. As Améry himself puts it,

Wer der Folter erlag, kann nicht mehr heimisch werden in der Welt. Die Schmach der Vernichtung läßt sich nicht austilgen. Das zum Teil schon mit dem ersten Schlag, in vollem Umfang aber schließlich in der Tortur eingestürzte Weltvertrauen wird nicht wiedergewonnen. Daß der Mitmensch als Gegenmensch erfahren wurde, bleibt als gestauter

Schrecken im Gefolterten liegen: Darüber blickt keiner hinaus in eine Welt, in der das Prinzip Hoffnung herrscht. Der gemartert wurde, ist waffenlos der Angst ausgeliefert. (2002, 85)

Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world. The shame of destruction cannot be erased. Trust in the world, which already collapsed in part at the first blow, but in the end, under torture, fully, will not be regained. That one's fellow man was experienced as the antiman remains in the tortured person as accumulated horror. It blocks the view into a world in which the principle of hope rules. One who was martyred is a defenseless prisoner of fear. (1980, 40)

According to Améry, suicide is a necessary or at least natural consequence. Suicide completes what torture began (Henke 2018, 255).

3. Intertextuality II. Améry's Body Philosophy as a Memory Concept

Furthermore, the novel reflects the body philosophy of Améry's thinking. This is – besides Améry's own experiences – fundamentally influenced by phenomenological philosophy. Phenomenological thinkers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty reject the concept of dividing human beings into body and soul and think of them as unitary animate bodies instead (1974, 235). In German, the term *Körper*, meaning the material corpus, differs from *Leib,* which refers to the phenomenological idea of body. According to phenomenology, there is no differentiation between corporal and mental sensations. Experience is always a bodily process. And so is memory.

The body philosophy in question – its characteristic hue in Améry's work – results in two aspects. First, the understanding of body as an inseparable entity means that suffering such as torture is inerasable since it is inscribed in the body, "ineradicably burned into him" (Améry 1980, 34). From this perspective bodies are understood as a storage medium for memory and history. In *Morbus Kitahara* this notion is impressively conveyed through the "signs of torture on [...] [Ambras'] bare back, violet scarred stripes left by blows of clubs and strokes of whips received decades before" (1998b, 191). They must be interpreted as *leiblich* and thus as inseparably physical and mental scars. Second, Améry argues that torture is untellable since it is a corporal experience, and the borders of the body mark the borders to other subjects' experience. The borders of the tortured body thus mark the borders of how far torture can be communicated.

Der Schmerz war, der er war. Darüber hinaus ist nichts zu sagen. Gefühlsqualitäten sind so unvergleichbar wie unbeschreibbar. Sie markieren die Grenze sprachlichen

Mitteilungsvermögens. Wer seinen Körperschmerz mit-teilen wollte, wäre darauf gestellt, ihn zuzufügen und damit selbst zum Folterknecht zu werden. (Améry 2002, 74)

The pain was what it was. Beyond that there is nothing to say. Qualities of feeling are as incomparable as they are indescribable. They mark the limit of the capacity of language to communicate. If someone wanted to impart his physical pain, he would be forced to inflict it and thereby become a torturer himself. (Améry 1980, 33)

Ambras cannot get rid of his body. He is crippled, unable to hold his hands above his head (1998a, 173; 1998b, 139). Thus, he carries his memories with him wherever he goes in a physical, bodily sense. The wholeness of his being is focused on the past. He experiences flashbacks and imagines himself in the concentration camp again right before committing suicide (1998a, 430-43; 1998b, 348). The village community hates Ambras for his good standing with the occupying forces and for being living proof of their historical guilt. Their view on their own history and on their deprivations is incompatible with a survivor's reality. And even when Ambras does share his memories of being tortured, the interlocutor flees them right away. The scene of the dialogue in question takes place on a boat. Ambras and his assistant Bering are crossing the lake in order to help a ferryman repair his boat. Upon arrival, Bering, who is abnormally fascinated by machines as signs of progress in his regressive world, immediately gets to work. By watching him it seems to Ambras, the narrator supposes,

[...] daß [...] [Bering] eine beschädigte Mechanik noch eher zu rühren vermochte als ein beschädigtes Leben: Nach so vielen Reden, Flugblättern und Botschaften des großen Lyndon Porter Stellamour und nach unzähligen Buß- und Gedächtnisritualen in den Kaffs am See und an seinem Blinden Ufer hörte auch der erste und einzige unter den Männern von Moor, dem Ambras jemals vertraut hatte, immer noch lieber auf das Klopfen und Hämmern von Maschinen als auf den Wortlaut der Erinnerung. (1998a, 227)

that [Bering] was more likely to be touched by a defective machine than by a defective life. After so many speeches, flyers, and messages [...], after countless penitential and memorial rites in the backwater villages along the lake and on its Blind Shore, the first man, the only man among the men of Moor in whom Ambras had ever confided, still would rather listen to the pounding and hammering of engines than to the words of memory. (1998b, 182-183)

The irreversibility of inner and physical pain – to differentiate briefly, irrespectively of the phenomenological notion of *Leib*, for the sake of clarity – and the impossibility to share it, combine in a fatal way. Ambras cannot get rid of his body that is profoundly shaped by the extreme experience of torture and at the same time his bodily maimed (in the sense of *leiblich*) existence hinders him

to get in contact with others. This is exactly what inevitably leads Ambras to commit suicide in the end. There is no other way back to the present world for a *Leib* that has experienced near-death and a life doomed to be obsessed with history. By reflecting the author's phenomenological body philosophy on the story level, the novel supports intertextuality studies that assert the metonymic character of intertextual references. That means that referring to parts of other texts implies referring to their original contexts as well (Holthuis 1993, 95). By identifying the borders of communication with those of the bodies, the novel firstly affirms Améry's belief that extremely painful experiences such as torture are not comparable and consequently inexpressible by language. By assuming the implications of Améry's thinking to constitute the figure of 'Ambras' and his story, the intertextual setting of Ransmayr's novel secondly expresses exactly the complex set of problems mentioned in the beginning: the problems of postmemorial commemoration and of narrating the unexperienced. In this way the novel reflects on its own representational (im)possibilities and on the sublimity of authentic memories. And as a crucial highlight point, at the same time, intertextual references overcome the postmemorial dilemma, since they maintain the original voice and the original narration of the experience. So here, within the context of postmemory, a new function of intertextuality showcases. Moreover, by relying on repetition, intertextuality gives more weight to the original memory that is referred.

The German Slavist Renate Lachmann in her monograph *Gedächtnis und Literatur* (1990) (meaning: Memory and Literature) examines the connection between the functionalities of memory and intertextuality. She argues that commemorating is something that happens between texts (Lachmann 1990, 35). Referring to texts of the past means constituting a cultural memory that is nothing else than intertextually transmitted experience. Lachmann's results might be useful to sharpen the concept of postmemory in general – defined as keeping specific memories within the memory discourse by intertextually referring them and thus transmitting them. By this means postmemory participates in memory by referring its contents, passing them on and transforming them (Lachmann 1990, 36; 76). In this way both goals might be accomplished: the commemorating of the past by later generations and yet not touching anything tabooed such as intimate memories.

4. The Strategy of Body Narration

The novel's second postmemorial strategy is what may be called a 'method of body narration' as a result of the inherent body philosophy that was mentioned above. By this I mean a narrative style which is characterized by the representation of physical processes, physical movements and choreographies of action. In this sense, Steffen Röhrs states: "Der Ausdruck 'Körper erzählen' meint [...] nicht nur, dass *vom* Körper erzählt wird. Vielmehr scheint der Körper in der Literatur auch *selbst* erzählen zu können" (2016, 106).[3]

Based on the insight that on the one hand, bodily experience cannot be shared, but on the other hand, individuals are shaped by their experiences in a bodily sense, Ransmayr uses body narratives instead of illegitimately claiming and inventing unexperienced inner processes and mental states. Thereby those narrative approaches to the body create effects of authenticity (Röhrs 2016, 109-110).

The torture scene is one example of the narration of physical processes and moves, but there are plenty of body narratives to be found in the novel. Another example occurs in a passage of the text in which Bering is killing a looter. The scene is represented as a choreography of killing.

Jetzt hält er die Pistole in der Hand. Wie seltsam leicht, federleicht sie in diesem Augenblick ist. Bei seinen geheimen Spielen mit ihrer Mechanik war sie ihm stets schwer wie ein Hammer in der Faust gelegen. Vier Schritte, drei Schritte vor ihm, ganz dicht bei ihm wird der Verfolger im Licht seiner eigenen Sturmlampe sichtbar [...]. Der erste Schuß schlägt Bering den Arm hoch [...]. Das Krachen reißt an seinem Trommelfell, dringt ihm tief in den Kopf und schmerzt, wie noch kein Laut geschmerzt hat. Der Blitz des Mündungsfeuers erlischt, ist schon vor einer Ewigkeit erloschen, und immer noch sieht er das nachleuchtende Gesicht seines Feindes, den aufgerissenen Mund. Als dieses Gesicht blaß wird und auch zu erlöschen droht, will er es nicht ins Dunkel fortlassen – und drückt zum zweitenmal ab. Erst jetzt fällt der Waffe ihr altes Gewicht zu. Sein Arm sinkt nach unten. Zitternd steht er in der Nacht. (1998a, 57-58)

Now he has the pistol in his hand. How strangely light, light as a feather, it is at this moment. Whenever he secretly played with its mechanism, it always lay heavy as a hammer in his hand. Four steps, three steps in front of him, at very close range—his pursuer at last becomes visible in the light of his own hurricane lamp [...]. The first shot throws Bering's arm back [...]. The crack of the blast rips at his eardrums, thrusts deep into his head and hurts more than any sound has ever hurt. The flash at the end of the barrel has gone out, went out an eternity ago, but he

[3] 'The expression 'narrating bodies' not only means speaking of bodies. In fact, the body itself seems to speak in literature, too' (my translation).

can still see the reflected face of his foe, that mouth gaping wide, a speechless amazement. When the face turns pale and threatens to go out as well, he doesn't want to release it into the dark—and squeezes a second time. Only now does the weapon assume its old weight. His arm falls. He stands trembling in the night. (1998b, 44-45)

The whole scene is narrated as body experience. And yet this body narrative – not any kind of authorial narrating and evaluating discourse – tells us about the extremeness of the situation and its meaning: Bering, the son of a perpetrator, is losing his innocence and is moving from collective guilt to individual guilt. I therefore conclude that body narratives are functional to constitute meaning.

Narrating bodies as a method or rather as a strategy, can fit into a specific figuration of the triad of memory, body, and writing. Experienced history inscribes itself into the bodies in the form of memory (Assmann 2001, 201). Body narration transforms bodily stored experience into commemorative contents, which are now written down, within a postmemorial frame.

A frequent criticism of Ransmayr's works as a novelist concerns the constitution of his characters. These are said to be presented from an exceedingly distant perspective, which makes them 'cold,' much too literary or simply not psychologically deep enough for readers to identify with (e.g. Honold 1999, 256; Just 2006, 375-380). My argument is based on the results about the novel's intertextuality and the body discourse that is thereby incorporated. From that perspective, human beings are considered as equal to bodies, in the sense of the German word *Leib*. Conclusively, literary figures are to be represented as bodies. Or contrariwise, body narration is figure narration at its best. There is nothing more internal that is tellable than what the body is able to tell us. Consequently, body narration creates the biggest possible closeness. Since body action is describable, but – following Améry – physical feeling is not, the second strategy to solve the problem of illegitimate fictional representation of the unexperienced adds up to letting the bodies speak and giving a detailed narration of physical processes and movements.

5. Direct Speech Passages. Keeping Memory Untouched

Lastly, we go back to Ambras and the torture-scene. The passages that are taken from Améry's torture experiences are put into direct speech. Ambras, the figure who experienced such agony is telling his assistant about it orally. Compared to the novel as a whole, the borrowed experiences stand out. Not only do we find rather few instances of direct discourse, but those passages broaching the issue of

Ambras' experiences in the concentration camp are the only long passages in direct speech. As a result, the novel's third strategy of transgressing the possibilities of postmemory narrative is putting the unexperienced into direct speech. Choosing that form of representation contributes to maintaining the original memory. Moreover, by this means commemoration is firmly delegated to a fictional character, who represents subjects who did experience the narrated, just like Jean Améry. Thus, the novel avoids commemorating through the narrator's voice as the closest entity to the author. By keeping the narrator in the background at least within the passages in question, the author, who belongs to the generation of postmemory and for whom the content of commemoration is unknown territory, maintains an appropriate distance.

By means of these three strategies – intertextuality, body narration, and the use of direct speech – Ransmayr prevents using other subjects' experiences for his postmemorial fiction in a presumptuous and illegitimate manner, e.g. inventing and representing it from an alleged internal perspective. Nevertheless, the novel contributes to keeping the past or rather specific experiences of the past in discourse and in the collective memory. That is the positive outcome that postmemorial fiction, regardless of the author's biographical origins, can provide – despite the ethical difficulties it still implies.

Bibliography

Améry, Jean. 2002 (1966). "Die Tortur." In *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne. Bewältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten*. In *Werke in 9 Bänden*. edited by Irene Heidelberger-Leonhard. Vol. 2: Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne / Unmeisterliche Wanderjahre / Örtlichkeiten. edited by Gerhard Scheit, 55-85. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.

Améry, Jean. 2005 (1976). *Hand an sich legen. Diskurs über den Freitod*. In *Werke in 9 Bänden*. edited by Irene Heidelberger-Leonhard. Vol. 3: Über das Altern / Hand an sich legen. edited by Monique Boussart, 173-343. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.

Améry, Jean. 1980. "Torture." In *At the Mind's Limits. Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*. Translated by Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld, 21-40. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Assmann, Jan. 2000. "Körper und Schrift als Gedächtnisspeicher. Vom kommunikativen zum kulturellen Gedächtnis." In *Speicher des Gedächtnisses*, edited by Moritz Csáky and Peter Stachel, part 1: *Absage an und Wiederherstellung von Vergangenheit, Kompensation von Geschichtsverlust*, 199-213. Wien: Passagen.

Assmann, Aleida. 2013. *Das Unbehagen in der Erinnerungskultur*. München: Beck.

Greiner, Bernd. 1995. *Die Morgenthau-Legende. Zur Geschichte eines umstrittenen Plans*. Hamburg: Hamburger Edition.

Henke, Daniela. 2018. "Die Tortur. Jean Améry und der Körperdiskurs in Christoph Ransmayrs *Morbus Kitahara* (1995)." In *Körperbewegungen in (Nach-)Kriegszeiten. Zu künstlerisch-medialen Repräsentationsformen von der Frühen Neuzeit bis zur Gegenwart*. edited by Jonas Nesselhauf, Till Nitschmann and Steffen Röhrs, 239-258. Hannover: Wehrhahn.

Hirsch, Marianne. 1997. *Family Frames. Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Hirsch, Marianne. 2012. *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Holthuis, Susanne. 1993. *Intertextualität – Aspekte einer rezeptionsorientierten Konzeption*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg.

Honold, Alexander. 1999. "Die steinerne Schuld. Gebirge und Geschichte in Christoph Ransmayrs *Morbus Kitahara*". In *Sinn und Form*, 51, 2: 252-267. Berlin.

Jureit, Ulrike. 2010. "Opferidentifikation und Erlösungshoffnung. Beobachtungen im erinnerungspolitischen Rampenlicht". In *Gefühlte Opfer. Illusionen der Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, edited by Ulrike Jureit and Christian Schneider, 17-103. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.

Just, Peter (ed.). 2006. *Das Literarische Quartett. Gesamtausgabe aller 77 Sendungen von 1988 bis 2001*. Vol. 2: "May 03 1993 – August 14 1997." Berlin: Directmedia.

Lachmann, Renate. 1990. *Gedächtnis und Literatur. Intertextualität in der russischen Moderne.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Löffler, Sigrid. 1997. "'... das Thema hat mich bedroht'. Gespräch mit Sigrid Löffler über *Morbus Kitahara* (Dublin 1995)". In *Die Erfindung der Welt. Zum Werk von Christoph* Ransmayr. edited by Uwe Wittstock, 213-219. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1974 (1965). *Phänomenologie der Wahrnehmung*. Photomechanischer Nachdruck. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Ransmayr, Christoph. 1998a (1995). *Morbus Kitahara*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer.

Ransmayr, Christoph. 1998b (1997). *The Dog King*. Translated by John E. Woods. London: Vintage.

Röhrs, Steffen. 2016. *Körper als Geschichte(n). Geschichtsreflexionen und Körperdarstellungen in der deutschsprachigen Erzählliteratur (1981-2012).* Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.

Daniela Henke is Scientific Assistant and PhD Researcher at "Graduiertenkolleg 1767 Faktuales und Fiktionales Erzählen" in Freiburg i. Br. (Project: Experimental Narratives in Fictions about the Holocaust and Nazi Germany between the *Historikerstreit* and the Current

Strengthening of the Right-Wing Populism). After her graduation in German Studies and Philosophy at University of Freiburg in 2014, she was a Pre doc scholar at "a.r.t.e.s. Graduate School of Cologne." Furthermore, she taught courses at "Deutsches Seminar II – Neuere Deutsche Literatur" in Freiburg and gave several lectures in Germany and abroad. She is the author of several articles and a monograph on Ransmayrs novels (*Geschichte neu denken. Postmoderne Geschichtsphilosophie und Historiographie im Romanwerk Christoph Ransmayrs*, Marburg: Tectum 2016). She is also editor of a volume on memory studies (together with Tom Vanassche: *Co-memoration. Limits, Challenges, and Possibilities in Contemporary Shoah Remembrance*, Berlin: De Gruyter 2020).

statuSQuaestionis
language text culture

Tom Vanassche
Independent Scholar

Screaming silences. Screen Memories and Postmemories of the Resistance and the Shoah in two French Contemporary Novels

Abstract

If the memory of the anti-fascist Resistance has served as a screen memory for collaboration and colonial violence, recent postmemories and the polemical debates they arouse are equally marked by telling silences. In this article, I analyse two contemporary French novels in which the memories of the Resistance and of the Shoah are entangled: Laurent Binet's *HHhH* and Yannick Haenel's *Jan Karski.* Nevertheless, these novels and the polemics in which they find themselves are still riddled with screaming silences concerning collaboration. These questions will be discussed alongside the novels' conscious use of fictionality as a metacommentary on processes of commemoration.

> *Detail is salient. [...] Silence is less obvious. One must be aware of it before it yields its information.*
> Raul Hilberg (2001, 160)

1. Introduction

If anything, the commemoration of historical and traumatic events is as much about what is not being communicated as about what is. In this paper, I will use the concepts of screen memory and postmemory to read two contemporary French novels, in which the memory of the Shoah is closely linked to the memory of the Resistance: Laurent Binet's *HHhH* provides this link through the figure of the perpetrator, while Yannick Haenel's *Jan Karski* (2009; transl. *The Messenger*, 2011) does so through the eponymous resistance fighter. While I pay specific attention to the silences these novels perpetuate, I also argue that tension between fiction(ality) and the historical account is created to fill the gaps of silence often found in postmemories. To be sure, the polemical potential of both novels, which hinges on the 'ownership' of the story rather than on the story itself, paradoxically creates an additional silencing. Before delving into these

analyses, I briefly sketch the historical background of the commemoration of the Resistance and the Shoah and the theoretical concepts of screen memory and postmemory, paying special attention to the advantages and the risks of the concept 'beyond' the 'second generation.'

2. Resistance as screen memory

If one looks at the early metanarratives surrounding the Second World War, one notes – at least in Western Europe and in Italy, but potentially elsewhere as well – a central role for the domestic Resistance against the Nazi occupation and its Fascist allies in France and Italy. Pieter Lagrou notes that these Resistance narratives served as relegitimization for the Belgian, Dutch, and French nation-states after years of collaboration and the liberation *manu militari* by third parties: "[r]esistance was crucial to the formation of a national epic. 'Being liberated' was too passive a mode to celebrate the recovery of national independence, and gratitude is a weak basis for national identity. For the three countries concerned [Belgium, France, the Netherlands], glorification was the only basis available for a true national myth" (2000, 26). Lagrou maintains that the memory of the concentration camp was a suitable compromise for the deportation of the Jews and of the resistance fighters (199). Dan Diner disagrees and notes that these memories were asymmetric in the first post-war decades: the commemoration of the Resistance, especially of the fighters deported to the concentration camps, was much more prominent than the commemoration of the Jewish victims deported to Birkenau and Sobibór (Diner 2007, 79-80). Alain Resnais's highly-acclaimed *Nuit et Brouillard* (1955) has been criticised for rendering the fate of the Jewish deportees nigh-invisible, lumping all deportees together in one undifferentiated group (Wilson 2006, 26–27; Dreyfus 2006, 43–44). This asymmetry may be explained with the concept of the screen memory: a memory that serves to "cove[r] up a traumatic event – another traumatic event – that cannot be approached directly" (Hansen 1996, 311). Such an understanding of 'screen memory' applies neatly to metanarratives about *the* memory of the Shoah, *the* memory of colonialism, *the* memory of postcolonialism. For the French context, the memory of the Resistance thus justifies the reinstallation of the French Republic as a nation-state, despite the unsettling and confusing Nazi occupation and the Vichy regime. The role of the Resistance, often exaggerated from a military perspective and presented in a Manichaean fashion, not only promotes active Resistance over passive victimhood (a binarity which is

admittedly problematic) but it also serves as a double screen memory: it allows precisely to cover up the complicity of the Vichy regime (*l'État français* as opposed to *la République française* in exile) and of individual collaborators.[1] Moreover, it deflects attention from the war in Algeria.[2] Dan Diner notes how, in an uncanny fashion, 8 May 1945 signifies in Algerian history and memory not (just) the victory over Nazi Germany but also the day of the Sétif massacre, during which the French military opened fire on a celebratory crowd flying the flag of the Arab independence movement (2007, 64–66). During the subsequent Algerian War, French soldiers did not shy away from torture methods or illegal executions, *inter alia* in the form of the infamous death flights.[3]

Perhaps such a broad understanding of "screen memory" is somewhat reductive when applied to literary criticism: it risks disregarding the complexity of literary texts and their reception. Michael Rothberg's re-reading of Freud results in his focus on screen memories as *revealing* what has been suppressed (as much as hiding it), adding the necessary nuance for the analysis of particular texts (2009, 13–14). Thus, in his use of the concept, the silence is never mute but speaks volumes, especially in the politics of representation and its concurrent violence.

3. The shift in the conceptualisation of postmemory

While public commemoration may have focused on the Resistance in the early post-war decades, the Shoah was – of course – remembered and commemorated by the survivors, often within their families. Indeed, the boom of memory studies can be explained by the publication of "artworks, films, novels, and memoirs, or hybrid 'postmemoirs'" by artists and writers who belong to the so-called "second generation" – a term that Marianne Hirsch, too, puts in quotation marks (2012,

[1] That this complicity was hushed up is clear by the censoring of *Nuit et Brouillard*. The presence of French gendarmes guarding Jews at the Pithiviers concentration camp was censored (Dreyfus 2006, 38; Wilson 2006, 25). What remained in this nonetheless fascinating documentary film is a narrative of suffering at the hands of sadistic Germans in the concentration camps – causing the German ambassador in France to ask for the film to be removed from the Cannes Film Festival programme, which in turn caused outrage in the French press (Dreyfus 2006, 38–40).

[2] Indeed, the censoring of *Nuit et Brouillard* sat very uneasy with its director, who was committed to the anti-colonial and anti-torture movement in France (41). Resnais would, along with many of the French intellectuals situated on the Left (including erstwhile deportees), sign the Manifesto of the 121 in 1960.

[3] The French government is only slowly starting to admit the use of torture and extralegal execution: not before September 2018 did a French president do so.

3) – and which thematise the omnipresence of the parents' memories of the Shoah in the familial setting as opposed to the public (and relative) silence (1997, 22). Hirsch, herself a member of this 'second generation', labels the transmission of traumatic memory within the family context as postmemory, which "describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they 'remember' only by means of 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" (2012, 5). While Hirsch has originally favoured the familial context for establishing and describing the transmission of trauma between generations, she has more generally broadened her concept to denote "a *structure* of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience. It is a *consequence* of traumatic recall but (unlike posttraumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove" (2012, 6). This broadening has been at times intensely criticised as risking the blunting of the analytical edge of Hirsch's concept (cf. Beiner 2014, 298–99). But it is not hard to see why Hirsch has opted to broaden her concept: it always contained a tension between two generations and between the private practices of commemorating and their broader dissemination in the artistic and literary works of the 'second generation'.[4] Moreover, apt though it already was for the commemoration of other instances of structural political violence (genocidal and otherwise), Hirsch responds to newer conceptualisations of memory, such as Rothberg's multidirectional memory, which led her to "explor[e] affiliative structures of memory beyond the familial" and to "see this connective memory work as another form of affiliation across lines of difference" (2012, 21). Indeed, her theorising of postmemory was inspired by hearing Toni Morrison read from *Beloved*, suggesting productive links between the memory of slavery and the memory of the Shoah – very much in line with Rothberg's multidirectional memory (11).

So now Hirsch distinguishes between 'familial' and 'affiliative' postmemory. While the first corresponds to her earlier conceptualisation of postmemory, 'affiliative' postmemory is "an extension of the loosened familial structure occasioned by war and persecution" (36). One way of rendering this extension hermeneutically useful would be to ask how the family is figuratively reconfigured, but perhaps another way is to pay close attention to silence. Silences

[4] This goes in both directions: transmissions of the past within the context of the family are influenced by public commemoration, too (Hirsch 2012, 30).

are "always present, and often central to the work of postmemory" (247). This is the unavoidable consequence of genocide, where the loss of life on a large scale tautologically mutes the victims' voices, but it is also caused by the physical destruction of the victims' traces (such as photographs and letters) or the extradiegetic narrator's forgetting (or ignorance) of family members' names. This silence is in turn thematised or depicted by means of empty frames, voids, or holes. And it poses a serious challenge to those enterprises which can be described as affiliative postmemory: a challenge "not to fill the space with projections that would allow these gaps to be screened or disguised" (248). In other words, the ethical and intellectual challenge is to refute the silence, which is, ultimately imposed, fundamentally, by the perpetrators, but without resorting to narrative fetishism, "the construction and deployment of a narrative consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or loss that called that narrative into being in the first place [...]; it is a strategy of undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness" (Santner 1992, 144).

So here, as with the screen memory, postmemory is marked by silences that speak – in the familial setting, they are the very index of the genocide; in affiliative postmemory, the silences are not disavowed but rather the space where cross-cultural, 'cross-traumatic' solidarity can manifest itself. Notwithstanding the fact that both kinds of silences (can) speak volumes, the connotations are decidedly different: in the first case, the silence speaks in spite of itself, almost betraying a secret, whereas in the second case it offers the opportunity for actively engaging the traumas of the past and denying the perpetrators their final victory.

4. Changes in memory dynamics

Eventually the memory of the Shoah became decoupled from the overall war between 1961 (the start of the Eichmann Trial) and 1979 (the airing of the miniseries *Holocaust* on German television) – depending on the commemorative community. By the turn of the century, the Shoah had become prominent, a negative founding myth for the European Union and a reunified Germany (Assmann 2012, 29–39; Elsaesser 2014, 54; Lagrou 2000, 203; Elsaesser 2005, 73).[5] Around the same time, a shift in 'the' French commemoration took place: in 1995,

[5] Indeed, the Shoah has doubtlessly become a screen memory for the histories of European colonisation – but that is a topic in itself and cannot be adequately addressed in this paper. The interested reader may want to consult Diner (2007), Rothberg (2009), Leggewie (2011).

President Jacques Chirac acknowledged the French co-responsibility for the *Rafle du Vél d'Hiv* in July 1942 – still a central topos for the French commemoration of the Shoah. Similarly, the trial against Maurice Papon, an erstwhile Vichy official and post-war prefect (and even Minister), raised questions about the function of the memory of the Résistance.[6] As Caroline Wiedmer noted in the late 1990s, "[t]here is a growing awareness in France that the imposing monuments erected on French soil during the late 1950s and early 1960s [...] circumvented the question of France's own culpability in the persecution of the Jewish people" (Wiedmer 1999, 32).[7]

I would assert that since the 1980s, the memory of the Resistance has – to some degree – left the framework of the nation-state and gone transnational. Moreover, there seems to be a trend to establish links between the memory of Resistance and Shoah.[8] This is exemplified in two novels which on the surface take similar approaches to the intertwined commemoration of the Resistance and the Shoah but also differ substantially when it comes to their relation to a 'parental' or 'fraternal' intertext. Moreover, the issue of silence is differently constructed and has different ethical stakes.

Similarly, the relation between both kinds of silences and fiction(ality) differs. Whereas screen memories (as Rothberg understands them) tacitly point to the mythological character of national memories, and thus to grossly inaccurate (or at least incomplete) representations of the past – precisely *because* tangible political and biographical issues are at stake – postmemories resort to fictional narratives in order to fill the silences. Whether the mythological character of the screen memory as regards the fictivity of such postmemorial (re)constructions is overt or not must be discussed for each work of postmemory individually.

[6] The trial started in 1997 – after years of legal procedures: deportation orders signed by him had already surfaced in 1981. During the Fourth Republic, Papon was responsible for the massacring of protestors against the Algerian War on 17 October 1961 in Paris (Rothberg 2009, 234–35).

[7] Notwithstanding these monuments, the erstwhile Résistance failed to achieve its political goals for the post-war nation, most notably in its desire for epuration of collaborators (Novick 1969, vii).

[8] By this I mean connections that do not depict Jewish resistance and uprisings as in Warsaw (April-May 1943), Treblinka (August 1943), Bialystok (August 1943), Sobibór (October 1943), Birkenau (October 1944) and the joining of various partisan formations throughout Europe.

5. A screen memory: Laurent Binet's *HHhH*

The plot of Laurent Binet's *HHhH* (2009), winner of the prestigious *Prix Goncourt du premier roman*, follows the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich in 1942 by Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš, two British-trained Czechoslovak parachutists. But Binet also sketches the biographic backgrounds of the protagonists and the antagonist; the history of Bohemia and Moravia; other depictions of Heydrich and of the assassination; and its aftermath: the eradication of the village of Lidice. Binet also reflects extensively on the act of writing, fictionality in historical discourse and the purposes of commemoration. The book cover of various editions is a crystallisation of two of the book's themes: thematically, Heydrich; epistemologically and stylistically, the uncertainties within the historical record and the fictionalisation that serves to fill these gaps – and which Binet initially refutes. In lieu of a mimetic representation of the antagonist stands the eponymous acronym, which stands for 'Himmlers Hirn heißt Heydrich' – Himmler's brain is called Heydrich (Martens 2015, 164). In both form and content, it is quite witty and was supposedly popular among the Nazi brass in the 1930s, but this is hard to verify. In this sense, the novel announces the ambiguity central to life-writing, myth, history, and memory. It is an ambiguity which the narrator initially refuses but does embrace eventually.

In many regards, *HHhH*'s poetics are juxtaposed to Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes* (2006; transl. *The Kindly Ones*, 2009),[9] and indeed, the novel was initially published without Binet's scanting remarks about Littell's premises, which were only reintroduced in later editions. These remarks concern the fictivity of the details in Littell's account:

> Je me demande bien comment Jonathan Littell sait que Blobel, le responsable alcoolique du Sonderkommando 4a de l'Einsatzgruppe C, en Ukraine, avait une Opel. Si Blobel roulait vraiment en Opel, je m'incline. J'avoue que sa documentation est supérieure à la mienne. Mais si c'est du bluff, cela fragilise toute l'oeuvre. Parfaitement ! [...] [*V*]*raisemblable* n'est pas *avéré*. Je radote, n'est-ce pas? Les gens à qui je dis ça me prennent pour un maniaque. Ils ne voient pas le problème. (Binet 2012, 307)

To be sure, *The Kindly Ones* is, despite Littell's meticulous research, a fictional text: its protagonist, Max Aue, is Littell's invention without a historical equivalent named Max Aue. As such, Binet's remark may come off as pedantic or

[9] Gunther Martens adds a narratological juxtaposition: he sees *HHhH* as "a third-person antithesis" to Littell's autodiegetic narrative (2015, 155).

even unfair, and one wonders whether the compliment at the end of the following utterance is sincere or strategic:

> Evidemment, on se sera douté que la parution du livre de Jonathan Littell et son succès m'ont un peu perturbé. Je peux toujours me rassurer en me disant que nous n'avons pas le même projet, je suis bien obligé de reconnaître que nos sujets sont assez proches. [...] Il faut que je réprime [mon] envie. Je mentionnerai simplement qu'il y a un portrait d'Heydrich au début du livre. Je ne citerai qu'une seule phrase: "ses mains paraissaient trop longues, comme des algues nerveuses attachées à ses bras", parce que, je ne sais pas pourquoi, j'aime bien cette image. (309)

There seems little doubt that these remarks were initially left out to avoid a commercial backlash, and perhaps to avoid literary polemics. Only after the good reception (and commercial success) of *HHhH* as a novel in its own right could such sneers be reincluded. In other words, the initial silencing, which was supposed to avoid an uproar, can safely be undone without risking a belated uproar. Yet Lev Grossman has mixed feelings about Binet's distancing metanarrative remarks: "[i]t's obviously not arrogance. Binet is nothing if not self-deprecating in his autobiographical cameos. [...] But sometimes one wishes for even more self-deprecation than that. When it comes to true humility in the face of history, nothing beats complete silence" (2012).

Indeed, Binet judges his own writing by the same harsh standards as any other depiction of the war. Yet whereas Grossman's position amounts to aniconism, Binet 'merely' refutes fictionality – only to ultimately give up on this strict position. The death scene of the 'good guys' is delayed on the discourse level: in the actual story-time, the final fight with the SS in 1942 took a couple of hours (accounts vary from two to over fourteen); in *HHhH* it takes over three weeks.[10] It is no coincidence that the literary death scene starts on 27 May – on this day in 1942, Heydrich was ambushed by Gabčík and Kubiš, yet the final fight with the SS took place on 18 June 1942. The year 2008 presumably refers to the writing process: the novel was released the next year. Binet stretches the death struggle of his (story's) heroes from mere hours to over three weeks, but ultimately cannot give in to the narrative fetishism of letting them miraculously escape and survive.

This is precisely why Binet speaks at all: his narrative comprises of a Manichean battle of Good versus Evil. The Good win but are betrayed and die – the material of tragedy. On top of that, Binet's fascination with the assassination plot (11-12) amounts to a narrating of the self, the subject of autobiography. But

[10] The differentiation between story and discourse stems from structural narratology, cf. Chatman 9.

more interestingly, and while staying in a Manichean framework, he frames Czechoslovakia as the victim of British and French betrayal during the 1938 Munich conference (102, 110, 130). Binet seems aware of the French post-war screen memory of the Resistance, to which he does not wish to subscribe. Instead, he connects the Shoah and the Resistance through the perpetrator instead of the deportee: Heydrich had successfully eliminated the Czechoslovak resistance, but he was also in charge of the infamous *Einsatzgruppen* in Poland and the Soviet Union. Moreover, he was the convenor of the infamous Wannsee conference in January 1942. What complicates this matter is that Heydrich was not assassinated because of his role as *génocidaire*, but in all likelihood because of the prospect of a posting to France: the British did not need their network of agents in France eradicated. As such, Binet's refusal to remain silent (apart from his apparent incapacity) causes the paradox: one screen memory is refuted, only to be replaced by another one. Binet refuses a narrative of the Résistance in a way that exculpates France. Instead, he uses a different foil which points to the French geostrategic role prior to the war. Yet his equally Manichean narrative shows that he is still to be situated in the French post-war mythologies concerning the Resistance. The role of Vichy is, after all, limited to a few short (albeit no less fierce) remarks on René Bousquet, the secretary general of the Vichy police force and in that function, co-responsible for the deportation of the Jews from France (321-325).

6. A postmemory? Yannick Haenel's *Jan Karski*

Yannick Haenel's *Jan Karski* does not feature such extensive metanarrative passages. Haenel does not inscribe himself in autofictional fashion into his narrative, yet his narrative dwells nonetheless on the thin line between fictionality and non-fictionality.[11] *Jan Karski* consists of three parts, each one having a different approach to the story of Jan Karski, who, as a member of the Polish resistance, infiltrated the Warsaw ghetto in order to testify to the Allies what was happening to the Jewish population of Poland. As such, here we have a protagonist who provides the link between Resistance and Shoah – not the antagonist. Karski had already featured prominently in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985). And indeed, the first part of *Jan Karski* constitutes an ekphrasis of

[11] A first (albeit rather weak) signpost for this hybridity is constituted in the motto chosen: "Who bears witness for the witness?" which is attributed to Paul Celan. Yet Celan did not pose the question; the poem *Aschenglorie* ends with an answer in the negative: nobody bears witness for the witness.

Lanzmann's interview with Karski – as is admitted in the peritext. The second part is best described as a 'summary' of Karski's 1944 account, *Story of a Secret State*. As such, the book leaves the ekphrastic mode and turns to intertextuality in a narrower sense. It also constitutes, on the discourse level, an analepsis: the reader leaves Karski's 1978 New York flat and goes back in time 34 years. The third part belongs clearly to the realm of fiction. In it, "Karski" (or Haenel *as* Karski, as Mark Baker would have it) recounts his failure to spur the Allies into action. The date of narrating is not specified, but can be assumed to be in the 1990s, since this Karski claims to have been haunted by nightmares for over 50 years (and the real-life Karski died in 2000). This constitutes a prolepsis on the discourse level: the reader is taken from 1944 and beyond 1978 to the 1990s. Its fictionality allows the correction of historical mistakes in 'the real' Karski's autobiographical wartime account – a reflection on the unavoidable fictivity found in non-fictional eyewitness accounts: "[c]'est en rapport avec le camp d'Izbica Lubelska, celui qui, dans mon livre, je confonds avec Belzec. À l'époque où je me suis infiltré dans ce camp, je ne pouvais pas savoir s'il s'agissait oui ou non de Belzec" (Haenel 2015, 190).[12] The fictional Karski also renounces the Allies for not having interfered in the Shoah. The accusations are not new: before the war few visa were issued to Jewish emigrants, the railways to Auschwitz were never bombed, and neither were the gas chambers (Hilberg 1985, 1109–32).

The polemics addressed both this fictional depiction of Karski and the ekphrastic depiction of his interview included in *Shoah*. According to Lanzmann, Haenel's fictionalisation of Karksi –in autodiegetic fashion, moreover – amounts to a distortion of history and its protagonists, notably American President Franklin Roosevelt. *Jan Karski* indeed features a Roosevelt who does not listen to the messenger, a Roosevelt who is not interested in the fate of the Jews (Wieder 2010). To be fair, this accusation is understandable. Annette Wieviorka notes that Haenel's account seems to be informed by a contemporary anti-Americanism, and certainly amounts to anachronism, by interpreting the past in hindsight (Wieder 2010). Perhaps this contributed to Lanzmann's verdict: by making 'the Americans' the bad guys of his story, Haenel does not address anti-Polish anti-Semitism at all, and offers – through Karski – the image of a Polish resistance which profoundly cared about the Jews (Assouline 2010). A few days later, Haenel reacted to Lanzmann's accusations by claiming that the latter had left out

[12] Towards the end of his life, Karski himself noted that he had "faithfully and honestly reported what [he] remembered." Thus, the fictional Karski simultaneously distances himself from the 1944 error and is in line with the elder non-fictional Karski, who equally pointed towards inaccuracies due to "limits on what could be published" (qtd. in Karski 2012, s.p.).

part of the interview where Karski accuses the Allies of non-interference, and he started a polemic to promote the imminent screening of *Shoah* on Arte (Haenel 2010). Lanzmann, in turn, reacted by releasing his film *Le Rapport Karski*, which consists of the footage shot in 1978 but which did not make the final cut for *Shoah*. In later years, he has additionally accused Haenel (without naming him explicitly) of plagiarism – which pertains not to the fictional part, but to the ekphrasis in part one (*Film by Claude Lanzmann: Jan Karski Report Introduced by Claude Lanzmann (The Allied Powers Response to the Holocaust Conference)* 2015, 12:35-15:45). I do not wish to judge who is right and who is wrong in the debate but would rather point out the similarities between Haenel and Lanzmann. These are bigger than the polemics would suggest – and not just because of the topic or of the ekphrasis.

Firstly, the figure of the witness is central to both works (it is no coincidence that Annette Wieviorka, author of *L'ère du témoin* [1998], joined the debate). As is well known, Lanzmann consciously opted for a different depiction of the Shoah than Resnais: he has not included archival footage, he does not show the genocide directly. Instead, Lanzmann documents the post-war silence – which suited the perpetrators and bystanders very well – as much as the events. As such, he documents a silence that speaks. This is not so different from *Jan Karski*. As Baker notes, this book is "a mediation on [...] the impossibility and the imperative of remembering, what Haenel will describe as a 'silence that speaks' through the cracks of memory" (2011, vii). Moreover, in their own ways, Haenel and Lanzmann manipulate their witnesses – Haenel by fictionalising him, Lanzmann by urging them to testify, even when they would rather remain silent (or return to silence).[13]

Secondly, Lanzmann's film can be considered a screen memory. Omer Bartov suggests that by depicting Polish anti-Semitism and collaborators, the filmmaker doesn't need to point to the role of *French* collaborators, a fact which may, aside from its incontestable cinematic brilliance, partially explain the film's huge popular and critical success (2003, 165). Indeed, in his later films, Lanzmann has explicitly referred to Polish pre-war anti-Semitic thought and policy considerations. From this perspective, and as hinted at above, Lanzmann's fierce

[13] As to Lanzmann's manipulation, the testimony of Abraham Bomba, who was forced to cut the hair of the soon-to-be-gassed victims in Treblinka and who is delivering his testimony in Shoah in a barber shop, is more relevant than Karski's – unless one would consider Lanzmann's omission of the material released as *Le Rapport Karski* in as manipulation. But would this not imply that *all* decisions as to including or excluding material are manipulative? And let us not forget that the material out of which *Shoah* was compiled clocks off at over 300 hours.

reaction is not necessarily informed by jealousy, as Haenel suggests, but rather is the consequence of a clash of screen memories: in this argumentation, Lanzmann emphasises Polish anti-Semitism without depicting French anti-Semitism, whereas Haenel's anti-Americanism distracts from Polish anti-Semitism. But if one considers *Jan Karski* a screen memory, what is the traumatic past that cannot be accessed directly? Is this text really a screen memory, or rather a novel that instrumentalises the past for contemporary critique instead of contemporary distraction?

The works of both Lanzmann and Haenel demonstrate the paradoxes of silence: for the first, it is something to be broken, to restore a voice to the drowned, even though there remains an excess which cannot be accessed (Lanzmann 2007, 30); for the latter, testimony serves the restoration of humanity, which is purportedly destroyed by the Shoah, which gave rise to testimony in the first place. The tension is obvious: could testimony ever restore the state of the world as it was before the genocide? This is a philosophical question that extends beyond the novel, which instead highlights the mediation of testimony, and hence, the illusion of any direct access to the past. By extension, it highlights the illusion of a *complete* shattering of the silence. I hope to have shown that the apocalyptical (Lanzmann) and eschatological (Haenel) philosophies of history have more in common than it would appear at first sight. *Jan Karski* points – just like *Shoah* – to the intrinsic paradoxes of silence: it serves the perpetrators, ought therefore to have been broken, wishes to break the silence surrounding the role of the Allies, yet in doing so, it detracts from its purported aim: to restore the voice of the actual *victims* of history. Or, if that is too much to ask, to give a voice to them.

7. Summarizing: two kinds of memory, two kinds of silence

I hope to have made clear that in both cases one must ask which silences are maintained, and which ones are indeed broken – despite all uttered intentions. *HHhH* can hardly be described in terms of postmemory: the silences it leaves are not primarily due to the trauma of the Shoah – on the contrary, the novel offers a story of justified resistance but without mentioning that the Shoah was not an argument for executing its convenor. Moreover, while hinting at the role of French collaboration, this is done mainly through the 'screen' of French betrayal – not in 1940-44, but in Munich in 1938. That other screen memory, the Algerian

War, is never mentioned in the novel.[14] The silences inherent to the historical record, which can in many cases be considered of secondary importance, since they give us no better understanding, no better explanations of the past, are addressed through Binet's polemics against Littell – a matter of style more than of salience. Binet refutes fictionalisation – mostly – in order to fill these little gaps and prefers resorting to the metalevel to indicate these gaps. Despite its self-reflexivity in terms of the shapes and functions of commemoration – and its desire not to fictionalise, not to falsify – *HHhH* bears several traits of a screen memory. That is perhaps unavoidable, given its Manichean logic.

By maintaining a close distance to *Shoah*, a screen memory which simultaneously denounces the post-war silence, *Jan Karski* poses fundamentally different questions concerning silence and testimony. Though *Shoah* is clearly marked with the voids – the empty landscapes, the lack of archival footage, the few remaining ruins – it is hard to conceive of this film as postmemory: although it occasionally, in the case of the Zaidls, refers to the silences between the survivors and their children (and how *Shoah* apparently caused the daughter, Hanna, to hear her father's story completely for the second time), the film obviously transcends the familial framework. And if one considers the subject matter or the ekphrasis in *Jan Karski* of *Shoah* to constitute a metaphorical familial tie between both works (say, a fraternal or father-son bond),[15] then it is a family strife with fights. The familial metaphor would also run the risk of skewing the proportions: let us not forget that the larger part of *Jan Karski* is not dedicated to Lanzmann's depiction of Karski but to Karski's autobiography and to Haenel's take on the story. Yet whether his fictionalisation of Karski, which is a reaction to the historical record gap between 1944 and 1978 (for Karski's life, that is), really offers a way of connecting traumata, or whether the voices of the victims are not usurped along the road to contemporary political critique, remains a poignant question. It seems, perhaps despite its author's intentions, that it cannot really live up to the ethical standards that Hirsch has set for affiliative postmemory. It sees a void in the historical record, purports to fill it, but tells us little more about either this void – or any other.

[14] And claiming that it shines through in Binet's referral to the French Foreign Legion's activities during the Second World War in Algeria (215) is perhaps wishful thinking for it to fit at all cost.

[15] Women are, indeed, largely absent from *both* works – as well as from *Shoah*, for that matter (cf. Hirsch and Spitzer 1993).

Bibliography

Assmann, Aleida. 2012. *Auf dem Weg zu einer europäischen Gedächtniskultur?* Wiener Vorlesungen im Rathaus 161. Wien: Picus Verlag.

Assouline, Pierre. 2010. "Lanzmann contre-attaque sur Karski." *Le Monde*, January 21 2010, sec. Livres. https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2010/01/21/lanzmann-contre-attaque-sur-karski_1294712_3260.html#ens_id=1296450

Baker, Mark. 2011. "If We Are the Message." In *The Messenger*, v–ix. Berkeley: Counter Point.

Bartov, Omer. 2003. *Germany's War and the Holocaust. Disputed Histories*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Beiner, Guy. 2014. "Probing the Boundaries of Irish Memory: From Postmemory to Prememory and Back." *Irish Historical Studies* Vol. 39, no. 154: 296–307. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021121400019106

Binet, Laurent. 2012. *HHhH*. Paris: Grasset

Chatman, Seymour. 1978. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Diner, Dan. 2007. *Gegenläufige Gedächtnisse. Über Geltung und Auswirkung des Holocaust.* Essays zur jüdischen Geschichte und Kultur 7. Göttingen: Vandenhoek & Ruprecht.

Dreyfus, Jean-Marc. 2006. "Censorship and Approval: The Reception of *Nuit et Brouillard* in France." In *Uncovering the Holocaust. The International Reception of Night and Fog*, edited by Ewout van der Knaap, 35–45. London & New York: Wallflower Press.

Elsaesser, Thomas. 2005. *European Cinema. Face to Face with Hollywood*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Elsaesser, Thomas. 2014. *German Cinema: Terror and Trauma. Cultural Memory since 1945*. New York and London: Routledge.

Grossman, Lev. 2012. "Assassination Fascination: A Review of Laurent Binet's Prize-Winning HHhH." *Time*, April 25, 2012.

http://entertainment.time.com/2012/04/25/assassination-fascination-a-review-of-laurent-binets-prize-winning-hhhh/

Haenel, Yannick. 2010. "Le recours à la fiction n'est pas seulement un droit, il est nécessaire." *Le Monde*, January 25, sec. Tribune. https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2010/01/25/le-recours-a-la-fiction-n-est-pas-seulement-un-droit-il-est-necessaire-par-yannick-haenel_1296378_3232.html#ens_id=1296450

Haenel, Yannick. 2015. *Jan Karski*. Folio 5178. Paris: Gallimard.

Hansen, Miriam Bratu. 1996. "'Schindler's List' Is Not 'Shoah': The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory." *Critical Inquiry* vol. 22, no. 2: 292–312.

Hilberg, Raul. 1985. *The Destruction of the European Jews. Revised and Definitive Version.* 3 vols. New York and London: Holmes & Meier.

Hilberg, Raul. 2001. *Sources of Holocaust Research. An Analysis*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.

Hirsch, Marianne. 1997. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Harvard University Press.

Hirsch, Marianne. 2012. *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hirsch, Marianne, and Leo Spitzer. 1993. "Gendered Translations: Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*." In *Gendering War Talk*, edited by Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott, 3–19. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Karski, Jan. 2012. *Story of a Secret State. My Report to the World*. Edited by Andrew Roberts. London et al.: Penguin Books.

Lagrou, Pieter. 2000. *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation. Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945-1965*. Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare 8. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lanzmann, Claude. 2007. "From the Holocaust to 'Holocaust.'" In *Claude Lanzmann's* Shoah. *Key Essays*, edited by Stuart Liebman, 27–36. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lanzmann, Claude. 2015. *FJan Karski Report Introduced by Claude Lanzmann (The Allied Powers Response to the Holocaust Conference)*. Jerusalem. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQ7Y1dc6sbQ

Leggewie, Claus. 2011. *Der Kampf um die europäische Erinnerung. Ein Schlachtfeld wird besichtigt*. München¨: C.H. Beck.

Martens, Gunther. 2015. "Unreliability in Non-Fiction: The Case of the Unreliable Addressee." In *Unreliable Narration and Trustworthiness. Intermedial and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Vera Nünning, 155–70. Narratologia 44. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Novick, Peter. 1969. *The Resistance versus Vichy: The Purge of Collaborators in Liberated France*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Rothberg, Michael. 2009. *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

Santner, Eric L. 1992. "History beyond the Pleasure Principle: Some Thoughts on the Representation of Trauma." In *Probing the Limits of Representation. Nazism and the "Final Solution,"* edited by Saul Friedländer, 143–54. Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press.

Wieder, Thomas. 2010. "Polémique autour de 'Jan Karski.'" *Le Monde*, January 25 2010, sec. Livres. https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2010/01/25/polemique-autour-de-jan-karski_1296377_3260.html

Wiedmer, Caroline. 1999. *The Claims of Memory. Representation of the Holocaust in Contemporary Germany and France*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Wilson, Emma. 2006. *Alain Resnais*. French Film Directors. Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press.

Tom Vanassche submitted his PhD on the pathos of anti-pathos in Shoah literature and historiography in December 2019 at Freiburg University. His publications are on documentary literature and theatre, the codification of emotionality and literary translation. In 2020, he will publish various articles and *Ko-Erinnerung: Grenzen, Herausforderungen und Perspektiven des neueren Shoahgedenkens/Co-memoration: Limits, Challenges, and Possibilities in*

Contemporary Shoah Remembrance (co-edited with Daniela Henke; De Gruyter). He is currently conceptualising a postdoctoral project on the representation of climate refugees in literary fiction, journalism and autobiography/testimony.

statuS Quaestionis
language text culture

Pilar Martínez Benedí
Università degli Studi dell'Aquila

Multidirectional Trains: Co-operative (Post)Memory in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

Abstract

This essay reads *The Underground Railroad* as an operation of 'multidirectional memory.' The essay explores the collaborative negotiation between Whitehead's (post)memorialization of slavery and the postmemory of the Shoah, as figured in the potent image of the railroad—a ubiquitous element in Holocaust narratives and memoirs. By literalizing the abolitionist metaphor, Whitehead turns the salvific underground network into a material train that leads to death and oppression. The essay aims to examine the powerful role of the railroad as the affective vehicle that ties together different memories in a communal project of public remembrance.

Toward the end of *MAUS*, Vladek Spiegelman gasps in wonder at the sight of a train—A "real train to take passengers," he says, not "for cows and horses" (Spiegelman 2003, 257)—which is supposed to take the few survivors from Dachau to the Swiss border for an exchange of prisoners. This is not the first nor the only railroad related image to appear in *MAUS,* or in narratives of the Shoah, for that matter. The train is in fact, as Baruch Stier observes, one of the most "significant and recurring images and symbols of the Holocaust" (2015, 40). In its multifarious variations, the railway has become a veritable "Holocaust Icon," as he calls those images and artifacts that have come to "completely embody and encapsulate the Shoah," to the extent that they become "a metonymy for it" (3). Citing the influential work of Marianne Hirsch, Stier includes the railway car among those images that, through inexhaustible repetition, have come to signal emblematically the Holocaust and are intimately "incorporated into the visual landscape of post-memory" (3).

Yet my interest in Stier's work on the iconicity of the Holocaust-era railway car lies less in the train's ubiquity than in its ability to elicit a "quick, noncognitive access to the larger, hidden reality" (7) of the Shoah. Like other icons, he claims, the train "neither show[s] nor tell[s] but rather viscerally present[s] the Holocaust for comprehension and consumption" (8). In this essay, I argue that

such automatic, visceral response originates not from the train's representational or figurative meaning, but rather from its material force—or, what Mitchum Huehls calls "ontological presence" (2016, xii). While I don't share Huehls's apparent lack of interest in ideology critique,[1] I find his resort to ontology useful, inasmuch as it draws attention to "the ways beings exist in relation to each other" (xii). I in fact turn to the railroad's conspicuous and assertive 'being there' in order to investigate the kind of connections it promotes. More precisely, I examine the ways in which the train's intrusive material presence in unexpected places complicates its iconicity. May we escape from the railway's fixed association with the Shoah so as to embrace other histories of trauma, in a way that *at the same time* retains its status as a Holocaust icon? May the image of the train thus understood be "prosthetic," in the sense intended by Alison Landsberg, as allowing or promoting a "portable, fluid, and nonessentialist form of memory" (2004, 18)? May the railway be the vehicle of the "productive, intercultural dynamic" that Michael Rothberg (2009, 3) places at the basis of his idea of multidirectional memory? Because of the undeviating linearity of the railroad tracks, the train would seem to signal an ironbound, univocal directionality. Yet, in what follows I explore how it may derail from its iron way towards a rhizomatic multidirectionality.

1. Trains for People and Dilapidated Boxcars

Vladek Spiegelman's "train for people" (Spiegelman 2003, 257) speaks to my argument in at least another important way, inasmuch as it reverses the usual significance of the railroad both in Spiegelman's graphic novel and in Holocaust narratives in general. Together with the barbed wire, the crematoria chimneys, and the striped pajamas, the railroad or train is, as I have said, a prominent part

[1] On the wave of the recent post-critical turn in the humanities, Huehls argues that Whitehead and other contemporary authors "seem curiously reluctant to critique the injustice and inequality that they clearly recognize as endemic to twenty-first century life" (x). Ontology, rather than representation, becomes in his opinion the device these authors propose for rethinking politics in a neoliberal era. Now, post-critique, especially in the work of Rita Felski and Bruno Latour's famous "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?", rather than to a complete dismissal of critique, amounts to a new, positive, affective (as opposed to skeptical and suspicious) critical attitude—and in this sense the new turn can be immensely fresh and productive. However, it seems hard to describe *The Underground Railroad* as "reluctant to critique," when, as Lee Konstantinou rightly argues "Whitehead . . . seems to revert to the sort of ideology critique—the historicist-contextualist paradigm—he [elsewhere] repudiated" (2017, 15).

of the Shoah imagery of suffering and annihilation. Consider Primo Levi's and Elie Wiesel's memoirs. Consider Claude Lanzmann's titanic documentary *Shoah,* which rather than on Holocaust-era footage capitalizes on the infamous rail-tracks, boxcars, and train-drivers. Recall the prominence of the railroad in Spielberg's *Schindler's List.* In these and other films, books, and graphic novels the railway functions as an ominous token of death and devastation. Trains, as Baruch Stier puts it, "represent a monumental turning point in the destruction of the European Jewry: deportation via railway marked a key systemic shift from mobile murderers and stationary victims to stationary murderers and mobile victims" (2015, 40). Conversely, the 'real train' in *MAUS* is, if transitorily, a hopeful sign of liberation. I say transitorily, of course, because—as we know from Vladek's own successive mishaps, as well as from the testimonies of Levi, Wiesel, and others—the path to freedom after the liberation of the camps was anything but smooth. Yet the fact that the reversal of the train's function is here coupled with the alteration of its outer appearance is indicative of the immense associative potential of the train's very material presence.

Now let me take a huge leap, to yet another railroad image that, at least apparently, retains that same liberating promise—and, as we shall see, marks an analogous reversal. The leap is huge both chronologically and thematically, as we move in time and space from mid twentieth century central Europe to mid-nineteenth century Southern USA—from the Shoah to America's 'peculiar institution': chattel slavery. The title of Colson Whitehead's 2016 Pulitzer-Prize winning novel, *The Underground Railroad*, refers of course to the undercover organization—a network of persons, routes, and shelters—that helped many African American slaves out of bondage. The novel resonates with an increasing public and artistic interest in slave narratives in general and in the Underground Railroad in particular to which novels like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), films like *12 Years A Slave* (2013), tv series like *Underground* (2016), as well as the foundation of "The Underground Railroad History Project" in 2003, testify. Yet, in Whitehead's brilliant conceit, this popular and "potent trope" (Dubek 2018, 68) becomes an actual railroad, a (literally) real train.

The flight of the novel's protagonist, Cora, and her fellow runaway slave, Caesar, begins at the Georgia station of the Underground Railroad. A 'real station,' as Vladek Spiegelman would say, even equipped, thoughtfully, with "a small bench on the platform" (Whitehead 2017, 80). After a short wait, we are told, "the bench rumbled [...] and the rumbling became a sound:"

> The thing arrived in its hulking strangeness. Caesar had seen trains in Virginia; Cora had only heard tell of the machines. It wasn't what she envisioned. The locomotive was black, an ungainly contraception led by the triangular snout of the cowcatcher . . . The bulb of the smokestack was next, a soot-covered stalk. The main body consisted of a large black box topped by the engineer's cabin. Below that, pistons and large cylinders engaged in a relentless dance with the ten wheels, two sets of small ones in front and three behind. The locomotive pulled one single car, a dilapidated boxcar missing numerous planks in its walls. (83)

The trope of the abolitionist movement becomes fully palpable: a preposterous steel and steam subway intrudes with material force into a (post)memorialization of slavery. But, to what end? As Mitchum Huehls has rightly argued, Whitehead's novels often revolve around conspicuous "mundane" objects, that function as the simultaneous "source of and foil to interpretive desire" (2016, 110). The railroad, that is, demands our attention as the apparent key to unlock the novel's meaning, at the same time refusing to be read according to a representational logic. The train imposes its ontological presence, forcing us to scrutinize its conspicuous materiality; to look at how its very being there shapes, determines and affects the fictional world of the novel, as well as our reading of it.

If we attend to the material semblance of the 'dilapidated boxcar' that the fugitives board in Georgia, the first thing that gives us pause is that it doesn't look like Vladek's 'train for people' at all. Rather it bears more resemblance to those freight trains—the Holocaust-era railway car that Stier considers iconic—that transported prisoners to the death camps. The train's outward appearance would seem a minor issue, were it not for the fact that Cora and her fellow runaway slave are, as we soon learn, headed to quite a bleak destiny. Like Vladek's "train for people," although in the opposite way, Whitehead's "dilapidated boxcar" overturns the liberating significance of the underground railroad. Likewise, it reverses Radu Mihaileanu's operation in *Train de vie* (1998), where, if you recall, the deadly train becomes an oneiric image of hope and life—until, in the devastating ending, we are confronted with the brutal truth.[2] By literalizing the

[2] In *Train de Vie*, the inhabitants of a *shtetl* in Central Europe concoct a brilliant plan to escape deportation: they organize their own train, manned with some of them disguised as German officers. But, instead of any camp, their final destination is the Russian frontier as a gateway to Palestine. At the end, however, we see a close-up of Shlomo, the village fool that came up with the plan, saying: "This is the true story of my shtetl." But then the camera zooms out and we see him on the other side of a barbed wire fence, dressed in the infamous striped uniform, as he says: "Ne yu, *almost* the true story!"

metaphor, Whitehead turns the salvific underground network into a material train that leads to death and oppression. I will have more to say about the reach of Whitehead's complex operation; for the moment let us just notice that, rather than communicating a particular story of slavery, Whitehead's improbable train functions as a vehicle that connects different and distant traumatic histories.[3]

2. Improbable States of Possibility

The agent of the Underground Railroad in Georgia tells the runaways that every state or train station is different, "Each one a state of possibility, with its own customs and ways of doing things" (Whitehead 2017, 82). As the novel follows Cora in her short-lived journey northward, and its circuitous continuation through Tennessee, Indiana, and, finally, westward, we enter an alternative-historical landscape, in which every "state of possibility" becomes uncannily familiar, resembling other (temporally and/or spatially distant) traumatic histories. The sight of a skyscraper as Cora and Caesar step out of the train station in South Carolina (80) clarifies that the literalized railroad is merely one of the many liberties Whitehead takes with the historical past.

South Carolina, the protagonists' first stop, has, as the local agent of the organization tells them, an "enlightened attitude toward colored advancement" (108). And it indeed seems an idyllic place to live in, where the runaways have jobs, education, free time and fancy clothes—and, apparently, universal healthcare. However, we soon discover that this apparent haven harbors its own kind of hell. There is a technical caveat to their freedom: the runaways are now "property of the United States Government," which has bought up "most of the colored folk in the state" (110) in exchange for food, employment, and housing. The State power over its colored property, however, goes beyond the patronizing supervision of their intellectual, emotional, and physical well-being. The new hospital, it later turns out, runs undercover syphilis experiments on black males and recommends "birth control" (134) to black women. In a fantastical and anachronistic move, Whitehead incorporates the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Study, conducted between 1932 and 1972 by the Department of Health in Macon

[3] In this sense, I hope this is clear, my interest lies not in how trauma theory illuminates *The Underground Railroad*, understood as a neo-slave narrative. Rather, my intent here is to explore the interconnection and cooperation between different traumatic histories. Whitehead's idiosyncratic fondness for material objects, and in particular his inventive literalization of a metaphorical train in his 2016 novel, provides a particularly appropriate vehicle for such interconnection and cooperation.

County, Alabama, into the South Carolinian landscape. On the other hand, the practice of forced sterilization, simply suggested to Cora as "a chance for [her] to take control over [her] own destiny," but "mandatory for . . . imbeciles or otherwise mentally unfit" (135), conjures up the specter of Nazi eugenics experiments along with the American ones.

Rather than these biopolitical horrors, however, it is the arrival of the slave catcher Ridgeway that precipitates Cora's lonely flight. But she escapes the South Carolinian frying pan only to land into the fire of North Carolina. While the former State hid its brutality under the paternalistic veneer of "colored advancement," the latter is openly and unabashedly hostile to the blacks. Found by mere chance by the reluctant local agent, Martin, Cora is forced to hide in an attic—a bit like Harriet Jacobs, no doubt, but a bit like Anne Frank, too. That the parallel between the "slave girl" and Frank (and other victims of the Nazi genocide) must be intended is beyond question, as it emerges from Whitehead's depiction of the Tar Heel State.

Shortly before her arrival, the powerful men of North Carolina, Martin tells Cora, had "convened to solve the colored question" (196). The expression has evident echoes of "the final solution to the Jewish question"—the infamous code name for the Holocaust formulated at the Wannsee Conference in 1942. North Carolina's "solution" includes "new race laws" that "forbid colored men and women from setting foot on [its] soil." Those who refused, "were run off or massacred" (198). Traces of such massacre are visible enough: upon her arrival, Cora is led to precarious safety through the so-called "Freedom Trail," a country road leading to town in either side of which hang, like so many 'strange fruits,' the mangled corpses of lynching victims. The odious trail is, of course, suggestive of the many images that attest to the practice of lynching in the U.S. from the Reconstruction and well into the twentieth century, but it is also reminiscent of the exemplary public hanging of Jews, for example in the Lwów ghetto.[4] "In what sort of hell had the train let her off" (183), Cora now wonders. In North Carolina in fact, as the narrator tells us, "The negro race did not exist except at the end of

[4] Some testimonies on public executions exist. Consider, for example, the words of Leon Saper, registered in the Yad Vashem Archive: "I knew one guy, Mark . . . he was selling something that was sort of leftover from before the war and I suppose they did it as an example. And I think three people that they hanged off trees, you know, and I remember passing them . . . and I remember him hanging there."
(https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205070.pdf); the visual images of the public hanging of Jews in Lwow are eloquent enough: https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa10135;
https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa10147.

ropes" (187). If Cora was running to the Northern Free States, she paradoxically ends up in a "Negro-Free" state: "Free," as one of its political leaders barks in one of the public rallies or "festivals" held every Friday, "from the contamination of a lesser race" (191). The idea closely recalls the *Judenfrei* or *Judenrein* areas, a tag used during the Third Reich to designate sections, towns or villages in which the Jewish population had been wiped out. Of course, this kind of white-supremacist rhetoric is not unique to twentieth century Nazi-fascism, and Whitehead himself has linked his fictional North Carolina with the foundation of the State of Oregon upon white supremacist ideals (Whitehead 2016a, 10:22). And yet, the connections with the Nazi atrocities are too many, and too suggestive, to be coincidental. Even when Cora is finally captured, not by the slave catcher after her, but by uniformed "night riders" (2017, 223) who had been alerted by the Irish housemaid working for her saviors, in exchange for a reward. These riders are no doubt inspired by the "slave-patrollers," a "de facto police force in the South" (Whitehead 2016a, 16:45) during the early nineteenth century. But, are they not reminiscent of SS members that enforced racial policing in Nazi Germany, too?

As the rendering of the Carolinas makes clear, Whitehead's imaginative version of the slave narrative refuses the format of the straightforward historical novel, so as to accommodate different histories of segregation, oppression, and genocide. Yet the connections that his novel proposes are both trans-generational and trans-cultural, exploring both the linear and the transversal perpetuation of systemic racism over time and across space. Even as Whitehead clearly rearranges history, he never invents from scratch. As he stated in a widely quoted interview for *The Fader:* "If I stuck to the facts then I couldn't bring in the Holocaust, and the KKK, and eugenic experiments" (2016b). The counterfactual timeline of *The Underground Railroad*, as Matthew Dischinger argues, forces us to see the events of the novel as "simultaneously preposterous and real" (2017, 90). But the anachronism is not merely chronological. Throughout the pages of his novel, Whitehead has us wondering: Is it Tuskegee or Mengele; Jacobs or Frank; the KKK or the SS; Oregon or the Third Reich? The narrative evokes both, without ever forcing us to choose, thereby turning an "either/or" logic into a "both/and" one. Whitehead's commemoration of slavery rejects that kind of "zero-sum logic" that, according to Michael Rothberg (2009, 20), exclusivist or competitive conceptions of memory bring about.

3. Who Ain't a Slave? Collective Memory Beyond Universalism and Particularism

During their brief interval of apparent freedom in South Carolina, Cora and Caesar often talk about their past life in chains. "Much of what they said could apply to any former slave who overheard them," the narrator explains, "A plantation was a plantation; one might think one's misfortunes distinct, but the true horror lay in their universality" (Whitehead 2017, 122). Likewise, one might be tempted to say, the connections Whitehead's novel encourages only point to the commonalities between atrocities. Oppressors are just the same old gang and, as Ishmael quips in the first chapter of *Moby-Dick*, "Who Ain't a Slave?" Such implication is provocative in its own way, especially if we consider that uniqueness is often predicated both of the Holocaust and of the African American experience. Whitehead seems to be challenging any claim to uniqueness.

Yet his operation is much more complex than that. Even as he pushes back against the notion of uniqueness, he never falls back into platitudes about the universality of racial oppression. In *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead is less interested in analogies or commonalities than he is in connections and intersections, or overlapping spaces. When he incorporates elements from the Shoah into an overt remembrance of African American slavery he does not resort to clear-cut images or situations that impose themselves upon, or cancel out, slavery's memorial traces; nor does he attempt to blend or fuse one into the other. Rather, he relies on subtle and supple intimations that keep the different traces visible. As I have tried to make clear, each reference can be intended both ways; each can be bent and stretched so as to fit into, and satisfy, different (post)memorial needs. In deploying events or situations in which separate histories overlap, Whitehead forces his readers to confront racialized horrors in a way that recognizes the commonalities between, while at the same time retaining the distinctness of, the different experiences. It is as if we were looking at a cubist painting by Picasso or Juan Gris, in which different perspectives, the past and the present, the here and the there, are represented simultaneously, side by side, and taken in with a single glance.

Michael Rothberg has described a similarly inclusive, all-embracing glance in relation to W.E.B. Du Bois's visit to the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto in 1949, as registered in his article "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto" (1952). His response, Rothberg suggests, provides both "an example and method for conceptualizing memory beyond the logic of competition" (2009, 114). Du Bois's visits to the ruins prompt a theoretical revision of his formulation of the color line, as he explicitly grapples with material and conceptual lines that both hold together and separate different histories and "varieties of racial terror" (115). I do not have the

space here to delve into Rothberg's careful analysis, but his reading of Du Bois's reaction to the Holocaust Memorial is worth noting with some detail. The controversial monument by Nathan Rapaport, Rothberg ventures, appealed to Du Bois because of its very "Du Bosian" form, which allows for "a kind of double consciousness" (128). The double-sided monument offers a stark opposition between images of universalizing heroism on the one side—with emerging bronze figures representing the fighters of the ghetto uprising—and the specific suffering of the Jews on the other—a bas-relief depicting a "train of huddled figures herded toward their deaths by barely visible Nazi soldiers" (128). The monument was harshly criticized particularly because its dominant "universalizing Socialist dimension" (128) risked suppressing the particularity of the Jewish experience within the memory of the Shoah. Yet, as Rothberg argues, it is precisely the double-sided form of the monument, which does not favor easy synthesis, that allows for non-appropriative but inclusive or co-operative readings, like Dubois's, that elude the same universal/particular dichotomy Whitehead grapples with.

To be clear, I am not claiming a perfect coincidence between Whitehead's novel and Dubois's take on the Rapoport monument. They are rather somewhat opposites: the latter contains a veritable split, an opposition between two different sides that cannot be observed simultaneously, while the former feeds on the juxtaposition of different planes that overlap, indeed allowing for simultaneous perception. Yet, although seemingly antithetical, each case discourages synthesis in its own way; each shows a different possibility for the reception of the Holocaust that eschews both universalism and uniqueness. And both, on the other hand, might be seen as articulations of multidirectional memory, as they provide, to borrow from Rothberg, "a point of intersection from which to remap the seemingly divergent genealogies of Holocaust memory and the global color line" (114). For Du Bois, the sight of the Warsaw ghetto brought about "not so much clear understanding of the Jewish problem . . . as . . . a real and more complete understanding of the Negro problem" (qtd. Rothberg 2009, 116). Far from the conflation of the two "problems," his reading both of the ghetto and of the Rapoport monument combines, Rothberg argues, "a recognition of the specificity of the Jewish catastrophe . . . and a broad understanding of how that history forms part of a larger path of destruction premised on an unusually virulent biopolitical vision of racial segregation" (129).

The Underground Railroad, I argue, aspires to a similar kind of "broad understanding." In Whitehead's novel, that "larger path of destruction" is traversed by train: a literal railroad that overturns the metaphorical "train of life"

the underground railroad was supposed to be. Moreover, by not sticking to the historical past, as Matthew Dischinger argues, "the novel presents an ahistorical but still faithful admixture of 'different forms of racial hysteria' that, in their devastating accumulation, clarify rather than obscure, histories of racism and imperial violence in the U.S" (2017, 83-4)—and, I would add, beyond.

However, I want to argue that the kind of multidirectional memory that Whitehead's counterfactual "states of possibility" enable has a precise political goal. How may, in other words, the memory of the Shoah foster a more complete understanding of the "racial hysteria" in the U.S., from nineteenth century slavery on? By having his protagonist witness or experience anachronistic medical experiments, lynchings, and other racial horrors that feel at once preposterous and appropriate; anachronistic and plausible, Whitehead wittingly discloses multiple connections and continuities (between slavery, Jim Crow laws, White Supremacism, and the Nazi genocide)—connections that the American unconscious would rather keep repressed. In this way, Whitehead's literal train effects an ultimate reversal. Neo-slave narratives and stories of the underground railroad, so popular today, make room for benevolent white abolitionists and heroic black runaways, thus circumscribing the responsibility for the atrocities of slavery to cruel slaveholders and pitiless slave catchers. As Kathryn Schultz claims, they have the soothing effect of "assuag[ing] our conscience," providing a "comparatively comfortable place" (Qtd. Dubek 2018, 69) from which to look at a profoundly uncomfortable and disturbing past of institutionalized racial oppression. By literalizing the abolitionist trope and seizing on its Holocaust-era iconicity, Whitehead's tale of a slave's flight to freedom disallows that comforting effect.

Talking about the ending of his monumental documentary *Shoah,* Claude Lanzmann remarked:

> I did not have the moral right to give a happy ending to this story. When does the Holocaust really end? Did it end the last days of the war? Did it end with the creation of the State of Israel? No. It still goes on. These events are of such magnitude, of such scope that they have never stopped developing their consequences . . . When I really had to conclude I decided that I did not have the right to do it . . . And I decided that the last image of the film would be a train, and endlessly rolling . . . train. (Qtd. Levine 2002, 318)

That endless rolling of the train, as Michael Levine notes, stresses the way "the Shoah outlives its apparent end" (318). In Lanzmann's work, as well as in much of Holocaust memorialization, trains and railway cars have become, as

Baruch Stier puts it, "literal vehicles of suffering transformed into vehicles of memory" (2015, 40). Colson Whitehead re-literalizes that same image to complicate the straightforward, linear tracks of memory: as if they could reach back to the past and spread sideways, connecting diverse histories and peoples. Unlike Lanzmann's *Shoah*, *The Underground Railroad* does have some kind of ending—not 'happy,' but mildly hopeful. After witnessing unspeakable horrors, Cora now goes West, where she might, perhaps, discover new "states of possibility." She is now traveling by horse wagon, not by train.

Bibliography

Dischinger, Matthew. 2017. "States of Possibility in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*." In *The Global South*, Vol. 11, no. 1, 82-99.

Dubek, Laura. 2018. "'Fight for It': The Twenty-First-Century Underground Railroad." In *The Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 68-79.

Huehls, Mitchum. 2016. *After Critique. Twenty-First Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age.* New York: Oxford UP.

Konstantinou, Lee. 2017. "Critique Has Its Uses." In *American Book Review,* Vol 38, No. 5, 15-18.

Landsberg, Alison. 2004. *Prosthetic Memory. The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture.* New York: Columbia UP.

Levine, Michael G. 2002. "Necessary Stains: Spiegelman's *MAUS* and the Bleeding of History." *American Imago* Vol. 59, No. 3, 317-41.

Rothberg, Michael. 2009. *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization.* Stanford: Stanford UP.

Spiegelman, Art. 2003. *The Complete MAUS*. London: Penguin Books.

Stier, Baruch. 2015. *Holocaust Icons: Symbolizing the Shoah in History and Memory.* New Brunswick: Rutgers UP.

Whitehead, Colson. 2016a. "Colson Whitehead's *Underground Railroad* is a Literal Train to Freedom." Radio Interview with Terry Gross. *Fresh Air*, 8 August 2016. https://www.npr.org/2016/08/08/489168232/colson-whiteheads-underground-railroad-is-a-literal-train-to-freedom?t=1555262475189

Whitehead, Colson. 2016b. "Colson Whitehead on Writing, Slavery, and the True Origins of America." Interview with Jason Parham. *The Fader*, 17 August 2016. https://www.thefader.com/2016/08/17/colson-whitehead-the-underground-railroad-interview

Whitehead, Colson. 2017. *The Underground Railroad*. London: Fleet.

Pilar Martinez Benedi is a research fellow in American literature at the University of L'Aquila. She has presented her work at MLA and several International Melville Conferences. Her first book, *The Insuperability of Sensation,* on literature and embodied cognition, was published in 2018. Her work has appeared or will appear in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies*, and *Rethinking Ahab: Melville and the Materialist Turn*.

statuS Quaestionis
language text culture

Nicola Paladin
Università degli Studi "G. D'Annunzio" di Chieti-Pescara

A Future-Oriented Past: Deictic Reformulations of WWII in Contemporary War Comics

Abstract

In recent years, the representation of the Second World War in US pop culture has undergone a radical transformation, especially in war comics. The conflict has indeed ceased to be depicted only in accurate historical reconstructions or on survivors' personal memories: several recent World War Two comics memorialize historical events only up to a certain point, beyond which they reinterpret history and envision a hypothetical future staged on World War Two but inspired by contemporary elements and preoccupations. In light of this transformation, this essay will demonstrate how one of the main products of post-generational comics about World War Two is a representational mode originated from a multi-layered imagination of the war itself, rooted in historical records but contaminated by post-Cold War era cultural tropes. This examination transcends Marianne Hirsch's notion of postmemory as strictly activated within familial bonds, but it implies the transfer of World War Two collective memory to a post-generation (broadly intended) of people "who were not actually there." I will focus on Garth Ennis' miniseries *Bloody Mary* (1996), and Kieron Gillen's ongoing series, titled *Über* (2013-present). Both texts envision dystopian contemporary societies torn apart by World War Two, which did not end in 1945 but continued into the 21st century, and both narratives present elements pertaining to the official memory, as well as on a constellation of components which are part of a contemporary and deictic war imagination.

Within the universe of war comics, the Second World War certainly constitutes the most represented conflict of Western culture. The bulk of "war comics" was produced during the second half of the 1950s and the expression encompasses all the graphic anthologies about war, whose content was dominated by stories set in the various fronts of the Second World War. Scholars have debated about the several reasons that can possibly explain the density with which the Second World War has characterized graphic narratives, especially in the US comics culture (see Dauber 2006 and Scott 2007). In particular, the war acquired the aura of a crusade against the evil (as Dwight D. Eisenhower defined it) – visually and ethically connoted – which soon became a palimpsest that could be readapted to other contexts, such as the Cold War. As Jacques R. Pauwels observes, the Second

World War was immediately depicted in the US public discourse as the good war as well as that of the "Greatest Generation," particularly through the mediation of Hollywood: "The countless popular war movies produced by Tinseltown in the fifties and sixties, such as the D-Day epic *The Longest Day*, propagated in a far from subtle yet very effective way the idea that an idealist USA had gone to war in order to restore freedom and justice in Europe and just about everywhere in the world" (2015, 19-20). Although Pauwles contends that the reasons that fostered the US struggle in the Second World War were by no means idealistic nor ideological, he also acknowledges the rhetorical strength of the narrative within which the war effort was encapsulated, which he defines as national mythology:

> The Second World War was also a good war in the sense that it was fought against 'an enemy of unspeakable evil,' as Howard Zinn has put it. That enemy was fascism in general and its German version, Nazism, in particular – an ideology and a system which will forever remain associated with oppression at home, with aggression abroad, with horrible war crimes, and with genocide, a Moloch to which millions of people fell victim in relatively few years. A war against such an evil was necessarily a good war. (2002, 267-268)

Michael C.C. Adams provides a similar perspective and elaborates a sharpened argument as he does not dwell on the notion of a mythology of the Second World War, but more overtly problematizes such a master narrative as a "mythologized version of the era" which he identifies as the result of "a complex period of history [that] became simplified into the popular story of the Best War Ever" (1994, 15). According to Adams, the moral range of such a representative mode solidified to the point of becoming paradigmatic, as he claims that "For generations of Americans, World War II has been the historical reference point that transformed and defined the future path of their country" (1994, 13).

The purpose of this essay is to examine the progressive transformation of the narrative modalities through which the mythology of the Second World War has interpolated the US popular culture along the "future path" of the nation not so much in the first few decades after the conflict, as much as in the forms of popular representation of the last thirty years. Despite the vastity of examples that have been produced recently,[1] the present analysis will be limited to two cases that are

[1] For example, Garth Ennis' *Adventures of the Rifle Brigade* (1990), Mike Mignola's *Hellboy* (1993), Chuck Dixon's *Team Zero* (2006), or Ted Nomura's *Dictators of the Twentieth Century* (2006). Moreover, several war comic sagas that had been running during the 1960s and 1970s have been recently renewed, such as Garth Ennis' *War Stories* (2001), illustrated by numerous artists including Dave Gibbons, Frank Marraffino's *The Haunted Tank* (2007), and *Battlefield* (2008) also by Garth Ennis, who, in 2016, wrote *Dreaming Eagles* (illustrated by Simon

believed significant because they constitute two among the latest evolutionary stages of the cultural consolidation of World War Two: *Bloody Mary*, written by Garth Ennis and illustrated by Carlos Ezquerra, published in 1996, and *Über* and *Über Invasion* written by Kieron Gillen and illustrated by Caanan White, published from 2013 and ongoing.

The abundance of narrative tropes that emerged in the decades that followed the Second World War from the popular imaginary soon started to fuel new forms of representation of the conflict and to contaminate the representation of other wars through the lenses of the Second World War. Along with its exceptional ethic status[2] in collective memory, the Second World War acquired the traits of a narrative paradigm that World War One had only partially embodied before the break out of the former: for example, as Ross J. Wilson argues, in England "the popular memory of the war, as represented in political cartoons, is far more than a simple reiteration of clichés. Indeed, these representations use references to the events of 1914 - 1918 to create new meanings by framing contemporary social and political debates far removed from the conflict itself" (2015, 84), a dynamic which transpired also among US cartoonists, such as Will Eisner. Yet, World War One as a cultural paradigm was replaced by the following war, whose atrocities, ideological stances, and visuality showed a stronger endurance and adaptability to Western narratives of the 20th century.[3]

In fact, the imaginative potential that the Second World War has generated on the Western popular culture has been such that the conflict has recently become the model through which even World War One has been remediated. One of the most evident examples of this transformation, provided by popular mass culture, can be identified in Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* (2017). The movie shows the genesis of the heroine and establishes a connection between her character and the rest of the narrative universe she belongs to. Soon after encountering her first human being, Amazon princess Diana is soon taken to the trenches of the French front where she intends to find and fight Ares, the god of

Coleby). A very recent partial reformulation of a classic of war comics is James Robinson and Greg Hinkle's reboot of *Airboy* (2017).

[2] Certainly, the Vietnam War produced a similar effect on other conflicts during the second half of the 20th century – Stefano Rosso observes how Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998) can be interpreted as the effect of the Vietnamization of the Second World War. However, the unequivocal moral status of the war to Nazism has always remained a crystallized feature of its representations, as opposed to several texts and films about Vietnam, which contend the legitimacy of the war in Indochina.

[3] Quite interestingly, Donald E. Pease identifies the immediate aftermath of the Second World War as the beginning of what he defines as the "new American exceptionalism" (Pease 2009).

war, considering him responsible for the World conflict. Although the historical framework of the film is clarified from the very beginning, several narrative tropes strike the viewer as they deliberately emerge from a World War Two-related culture. This presence is particularly evident in two of the villains, scientist Dr. Isabel Maru (her alter ego is Doctor Poison), and German General Erich Ludendorff.[4] The latter is a high-rank officer who aspires at the ultimate German victory in the war, and to do so, he encourages the scientist to develop a secret weapon that is capable of destroying the Allies: doctor Maru works on a deadly mustard gas with which to bomb the enemy's trenches. She also provides Ludendorff with a particular toxin that is able to enhance temporarily his human body and transform him into an experimental *Übermensch*. These tropes are evidently inspired by classic representations of the Second World War produced from the 1940s and in the following decades: on this note, *Captain America* could be considered as one of the most comprehensive examples, considering the way it portrays science and enhanced humans, not only iconic Steve Rogers but also his nemesis, Red Skull.

As episodic as it may seem, *Wonder Woman* constitutes one of the latest reformulations of the Second World War in US pop culture and it is the peak of a long, recent tradition that has vehemently re-emerged within the cinematic field, which encompasses a wide variety of films about the conflict such as *The Pianist* (2002), *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006), *Inglorious Bastards* (2009), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), *Fury* and *Unbroken* (2014), *Dunkirk* (2017), and several others.

Comics and graphic narratives do not differ from this trend, in fact, the history of comics about World War Two is articulated and divisible in different stages (moving from *The Spirit*, *Captain America*, *Superman*, to Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, for example), each of which has contributed to enrich a wide imaginary of the conflict, whose relevance continues to contaminate and define new graphic narratives, through features that re-emerge, distorted or modified according to the new cultural chronological context. In this sense, the intertwining of the representation of World War Two and the history of US comics is generational: the first wave of war comics was oftentimes produced by

[4] The character results as a highly fictionalized version of Erich Friederich Wilhelm Ludendorff (1865-1837), German general in the World War One and, later on, one of the theorists of the "Stab-in-the-back doctrine," which imputed the defeat of the German Reich to an internal enemy of the nation, such as Marxists and Jews. In the first volume of his groundbreaking trilogy, *Berlin: City of Stones* (2000), Jason Lutes portrays postwar Germany and the socio-economic environment in which this kind of narratives quickly spread out, leading to the establishment of the Nazi Party.

cartoonists that had a direct experience of the conflict, especially on the front,[5] while the second and more complex phase of representation of the war – epitomized by Spiegelman – was depicted by the so-called generation after, that is, by the sons and daughters of people that had experienced the conflict directly. Yet, the paradigmatic and mythic narrative of World War Two has created the conditions for an expansion of the imagination and imagery that has trespassed the borders of the postmemorial generation and flowed into a third-generational level of remediation and reinvention.

The existence of an immense archive of recent comics about World War Two leads to a set of inevitably rhetorical questions: is World War Two still relevant? How can its persistence be explained in contemporary pop culture? Should World War Two still be considered as the narrative and cultural war model for the twenty-first century? Why has World War Two not been supplanted by more contemporary and longer wars, such as the Cold War or the War on Terror? On the one hand, temporal distance determines a broader understanding of the historical events and their cultural, political, and ethical repercussions on the Western culture; on the other hand, for the atrocities that were perpetrated (not only the Holocaust but also the explosion of the first two atomic bombs), World War Two represents a unique turning point of the contemporary age. For these generic reasons and several more, one of the main products of contemporary media – particularly of comics – about World War Two is a mode of representation more than a model, which is the result of a multi-layered imagination of the war, rooted in historical records and contaminated and re-mediated by post-generational cultural tropes. This claim cannot prescind from Marianne Hirsch's well-known notion of postmemory, however, the reading here proposed will attempt to transcend the mechanism of a post-generational relation to the events, strictly activated within familial bonds, and focus instead on a transverse leaking of the World War Two collective memory to a generation beyond the generation after, composed of people "who were not actually there" (Hirsch 2012, 3), and who are not related to people who were actually there.

In light of the transversality that this essay's standpoint requires, Alison Landsberg's notion of prosthetic memory seems to be preferable for the present debate: in particular, World War Two will be discussed in contemporary war comics as the result of a "new form of cultural memory" which emerges "at the interface between a persona and a historical narrative of the past." What

[5] For example, Jack Kirby participated in the liberation of a concentration camp and many other cartoonists served in the US army, such as Bernie Klein, who died at war, and Bill Everett, one of the creators of *Daredevil*. See Nicholas Yanes 2009.

Landsberg means is that a "person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event which he or she did not live" (2004, 2). Landsberg also stresses the fundamental contribution that pop culture media provide to this process: "Mass culture makes particular memories more widely available so that people who have no 'natural' claim to them might nevertheless incorporate them into their own archive of experience" (2004, 9). Or, to put it differently,[6] "the turn to mass culture [...] has made what was once considered a group's private memory available to a much broader public. In this process, memories have ceased to belong exclusively to a particular group and instead have become part of a common public domain" (2004, 11). The broadening of this domain interests both temporal and spatial coordinates, a reason that justifies the choice of targeting two "third-generational" World War Two comics (published from the 1990s on), produced by non-American cartoonists, outside from any logic of cultural and national mystification of World War Two.

Although with some differences, Ennis' and Gillen's sagas propose two different reformulations of the main narrative tropes that had emerged from the popular imagination of the Second World War. Garth Ennis' *Bloody Mary* is a four-issue series and it narrates a story set in a dystopic 1999 in which the Second World War starts again: "This time, the Franco-German-dominated community became a superstate" and England joined once again "The United States and once again survives a battle of Britain" (Ennis 1996, 10). Weaponry evolved so much in both parties that war has determined a status of belligerent balance, and the story starts presenting both parties' race for a new form of weapon, a parasite that is capable of transforming a human body into a stronger and more enduring organism whose structure is human but whose nervous system is animal. In this way, not only are the human hosts stronger, but their nervous system prevents them from feeling physical pain. Mary is a US secret agent whose mission is to prevent the Nazi superstate's acquisition of the parasite, which would grant them military supremacy over the Allies and the ultimate victory in the conflict. The only existing examples are owned by Anderton, a mercenary working for the Nazis, and a former member of a task force that Mary herself had been part of. After she had left the squad, Anderton killed her parents. Soon enough, Bloody

[6] Concerning graphic narratives, Ross J. Wilson goes in a similar direction and argues that "Memory in this assessment is mediated, but this is done by agents who use monuments, memorials, commemorative practices, novels, film, and theatre as vehicles or devices for expression, not as directives for comprehension" (2015, 87).

Mary is required to find the parasites and discovers Anderton's position, finally getting the chance to take her revenge.

2013 Kieron Gillen's *Über* and *Über Invasion* present a very similar narrative scenario, yet they are set in an alternative 1945, that is, not in a different dystopic future but in an alternate past. The story begins as the Third Reich was historically about to capitulate to the Allies, when a secret weapon was discovered: a chemical formula that was able to enhance some chosen human beings called "battleships," to the point of making them not immortal nor invulnerable, but capable of massively killing entire armies or destroying any sort of weapons. The saga relates about a spy who succeeds in sneaking the formula to the Allies, who in turn start working on their own battleships, continuing the war on a different level of hostility where the balance of power is restored, at least until *Über Invasion*, which envisions a German invasion of the United States, starting with the destruction of Washington D.C.

Two of the fundamental common elements that characterize *Bloody Mary* and *Über* are their strong focus on race and biology combined with weaponry. In both storylines race and the principle of supremacy between certain kinds of human beings on others tend to play the most significant part. The perpetual quest for a superior form of humans constitutes *per se* a form of transposition and remediation of Hitler's catastrophic vision of a purely Aryan German Reich, free from any contamination deriving from different ethnicities. In both graphic narratives, the implications of this superiority affect the military dimension: to have the best (in)humans means to win the war. Such a narrative choice does not imply any considerable change from some of the most well-known American comics, both as war comics and golden age comics are concerned. Quite the contrary: the centrality of physical (and moral) superiority constitutes part of a tradition along the history of American comics and originated in the first half of the 20th century through eugenics, when, starting after World War One, "Physical weakness was perceived as not only unpatriotic but also as a sign of cowardice" (Hack 2009, 80): the most famous superheroes of the Marvel universe and some of the DC one are non-humans (for example, Superman and Wonder Woman) or metahumans (such as Captain America, the X-Men – also defined as enhanced humans –, Hulk, ect.), and the majority of them were employed as

weapons either against Nazi Germany[7] or the Soviet Union.[8] In this sense, the proximity between very recent graphic narratives and the tradition is quite self-evident; what seems to require further investigation is rather their operational mechanism: World War Two functions as a deictic, namely as an element whose nuclear meanings and sense remain unaltered but which are able to adapt to a different narrative and historical frame and a different target context so as to change accordingly. In other terms, what I contend here is the impossibility for contemporary-pop-culture representations of the Second World War not to be influenced by the cultural environment in which they are produced. This condition triggers two effects on the cultural meaning of World War Two in the third generational age: first the extraction of its original narratives from its original contexts, and, second, their representation into different cultural frames which produces the infiltration of new elements inspired by different contingencies that affect the already existing collective and universal "physical and mental landscapes" of the war (Kaplan 2011, 1).

One of the most evident examples of this extraction can be recognized in the trope of the "secret weapon," which is present and evident in both the works here analyzed. Historically, being one of the first large-scale wars, World War One had functioned as a cultural paradigm, considering that it provided the occasion for the debut of several new weapons (tanks, flamethrowers, gas, etc.). However, grounded on this template trope, the cultural heritage of the Second World War built a stronger paradigm of the secret weapon: the atomic bomb, which both the United States and Germany had worked on in order to synthesize and win the war. *Bloody Mary* offers a clear example of the extraction process of a symbolic trope of World War Two, and its infiltration into a new scenario: in the very beginning of the mini-series, an atomic bomb is reported to have exploded in Birmingham, thus ending the Second Battle of England, as we read "Birmingham paid the price" (Ennis 1996, 11). The image simply shows a huge mushroom cloud that dominates the panel, without other significant details; interestingly enough,

[7] As Brian E. Hack argues, "As it was well-known that the creation of the 'superman' [...] was on the agenda of the Third Reich, this preemptive plan to create an American counterpart begs the questions of how the creation of [...] an army of super-soldiers differed philosophically and ethically from the Nazi program" (2009, 82).

[8] This is particularly characteristic of Captain America. Steve Rogers' alter ego was genetically created as a weapon to be deployed against the Nazis. However, once World War Two finished, the propagandist trajectory entered a decline due to the lack of an enemy to fight, and Cap's mission was interrupted as he fell in the North Atlantic Ocean and remained frozen. From the late 1940s to the early 1950s, Captain America was "rebooted" and re-deployed against a new enemy of America, communism. However, this revival was not as successful as the first version of the character (Scott 2007, Walton 2009, and Di Paolo 2011).

no explicit mention of the atomic bomb is provided. Combined with a veiled tagline, the visual void only exposes the reader to the aura of the event. The cause of this authorial choice might be dual: on the one hand, the explosion is one of the preparatory components of the narrative framework. On the other hand, the choice may be due to the cultural panorama of the epoch in which the series was published: being released few years after the end of the Cold War, it could be inferred that the author considers the popular awareness of the risk of an atomic war as standardized and a "normal" part of the order of things in a bipolar world. In other terms, the endemic fear of atomic warfare that had permeated Western culture before the end of the Cold War ends up obliterated and does not constitute a taboo as before, to the point that its reference can only be alluded to and its significance completed by the reader through the process that Scott McCloud famously defines as "closure" (1993, 63).

Yet, despite its content, the narrative function of the secret weapon remains untouched. The authorial silence about the atomic bomb and the focus on new biological weapons reflect the adaptation of a well-known pattern to the different epoch in which the comics are produced. Ennis transposes the fear of a new weapon whose potential and consequences are unknown into a new cultural moment, namely concentrating on biological threats that have become more and more urgent after the conclusion of the Cold War era.[9] The racial aspect follows a similar pattern: if, traditionally, superheroes and enhanced humans came from other planets, or were providential results of mistakes (Hack 2009) – probably with the exception of Captain America, whose genesis was premeditated (Kripal 2011 and Fawaz 2016) – in *Bloody Mary* and *Über* superhumans are the scope of large scale scientific experiments that completely lack any moral component but only respond to the military logic. In *Über*, the Nazi officer in charge of the scientific warfare explicitly claims that it had been necessary to sacrifice thousands of test subjects before finding one that was able to host the formula. In parallel, when the secret formula sneaks to the Allies, large scale experimentation starts and only randomly the first subject fit to become a "battleship" is found, without showing a particular predisposition – biological nor moral – for the enhancement process.

Garth Ennis explicitly establishes a connection between biology and weaponry during the final confrontation between Bloody Mary and her enemy, Anderton, both enhanced by the parasite. Mary, who had swallowed a parasite

[9] In particular, see Wheelis, Rósza, and Dando 2006, and Smith 2014.

only in order to be able to fight Anderton, asks information about the organism. Anderton explains that:

> The Chinese called it the Blood Dragon. [...] It's a kind of biological supercharger. It was designed to keep its host alive [...]. It grows a new nervous system alongside that of the host – but one that can instantly adapt to loss of tissue, or even limbs. It produces vast quantities of adrenaline and oxygen for the host body, feeding with the organs which thus become redundant [...]. It even has a basic brain in case the host loses theirs. Motor functions and even partial sentience will remain. His body it occupies will effectively never die. (Ennis 1996, 84)

Right after the scientific description of the Blood Dragon, Anderton exclaims, "It's a War-Winner" (1996, 85). Although the storyline of Mary's revenge interlaces with the broader picture of the war she is fighting, the personal trajectory tends to maintain a dominant position in the textual economy of the mini-series.

The relationship between biological secret weapons and traditional military materiel constitutes one of the largest narrative components that characterize Gillen's saga. In issue #1, when scientist-spy Stephanie is crossing the German lines in order to give the secret formula to the Allies, she is escorted by a Panzermensh (an enhanced human, weaker than a battleship) who is not aware of the imminent treason; as they talk, he asks "So is the problem military or to do with the science?" (Gillen 2013a, 16), precisely locating the center of the saga over the relationship between weaponry and biology. The entire military dimension of *Über* simply stages a war based on the superiority of some weapons (Panzermensch over "normal" humans, or Battleships over Panzermensch). Whereas the first few issues focus on the German side, from issues #4 and #5, the Anglo-American side of the war is presented. Particularly, in issue #5, a British officer instructs a regiment of English equivalent to Panzermensch about how to fight and warns them in case they met battleships, such as Sieglinde, the only woman battleship, and he claims: "Battleship Sieglinde is beyond your capabilities. If she engages, retreat, immediately" (2013d, 8). This example of the military logic provided by *Über* also constitutes an example of the function of palimpsest that World War Two plays in second and third-generational comics: the superiority of battleships can be interpreted as an alternative transposition of several other products of the relationship between weaponry and science that historically characterized the conflict. To put it simply, the British officer's command to retreat in front of a more powerful weapon reminds of instructions that American Sherman tank crews were given in case they encountered a

German Tiger Panzer, or when American P-40 aircrafts confronted German Messerschmitts or Japanese Zeros, in both cases, higher class military machinery.[10]

In narrative terms, both *Bloody Mary* and *Über* stage a common trope that is structured on the traditional template of previous World War Two comics as part of the Western literary tradition (from epic poetry onward), the duel. Just as Golden Age superhero comics depicted the opposition between heroes and their nemesis, so contemporary representations of World War Two tend to isolate symbolic models in the struggle between the good and the evil; both world wars are condensed in a binary representative structure numerically minimized against the background of two global conflicts. Whereas in *Bloody Mary* the war is intertwined with the subplot of personal revenge, in *Über* the unicity of the battleships (three supersoldiers on the German side and two on the American one) responds both to narrative and ideological logics: Kieron Gillen and Caanan White stage a total war and dedicate several panels to the representation of a large number of soldiers which require personifications in order to construct the reader's involvement. In addition to that, this form of reduction of protagonists reflects the unicity that the superhuman nature implies. However, both the narrative and ideological aspects show a prosecution of the dominant tradition of the American War comics.[11]

In conclusion, Garth Ennis and Kieron Gillen provide examples that convey a representation of the past which is bluntly future-oriented, namely, built on narrative details that belong to different future epochs but that are structured on a narrative template deeply rooted in the original historical and cultural scenario. In the light of these contemporary reformulations of World War Two, one could question whether the original conflict is postponed in "days of future past," or contemporary elements are anticipated into a past-oriented future. Clearly enough, the answer might encompass both readings, considering that elements from the future are able to modify the representation of World War Two and, at

[10] The supremacy of the German military manufacturing has provided notable content for popular culture representations of the Second World War, again in cinema, where the imbalance of power offers the possibility for a narrative upgrade of the protagonists' mission: that is the case of Michael Bay's *Pearl Harbor* (2001), Anthony Hemingway's *Red Tails* (2012), and David Ayer's *Fury* (2014). On the military efficiency of the German army, see Thomas 2002 and Hull 2005. A significant example in war comics was also written by Garth Ennis: *Dreaming Eagles* (2016), relating to the 332nd Expeditionary Operations Group – also known as the Tuskegee Airmen (as in Anthony Hemingway's film).

[11] Very few famous cases exist in which this binary scheme is disrupted within a military framework, that is, where the individual is subordinate to a dehumanized representation of the war front and they both depict the French front during World War One: Jacques Tardi's *It Was the War of the Trenches* (1993) and Joe Sacco's *The Great War* (2014).

the same time, World War Two can function as an adequate narrative stage where to project future historical preoccupations.

The template mode that characterizes several re-interpretations of the Second World War until very recent episodes constitutes the most relevant aspect in the present discourse: the fact that a narrative model has underlain war graphic narratives for more than fifty years indicates the unique nature of the conflict in the way it has been culturally recorded, circulated and acquired by multi-generational audiences. The evocative power of this trajectory does not have equals in the representation of any other conflict, not even World War One, whose paradigm was, in fact, overcome soon after the breakout of World War Two. For this reason, the present essay has intended to target and examine the shadow of the Second World War in its third-generational prosthetic memorial reformulations. Although both Ennis and Gillen's works seem to be constructed on the same textual and partially historical foundations, the tropes they most consistently resort to in order to develop their cultural infiltrations are the most oblique ones rather than those that contributed to strengthening the mythological status of the conflict.

Due to their multifaceted angulations, the trope of the secret weapon as well as the ethnic element thoroughly problematize any possible contemporary reinvention of World War Two: even when explicitly referring to historical events, both narrative aspects show their non-univocal nature and, as a consequence, they do not reflect any idealist myth of the war, but rather universalize and readapt to different historical contexts a critical understanding of what the mythology of the Second World War has been. According to Pauwels, victors "certainly did not emerge with clean hands from this "crusade" against fascism, as the names Dresden, Katyn, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki remind us" (2002, 268). Certainly, both sagas depict the Nazis as "an enemy of unspeakable evil" (Zinn 1980, 382), but their critical approach does not look as "systematically sanitized," as Paul Fussell would put it (1989, 267), but consistently perceivable as they controvert the Manichean polarization between Good and Evil which encrusts the dominant discourses on the Second World War in the Western culture.

Bibliography

Adams, Michael C.C. 1994. *The Best War Ever. American and World War II*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Dauber, Jeremy. 2006. "Comic Books, Tragic Stories: Will Eisner's American Jewish History." *AJS Review* Vol. 30, no. 3: 277-304.

Di Paolo, Marc. 2011. *War, Politics, and Superheroes. Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film*. Jefferson: McFarland and Company.

Ennis, Garth, and Carlos Ezquerra. 1996. *Bloody Mary #1*, Burbank: DC Comics.

Ennis, Garth, and Carlos Ezquerra. 1997. *Bloody Mary #2*, Burbank: DC Comics.

Fawaz, Ramzi. *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics*. New York: New York University Press.

Fussell, Paul. 1989. *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gillen, Kieron and Caanan White. 2013a. *Über #1.* Rantoul: Avatar Press.

Gillen, Kieron and Caanan White. 2013b. *Über #2.* Rantoul: Avatar Press.

Gillen, Kieron and Caanan White. 2013c. *Über #4.* Rantoul: Avatar Press.

Gillen, Kieron and Caanan White. 2013d. *Über #5*. Rantoul: Avatar Press.

Hack, Brian E. 2009. "Weakness is a Crime. Captain America and the Eugenic Ideal in Early-Twentieth Century America." In *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero*, edited by Robert G. Weiner, 79-89. Jefferson: McFarland & Company.

Hirsch, Marianne. 2012. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hull, Isabel V. 2005. *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Kaplan, Brett Ashley. 2011. *Landscapes of Holocaust Postmemory*. New York: Routledge.

Landsberg, Alison. 2004. *Prosthetic Memory. The transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lury, Celia. 2014. *Prosthetic Culture: Photography, Memory, and Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Kripal, Jeffrey J. 2011. *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

McCloud, Scott. 1993. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Northampton: Kitchen Sink Press.

Pauwsels, Jacques R. 2002. *The Myth of the Good War. America in the Second World War*. Toronto: James Lorimer & Company Ltd. Publishers.

Pease, Donald E. 2009. *The New American Exceptionalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Rose, Kenneth D. 2008. *Myth and the Greatest Generation: A Social History of Americans in World War II*. New York: Routledge.

Scott, Cord. 2007. "Written in Red, White, and Blue: A Comparison of Comic Book Propaganda from World War II and September 11." *The Journal of Popular Culture* Vol. 40, no. 2: 325-343.

Smith, Frank L. 2014. *American Biodefense. How Dangerous Ideas about Biological Weapons Shape National Security*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Thomas, Nigel. 2002. *The German Army in World War Two*. Oxford: Osprey.

Walton, David. 2009. "'Captain America Must Die.' The Many Afterlives of Steve Rogers," in *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero*, edited by Robert G. Weiner, 160-175. Jefferson: McFarland & Company.

Wheelis, Mark, Lajos Rósza, and Malcolm Dando. 2006. *Deadly Cultures. Biological Weapons since 1945*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

White, Mark D. 2014. *The Virtues of Captain America. Modern-Day Lessons on Character from a World War II Superhero*. Malden: Wiley Blackwell.

Wilson, Ross J. 2015. "The past and present war. Political Cartoons and Memory of the First World War in Britain." *European Comic Art* vol. 8, no. 2: 83-102.

Yanes, Nicholas. 2009. "Graphic Imagery: Jewish American Comic Book Creators' of Class, Race, Patriotism and the Birth of the Good Captain." In *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero*, edited by Robert G. Weiner, 53-65. Jefferson: McFarland & Company.

Zinn, Howard. 1980. *People's History of the United States: 1942 – present*. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers.

Nicola Paladin teaches Anglo-American literature at the University "G. D'Annunzio" Chieti-Pescara. He holds a Ph.D. from "Sapienza" University of Rome and was a visiting scholar at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His research interests include Early and 19th century American literature and War studies. He has published essays on Thomas Paine, Hugh H. Brackenridge, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville among others. He is currently working on a book on the multilayered imaginary of the American Revolution in 19th century US literature.

statuS Quaestionis
language text culture

Alice Balestrino
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

"A Thousand of Kaleidoscopic Possibilities." Postmemorial Agency in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes*

Abstract

This article focuses on Jonathan Safran Foer's book-sculpture *Tree of Codes* (2010) as a postmemorial work formally intertextual and substantially metaliterary. In particular, it investigates the conundrum of the author's and the reader's generative agency within a postmemorial framework by dwelling on the highly experimental format of the book. *Tree of Codes* is the result of Foer's performative approach to Bruno Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles,* from which the author carved out words, sentences and even whole pages in order to let a new text surface. The cut off pieces left material voids in the pages, empty rectangles displaying the intrinsic "extra-vacancy" of postmemorial narratives and producing a sense of bewilderment in the reader. As a consequence, readers seem to be invited to complement the author's generative act with their interpretive potential, in "a thousand of kaleidoscopic possibilities" to inhabit the empty spaces, the vacancies of the postmemorial endeavor.

"The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million – a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together [...]" (James 2004, 16). With these words, in the Author's Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), Henry James conceives of the narrator's viewpoint – or, what he calls the "posted presence of the watcher" on the "spreading field" (14) – as a "unique" and framed perspective on the novel's subject. In other words, according to James, the "human scene" can be narrated, i.e. can become part of the house of fiction, only through the distinctive mediation of the "consciousness of the artist," which James describes as an opening, although a restricted one, through which the world is seen and narrated – a window, indeed. These windows, James' articulation goes on, are "holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life," and their being indirect accesses to a subject seems to grant

their uniqueness as well as the "boundless freedom and [...] 'moral' reference" of the author (16).

The parallel intrinsic in the image of "the house of fiction" suggests the comprehension of narratives as artifacts, as cumulative and composite results of the act of writing understood as crafting. James' metaphor seems, therefore, to hint at a trait that has been subsequently defined in narratology as the synthetic dimension of literature, that is the perception, on the part of readers, of narratives as artificial constructs.[1] In this respect, some of the questions this essay sets out to investigate are: what happens to the house of fiction when the openness of the windows is physically located inside the text? In what terms are the author's generative act and the reader's interpretive potential reconceived when the overture traditionally occupied by the narrator – who, from that "posted presence," watches and then narrates the subject of choice from his or her own point of view – is repositioned inside the book, thus creating a liminal space simultaneously in and out of the narrative; a literally empty space where both the author and the reader are watchers? I will address these issues by focusing on Jonathan Safran Foer's book-sculpture *Tree of Codes* that, thanks to its highly experimental format, interestingly reflects on the author's and the reader's agency – in consonance with Umberto Eco's classical notions of *intentio auctoris* and *intentio lectoris* (Eco 1988, 154)[2] – specifically within the postmemorial discourse.

Indeed, *Tree of Codes* (published by Visual Editions in 2010) represents a literary and artistic endeavor that, I argue, allows the exercise of the postmemorial agency (on the part of both the author and the reader) because it deconstructs a narrative of the past by opening in it a number of apertures, of windows, within which new narratives and interpretations can ensue. In what follows, I will discuss the figurative and graphic mechanisms through which *Tree of Codes* takes

[1] See James Phelan's classic work (1996) on the synthetic dimension and function of characters. He distinguishes between three intents, synthetic (character as an artificial construct, e.g. Paul Auster's characters); mimetic (character as a person); thematic (character as an idea). Postmodernist literature and metafiction are key examples of how the synthetic component may stress the readers' awareness of a narrative as a construct, by betraying the mimetic illusion.

[2] "The functioning of a text (including non-verbal ones) can be explained by taking into account not only its generative process but also [...] the role performed by the addressee and (at most) the way in which the text foresees and directs this kind of interpretative cooperation" (Eco 1988, 148). Along these lines, I will resort to a semiotic, response-oriented approach that deals with the dynamics through which "an addressee, facing a linear textual manifestation, fills it up with a given meaning" (158). More to the point of my reasoning, "[a] text is a device conceived in order to produce its Model Reader [, ... who] is not the one who makes the only right conjecture. A text can foresee a Model Reader entitled to try infinite conjectures" (162), and the latter is the case with *Tree of Codes*.

to the extreme the synthetic intent of narratives and, in its transformative and performative approach towards a text, raises questions on the postmemorial act in itself. More to the point, I will posit that the practice of piercing through a narrative and of renegotiating its "eternal solidity" can be considered fundamentally postmemorial in form and substance (Foer 2002, 135). In turn, the postmemorial character may be stressed by the shattering of the mimetic illusion, and by the ontological tension between the narrative world and the actual world materialized in the "negative spaces" in the house of fiction (135). To some extent, the essence of postmemory is creating breaks in the wall of the narrative of the past in order to accommodate new perspectives.

As defined by the author himself, *Tree of Codes* is "the perfect intersection of visual arts and literature;" it is a book composed of 134 carved pages, created with the artisanal technique of the die-cutting and resulting in a text made of scattered words and rectangular holes. How were these pages carved out? Foer took Celina Wieniewska's 1963 English translation of Bruno Schulz's collection of short stories *The Street of Crocodiles* (originally published in Polish in 1934)[3] and carved out words, sentences and even whole pages from it. The cut off pieces left material voids in the pages; traces that create an aesthetically and formally unconventional narrative that brings about a sense of bewilderment in the reader.

Bruno Schulz was a Polish Jewish artist (known mainly as a writer, he was also a talented painter) who was killed in 1942 by an SS officer. In 1939 the Nazi army had invaded his hometown of Drohobycz, which is now in Ukraine, but he had decided not to flee because "he knew its streets, their houses and shops with a paralyzing intimacy;" he had resorted to remain "for the sake of the gargoylish and astonishing map his imagination had learned to draw of an invisible Drogobych contrived entirely out of language" (Ozick 1977). Much of Schulz's art got lost in the Holocaust, including the manuscript of his final novel, thought to be also his masterpiece, *The Messiah.* After the publication in English, in the 1960s, of the few works preserved (and among them *The Street of Crocodiles*), he acquired an almost "mythical status" especially in the Jewish-American community (Goldfarb 2014). From author he became a literary figure recounted or alluded to in works such as Philip Roth's *The Prague Orgy* (1985), Cynthia Ozick's *The Messiah of Stockholm* (1987), David Grossman's *See Under: Love* (1986), and Nicole Krauss' *The History of Love* (2005); Schulz, in other words,

[3] *The Street of Crocodiles* was also part of the Penguin series "Writers from the Other Europe," edited by Philip Roth from 1974 to 1989. The selection included another work by Schulz, *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass*, as well as other Holocaust-related texts, such as Tadeusz Borowski's *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*.

has been considered a sort of lost literary father to the displaced, postmemorial Jewish communities (Goldfarb 2014). Therefore, Foer situates his performative act on Schulz's corpus within a cultural comprehension of the Polish author as a trope, a symbol of the Jewish artistic richness forever lost in the Holocaust, and, in this respect, a particularly apt subject for a postmemorial enterprise.

Equally central to my analysis of *Tree of Codes* is the artistic tradition of the "book-work,"[4] epitomized by Tom Phillips' *A Humument* (1970 – 2016) – a re-elaboration of W.H. Mallock's Victorian novel *A Human Document* (1892) – along whose lines Foer works in order to conceptualize what he perceives to be the unexpressed potentiality of Schulz's art. Like *Tree of Codes, A Humument* is a mainly visual project that transforms a text through the erasure of a conspicuous part of its words; an act that results in the surfacing of a new text (out of the words left) that challenges and complements the original. The authors' lexicographical take on literature frames both *Tree of Codes* and *A Humument* within a meta-literary intent that redefines the formal structure as well as the aesthetic code of the initial work. According to Jessica Pressman, in being an "artifact rather than [...] just a medium for information transmission," *Tree of Codes* critically commemorates an important text of the past by "repurpos[ing it] in ways that focus attention not only on the particular content of the text (the data that has been lost or saved) but also on the media supporting this engagement" and, by extension, on the forms and vehicles of postmemory (97-98).

Against the background of this twofold reflection on a text connected to the canon of Holocaust literature, Foer devises a postmemorial technology that engages the memory of the past in an expressive, radical way that subverts the traditional interpretive system according to which the narrator's viewpoint assesses the meaning of a text. Indeed, presented with the breaks within the text and the breaks with conventional reading practices, the reader's agency gains a wider hermeneutic capacity and integrates and counters the author's one, in a profitable triangulation between the artist, the work and the reader/viewer. As Stewart Garrett points out with reference to conceptual book sculptures, "a recognition of the book object, in all its skewing ironies of access, can at times seem inseparable from a viewer's instinct to reconfigure in the mind's own workshop other latent book properties worthy of similar abstraction" (xix). In other words, the intellectual labor entailed by Foer's postmemorial book-work is

4 Stewart Garrett derives the concept of the "book-work" from the codex form understood as "conceptual *book art*." In his discussion, "the book-work – as material object – once denied its mediating purpose as verbal text, can only be studied for the bookwork – as conceptual labor – it performs" (xiii).

necessarily inseparable from the disconcerting materiality of the book that "make[s] its mark on imagination by passing straight through craft to idea," thus tweaking the readers "with unspoken possibilities" (xix).

The projection of "unspoken possibilities" within and through the pierced text makes *Tree of Codes* a reflective and enabling gesture that delves into the past and its heritage by "reflecting an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture." It interrogates the agency of "the generation after" in dealing with the Holocaust by means of "imaginative investment, projection, and creation," as well as of "practices of citations and supplementarity" (Hirsch 2012, 5-6). In line with book-work theory, I will focus on the form, rather than the content, of the book, by analyzing the voids created rather than the words spared, because the idiosyncratic holes inside the narrative seem to function as Barthesian *puncti* of intensity which represent "the lacerating emphasis" of the coexistence of "this will be" and "this has been," famously exemplified by the photograph of Lewis Payne waiting in his cell to be hanged, supplied with the caption "he is dead and he is going to die" (Barthes 1981, 95-97). As a matter of fact, the breaks opened by Foer in the wall of words of *The Street of Crocodiles* vividly convey "the vertigo of Time defeated," because they stand for the postmemorial "equivalence" between the "absolute past" of the Holocaust narrative and "the death in the future" of the memorial stance; in this lies the book's capacity to represent and engage with the postmemorial stance gazing the unfolding of "a catastrophe which has already occurred" (Barthes 1981, 96).

The overtures inside the narrative are, in a sense, the postmemorial window in the Holocaust house of fiction. They appear as the space where authors and readers belonging to the generation after exercise their agency on the archive of the past – a dimension which, quoting from the text of *Tree of Codes*, "grows in the emptiness, [...] and where the future lay[s] open. [...] With a thousand of kaleidoscopic possibilities." Similarly, in critiquing the project *En Camino* by Jewish Argentinian artist Mirta Kupferminc (the daughter of Holocaust survivors), Marianne Hirsch notices how the viewers "are also invited to imagine different scenarios with different beginnings and endings," following a trajectory "mobilizing multiple potential histories on the threshold of more open-ended futures" and "complicat[ing] a genealogical temporality of loss and attempted recovery." Crucially, "Kupferminc's work performs the unforgiving visceral transfer of a painful past to future generations, [and yet] it allows us to glimpse the possibility of different futures – futures we, as viewers, can participate in imagining" (Hirsch 2019). The elisions in *Tree of Codes* function in a similar fashion; they activate a figurative circuit connecting the author's and the reader's

postmemorial agency because both are allowed to mobilize personal, non-hegemonic, unofficial interpretations over the recollection of the past (Hirsch 2019).

Therefore, the holes created by Foer comprehend and dramatize the postmemorial condition of living with the presence of an absence, crafting a narrative that I define as "extra-vacant," meaning a narrative which is highly conscious of its being always already confronted by an experiential, existential, and ultimately ontological vacancy. Moreover, *Tree of Codes* integrates preservation (the words) and erasure (the voids), language and silence, memory and forgetfulness, thus producing a de-familiarizing effect in the reader which highlights the unsettled, postmemorial approach towards the past of this work. Also the publisher's note in the copyright page calls attention to this opposition between presence and absence: "in order to write *Tree of Codes,* the author took an English language edition of Bruno Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles* and cut into its pages, carving out a new story." The term "to write" may seem somehow at odds with the final phrase "carving out a new story;" although the juxtaposition of these two verbs points once again to the comprehension of narratives as artificially crafted, there remains an underlying tension between the act of writing as creating *ex nihilo* and that of carving out, which entails the preexistence of a matter which is then shaped into something new through the removal of some of its constituents. For sure, when it comes to literature, the friction between these two generative acts blurs, because when the Jamesian "human scene" is turned into a specific narrative, some of its aspects are inevitably lost; however, the pressure between continuity and rupture acquires an even more dramatic intent within the postmemorial sphere.

In fact, the peculiarity of *Tree of Codes* is the visual realization of this process of creation by erasure; in the Author's Afterword entitled "This Book and The Book," Foer claims: "For years I had wanted to create a die-cut book by erasure, a book whose meaning was exhumed from another book. [...] I was in search of a text whose erasure would somehow be a continuation of its creation" (Foer 2010). The intertextuality grounding the very *raison d'être* of "this book" – which is in conversation with the postmodern rewriting and *pastiche* – dwells on the relationship between the contemporary age and the past also proposing a dislocated and diachronic perspective on "the book," Schulz's text and, by extension, the legacy of the Holocaust – a practice which, I believe, shifts the dominant of the narrative from epistemological to ontological.

Dislocation and multilayered temporality, the unfolding of a catastrophe already occurred, are made explicit and even palpable by the experience of reading

Tree of Codes: the text can be read as any other in English (from left to right, from top to bottom), but the presence of the holes lets words from other pages poke through – an inconvenience which can be prevented by putting a white piece of paper between the page being read and the next. This book is, hence, difficult to enjoy, it requires a conscious (and careful) handling of the book-object while flipping the pages; moreover, reading for the plot is almost impossible because the narrative is weak, relying on the surrealist imaginary of Schulz's original but being necessarily even more vague (also in consonance with its book-work character). There is no correct way to approach the text, readers can decide to look at all the words that they can see at the same time, synchronically, experiencing it in a non-linear and purely visual way. Alternatively, a tactile approach may guide the reader's hand through the heterogeneity of the surface that counters the consistency of the paper with the void of the holes and intersperses it with the sharp edges of the rectangles where the words are encapsulated. In any way, the fruition of *Tree of Codes* is diverse and puzzling.

The cognitive tensions intrinsic in this postmemorial book-work back its extra-vacant essence and harbor its conceptual and ontological effort. The Holocaust understood as a catastrophe – from the ancient Greek καταστροφή, meaning "to come to an end" but also "to overturn" – may be thought not only as an epistemological fracture that seemed to have brought to an end the theoretical Western tradition, but also as a rupture that completely overturned the historical scenario of what was expected, possible, imaginable – thus generating a consequent ontological instability. In *Se questo è un uomo* (1947), Primo Levi frames in epistemological terms his reflections on the impossibility to bear witness to Auschwitz because survivors are not the true witnesses, only the dead, the drowned are integral witnesses to the concentrationary universe. Subsequently, in *I sommersi e i salvati* (1986), he ponders the mechanisms that falsify remembrance under certain conditions, so that sometimes it is impossible to establish whether an individual is aware or not of being lying and, even more importantly, may distort reality not only in memories (i.e. retrospectively), but also in the exact moment in which it is unfolding.

More radically, Giorgio Agamben in *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999) elaborates on the constituents and circumstances of Holocaust remembrance from an ontological perspective. By stating that Auschwitz is "the devastating experience in which the impossible is forced into the real [and that] the *Muselmann* produced by Auschwitz is the catastrophe of the subject that then follows" (148), Agamben posits overturning, catastrophic questions embodied by the very

oxymoronic, ontologically ambiguous figure of the *Muselmann,* i.e. the living dead, the completely alienated inmate. Ontological instability, hence, seems to have been always part of the concentrationary universe and the act of testimony, marking a distance, a void not so much in terms of representability as in terms of existential condition, between those who wholly experienced that alternate universe and those who did not. Agamben always suggests that: "testimony is always an act of an 'author:' it always implies an essential duality in which an insufficiency or incapacity is completed or made valid" (150). In other words, the etymological root of "testimony" itself bears the idea of bridging a distance, of facing a void (an ontological vacuum, maybe), which makes the very existence of the testimony possible.

Postmemory further expands the distance separating the supposed "witness," in this case the second-hand witness, from the event – a distance that is, by the very definition of "post," impossible to fill, because the event is always already lost to those who came after it. This impossibility is made explicit in extra-vacant narratives of the Holocaust such as *Tree of Codes* which exacerbate the dialectic tension of postmemorial generations to reach and account for the catastrophe from their own historical and existential position and according to their own practices. The breaks in and with the Holocaust source turn the readers of *Tree of Codes* into postmemorial authors themselves, in an Agambian sense. Moreover, by interconnecting the *intetio of the author,* who challenged the canon by creating new spaces in it, and the *intentio of the reader,* activated in and by the blank spaces, the holes make the act of postmemorial testimony not only possible, but also effective. It seems as though postmemorial endeavors, with their extra-vacant cipher, problematize the house of fiction and the relation between author and work – outlined by James in terms of the author's centrality and freedom with "no limit to his possible experiments, efforts, discoveries, successes" (James 1884, 3) – in that they imply and elicit the reader's freedom to fill in the vacancies, the empty spaces.

In the Author's Afterword of *Tree of Codes*, Foer draws a parallel between the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem and Schulz's survived literary works, building on the idea that what survives inevitably evokes and projects its presence over the absence of what has been destroyed. In this respect, the Wailing Wall can be thought of as a site of destruction and mourning but also as a reality of new, imaginative projections. In Foer's words, the tradition of leaving small notes of prayer in the cracks of the wall creates a "magical, unbound book," which can be seen as a non-linear, non-hegemonic, postmemorial narrative. The wailing wall as an emblem of catastrophes, hence, may be integrated into a sphere of

imaginative investment, where, through the insertion of individual, frail notes challenging the monumentality and immutability of the solid text of history, a new "unspoken possibility" may be generated. I would suggest that, in turn, *Tree of Codes* may be experienced as a wailing wall itself, because it pays homage to the cultural and artistic heritage wiped out by the Holocaust, while creating space (in the holes/cracks) for imagination, through which contemporary, postmemorial readers can project rather than physically insert their own agencies. *Tree of Codes*, carved out of a text which was itself a remnant of a lost tradition, carves yet another break in the wall, enhancing its own and postmemory's extra-vacant nature.

To conclude, *Tree of Codes* may be interpreted as a prototypical postmemorial enterprise because it explicitly and self-consciously (i.e. extra-vacantly) exposes the nostalgia for the lost past of the Jewish artistry as well as the anxiety for a future to be reimagined on these ruins. In particular, the material openness of the breaks allows for a formal and critical reflection on postmemorial agency on the part of both the artist and the reader: in the economy of the text, both play the role of postmemorial author.

Bibliography

Agamben, Giorgio. 1999 (1998). *Remnants of Auschwitz,* trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Barthes, Roland. 1981 (1980). *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography,* trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang.

Brillenburg Wurth, Kiene. 2011. "Old and New Medialities in Foer's *Tree of Codes*." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture,* Vol. 13, no. 3. https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1800

Eco, Umberto. 1988. "Intentio Lectoris." *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought,* no. 2: 147-168.

Faber, Michel. 2010. "Tree of Codes by Jonathan Safran Foer – Review." *The Guardian,* 18 September 2010.
https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/dec/18/tree-codes-safran-foer-review

Foer, Jonathan Safran. 2002. *Everything is Illuminated.* Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company.

Foer, Jonathan Safran. 2010. *Tree of Codes.* London: Visual Editions.

Garrett, Stewart. 2011. *Bookwork. Medium to Object to Concept to Art.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Goldfarb, David A. 2014. "Appropriations of Bruno Schulz." *Jewish Quarterly,* 21 August 2014. https://www.jewishquarterly.org/2011/06/appropriations-of-bruno-schulz/

Heller, Steven. 2010. "Jonathan Safran Foer's Book as Art Object." *New York Times,* 24 November 2010.

https://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/11/24/jonathan-safran-foers-book-as-art-object/

Hirsch, Marianne. 2012. *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Hirsch, Marianne. 2019. "Carrying Memory." In *Women and Migration: Responses in Art and History,* edited by Deborah Willis, Ellyn Toscano and Kalia Brooks Nelson, 57-77. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers.

James, Henry. 2004 (1881). *The Portrait of a Lady*. London: Collector's Library.

James, Henry. 2010 (1884). "The Art of Fiction." Charleston: Nabu Press.

Kachka, Boris. 2010. "Reinventing the Book. Jonathan Safran Foer's Object of Anti-Technology." *New York Magazine*, 21 November 2010. http://nymag.com/arts/books/features/69635/

Levi, Primo. 1947. *Se questo è un uomo*. Torino: Francesco de Silva.

Levi, Primo. 1986. *I sommersi e i salvati.* Torino: Einaudi.

Miller Budick, Emily. 2015. *The Subject of Holocaust Fiction.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Ozick, Cynthia. 1977. "The Street of Crocodiles." *New York Times,* 13 February 1977. https://www.nytimes.com/1977/02/13/archives/the-street-of-crocodiles-with-babel-and-singer-and-kafka.html

Phelan, James. 1996. *Narrative as Rhetoric. Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Pressman, Jessica. 2018. "Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes:* Memorial, Fetish, Bookishness." *ASAP/Journal*, Vol. 3, no. 1: 97-120.

Schulz, Bruno. 2008 (1963). *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories.* trans. Celina Wieniewska. London: Penguin.

Stefans, Brian Kim. 2014. "Terrible Engines: A Speculative Turn in Recent Poetry and Fiction." *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 51, no. 1: 159-183.

Tanderup Linkis, Sara. 2019. *Memory, Intermediality, and Literature. "Something to Hold on to."* Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge.

Alice Balestrino holds a Ph.D. in American literature from Sapienza University of Rome. Her dissertation "Extra-Vacant Narratives. Reading Holocaust Fiction in the Post-9/11 Age" investigates the concept of vacancy as a reading strategy for Holocaust texts published in the

aftermath of 9/11. She is currently pursuing a second Ph.D., with a project on post-Holocaust (post-)humanism in Philip Roth's and Primo Levi's works and a particular focus on *Italian Theory*, at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, where she is also Research Assistant at the International Forum for US Studies (IFUSS). Among her research interests: Jewish-American Holocaust literature and postmemory, alternate histories, post-9/11 fiction, memory studies and graphic narratives.

statuS Quaestionis
language text culture

Tommaso Gennaro
Sapienza, Università di Roma

"Un'ombra divenuta eterna"
Tracce esposte della memoria di guerra

Abstract
By a comparison between different points of view (above all, artistic and literary), this article aims to show how the conceptualization of time and human bodies have been distraught in the twentieth century, especially because of World War II. The artists and writers analysed are W.G. Sebald, Mathias Énard, Louis Le Brocquy, Claudio Parmiggiani and Roman Opałka.

1.

Fra le tante tremendamente memorabili nell'opera di Primo Levi, spiccano due immagini di atroce icasticità, poste quasi ad apertura e a sigillo estremo della sua parabola di scrittore: la loro carica emblematica è indice attendibile di una tendenza assai più comune; inoltre, anche in virtù dello scarto che porta dalla prima alla seconda, inquadrano con precisione una delle cifre più peculiari della produzione artistica e letteraria del secondo Novecento. La prima immagine compare ne *La tregua* (1963):

> Nessuno di noi sapeva chi fosse costui, perché non era in grado di parlare. Era una larva, un ometto calvo, nodoso come una vite, scheletrico, accartocciato da una orribile contrattura di tutti i muscoli: lo avevano deposto dal carro di peso, come un blocco inanimato, e ora giaceva a terra su un fianco, acciambellato e rigido, in una disperata posizione di difesa, con le ginocchia premute fin contro la fronte, i gomiti serrati ai fianchi, e le mani a cuneo con le dita puntate contro le spalle. (1997, I, 309)

La seconda ne *I sommersi e i salvati* (1986):

> Le ceneri umane provenienti dai crematori, tonnellate al giorno, erano facilmente riconoscibili come tali, poiché contenevano spesso denti o vertebre. Ciò nonostante, furono usate per vari scopi: per colmare i terreni paludosi, come isolante termico nelle intercapedini di costruzioni in legno, come fertilizzante fosfatico; segnatamente, furono impiegate invece della ghiaia per

rivestire i sentieri del villaggio delle SS, situato accanto al campo. Non saprei dire se per pura callosità, o se non invece perché, per sua origine, era materiale da calpestare. (1997, II, 1089)

In queste pagine, Levi ha mostrato l'esito scandaloso delle pratiche dei nazisti: il totale annientamento dell'individuo, spogliato di ogni cosa, anche di quel corpo che – se nei sopravvissuti, per quanto ancora fisicamente presente, è stato ridotto ai minimi termini dalla violenza corrosiva del lager (al punto da essersi ristretto dentro ai suoi stessi confini) – nei morti è stato al punto annientato da lasciare di sé solo un residuo inconsistente. Ma mentre la "larva" accartocciata presente nella *Tregua* è, accidentalmente, il prodotto di scarto di quella "macchina per ridurci a bestie" (1997, I, 35) orientata al totale annientamento che era il campo, quello che insomma Günther Anders avrebbe definito un "reisidu[o] antieconomic[o] di vita" (2003, 254), vent'anni più tardi, nel suo testo-testamento, con algida e lancinante chiarezza lo scrittore italiano esibirà con l'altra immagine, stavolta ben più radicale, qual era il vero prodotto finale di quei luoghi (nonché il lascito più doloroso della Seconda guerra mondiale): solo "cenere".

Ma una traccia, esigua quanto indelebile, come appunto delle ossa fra la cenere, un resto, dunque, qualcosa – nonostante tutto – rimane. È questo 'ciò che resta': dei salvati, ovvero l'"eccezione", la "minoranza anomala" dei "superstiti [...] toccati dalla sorte", di chi è tornato a raccontare "per delega"; ma, soprattutto, dei "sommersi": i "testimoni veri" e "integrali": cioè "chi non è tornato per raccontare", "chi ha visto la Gorgone" (1997, II, 1056-7). Un nucleo insopprimibile, per quanto oramai quasi del tutto estraneo all'identità di appartenenza, si radica a resistere. Ed è anche ciò che resiste nella memoria di chi, dopo la guerra, è tornato alla vita o di quanti, nelle generazioni successive, hanno visto riaffiorare lo scempio di quegli eventi senza mai averli vissuti veramente sul corpo (come nel caso dell'*Interminable Uncanniness* nelle seconde generazioni, cf. Gampel 1996). Si tratterà infatti proprio di un'emergenza: un ritorno alla superficie di quanto si credeva il tempo avesse definitivamente cancellato: sommerso, per l'appunto.

2.

Centrale nelle esperienze successive al conflitto mondiale (a partire da quello del 1914-1918) è un'alterazione nella percezione della dimensione spazio-temporale (Kern 1988, 117-66), che cortocircuita il presente di pace con quel passato di guerra la cui eco non smette di risuonare in un futuro sempre più incerto. Che d'altronde il nesso presente-passato, da intendersi tanto temporalmente quanto

spazialmente, sia il nodo essenziale della questione (in parallelo con la codificazione in ambito psicoanalitico del trauma quale paradigma post-bellico per antonomasia) lo si evince chiaramente dall'arte e dalla letteratura che, dopo il 1945, nello scorcio terminale del XX secolo e, con lunghi strascichi, ancora nel XXI, lo hanno spesso emblematizzato, esponendo secondo differenti tipologie espressive la radice del problema. È un dettaglio sintomatico, la cui frequenza si fa spia però di una tendenza tale da non poter passare inosservata.

Sono numerose le ragioni che hanno concorso storicamente a determinare una simile circostanza: ma alla base di questo scarto percettivo che altera i rapporti con lo spazio-tempo dei reduci di quella "guerra-mondo" (Aglan e Frank 2016), che toccò direttamente anche quanti non parteciparono di persona al fronte[1], fra le tante, possono essere indicate due cause decisive: la presenza prolungata delle macerie sul territorio prima di guerra e poi di pace (Pirazzoli 2010; Gennaro 2017, 13-74) e la percezione della provvisorietà della vita non solo individuale ma collettiva che quel conflitto, più degli altri, aveva indotto (Scarry 1987; Anders 2003, 251-314). È questo proprio in virtù dell'assoluta pervasività di quella che può definirsi, a detta di Gerhard L. Weinberg, "the Greatest War" (1994, 3); il Secondo conflitto mondiale, infatti, a differenza di tutti i precedenti, e proseguendo nel solco tracciato dalla Grande guerra, penetrò direttamente nel tessuto urbano (in specie per merito dei bombardamenti aerei su obiettivi civili, praticati indifferentemente da entrambi gli schieramenti), andando così a portare la violenza degli scontri nelle case come nelle trincee: "Since the era of air raids, civilians have their own war tales too: as an old woman explained to me once, in World War I 'they fought among themselves out there', but in World War II 'we all were involved'" (Portelli 1997, 7). Si può anzi sostenere, come hanno fatto molti storici negli ultimi anni, che di guerre mondiali non ce ne furono due, bensì una sola, che durò trent'anni, dal 1914 al 1945, definita di recente da Enzo Traverso "la guerra civile europea" (2008): e ciò in virtù di quell'"*estensione del tempo di guerra*" che, secondo Giancarlo Alfano, ha implicato "una sovrapposizione di situazioni e immagini" (2014, 76) fra i due conflitti che avrebbe spinto la cosiddetta Seconda a portare a termine il "lavoro lasciato a metà" dalla Prima (Kershaw 2016, 398). "Il ricordo della prima campagna bellica dell'era tecnologica", ha chiarito in proposito Andrea Cortellessa, "assurge insomma a paradigma della *sostanza traumatica del mondo*, e questo sebbene alla Grande

[1] I morti civili della Seconda guerra mondiale sono stati, per la prima volta nella storia, superiori a quelli fra i militari: e, per quanto le cifre siano ancora discusse, la stima indica un numero complessivo di vittime pari a circa quaranta milioni, il quadruplo di quelli della Grande guerra (Kershaw 2016, 397-sgg.).

Guerra ne sia seguita un'altra, infinitamente più distruttiva, che ha conosciuto gli orrori assoluti dei bombardamenti strategici e dello sterminio razziale. Come se nella memoria collettiva fosse da sempre sedimentata l'idea di un'*unica lunga guerra* durata trent'anni, che occupi per intero la prima metà del 'secolo breve'" (Cortellessa 2018, 21).

Il corpo umano e urbano sono al centro della questione. La visione delle macerie inoccultabili e la consapevolezza della propria provvisorietà esistenziale sono infatti i connotati dell'orizzonte cognitivo-esperienziale di quanti, nell'immediato post-1945, si ritrovarono a "vivere all'ombra della bomba" (Kershaw 2016, 467): perché, come ha scritto Elena Pirazzoli, "questo nuovo tipo di guerra annulla la forma, la annienta, sia quella del corpo umano, sia quella della città: il corpo viene *disperso*, gli edifici e la stessa articolazione urbana vengono cancellati, ridotti a segni sul terreno, percepibili solo dall'alto, come nelle sezioni archeologiche" (2010, 123). Uno spazio ricolmo delle macerie di un tempo passato e un tempo spogliato della certezza di uno spazio futuro: sono questi i tratti ambivalenti ma non contrastanti con cui si articolano molte delle poetiche secondonovecentesche orientate, esplicitamente o implicitamente, a ripensare la guerra, e che molto spesso si sono declinate proprio in modo obliquo e indiretto probabilmente a causa del magistero di quelli che sono (non solo secondo Adorno) i due dioscuri della letteratura post-bellica: Samuel Beckett e Paul Celan. Entrambi non parlarono mai direttamente della guerra: il poeta rumeno, che si riferiva all'Olocausto definendolo ellitticamente "das, was war" o "das, was geschehen ist" ("ciò che è stato", "ciò che è accaduto"), scrive in un tedesco "precipitato nell'aporia di una lingua madre di vittime e carnefici [...]: come sola lingua nella quale far rivivere la memoria degli sterminati" e, l'ha spiegato Camilla Miglio, "ripristina una dignità perduta, testimoniando per chi non ha potuto più farlo", scontando però il fatto che "sono proprio l'esperienza, la memoria dello sterminio, ciò cui la parola non può accedere direttamente. Il linguaggio gira dunque intorno alla sostanza non nominabile, ma non per questo irreale o dimenticata" (2005, 69; 112; 101). Mentre nell'opera dell'autore irlandese scritta dopo il 1945, a partire cioè dall'adozione del francese, la "scelta di campo, emotiva ed etica" di Beckett è stata quella di "ricominciare a prendere la parola dalla 'capitale delle rovine', anzi di 'interiorizzare' queste rovine e farne la propria lingua" (Frasca 1999, XXXIX) per esprimere letteralmente la realtà post-bellica; come ebbe a chiarire Ernst Fischer, "la parola Auschwitz non compare mai, ma tutto ciò che [Beckett] ha scritto lo ha fatto nelle ceneri di Auschwitz" (Adorno 2012, 52).

E dunque di frequente alla messa in scena di una riduzione del tempo – visto scorrere come dentro un imbuto, destinato a consumarsi in un andamento progressivamente regressivo e che porta all'esaurimento tanto della materia che ne vive quanto dei supporti che tentano di conservarne una traccia durevole – è corrisposta un'intensificazione dello spazio, che si rivela allo sguardo degli artisti spalancandosi in una stratificazione geologica, dove non solo le macerie della guerra restano incuneate nel territorio del presente, ma si aprono faglie e voragini ricolme di storia e di morte. Da ciò è possibile desumere l'insorgenza di due compenetranti visioni del mondo, secondo le diverse modalità espressive maturate da artisti e scrittori che hanno operato dal 1945 a oggi. Da una parte, seguendo il primo caso, si dipana una temporalità a flusso continuo, caratterizzato da una lenta ma ininterrotta e graduale riduzione di tutti gli elementi, dello spazio, del tempo stesso (per cui quello in corso è il flusso di una corrente destinata a una progressiva dissoluzione); dall'altra, nel secondo caso, si consolida una visione stereometrica nella quale il passato e il presente si combinano fra loro, costituendo un tempo poliedrico e simultaneo fondato sulle macerie esposte della guerra (vale a dire un tempo nel quale l'oggi mostra sempre le tracce dello ieri).

3.

Nell'opera di Claudio Parmiggiani, autore delle *Sculture d'ombra* o *Sculture di cenere*, si ritrova la tendenza, espressa dall'autore stesso, a "lavorare con tutto quello che si disperde, che è impalpabile, inafferrabile, con la parte più duratura: l'ombra, la polvere, la cenere" (2010, 84-5). Delle sue *Sculture*, Parmiggiani ha scritto che "Hanno origine dal silenzio, dall'ombra, dai falò dell'estate [...], dalle montagne di occhiali, di scarpe, di dentiere ammassati nel campo di Auschwitz [...], dagli spettri di cenere contro i muri di Hiroshima [...], dagli autodafé, dalle macerie di Stalingrado dove sono nato, dalla poesia di Paul Celan [...]" (23). Per quanto l'autore non abbia avuto contatti diretti con la Seconda guerra mondiale (è nato, nel 1943, non a Stalingrado, ma a Luzzara), la sua scelta di impiegare come materiali d'uso "l'ombra, la polvere, la cenere" è dovuta al fatto che, come ha dichiarato, "Se osservo attorno a me non intravedo un paesaggio tanto diverso da quello suggerito in queste opere e con questi materiali" (312). La sua opera inscena dunque una "dialettica fra piani temporali" (Cortellessa 2010, 402), nei quali il passato si fa lo strumento per l'edificazione del presente; nel presente il passato della guerra resiste, occultato ma sempre pronto a riemergere. Le sue *Sculture*

sono infatti la traduzione delle ombre dei morti impressionate sui marciapiedi di Hiroshima: così "quella di Parmiggiani appare come tra le più drastiche mozioni riduttive riguardanti la forma e la sua crisi entro la più ampia interrogazione sul tempo e sull'esistenza" (Corà 2003, 105).

Parimenti, una visione del tempo postbellico nella quale il passato non si cancella dal presente è quella offerta dallo scrittore tedesco W.G. Sebald nel romanzo *Austerlitz* (2001). Ambientato negli anni del dopo guerra, quest'opera è una formidabile riflessione sul tempo volta a mettere in scena l'ambivalenza dell'epoca attuale, che rivela di continuo le tracce degli eventi dai quali è sorta, e che pertanto – come ha notato Marianne Hirsch – "provokes us to scrutinize the unraveling link between present and past" (2008, 125). Il protagonista del libro sostiene: "mi sono sempre ribellato al potere del tempo escludendomi dai cosiddetti eventi temporali, nella speranza [...] che il tempo non passasse, non fosse passato, che mi si concedesse di risalirne in fretta il corso alle sue spalle, che là tutto fosse come prima o, per meglio dire, che tutti i punti temporali potessero esistere simultaneamente gli uni accanto agli altri" (2013, 113). Egli ha una visione del tempo spaziale, come una figura nella quale coesistono simultaneamente più tempi (attuali, trascorsi, da venire, in sincronica compresenza): "[...] noi non comprendiamo le leggi che regolano il ritorno del passato, e tuttavia ho sempre più l'impressione che il tempo non esista affatto, ma esistano soltanto gli spazi differenti, incastrati gli uni negli altri, in base a una superiore stereometria, fra i quali i vivi e i morti possono entrare e uscire a seconda della loro disposizione d'animo" (199).

Le ragioni di una simile convergenza fra passato e presente, già emerse in precedenza nel libro – quando l'autore rivela che "qualcosa ci dice che gli edifici sovradimensionati gettano già in anticipo l'ombra della loro distruzione e, sin dall'inizio, sono concepiti in vista della loro futura esistenza di rovine" (26) – si chiariscono dentro la stazione di Liverpool Street di Londra: dacché "la stazione nuova sorgeva letteralmente dalle macerie della vecchia", il protagonista vive la spaesante incomunicabilità con il proprio tempo, arrivando a chiedersi se si trova "all'interno di una rovina o di un edificio ancora in costruzione" (149). Il presente è dunque il fulcro in cui ciò che non è più (le macerie della guerra passata) e ciò che non è ancora (la costruzione della città futura) si incontrano saldandosi in una dimensione incomprensibile: lo storico dell'arte Michel Makarius aveva opportunamente notato, per altri versi, come "à partir de 1945, les ruines ne renvoient plus au passé, mais au présent" (2011, 245); proprio perché l'eco della catastrofe bellica, per via della sua devastazione senza precedenti, non può smettere di durare.

Passando ora all'altro versante espressivo maturato all'indomani della guerra, si prenda l'opera di Roman Opałka, nato nel 1931 in Francia da genitori polacchi. A partire dal 1965, egli dà il via al suo progetto pittorico *Opałka 1965 / 1 – ∞*, al quale attenderà fino alla morte, nell'agosto del 2011. L'opera è la trascrizione su tela del tempo che passa sotto forma di numeri. Opałka iniziò a riempire tele nere, tutte delle stesse dimensioni (196 x 135 cm) e chiamate dall'artista *Détails*, con una serie progressiva di numeri ascendenti che non si interrompe nel passaggio da una tela all'altra. Non si tratta del tempo assoluto, ma di quello singolare proprio solo all'individuo. Dal 1972, Opałka ha introdotto alcune varianti al suo lavoro: la più significativa è l'aggiunta di una percentuale di colore bianco alla colorazione nera che ricopre le tele prima che vengano segnati i numeri su di esse; questa percentuale aumenta ad ogni nuovo *Détail* che il pittore ha inaugurato. Una simile operazione, sotterranea e riconoscibile solo dispiegando sinotticamente i vari *Détails*, introduce un movimento opposto a quello *in progress* del tempo che si dipana: si tratta del gesto *in regress* di chi, scindendo dal flusso temporale la cronologia individuale, intuisce l'inevitabile esaurirsi del proprio tempo. Lo sfondo sempre più abbacinante si riduce, come il corpo dell'artista (che si è fotografato ogni giorno alla fine della giornata di lavoro), ad un progressivo svanimento mentre le cifre del tempo avanzano inesorabili. È la "scomparsa", l'ha ribadito Lóránd Hegyi, il "principio estetico principale" (2011, 24) di quest'opera.

Si noti qui come la svolta del pittore irlandese Louis Le Brocquy, classe 1916, sia per certi versi paragonabile alle modalità regressive di Opałka (e funzioni dunque come ulteriore riprova del discorso). Dopo la guerra, l'incontro con l'opera di quello che è stato il maestro inconsapevole di buona parte delle poetiche riduzioniste del secondo Novecento, Alberto Giacometti, avvenuto alla Biennale di Venezia del 1956, servì a Le Brocquy per abbandonare la sua maniera pittorica cubista *à la Picasso* (come risulta evidente dall'opera che lo stesso Le Brocquy presentò in quell'occasione, *A Family*, del 1951), per passare a quello che fu definito il suo "white period", iniziato nel 1958 con il quadro *Ecce homo*. Il titolo di quest'opera, da una prospettiva laica e disincantata, sembrerebbe proprio presentare quell'uomo nuovo post-bellico che ha fatto finalmente i conti con la storia. Nella tela dell'artista irlandese il bianco abbacinante che tende sempre più verso il centro del quadro intacca il corpo del soggetto, che si addensa isolato, in un chiarore smagliante, mostrando ciò che resta di una figura umana: essenzialmente un 'povero cristo' anonimo, una sostanza filiforme, un principio verticale che condensa icasticamente l'essenza umana all'indomani del 1945 – proprio come i torsoli erosi a cui lavorava indefessamente, già dal 1934 (ma con tutt'altre intenzioni), Giacometti.

Infine, si prenda il romanzo *Zona* (2008) di Mathias Énard (nato in Francia nel 1972). Questo libro, costituito da una sola, lunga frase di 500 pagine, è il racconto sotto forma di flusso di coscienza di un viaggio in treno da Milano a Roma (Giancotti 2017, 214-29). Nel corso di 24 capitoli (come quelli dell'*Iliade*), il protagonista si trova al cospetto di una "folla di cadaveri" (Énard 2012, 72) immaginati o anche solo ricordati che popolano la sua mente. Énard incrocia il flusso orizzontale del presente che anima il suo romanzo (di cui sono simboli evidenti il viaggio in treno e la narrazione post-joyciana) con la visione verticale del passato, indagato secondo un'ottica geologica: "sotto i sedimenti del fiume, sotto i morti di una delle prime battaglie di Bonaparte in Italia, sotto le tonnellate di polvere portate dal tempo si trovano gli scheletri dei pachidermi vincitori dei Romani ma vinti dalla neve" (98). Alla vista della memoria del protagonista, che cerca "un posto nuovo senza ricordi senza rovine sotto i piedi" (361), affiorano infatti i morti di ogni guerra che, sin dall'antichità, si è svolta nel teatro del Mediterraneo: da quella del Peloponneso ai massacri in Kosovo, dallo scontro fra Ettore e Achille alle stragi naziste. Qui le tracce del passato emergono letteralmente dalla terra facendo inciampare il normale scorrere del tempo presente: per ricordare come il sangue di ieri nutra ancora la vita di oggi: "[...] tombe fosse comuni carnai una nuova cartina un'altra rete di tracce di strade di ferrovie di fiumi che continuano a trascinare cadaveri resti frammenti grida ossa dimenticati onorati anonimi o spinti sulla ribalta della Storia misera pergamena che invano imita il marmo [...]" (29-30).

Parmiggiani, Sebald, Opałka, Le Brocquy, Énard sono tutti "figli della guerra" (Cortellessa 2007) che, se pure in alcuni casi non hanno vissuto direttamente le conseguenze di quel secondo conflitto globale e atomico, hanno sentito e continuano a sentire risuonare nel presente la memoria del passato. Perché la guerra, di fatto, l'hanno vissuta; la loro opera lo testimonia, e non si tratta certo di un'operazione anacronistica: anzi, è quanto mai attuale. La ragione sta forse in quella dimensione "essenzialmente *interpersonale*" che, secondo Sergio Finzi, ha assunto il "trauma della guerra": "non passaggio di sintomi ma di persone", e dunque, più propriamente, "contagio", per cui "*uno* ne soffre nella carne, per non dire nelle cellule" (1989, 137).

Agli occhi del mondo quello odierno è un tempo poco chiaro, come se fosse coperto da un'ombra mai scomparsa. Si tratta dell'ombra gettata dai funghi atomici sui cieli giapponesi, non ancora diradata; dell'ombra dei corpi rimasti impressionati sui marciapiedi di Hiroshima e Nagasaki dopo la detonazione, che non può essere cancellata. "Un'ombra" – come ebbe a dire Günther Andres, recatosi in Giappone negli anni Cinquanta per comprendere meglio le

conseguenze della catastrofe – "resasi autonoma. Un'ombra divenuta eterna" (2014, 134). E la vita in questa zona buia si fa consapevole della sua provvisorietà.

4.

Il Galateo in Bosco (1978) è forse il libro più celebre di Andrea Zanzotto: in quest'opera di fine Novecento, in un cortocircuito temporale solo apparente, la Prima guerra mondiale (e non la Seconda) riemerge in modo osceno da un paesaggio (la selva del Montello) che, sintomaticamente, non è riuscito a inghiottirla per intero e ne rivomita ancora oggi le macerie, i resti, i detriti insanguinati. Il poeta espone così una stratigrafia plurisecolare nella quale sono combinati, in uno scarto diacronico vertiginoso, i trionfi della cultura cinquecentesca (la composizione del *Galateo* di Della Casa, 1551-1555) e gli orrori della catastrofe bellica (le offensive degli austriaci nel 1918, dopo la rotta di Caporetto): eventi lontani eppure compressi, carichi "della vertigine del passato", schiacciati fra i "megasecoli" della storia (Zanzotto 2011, 508). Qui dunque Zanzotto procede, in versi oramai celebri, "tra quell'incoercibile sanguinare / ed il verde dell'argenteizzare altrettanto incoercibili, / in quel grandore dove tutti i silenzi sono possibili" e si imbatte negli ossari di guerra, ritrovandosi a camminare improvvisamente "tra pezzi di guerra sporgenti da terra" (532). Sono "pezzi" della Grande guerra, ancora incistati nel territorio, nonostante il tempo di pace nel quale vive il poeta e nonostante a quella guerra ne sia seguita un'altra, assai peggiore. Le macerie del conflitto, pare di capire, fanno parte del paesaggio (Giancotti 2017, 180-90): dall' "orizzonte / che si vaiola di crateri" di Ungaretti allo spazio di Zanzotto e Parmiggiani, Opałka, Sebald, Le Brocquy, Énard: ininterrottamente. Lo spazio insomma di una guerra non Grande ma Grandissima, che ancora dura in concreto, non solo nella memoria.

Ma c'è un altro verso di Zanzotto, meno noto eppure duro come pochi, che racconta senza mezzi termini la condizione orrendamente provvisoria dei soldati sul campo: "quando come a pidocchi si sentenziavano destini" (2011, 597). Non è un controcanto bruciante del più celebre Ungaretti – "Si sta come / d'autunno / sugli alberi / le foglie" (2009, 125) –, nel quale, se non altro, è possibile aggrapparsi alla speranza che quella stagione passi presto per dare spazio a un periodo più vitale; l'indicazione temporale di Zanzotto è volutamente meno esplicita, volta com'è a chiarire il verso immediatamente precedente ("Nell'ora che più intenta al

suo banco squartava la battaglia") senza però determinare la durata di quell'esperienza: non puntuale (col rischio di risultare episodica) ma durevole, e persistente, com'è stata appunto quella Grandissima Guerra lunga trent'anni. E se dunque oggi possiamo ancora incontrare le macerie del conflitto globale, i suoi "pezzi", senza riuscire a dimenticarne le memorie da una condizione *post eventum*, è forse perché quell' "ora" della "battaglia" al momento si è arrestata: non è trascorsa, né tantomeno è finita del tutto; solo, temporaneamente, si è fermata; e non per questo gli uomini hanno smesso di essere altro che esseri effimeri pronti a spazzarsi via a vicenda.

Al lieve cadere delle foglie di Ungaretti si sostituisce così, giusto sessant'anni e due bombe atomiche dopo, la sorte ineluttabile dei "pidocchi" nel verso di Zanzotto; non è disprezzo irrisorio per quei morti, ma, al contrario, ricordo persistente della loro sorte, la più infame, quella destinata da sempre agli ultimi (i quali, lo ricordava Levi, non verranno più a raccontarci quanto hanno subito): espulsi dal paesaggio della vita senza alcun riguardo, come se la Storia se li fosse grattati via distrattamente.

Bibliografia

Adorno, Theodor. 2012. *Essere ottimisti è da criminali. Una conversazione televisiva su Beckett*. A cura di Gabriele Frasca. Napoli: l'ancora del mediterraneo.

Aglan, Alya, e Robert Frank (a cura di). 2016. *La guerra-mondo 1937-1945*, 2 voll. Torino: Einaudi.

Alfano, Giancarlo. 2014. *Ciò che ritorna. Gli effetti della guerra nella letteratura italiana del Novecento*. Firenze: Franco Cesati.

Anders, Günther. 2003. *L'uomo è antiquato. Considerazioni sull'anima nell'epoca della seconda rivoluzione industriale*, traduzione italiana di Laura Dallapiccola. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.

Anders, Günther. 2014. *Diario di Hiroshima e Nagasaki. Un racconto, un testamento intellettuale*. Milano: Ghibli.

Corà, Bruno. 2003. "Claudio Parmiggiani: l'artista seduto davanti alle rive segrete dell'eternità". In *Parmiggiani*, a cura di Peter Weiermair, 95-129. Milano: Silvana Editoriale.

Cortellessa, Andrea. 2007. "Una vita esposta". In *La furia dei venti contrari. Variazioni Amelia Rosselli*, a cura di Andra Cortellessa, V-XII. Firenze: Le Lettere.

Cortellessa, Andrea. 2010. "L'ombra, l'opera". In Claudio Parmiggiani, *Una fede in niente ma totale*, a cura di Andrea Cortellessa, 397-415. Firenze: Le Lettere.

Cortellessa, Andrea. 2018. "Fra le parentesi della storia". In *Le notti chiare erano tutte un'alba. Antologia dei poeti italiani nella Prima guerra mondiale*, Nuova edizione accresciuta, a cura di Andrea Cortellessa, 11-87. Milano: Bompiani.

Énard, Mathias. 2012. *Zona*, traduzione italiana di Yasmina Melaouah. Milano: BUR.

Finzi, Sergio. 1989. *Nevrosi di guerra in tempo di pace*. Bari: Dedalo.

Frasca, Gabriele. 1999. "Introduzione." In Samuel Beckett, *Le poesie*, a cura di Gabriele Frasca, V-LX. Torino: Einaudi.

Gampel, Yolanda. 1996. "The Interminable Uncanniness." In *Psychoanalysis at the Political Border: Essays in Honor of Rafael Moses*, edited by Leo Rangell and Rena Moses-Hrushovski, 85-96. Madison: International University Press.

Gennaro, Tommaso. 2017. *La traccia dell'addio delle cose. Macerie urbane, umane e culturali nel secondo dopoguerra*. Roma: Sapienza Università Editrice.

Giancotti, Matteo. 2017. *Paesaggi del trauma*. Milano: Bompiani.

Hegyi, Lóránd. 2011. "Radicalità e responsabilità. Aspetti etici nell'operato artistico di Roman Opałka". In *Roman Opałka. Il tempo della pittura*, a cura di Ludovico Pratesi, 16-27. Venezia: Marsilio.

Hirsch, Marianne. 2008. "The Generation of Postmemory." In *Poetics Today*, 29:1. 103-128.

Kern, Stephen. 1988. *Il tempo e lo spazio. La percezione del mondo fra Otto e Novecento*, traduzione italiana di Barnaba Maj. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Kershaw, Ian. 2016. *All'inferno e ritorno. Europa 1914-1949*, traduzione italiana di Giovanni Ferrara Degli Uberti. Roma-Bari: Laterza.

Levi, Primo. 1997. *Opere*. A cura di Marco Belpoliti, 2 voll. Torino: Einaudi.

Löwenthal, David. 1985. *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Makarius, Michel. 2011. *Ruines*. Paris: Champs arts.

Miglio, Camilla. 2005. *Vita a fronte. Saggio su Paul Celan*. Macerata: Quodlibet.

Parmiggiani, Claudio. 2010. *Una fede in niente ma totale*. A cura di Andrea Cortellessa. Firenze: Le Lettere.

Pirazzoli, Elena. 2010. *A partire da ciò che resta. Forme memoriali dal 1945 alle macerie del Muro di Berlino*. Bologna: Diabasis.

Portelli, Alessandro. 1997. *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Scarry, Elaine. 1987. *The Body in Pain. The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sebald, Winfried G. 2013. *Austerlitz*, traduzione italiana di Ada Vigliani. Milano: Adelphi.

Traverso, Enzo. 2008. *A ferro e fuoco: la guerra civile europea, 1914-1945*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Ungaretti, Giuseppe. 2009. *Vita d'un uomo. Tutte le poesie*. A cura di Carlo Ossola. Milano: Mondadori.

Weinberg, Gerhard L. 1994. *A World at Arms. Global History of World War II*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zanzotto, Andrea. 2011. *Tutte le poesie*. A cura di Stefano Dal Bianco. Milano: Mondadori.

Tommaso Gennaro, PhD in Intercultural Studies (Sapienza – University of Roma), has been a post-doc fellow at Sapienza in Cultural Anthropology and Romance Philology (research topic: the book burning, from the symbolization to E. Canetti and R. Bradbury). Author of several publications (including two monographs: *La traccia dell'addio delle cose. Macerie umane, urbane e culturali nel secondo dopoguerra*, 2017; *Irishless. Samuel Beckett e la cultura europea*, 2018), he studies Comparative Literature with a focus on the 20th century.

statuS Quaestionis
language text culture

Carla Subrizi
Sapienza Università di Roma

Trauma and Intimacy: Transcultural Bodies and Performative Memory in Louise Bourgeois' *Cells*

Abstract

A cycle of works that Louise Bourgeois titled *Cells*, created between the late eighties and the nineties and defined as environments or installations, help us define what I believe to be a fundamental aspect of the reflection on memory specifically pertaining to its transgenerational character. Within this framework, my contribution underlines a specific aspect: the memory and the trauma these works and images tell are referable not to an event within history but to a genealogy of pain or of the psychical wound as Louise Bourgeois intended them. I'll refer to these images and their function with the term "bridge image," which refers to when an image becomes a vessel, a story to be told, between individuals or situations that distantly and differently share similar elements.

1. Between memory, trauma and image

Attempting to consider the theoretical journey taking place from memories that are born or solicited from afar and in successive phases, without direct experience of the traumatic event, through information, stories, documents, imaginaries and imagination, which occur as aftereffects of the remembered fact, is part of an important reflection affecting the very rereading of art itself.

In 1993, in *Misère de la philosophie* Jean-François Lyotard affirms that "la peinture lutte, travaille au sens fort, celui de l'obstétrique et de la psychanalise, pour donner trace ou pour faire signe, dans le visible, d'un geste qui excéde le visible" (2000, 99). Talking about going beyond the visible would already offer much food for thought. In the same essay, titled *Anamnèse du visible*, Lyotard differentiates between the way in which history relates to time, from the way the so-called "*anamnèse*" does. While history refers to dates and facts, "*anamnèse*" inserts itself into the gaps, pushes into one's memory, which is an elusive substance of time without borders.

In order to infiltrate the gaps where memory resides, the work to be done, as Lyotard says, is similar to an investigation or a challenge that pushes through

historical time to locate traces and signs representing the symptoms of something that can reemerge.

"The era of memory" which Eva Hoffman speaks of, is – as we might say with more conviction after the nineties – more of a condition on which to reflect rather than a periodization (2004, XV).

The issue of memory, in the particular forms that will be addressed, is born from an observation that considers mainly two perspectives: the artistic one, or rather the ways in which artworks have investigated time and, more specifically, the forms of memory, remembrance or oblivion; and the gender perspective, in order to understand how memory can be a vehicle for identity and subjective forms connected to one's gender and condition in relation to the social and cultural context. More specifically, I will address some works by artist Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) to whom I have dedicated my recent studies touching aspects connected to the issues put forth in this essay (Subrizi 2010 e 2012). I will, however, have to necessarily circumscribe a possible artist's work analysis to really delve into the subtle fragile groove that opens up between memory, trauma and image. For this purpose, I will refer to a cycle of works (which are very relevant to what I will be trying to demonstrate) that the artist herself titled *Cells* (Crone 2008). These works may be defined as environments or installations, realized between the late eighties and the nineties (1986-1997), that help us define what I believe to be a fundamental aspect of the reflection on memory specifically attaining to its transgenerational character.

Within this framework, my contribution underlines a specific aspect: the memory and the trauma these works relate are referable not to an event within history but to a genealogy of pain or of the psychical wound in the sense that Louise Bourgeois intended. Bourgeois didn't represent pain and didn't create works about pain. Hers is an operation about capturing and overturning, about sedimentation and the attempt to upheave, to give form, and to make visible and face once more the traces of a historical trauma, which doesn't only concern herself. This traumatic condition is not referable to a single event. It resides in the culture of oppression and domination that Bourgeois always witnessed within hypocrisy or the traditional family roles and the relationship between father and offspring. We do know a few facts about Bourgeois' personal life: her governess Sadie was welcomed into the family as an English teacher, but was actually her father's lover. This had caused Louise to experience a double emotional betrayal (by her father and Sadie herself) and the consequences of a difficult role for her mother who had passively accepted the situation in the context of a configuration of upper-class rules that could not accept such an evident betrayal. However, I

don't want to consider this situation as the cause of a particular reaction in Bourgeois. This family balance, made precarious and impossible in the complex intertwining of the hypocrisy and falsity which were naturally dominant, was addressed and investigated transversally by Bourgeois by making her own condition become an objective condition of abuse and domination both relating to the effects caused (affective and psychical) and to memory itself, resulting from a long history of wounds and pain going far beyond her individual experience. Art can be considered as an instrument to give shape and image to a story of survival from trauma: the recovery of fragments from the past that return to memory from one's own imaginary. The first perspective considered refers to a transgenerational temporal dimension.

2. Bridge Images

In this order of ideas, the body becomes a physical and psychic place of transit and dislocation, not only from one generation to the next, but between multiple generations, cultures and personal or collective histories. The transcultural body is an individual entity absorbing issues that are not part of its personal experience, but arrive from afar, from stories and affections which are transferred from a distance.

The gender perspective, on the other hand, is born from life experience and from the particular way in which the latter is investigated and confronted by an artist and a woman, profoundly connected to feminism, and feminist in the sense that Bourgeois has conducted *an intimate revolt,* as Julia Kristeva might say (1997), since her first works, *Femme Maison*, from the forties. In the mid-seventies, Bourgeois places her father's figure at the center of a reflection about power, family, and the logics of oppression and wounds, which are established within the domestic framework, through an emblematic work called *Destruction of the Father* (1974). The revolt against her father is taken on in Bourgeois not simply as the refusal of one's father, but as a profound analysis, through her works, of a condition of frustration, pain and trauma, tied to logics of power and emotional abuse, and sedimented in history. Destroying the father thus becomes the metaphor for an inner process that emerges in the form of a sought for and achieved awareness or rather in the identification of a compulsion to repeat within the relationship between father and daughter, where the *father* represents the symbol for all forms of power and, on the other hand, the stricken and shredded desire for freedom. In this condition a profound trauma is born, which

reiterates through history, gets lost within the monumentality of historical facts, and remains relegated within the gaps or the minimal spaces of thresholds between history and its marginality, or between history and absence, also considered as the failed presence of certain voices and roles.

The installations of Louise Bourgeois and the images that emerge from them can be read as symptoms of an extended and anachronistic condition, which connects distant experiences, transforming them into an emotional or psychic matter, with common and shareable characteristics. Sharing memories is thus a central aspect, even when referred to traumas. They are reiterated in time and through specific works (works like this artist's) and find new ways to be told by reactivating perceptive and affective states that emerge, like a shock, to the sensibility of the observer who feels his or her own, sometimes forgotten, condition.

I am talking about the trauma that inhabits us (Kahn 1963), which we may still not know the meaning of, but that is reactivated by the work's game of correspondence, emerging as a story that, posthumously, connects us to past events. Traumatic conditions, despite their belonging to another time or specific circumstance, can at a certain point reconnect to and echo with one another, and return to memory, notwithstanding chronological time. It's a difficult thesis that certain authors have begun studying and that I too will attempt to tackle.[1]

I want to talk about Louise Bourgeois' *Cells* as works that pose the question of time and memory through images that reconnect posthumous time and faraway experiences, associated with the survival of emotional states and affections. As a consequence, the anachronistic time returns and reconnects similar perceptive universes at a distance. The Objects that we see in the works of Bourgeois let time live beyond them. Letting images of unknown time and spaces arise, the public, which moves inside or around these environments, slowly perceives that its own psychic condition can regain voice or a form through someone else's experience and distant memory. I will refer to this image function as "bridge image," which is when the image becomes a vessel, a story to be told, between individuals or situations that distantly and differently share similar elements.

[1] Hirsch 1997; 2002; 2012. See also Ettinger 2000 and 2006; Pollock 2013.

3. Intimate spaces

Clothes hung on coat hangers in the claustrophobic but intimate space of the *Cells*, containers and glass bottles on furniture or shelves, fragments of bodies such as hands or arms, shaped chairs with different styles, used beds, some of which are made of steel recalling containment: these are some of the elements building up the settings. The name itself, *Cells,* relates to human cells and prison cells: what is inside us and what imprisons us. And the home can also be a cell. Between claustrophobia and intimacy, the space is always characterized as double, real and reflected, true and false, between memory and oblivion.

Glass is a material that returns. Its transparency is important. We see it in close proximity with materials that are antique, rusty, and old. The handcrafted sculptures coexist with these found materials. Old and new, history and actuality, past and present coincide in a temporality with no beginning or end.

Entering one of the *Cells*, we have the impression of participating in an event, at once observers and voyeurs, witnesses to and creators of something that cannot be seen: we feel as if we have already been part of it, without knowing when and why. The *Cells* become the possible account of a genealogy of trauma: oppression, violence, abuse, psychic constrictions, which in the same instant connect Antigone and Electra, according to the words of Simone Weil (1953), and the thrilling rituals of ancient Pompeii and Louise Bourgeois.

Let's see more clearly why these environments relate traumatic conditions. The language is fragmented. The fragment responds to the necessity to rip those objects from the structure they belong to. Linguistic chains are presented as made up of small parts and discreet elements subtracted from the all-inclusive and self-defining structures of (any) given sense: everything, the whole, and the unit (of history, a moment in history, an identity, a condition of pain) are broken. So, in *Cells*, a bottle of perfume, an ampoule, a bedpan, a chair: all are non-symbolic presences, which don't refer to old or new iconographies. They are images that have already been seen before; however, within this game of adjacencies that the environment produces, these images overturn their conventional definition to say something new: the father's chair, the bottle of perfume, which refers to a smell or an ancestor, and the bed, where the act of love took place, become the primal scene and the representation of dynamics of exclusion, betrayal and absence. The story that is built from a distance by these objects can happen and come back to life through seeing or coming across one of the *Cells*: memory resounds in post memory, and echoes from time (without a date) are heard in a chain of experiences without a chronology that intertwine generations and

moments, which sometimes are very far from each other. The passage itself throughout these spaces, the fact that one enters inside them and crosses them left to right, or gazes through the glass and nets surrounding them, becomes a metaphor for a different transition – one that which leads into the psyche.

Let's now enter one of these environments. *Passage dangereux* is a *Cell* dating from 1997. It is the largest and, in a way, the most complex one. It measures 264 by 355 by 876 cm. The entire *passage* is constructed with a metal net on all four walls, the ceiling and the floor; even the doors, entrance and exit, are closed by nets, yet openable. On the left of the entrance door is a welded key and on the upper right is a plaster breast. In the first room, six shirt cuffs are placed on six shelves; on the lowest shelf there are a perfume bottle, a mirror for makeup and a larger mirror, and a piece of marble with two long ears; along the corridor that goes into the rooms, a long rubber object is hung and traversed by pins. In the second room, a children's swing-set with a fabric seat is hung in front of a large tapestry and besides the swing-set there is a narrow mirror placed slantwise. The third room is occupied by an electric chair and a mirror, welded on one side. In the fourth room, seventeen chairs are hung on the ceiling next to an artificial leg; on the bed structure below is a couple engaged in a sexual act and constructed out of wooden legs (the legs come out of a metal box) and plaster feet that push a small spider with a welded leg into a small metal ring; on one side of the bed there is a wooden chair covered in fabric and on the other side there is a small child's writing desk and a chair, while at the foot of the bed an armchair is placed in frontal perspective, turned towards the bed. In the fifth room there are one metal chair with a fabric pillow and several children's wooden stools placed in a circle; glass spheres are on three of the four stools, while higher up, tied to the metal wall on a steel and marble shelf, there are a small glass horse, an insect and shreds of written paper. Below the horse is a small bronze bull; the horse is reflected in an oval mirror. In the sixth room, there are several objects placed on three wooden chairs, which function as pedestals: on the first one there are two plastic spheres, one larger and one smaller, containing bone fragments; on the second chair there are a wasp's nest and a full sock; on the third, a bronze spiral with a small mirror and another glass object; hung on the metal walls are two mirrors, while a linen drape and a steel nest occupy the corners. The term "passage" clearly indicates a space to cross; the fact that it is dangerous implies that we are dealing with a sensitive space. Danger to remember, danger to find one's self in the middle of one's fears, danger of not being able to face them. It is not about a journey back in time. Although the space of memory is maze-like and discontinuous, it connects and creates interrelations. The objects inhabiting the space have been

found and accumulated, not in a casual order, but according to semantic, metonymic and sometimes allegoric associations, which take us beyond the actual object. Here, every detail is part of an ampler reflection, which is never fully expressed, but is only whispered through hints and details. If, on one side, there's accumulation (chairs, bones, glass or forms), on the other hand, some elements are individually perceived, whose message arrives without mediations. The narration is fragmented and discontinuous; while passing from room to room one crosses diverse experiences and memories.

Moving through this space, which appears as both a cage and an architectural structure, closed and transparent at the same time, visual conflicts emerge: the metal net and the doors' "overtones of a jail and its occupants, of the inescapable" (Bourgeois 1998, 231). The mechanisms through which memory functions are metaphorically identified with those allowing the movement of the net door hinges. Between the objects, mirrors overlap. "They interact, giving a multiple view of the world. The mirrors reflect the many difficult realities, one worse than the next" (231). An (imagined) scent of nostalgia spreads from the bottles. The small figures within glass spheres evoke isolation from the rest of the world: finding oneself in a bubble without interacting directly with reality.

Glass returns in the *Cell* titled *Precious Liquid*, dated 1992 and shown at *Documenta IX* that same year. Emotions become liquid: glass bottles, ampoules, empty perfume bottles are, as Bourgeois says, like memory that melts and re-emerges. There are various types of glass as there are various types of memories, which are never the same in their intensity and way of arising: perfume bottles, a horse, mirrors, spheres.

The sculptures with large hands that hold smaller hands, as stated by Bourgeois, express anxiety, fear and the request for protection, love and reassurance.

4. The action of memory

Within this *Cell*, the fragmentation of the space decenters vision; the accumulation of objects creates false sight perspectives (as the eye appears to be caught by multiple focus points in different directions); the smaller objects hide behind those that are more easily visible; however, within that smallness, details constructing other narrations can be found: the bone fragments caught within the spheres, the scent that we imagine to be contained in the perfume bottle – that are, for Bourgeois, a symbol for nostalgia –, the insect inside the little glass

horse. What is small or contained within other objects is often an image of childhood. The chairs are many and different: an electric chair, children's chairs, office chairs, large chairs located where one imagines the seated authority. This way of positioning the objects is extremely important. The construction of places, through objects, determines security but also fear of moving forward. Fear and reassurance, certainty and uncertainty of the next visual finish line articulate a discussion which invites us – those who tread the space – to search in all directions: below, on the side, beyond the walls, underneath, outside and inside one's self. Through images that work as activators of other images, Bourgeois puts the observer in the situation of searching for a story, of becoming the body, the physical entity that is missing in these environments, but has left traces and visual journeys, which can be followed. The fragments, the present figures, and the objects are all part of an ampler discussion.

Sex, eroticism, the female body, the fear of becoming something unexpected, the relationship with one's childhood, morals and the ambiguities of the upper class world, construct a narration which persuades the viewer, given that, for example, no images or imaginaries of Bourgeois herself are reflected in the mirror (another recurring object), but instead in the mirror are reflected only our own images and those of an entire culture and its stereotypes. The mirrors, in these works, don't reflect; they deform the images and move the objects reflected into another space by playing a game of inclinations and projections of sight. Because of this, Bourgeois' works are stories with no end: it is necessary for something to happen on the observers' side. The narration is thus inter-subjective: it is built on the relationship between histories and memories.

Why and how is this process of narration activated by such a work installation and the objects, elements, and spaces it presents? What these works activate is a relation between trauma and the reactivation or memory of a distant trauma. The specific memory these works relate to is the one of pain and subjective emptiness that trauma leaves. While trauma is defined as a psychic wound, as the consequence of a shock or a specific event that bursts on a psychic level producing pain and its crystallizations, it is less and less evident on a physical level: its definition and the reason for its being a trauma, which violates and causes pain, remain inaccessible to all – including those who have felt it.

What seems to be happening in these works by Bourgeois is important for two aspects: first, the artist's memory, acts as a dynamic element, which takes form by choosing the objects and the system of adjacencies which constructs the environment from an individual traumatic condition; second, despite this, the works never tell specific facts nor directly refer to events from the artist's personal

life. Instead, they deal with emotional dynamics which meld into archetypal figures of pain and trauma. The genealogy of memory that one is able to build is made of reflections, references, and sensations which solicit each other and dialogue with each other from a distance. The dynamics and tensions become spiral-like images, multiplications of the same elements, fragmentation of bodies, and dissemination of objects. The specific elements of this language activate tensions and different meeting points. Traumatic is also the experience of these works; the work itself becomes witness to an event that has happened and is told in order for others, even from far away generations, to understand and hear.

Through these aspects, actions of movement and bouncing, focusing and remittal, coagulation of memories and their transmission are realized. What I called a "bridge image" is active in the *Cells*. Bourgeois says: "The subject of pain is the business I am in. To give meaning and shape to frustration and suffering [...] The existence of pain cannot be denied. I propose no remedies or excuses" (205).

If Bourgeois starts from the consideration that suffering is not eliminated, and that pain is the present state of her works, in what way does this emotional component of the work emerge and how does it reemerge every time in different moments and circumstances? What persists in time? Do we have memory of this pain? How does the work tell this state of mind and how does it transmit it in time to those looking and to those who will look in the future? In what way did the artist shape these emotional contexts making her personal individual experience not a private fact but an element that connects to many other stories?

The artist says "art is the experiencing – or rather the re-experiencing – of a trauma" (Bernadac 1996, 8), but in what way does this happen? What did Louise Bourgeois mean with trauma: is it the consequence of facts belonging to one's history, the relations of this history with a more extended history, the survival not only of a fact but of a *relationship* that generated and continues to generate forms of oppression, marginalization, erasure? The story at stake is not one which someone tells another person, relegating memory in a post-dimension that makes the story an experience of distance.

I am not considering the relationship between art and memory as the possible subject of an artwork, but memory itself as being activated by the work. If the object of Bourgeois activates perceptive states and memory, we can talk about a performative characteristic of the work that solicits, moves and affects acts such as remembrance and the removal of traumatic subconscious states deriving from personal or collective experience.

These objects are "theoretical objects," as stated by Mieke Bal who introduced the concept of "preposterous history" (2001). This theoretical component resides in the fact that the objects making up such installations are presented as small fragments of unrelated texts that await to be grabbed and recomposed through an act that requires seeing, feeling and understanding. They are theoretical objects and also emotional objects as they solicit a connection to mental moods that move "forgotten" sensations and psychic states. The object that we see, the relationship between the object and our gaze, determines a dynamic situation that I called bridge: the *bridge image* is the image that bounces from our perceptual apparatus towards other times and histories, towards unknown geographies.

Bibliography

Bal, Mieke. 2001. *Louise Bourgeois' Spider. The Architecture of Art-Writing*. Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press.

Bennett, Jill. 2000. *Emphatic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

Bernadac, Marie-Laure. 1996. *Louise Bourgeois*. Paris-New York: Flammarion.

Bourgeois, Louise. 1998. *Destruction of the Father/Reconstruction of the Father. Writings and Interviews 1923-1997*. London: Violette Editions.

Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Crone, Rainer, and Petrus Graf Schaesberg. 2008. *Louise Bourgeois. The Secret of the Cells*. New York: Prestel Publishing.

Ettinger, Bracha L. 2000. "Art as the Transport-Station of Trauma." In *Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger: Artworking 1985–1999*: 91-115. Gent: Ludion.

Ettinger, Bracha L. 2006. *The Matrixial Borderspace*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Hirsch, Marianne. 1997. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Hirsch, Marianne, and Valerie Smith. 2002. "Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction." Gender and Cultural Memory, special issue of *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* vol. 28, no. 1: 1-19.

Hirsch, Marianne. 2012. *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hoffman, Eva. 2004. *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust*. New York: Public Affairs.

Khan, Masud. 1963. "The concept of cumulative trauma". In *The Privacy of the Self*. London: Hogarth Press.

Kristeva, Julia. 1997. *La révolte intime.* Paris: Fayard.

Pollock, Griselda. 2013. *Visual Politics of Psychoanalysis. Art and the image in post-traumatic cultures*. London-New York: I.B. Tauris.

Pollock, Griselda. 2013. *After-affects/After-images*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.

Storr, Robert. 2016. *Intimate Geometries: The Art and Life of Louise Bourgeois.* New York: The Monacelli Press.

Subrizi, Carla. 2010. "Louise Bourgeois. Artista, malgrado tutto." Undo.net, July 6, 2010. https://1995-2015.undo.net/it/argomenti/1278427651

Subrizi Carla. 2012. *Azioni che cambiano il mondo. Donne, arte e politiche dello sguardo*. Milano: Postmediabooks.

Weil, Simone. 1953. *Electre et Antigone*. Paris: Gallimard.

Carla Subrizi (1958) is Associate Professor of History of Contemporary Art at Sapienza Rome University. She is the President of the Baruchello Foundation. Among her publications, in addition to numerous essays, are *Psicoenciclopedia possibile, note a margine. L'arte come esperimento del sapere,* Treccani, (Roma 2020); *Gianfranco Baruchello. Archive of Moving Images* (Milan, 2017); *Azioni che cambiano il mondo. Donne, arte e politiche dello sguardo* (Milan, 2012), *Introduzione a Duchamp* (Rome-Bari, 2008), *Cesare Viel. Azioni 1996-2007* (Cinisello Balsamo, 2008), *Europa e America, 1945-1985* (Rome, 2008), *Imagine/Image* (Rome-London 2007), *Verifica incerta. L'arte oltre i confini del cinema* (Rome, 2004), *Il corpo disperso dell'arte* (Rome, 2000). Recent exhibitions include: *Verifica Incerta - Documents & Souvenirs,* (8 rue Saint-Bon, Paris, October 23- November 22, 2014), *Duchamp Re-Made in Italy* (Galleria nazionale d'arte moderna, Rome, October 8, 2013 - February 9, 2014), *Baruchello. Certe idee* (Galleria nazionale d'arte moderna, Rome, December 21, 2011-March 4, 2012), *Camuflajes* (La Casa Encendida, Madrid, September 17 - November 1, 2009).

statuS Quaestionis
language text culture

Fabio Simonetti
University of Reading and Imperial War Museum

Researching Testimonial Objects: The Postmemory of the Allied Occupation of Italy through the Imperial War Museum's Collections

Abstract

This article examines from different angles the memory and postmemory of the Allied liberation and consequent occupation of Italy in the years 1943-1947 by selecting and "reading" a series of objects among the Imperial War Museum holding. The relevance of the museum's collection and display lies in its capacity to narrate history through highly significant objects, linking past and present, memory and postmemory, individual and collective remembrance. Taking my cue from Aleida Assmann's parallel between remembering and forgetting, and the museum's two faces of the display and the store, I intend to consider IWM's role as a bridge between the generation who first retained, used and donated their own cherished testimonial objects, and the new generations who experienced the war only by interacting with those items.

1. The Imperial War Museum's collection and its testimonial objects

Since the end of the Second World War, the elaboration of both the cultural memory and the postmemory of the conflict in Italy – in the forms of official memorialisation and individual transmission of past experiences from generation to generation – involved the years of the Allied occupation only marginally.[1] The main reason behind this flaw is the close proximity of the occupation period to landmark events, such as the German occupation and the civil war, that dominated the traumatic memory of the people and the communities who lived in post-war Italy. As Maurice Halbwachs demonstrated in his seminal work, memory is largely framed and formed in the present rather than the past (1992,

[1] According to Aleida Assmann the term "cultural memory" defines the dynamics in which human relationships to the past are interpreted by social institutions "with the aid of memorial signs such as symbols, texts, images, rites, ceremonies, places, and monuments" (2004, 26). Marianne Hirsch defined "postmemory" the "relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences 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" (2012, 5).

34). As a result, especially in central-northern Italy, where the occupation had been longer and harder to endure, it was inevitably the memory of the bombings, atrocities, and deportations that dominated eyewitnesses' recollections of the Second World War, and that tended to be subject to public recognition and commemoration.

In this perspective, the role attributed to the Allied liberation was primarily that of providing a logical conclusion to this narrative. However, when post-war communities interpreted their own liberation exclusively as the "end" of a traumatic historical experience – the German occupation and the havoc created by the civil war –, they neglected to see the event as the "beginning" of a new, crucial, transitory period: that of the Allied occupation and the slow reconstruction. Consequently, anything that happened after this fundamental turning point was largely left out of most eyewitnesses' discourse, or at least strongly marginalised. At the same time, the public recognition of relevant events linked to the arrival of the Allied armies in Italy and the memory of their presence was equally problematic. This is the case, for instance, of the protracted, gruelling four-year-long campaign carried out by British veteran Harry Shindler, that culminated only in 2006 with the erection in Rome of a monument to the liberators.[2]

The difficulty in critically approaching the immediate post-war scenario – a period still marked by great hardship and characterized by the prolonged presence of the liberators in the new guise of occupiers – has made problematic an open confrontation with the Allied occupation of Italy individually as well as collectively. After all, memory is a highly selective instrument, and, as German theorist Aleida Assmann argued, sometimes "in order to remember some things, other things must be forgotten" (2008, 97). In describing the dynamics of cultural memory, Assmann analysed the interactions between remembering and forgetting in both their active and passive modes. In so doing, she argued that these two modes of cultural memory may be illustrated by two museum rooms: the gallery and the store. Museums can display only a small selection of the objects they hold, making them accessible to the public through the mediation of the curator. However, their stores contain a large variety of artefacts which are not

[2] Harry Shindler fought in the Italian Campaign from Anzio to Trieste and subsequently married an Italian woman he met during the war. He currently lives in Italy. He recalled the wide scepticism he encountered during his campaign to erect a monument to the liberators in a book he published in 2008 and in an interview recorded by the author on 23 January 2019. Today the monument is the location where the annual ceremony for the liberation of Rome takes place, on 4 June.

publicly presented but are archived "halfway between the canon and forgetting," waiting for their turn to be brought back to light (2008, 102). This distinction means that while "some memories are preserved but not really kept alive," others are publicly displayed and commemorated, with the result that certain past events come to acquire greater significance than others or have the potential to affect a wider audience (Arnold-de Simine 2013, 22).

The Imperial War Museum (London, UK), a leading resource for the study of contemporary conflicts, has recently celebrated its centenary. The IWM was founded in 1917, while the First World War battlefields were still claiming countless lives, to provide UK with a national war museum to record the events of what was then known as the Great War. According to its founders' vision, the museum would have a twofold role as a place for both commemoration and research. At the beginning of its history, the museum, originally founded to commemorate the "war to end all wars," was confronted with the issue of facing the outbreak of new conflicts – first of all, the Second World War. This circumstance put into question its own existence and rationale, while stimulating the development of new approaches to its subject matter.

Today IWM's unique role is to address and interpret the history and the memory of 20th- and 21st-century conflicts by showing how these events have affected people's lives and shaped today's world. Furthermore, a recent and crucial transformation in the definition of the museum's own identity as a centre of research and education has favoured a more social-cultural approach to the interpretation of modern conflicts (Cundy 2015, 25). With its vast, heterogeneous collection of objects, artworks, photos, films, and documents, its sound archive as well as its specialist library, the museum is committed to maintaining its leading role in promoting innovative research on its subject matters. An indication of IWM's current efforts is the reinterpretation and complete renovation of the Second World War and Holocaust galleries, due to open in 2021.

Marianne Hirsch defined "testimonial objects" those items that, due to the particular significance they have for their owner, are able to carry memory traces from the past and represent the process of its transmission from one generation to another (Hirsch and Spitzer 2006, 355 and Hirsch 2012, 178). Taking my cue from this definition, as well as from Assmann's previously quoted reflection, I aim to examine a series of objects from the IWM collection not currently on display, in order to "read" them as witnesses of different aspects of the postmemory of the British presence in Italy and of the soldiers' encounter with Italian civilians. In so doing, it will be necessary to cross the cultural and geographic borders of what I called the "Italian contact zone," a definition

inspired by the term Mary Louise Pratt coined to indicate specific areas of conflictual cultural encounters involving peoples geographically and historically separated (1991, 34).

What is so special about museum objects? Even when an accessioned item is not exhibited in a display but placed out of sight in a dark store, the fact that it has been "singled out" and preserved makes it different from other objects, charging it with a completely new connotation. It is, in fact, "in the space between the person and the object that new connections and meanings are articulated" (Poulter 2014, 26). In this context, the IWM plays the role of the mediator, bridging the generation who first retained, used, and donated its own cherished possession, and the people who experienced war only by interacting with those items at the museum. In so doing, the museum itself becomes a significant place of encounters: between visitors and objects, between new generations and history.[3]

In this analysis, I also intend to highlight the role oral history sources – not necessarily linked to the specific objects discussed – can play in the transmission of these items' meanings to new generations. As oral historian Alessandro Portelli argued, the greatest value of oral history lies in what these sources can tell us about the meaning of an event for the speaker, rather than in the event itself (1981, 99). The same applies to objects, since their relevance can be better understood when their context is filled out with the memories of those who originally created or interacted with them. It is to some of the artefacts and places I came across while studying the encounter between British soldiers and Italian civilians that I now turn my attention.[4]

2. An English-Italian dictionary: a bridge between two cultures

Without a doubt, the object that in most cases made possible the wartime interaction between British soldiers and Italian civilians was the bilingual dictionary. From the beginning of the Allied campaign in Italy, in July 1943, both

[3] On material culture and the study of artefacts as they are perceived in relation to specific cultural and historic contexts and communities, see Asa Berger 2014 and the essays in Buchli 2002. On museum objects in relation to material culture see Fritsch 2011.

[4] I recorded all the interviews used in this article during my ongoing PhD research on "British Military Encounters with Italian Civilians, 1943-1946" (provisional title). This is an AHRC funded project in collaboration with the University of Reading and the Imperial War Museums. Interviews will be acquisitioned by the IWM's Sound Archive at the end of the current research.

the British and American armies produced special soldiers' English-Italian dictionaries and guidebooks designed to aid servicemen in their daily interactions with locals. However, the British could also benefit from Italian language lessons published by army newspapers,[5] and from local publishers who saw their opportunity and produced numerous sought-after phrasebooks that predictably focused on less licit interactions with women and other kinds of daily street encounters. An example of the competition created by this brand-new market was a dictionary printed in Naples in 1943 that claimed: "all other pamphlets you see around are useless for you" [figure 1].[6]

During the two days I spent interviewing British veteran Roy Quinton, present Chairman of the Italy Star Association, he shared with me his recollections of his fight with the Royal Artillery from Taranto to Rimini. In the course of our discussion, it became clear that the dictionary was one of the key factors influencing not only his wartime experience but also the rest of his whole life. Once in Italy, Roy Quinton's initiative and commitment helped him gain fluency in the language while his interest in the Italian culture persuaded him to learn more about the country: "If I survive the war – he said – I want to learn to speak Italian! And so [my parents] sent me dictionaries and small grammar-books, and from then on every spare minute I had I was studying. Even when we were under bombardment, we had holes in the ground, and I would get these books out 'cause it took my mind out of the war."[7]

For Roy Quinton learning Italian was not only a "therapy" against the horror of war: thanks to his mastery of the Italian language, at the end of 1944 he was withdrawn from the frontline, avoiding the last bloody battles of the Italian Campaign. Later on, working as an interpreter, Roy spent time in Italian cities behind the Allied lines and had the chance to meet Irene, the young woman from Perugia he would marry immediately after the war. Roy described the first time he knocked at her door, after having heard piano music coming out of a home, as the best thing he ever did: "My life has changed when I met my wife, Irene." Significantly, Roy Quinton has kept his own dictionary ever since. If for Roy this wartime souvenir is an object able to authenticate his own past and trigger memories of places and faces belonging to that particular time of his life, for the readers of the IWM's phrasebook it represents the bridge between two cultures,

[5] See, for example: Union Jack: The Newspaper for the British Fighting Forces (Italy ed.) and Eight Army News (Sicily and Italy ed.).
[6] IWM, LBY K. 16/2896: "English – Italian (Figured Pronunciation): The Essential of Italian Grammar Dictionary and Pronunciation."
[7] Interview with Roy Quinton recorded by Fabio Simonetti on 9 January 2018.

a testimony of the multicultural wartime encounter he, and many others like him, experienced in Italy.

Figure 1. *IWM, LBY K. 16/2896: English-Italian dictionary printed in Naples during the war. In the top right, a photo from Roy Quinton and Irene's wedding day in Perugia (from Roy Quinton's private collection).*

3. A San Carlo poster: a new kind of occupation

An English-Italian poster advertising the play *Otello* at the prestigious Real Teatro di San Carlo in Naples, one of the oldest opera houses in the world, provides the chance to discuss the Allied authorities' attitude towards the occupation of Italy [figure 2].[8] After the Anglo-American forces established their presence in the city, in October 1943, the strategical importance of its harbour, as

[8] IWM, LBY 83/726: "Collection of ephemera relating to the San Carlo Opera House, Naples, during the Second World War".

well as the transit of soldiers on leave or convalescent, made Naples the city with the highest concentration of troops in Italy. With 480,000 soldiers attending its performances only in the first year since its reopening, the San Carlo Opera House soon became one of the troops' favourite authorised sources of entertainment.[9] For occupiers and occupied, the theatre was also an important site for encounters as both could work on the productions together as well as sit next to each other in the audience.

It was on 4 November 1943, just over a month after the first Allied soldiers entered war-torn Naples, that Lt Peter Francis of the Royal Artillery made his first acquaintance with the ruins of the San Carlo. The theatre had been closed in 1942 and it was now in a terrible state: bomb damage had blasted the foyer, debris and layers of dust covered the internal surface, there was no electricity or water and a German machine gun nest was still installed on its roof. However, the British requisitioned the building and, under Peter Francis's authority, on 15 November 1943, with the frontline just 30 miles away, the venue officially re-opened its doors to soldiers and civilians. While the original purpose of this initiative was just to "give troops something to do," it soon became clear that soldiers found much more in this experience; by the end of the war, 4 million servicemen had enjoyed opera throughout the country.

When the news that the theatre was about to reopen and in need of workers spread, Neapolitans hastened to the venue, and 260 of them started working under British authorities. The first production of San Carlo's new course was an improvised revue significantly titled *So this is Naples*. After an initial series of technical issues, the decidedly diverse production offered the crowded auditorium "dancers wearing brassieres and 'G' strings," a band playing "the latest popular successes in swing time," and a tenor singing *Torna a Surriento*. Regardless of the mixed success of this first performance, Francis's ambitious plan to open a proper opera season eventually materialised on Boxing Day, with a performance of Puccini's *La Bohème*. From then on, the San Carlo offered opera performances and symphony concerts on an almost daily basis. Italian artists, managed by the British Central Mediterranean Force Opera Company, proved so successful that in 1946 they toured London with eight productions and were the first to reintroduce Italian operas to Covent Garden after the war. The poster advertising San Carlo's opera season represents the Allied propaganda efforts to mark their occupation as very different from that of the recently departed

[9] All information regarding the British authorities "resurrection" of the San Carlo come from IWM, LBY 83/726-1: "San Carlo Souvenir: Personal Impressions of a Season of Opera at the San Carlo Opera House, Naples – 1943/1946, by F. Fesel."

Germans. In their strategy, the Naples theatre epitomised a new kind of occupation, one characterized not by round-ups and imprisonments, but by concerts, clubs, and exhibitions – an explicit manifestation of Allied countries' democratic values over totalitarianism.

The memory of the resurrection of the San Carlo by the British authorities allows considering the story of Cpl Frank Capey, stationed in Naples between 1944 and 1946. When I interviewed his widow, Doris, I was surprised to hear that the only wartime experiences he shared with his family were his countless visits to the San Carlo. However, when I researched deeper into Frank's army career, it appeared that he fought, and was wounded, at the 1944 battle on the Cassino front. Subsequently, his withdrawal from the frontline and the following posting to Naples with military police duties was only the consequence of his ear injury. Thinking of her husband's passion for opera, Doris kept saying: "they couldn't send him to a better place."[10] Not surprisingly, his only wartime souvenirs were five San Carlo opera programmes that he carefully kept. Perhaps Frank Capey's focus on his wartime encounter with the Italian opera betrays his deliberate effort to forget what must have been the horrific sight of the Cassino battlefield and the painful memory of the starving people of Naples: a deliberate attempt to divert and rewrite the postmemory of his wartime experience that left his family with a more acceptable account of his past.

[10] Interview with Doris Capey (neè Smith) recorded by Fabio Simonetti on 28 October 2017.

Figure 2. *IWM, LBY 83 / 726: Collection of ephemera relating to the San Carlo Opera House, Naples, during the Second World War. In the top right, a photo of Cpl Frank Capey (from Doris Capey's private collection).*

4. A *Luftwaffe* fur coat: on pleasant wartime encounters

The next item – a fur coat from a collection of objects recently acquired by the IWM – provides an insight into more pleasant encounters between British soldiers and Italian civilians. The object is linked to the story of Cpl Walter Franklin, a RAF Fitter who worked on Spitfire engines in Italy between 1945 and 1947, and Tina, a young Italian chambermaid at the RAF Sorrento Rest & Leave Camp [figure 3].[11] The couple met thanks to a football match organised by the British Army between soldiers on leave and locals in which both he and Tina's brothers took part. The new Anglo-Italian couple married in 1946 in Pompeii,

[11] IWM, UNI 16101: "Coat, fur: woman's, civilian." The collection of objects held at the IWM also contains a muff made out of a Luftwaffe flying jacket (UNI 16102), a scratch-built Lancaster model made from Spitfire windscreen glass (MOD 2551), and a few photographs and documents relating to Walter Franklin and his wife dating back to the period of their wedding (Documents.26444).

but their decision to move to the UK proved more difficult than they initially thought. In fact, being an Italian civilian, Tina was not allowed to travel with British soldiers, and she had to wait for the Army to organise an official transport for Italian war brides. When her steam train finally arrived in London at Waterloo Station, her sister-in-law was the only member of the Franklin family who could make for the station, but she had only a small black and white photograph to identify her among all the other brides. However, once reunited, Frank and Tina lived together for thirty-one years and their shared passion for dancing bonded their union until she died in 1977.

When she arrived in London, Tina was wearing a fur coat Walter had previously gifted her. This object also has its own, troubled story. Its wartime journey began in the hands of its German producers as a *Luftwaffe* flying jacket. When the Nazis were driven off Naples, the coat was left in a warehouse in nearby Pomigliano d'Arco, where Cpl Franklin found it and saw in it a perfect gift for his young Italian bride-to-be. Only at this point, when a tailor from Sorrento adapted it to its new use, did this military garment begin its new life as the fur coat that Tina brought with her to the UK – an object that crossed both the frontline and the borders of the multifaceted Italian contact zone before to arrive at the IWM.

Figure 3. *IWM, UNI 16101: Single-breasted, three-quarter length coat of brown fur, constructed of pelts originally used to line Luftwaffe flying jackets. In the bottom, two photographs from IWM, Documents 26444: Private papers of Cpl. W.J.E. Franklin.*

Now that both Walter and Tina have died, the task of telling the story of their wartime encounter falls to their eldest daughter, whose name bears the marks of the Italian contact zone: Denise Filomena. She still remembers her mother "wearing [the fur] in England in the early sixties but never after as it was rather stiff and heavy, and modern wool coats were more wearable and practical."[12] Despite this, she has kept the coat and wore it on occasions. Regrettably, as it often happens, she did not ask her parents about their past when she was younger, and they did not use to talk about it. However, her decision to donate her cherished heirloom to the IWM ensured that Tina and Walter's story would not fade. In so doing, she gave her parents' object the chance to become a testimony of the pleasant encounters that also characterized the Allied presence in Italy, an

[12] Email to the author, 20 January 2018.

experience that was inevitably shaped by the frictions emerging from the forced cohabitation of Allied soldiers and Italian civilians in a war-torn country.

5. Silk undergarments: on the interpretation of controversial objects

The last objects considered are a French-style bra and knickers made for Patricia Knatchbull, 2nd Countess Mountbatten of Burma and first daughter of Louis Mountbatten [figure 4].[13] What is striking about the undergarments is that they are made from silk escape maps of Italy of the kind issued to RAF personnel for emergency use in enemy territory. The fact that the cities of Trieste and Milan are shown right on the front of the bra might not be a coincidence, but it could be related to the personal story of the wartime owner of the map. However, as the museum's archive does not hold enough information about this collection, the observer's mind is left without the curator's guidance and domestication function. Is the object's transformation in undergarments to be connected to the dimension of a colonialist attitude towards a defeated country? Or is it an expression of their original owner's character and masculinity? Or rather a personal symbol of pride, a brave memento of a wartime experience that was gifted to a loved one?

This group of objects invites to consider the diverse interpretations that may fill the gap between different observers and a controversial object. The risk of "contaminating" a balanced judgment due to the lack of background information and the anachronistic influence of present-day political or social ideas needs to be taken into consideration. Such a discourse becomes particularly relevant when we think that Second World War artefacts are still subjected to high public sensitivity and therefore "carry an extraordinary burden of responsibility" (Crane 1997, 328). The famous controversy aroused in 1993-1995 around the aborted Enola Gay exhibit at the National Air and Space Museum (USA) demonstrated how memories of this period are still emotionally and politically charged, and how the point of view of the curator could diverge from that of the veteran/eyewitness. Would the aircraft that dropped the first atomic bomb represent the use of new technologies for mass destruction or democracy's triumph over tyranny?[14]

As Assmann argued, "objects and places do not themselves carry qualities of past lives, they do hold whatever we ourselves project onto them or invest them

[13] IWM, EPH 10930: "Underwear."
[14] On the Enola Gay controversy see Linenthal and Englehardt 1996 and Crane 1997.

with" (2006, 211). Even when there is little documentation associated with it, a museum object does still communicate with the observer. However, the possibility to establish a careful dialogue with its physicality might produce alternative interpretations of its history. What is certain is that when they enter a museum collection objects lose their original purpose – or their "place in life," as Assmann called it – and are given the chance of a second life that prolongs their existence (2008, 103). Thanks to the new exclusive status they acquire, museum objects carry and transmit different meanings, and prompt a dialogue with visitors interacting with the rest of the collection, thus acting as contact zones themselves (Poulter 2014, 27).

***Figure 4**. IWM, EPH 10930: Ladies bra and knickers set made from silk escape maps of Italy.*

6. Conclusions

Today IWM holds more than twelve million objects, but, inevitably, only a very small percentage of these items are on display at any one time. Consequentially, display choices provide museums – and especially war museums – with a crucial responsibility while highlighting their role in building a society's memory and

identity. History museums are important places of public memory: by bringing some memories alive while "excluding" others (Keene 2005, 98), they have the possibility to direct the attention of the community and foster particular interpretations of crucial historical events, thus 'rationalizing' and sometimes 'institutionalizing' the past (Walsh 1992, 2). In the case of the IWM, it is evident how the current display dedicates only a narrow space to the Italian Campaign. This choice is echoed in the long-standing national view that since the end of the war strongly privileges the events that brought Allied troops from France to Germany at the expense of the alleged "D-Day dodgers" who fought in Italy.

Today, seventy-five years after the end of the Second World War, the gradual passing away of eyewitnesses challenges the museum in new ways: can objects that were meaningful to some people evoke meaning in others and help later generations to interpret the past? The feeling that objects "have soaked up the events in which [they have] played a role" is an impression that can be helped and shaped by the mediation and interpretation of the museum's curator (Arnold-de Simine 2013, 84). With the disappearance of the unmediated first-hand experience of the war, the IWM's urge to pass on the memory from generation to generation is reflected by the increasing importance drawn on personal stories. By displaying its collection of objects and linking them to accounts from diaries, letters and interviews, the display acquires a new meaning that is supposed to give the visitor the possibility to identify with a specific experience in order to stimulate reflection. People often feel that the testimonial objects they donated to the museum, as well as their recollection of past events, are too insignificant to be of general interest. However, once their stories are accessioned into the museum's collection, they become a meaningful part of a larger, collective body of experiences, while remaining nonetheless valuable individual testimonies (Keene 2005, 96).

Silke Arnold-de Simine stated that contemporary memorial museums provide "a controlled and safe environment in which all members of society can potentially expose themselves to past events that are difficult to remember because they are painful and/or controversial and inspire guilt rather than pride" (2013, 119). The IWM's collection of objects and its use of personal recollections gives visitors the possibility to become "secondary witnesses," by empathising with the experience of individual soldiers and civilians in wartime. In this process, the IWM's role is to mediate the transmission of experiences that the traumatised eyewitness of the events could not articulate in a coherent form. It is thanks to the curator's selection of significant objects and personal recollections from the museum's collection, and to its historically accurate interpretation of their stories

in the display, that a specific experience passes on to the museum's visitors and to new generations. This mediated process would encourage such "secondary witnesses" to emphatically re-live and partially re-experience the emotions aroused by the display, finding in testimonial objects a meaning that was often denied even to their original owners.

Bibliography

Arnold-de Simine, Silke. 2013. *Mediating Memory in the Museum: Trauma, Empathy, Nostalgia*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Asa Berger, Arthur. 2014. *What Objects Mean: An Introduction to Material Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Assmann, Aleida. 2004. "Four Formats of Memory: From Individual to Collective Constructions of the Past." In *Cultural Memory and Historical Consciousness in the German-Speaking World Since 1500*, edited by C. Emden, and D. Migdley, 19-38. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

Assmann, Aleida. 2006. *Der Lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik*. Munich: C. H. Beck.

Assmann, Aleida. 2008. "The Canon and the Archive." In *Media and Cultural Memory*, edited by Herausgegeben von Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, 97-108. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Buchli, Victor (edited by). 2002. *The Material Culture Reader*. Oxford-New York: Berg.

Crane, Susan A. 1997. "Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum." In *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Context*, edited by Bettina M. Carbonnell, 318-334. Oxford: Blackwell.

Cundy, Alys. 2015. *A Century of Reinvention: Display Policy and Practice at the Imperial War Museum, London, 1917-2017*. PhD diss., University of Bristol.

Fritsch, Juliette (edited by). 2011. *Museum Gallery: Interpretation and Material Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Halbwachs, Maurice. 1992. *On Collective Memory*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Hirsch, Marianne and Spitzer, Leo. 2006. "Testimonial Objects: Memory, Gender, and Transmission". In *Poetics Today* Vol. 27, no. 2, Summer: 353-383.

Hirsch, Marianne. 2012. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Keene, Suzanne. 2005. *Fragments of the World: Uses of Museum Collections*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.

Linenthal, Edward T. and Englehardt, Tom (edited by). 1996. *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Portelli, Alessandro. 1981. "The Peculiarities of Oral History." In *History Workshop*, Vol. 12: 96-107.

Poulter, Emma K. 2014. "Hybridity – Objects as Contact Zones: A Critical Analysis of Objects in the West African Collections at the Manchester Museum." In *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research*, Vol. 2: 25-41.

Pratt, Mary Louise. 1991. "Arts of the Contact Zone." In *Profession* no. 91, July: 33-40.

Shindler, Harry. 2008. *Roma ricorda i suoi liberatori*. Ascoli Piceno: Lìbrati.

Walsh, Kevin. 1992. *The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the Post-modern World*. London: Routledge.

Fabio Simonetti is Sessional Lecturer at the University of Reading, where he currently teaches History of Modern Italy. He is a Ph.D. student at the University of Reading and the Imperial War Museums as part of an AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Partnership (CDP), and he is researching on the encounter between British soldiers and Italian civilians during the Second World War. He is the author of a monography entitled *Via Tasso. Quartier generale e carcere tedesco durante l'occupazione di Roma* (Odradek, 2016), and he has published articles on different aspects of Italy's involvement in the Second World War: *Shaping Each Other: British and Italian Depictions of the Enemy (1935-1943)* (Pacini Editore, 2020), and *From the Alps to the American Air Museum: Pont-Saint-Martin and the Memory of the Bombing Raid of 23 August 1944* (IWM Despatches, 2016).

statuS Quaestionis
language text culture

Marco Malvestio
University of Toronto

"If Necessary for Years, If Necessary Alone": History, Memory, and Fiction in Contemporary Representations of Dunkirk

Abstract

A seemingly impossible task, the evacuation of the majority of the British Expeditionary Force (more than 300,000 men) from the shores of Dunkirk, besieged by the German forces, represented a symbol of hope in a moment in which the British Empire was suffering crushing defeats in Europe as well as in Asia. The myth of the 'finest hour' of the British people, both spontaneously generated from below and directed from above by the government, has been a central topic of the British propaganda during and after the war, and it still possesses a strongly evocative power over new generations of artists. In recent years, several movies (*Atonement*, 2007, *Dunkirk*, 2017, *Darkest Hour*, 2017) have represented the evacuation of Dunkirk, oscillating between propagandistic rhetoric and a problematization of the memory of the war. By analyzing these films, this article shows how post-war generations have appropriated the cultural memory of Dunkirk as a way of restaging an ideal of Britishness and at the same time as a controversial attempt to update it by highlighting the divisions of class and ideology among British society and the army.

The evacuation of the majority of the British Expeditionary Force (more than 300,000 men) from the shores of Dunkirk took place between 26th May and 4th June 1940 when troops were besieged by the German forces. This seemingly impossible task represented a symbol of hope in the crucial years of the war, when the British Empire was suffering crushing defeats in Europe as well as in Asia. The myth of the 'finest hour' of the British people and of the Commonwealth ("produced with apparent spontaneity from below and sometimes engineered politically from above by crown and government", Gilroy 2004, 97) largely depended on the capability of the army and the fleet to endure the military catastrophe and to prepare the counterattack that led to the final victory in the war. Indeed, this event still possesses a strongly evocative power over new generations of citizens and artists. In this essay I will analyse two recent movies which were released in 2017, Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk* and Joe Wright's

Darkest Hour (with a reference also to *Atonement*, 2007, by the same director), highlighting their simplified portrayals of the evacuation. I will focus on recent examples to show the vitality, persistence and ambiguity of this myth even in the present day. While these movies suggest varying degrees of distance from, and criticism towards, the mainstream version of Dunkirk, they all portray some main features: unity against the common enemy, heroism, and the role of the civilian fleet. Despite certain attempts to debunk the myth of Dunkirk (especially in Nolan's case), these movies fail to provide a portrait of the evacuation that is not jingoistic.

According to Paul Gilroy, "there is something neurotic about Britain's continued citation of the anti-Nazi war" (2004, 97). The emphasis of the memory of the Second World War, with particular reference to the iconic event, Dunkirk, represents a way to return to a moment in which a clear and uncomplicated idea of British identity supposedly still existed and when "the national culture [...] was, irrespective of the suffering involved in the conflict, both comprehensible and habitable" (97). "That memory of the country at war against foes who are simply, tidily, and uncomplicatedly evil," Gilroy continues, "has recently acquired the status of an ethnic myth" evoked to refuse a discussion of the reality of the post-war period and present problems of the country. Gilroy labels this problematic relationship of Britain with its past "postimperial melancholia" (98). Following on from Gilroy's suggestion, this article shows how Dunkirk has been the object of an ambiguous post-memorial process, becoming both a mythical moment in British history and a continuous presence in the present of the nation.

Two 2017 films, *Dunkirk* by Christopher Nolan and *Darkest Hour* by Joe Wright, represent the evacuation of Dunkirk by oscillating between propagandistic rhetoric and attempts to problematize the memory of the war. Dunkirk reinforced the notion of the British as an island people, willing to sacrifice themselves for the cause and with a great capacity of improvisation. Nevertheless, such romanticised accounts of the evacuation leave out several uncomfortable facts. For example, the British failed to help the Belgians in the defense of their country and many French soldiers were abandoned during the retreat. The British Expeditionary Force was poorly and inappropriately equipped, and military tactics failed to elaborate and react to the new German *blitzkrieg* strategy witnessed in Poland. Moreover, the German forces did not explicitly aim to annihilate the BEF, but rather to march rapidly on Paris. Finally, and most importantly, the contribution of civilian boats was very small in the overall context of the evacuation, which itself was made possible by the efforts of the RAF and the indecision of the German command. On the contrary, civilian

boats often proved to be ineffective, sinking in the channel or remaining stuck on the shore of Dunkirk.[1] The press exaggerated the boats' role, which was so insignificant in the success of the evacuation that Churchill himself omitted it in his speech on 4th June. All of these facts depict a historical situation rather different from its popular reception, according to which the BEF was left alone in danger of total annihilation while the combined effort of the military and the British people managed to save it. This being said, the films I analyze here prioritise and afford more space to the popular version of the myth of Dunkirk over and above the historical one. Thus, I intend to show how post-war generations have appropriated the cultural memory of Dunkirk as a way of restaging an ideal of Britishness and, at the same time, have controversially mobilised the events of Dunkirk in order to blur the divisions of class and ideology amongst British society and the army.

I argue that Gilroy's concept of postcolonial melancholia is relevant to Dunkirk, which represents, in British public memory, a synecdoche of the Second World War. The long and expensive military effort necessary to win the war was too costly for the financial and industrial system of the United Kingdom to bear, eventually resulting in the collapse of the Empire. As Angus Calder has argued, "the greatest single fact suppressed by the Myth of the Blitz is this: in 1940, because Churchill refused to give in, world power passed decisively away from Britain to the USA" (1994, 53). In other words, the celebration of Dunkirk as a culminating moment of heroism coincides with its being the last widely remembered military success of the British forces. It is fitting, in this sense, that this success consists of a retreat.

The memorialization of war is usually aligned with a country's propaganda and with the self-representation and interpretation of the war's participants (Connelly 2004, 4). It comes as no surprise, then, that the myth of Dunkirk has a long history, which can be traced to its immediate aftermath, when the government and newspapers exaggerated the merits of the army and the civilian fleet (Calder 1994, 97-98; Summerfield 2010, 790-791). During the decades that followed the war (a period of general decline for the United Kingdom both economically and in terms of foreign politics) a plethora of movies and documentaries about the war were produced. The memory of the war, with particular emphasis on the episode of Dunkirk, was widely evoked in public and private contexts. This process was so pervasive that, as Geoff Eley argues,

[1] These details can be found in Calder 1994, 90-118. For a summary, see also Summerfield 2010, 789, note.

"'remembering' World War II requires no immediate experience of those years. [...] Consciously and unconsciously, this field of connectedness to the war became worked into public discourse in inspiring, insidious, and enduring ways, making an active archive of collective identification" (2001, 818-819).

As Penny Summerfield highlights in her most important study of the early cinematic representations of Dunkirk, during wartime and its immediate aftermath the memory of the evacuation was not monolithic. In 1942, two movies about the evacuation were released, *Mrs. Miniver* (an American production, received enthusiastically in England) and *In Which We Serve*. Whilst the former placed great focus on the civilian effort to save the BEF, in the latter the civilian fleet did not appear (Summerfield 2010, 796). This attention to the episode of Dunkirk in British cinema was even more significant after the war, with almost 100 movies about the war released between 1945 and 1963. Many of these were box-office successes (779). Once again, the account of the events was not univocal, and some cases (for example Alex Holmes's *Dunkirk*, 1958) were critical of the army and the military leaders. Nevertheless, the vast amount of productions concerning the evacuation nourished the popular memory of Dunkirk as an extraordinary event and a celebration either of the army or of the British people's determination to never surrender (809).

Many of these movies belong to the "drama-documentary" category, which means they merge "the conventions of narrative cinema [...] with documentary techniques" (Chapman 2007, 16). Narratorial consequentiality and continuity montage editing are employed together with *typage* ("casting actors who physically resemble the social types that they are portraying"). They often follow a group rather than an individual protagonist, as typical of documentaries. The effect of this authorial choice is that, of course, the portrayal of individual stories is balanced by collective events, to the extent that a commonality develops between the destinies and merits of war heroes and the collective expression of the nation (16).

"Winston's Civilian Fleet." The People's War in *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour*

Despite attempting to offer an uncomfortable depiction of the evacuation by including the fights amongst the British and their allies, *Dunkirk* nevertheless indulges in an extremely patriotic interpretation of events, which recuperates the memorialisation of the evacuation. The movie tells three stories taking place in Dunkirk. Each story has a different timeframe and covers a different natural

element and part of warfare. The first timeframe focuses on a British private and his attempts to be embarked to England during the week before the evacuation. The second covers the crew of a civilian boat during the day before the evacuation and their fight with a shell-shocked soldier they rescue who refuses to go back to the French shore. The third covers one hour of the fight between a British aviator and a German plane.

Nolan's film seems to aim for an ideal and abstract representation of the retreat as a timeless allegory for the human condition. Similarly to the drama-documentary discussed above, the film follows individual stories, but the details about the characters' personal lives and features are reduced, forbidding the viewers to empathise with them and suggesting the evacuation was a collective event. The caption that opens the film does not name the Germans, referring them simply as "the enemy;" and the British troops are said to be waiting for "a miracle." It is indicative that the enemy is never shown in person, not even during the battles: the viewers can see German bombs and machinery, but never other human beings. When, in the last minutes of the movie, the aviator (played by Tom Hardy) destroys his plane and surrenders to the Germans, their faces are shown unclearly in shadows. Similarly, there is almost no display of Union Jacks among the British forces.

To reinforce this absoluteness and abstractness, the spaces in which the film is set are either liminal (like the beach) or spaces connected with movement and journey (i.e. the air, the sea) that are all empty and deprived of human presence. Similarly, the soldiers do not crowd the beach chaotically. Instead, they wait their turn in lines, breaking them only when the menace of a bomb appears and forming them anew shortly after. Therefore, the spaces of Nolan's movie are almost metaphysical spaces, suggestive of a general uncertainty for the future rather than national identity. This sense of uncertainty is reinforced by the soundtrack of the movie composed by Hans Zimmer. Zimmer employs the Shepard tone, an auditory illusion that creates "a never-ending sensation of rising or falling" (Rapan 2018, 137), keeping the audience in a perpetual state of anxiety.

What is significant within Nolan's representation of the war is that, despite its lyrical and epic elements, it does not hide the internal fights among the British forces as Wright's film does, and as the popularized memory of the war tends to do. In the second time frame, a shell-shocked soldier is rescued at sea by a civilian boat after the shipwreck of his own plane and ends up fighting the members of the crew when they tell him that they intend to go to Dunkirk to help the army evacuation. During this fight, he kills a teenage boy by throwing him down the stairs of the boat. Even more significantly, in another scene, a fight among the

Allied forces hiding in a trawler and under fire by the enemy results in the death of a French soldier. Not only is such a scene suggestive of the disagreements between the British and the French, and the lack of cooperation between the armies that made German victory possible, but also (referring to the Highlanders Regiment) of the rivalries between different identities within the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, it has to be noted that Nolan's movie has been criticised for its lack of portrayal of different ethnicities, specifically of Indian soldiers, who were indeed present on the shores of Dunkirk with several regiments (Naahar 2017).

Despite these episodes, Nolan's film participates in a representation of Dunkirk that welcomes several tropes of the popular memory of the evacuation. Except for the aforementioned scene in the trawler, conflicts (most notably class conflicts) are absent, and there appears to be general concordance between the officers and the troops; whilst historically the heads of the expedition were widely criticised for their lack of preparation. Nolan shows Commander Bolton, the officer that supervises the evacuation, refusing to leave the beach in an act of heroism. Played by Kenneth Branagh, a popular actor and arguably an incarnation of idealized British aesthetics and values, the Commander is, significantly, a fictional character. The behaviour of real-life officers during the retreat was much more ambiguous and open to criticism.

Most significantly, the movie devotes a large amount of screen space to the role of the civilian fleet (approximately one third of the movie), despite the fact that, as noted above, such efforts were largely exaggerated in the aftermath of the operation for propagandistic purposes. Mr. Dawson (played by Mark Rylance), the owner of the private vessel, is portrayed as a taciturn and reserved middle-aged man who has no hesitation when it comes to serving his country. Similarly, his son and his teenage friend are portrayed as enthusiastic youth who help during the war effort. Moreover, since the viewers are shown the sinking of a British destroyer leaving Dunkirk, Dawson's boat is one of the few sea vehicles that successfully fulfills its task, thereby suggesting that the civilian fleet had the same impact on the evacuation of the British military float. The emphasis on the role of the civilian fleet is intended to suggest the unity of the nation as a whole against the difficulties of the war; interestingly, when Branagh's character sees the float approaching he says he sees "home."

Finally, the movie ends with a soldier reading aloud from a newspaper the speech that Winston Churchill delivered to the House of Commons on 4th June, at the end of the evacuation, as their train arrives at Woking and they are welcomed by the cheers of the crowd. In Nolan's movie, Churchill's speech,

alternated with images of the abandoned shore and accompanying the return home of the soldiers, is used as a symbol of the will of the British people and as a source of inspiration and closure for those involved.

Something similar happens in Joe Wright's *Darkest Hour*, a political drama focusing on Winston Churchill's attempt to convince the parliament to continue the war effort without reaching a peace treaty with the Germans. The movie spans from the forced resignation of Neville Chamberlain due to pressure from the opposition and his own party, to the end of the evacuation of Dunkirk. Essentially it covers that very short period of time during which the British finally understood the superiority of the German army at the time, and nearly risked losing the war.

The entire movie plays on the opposition between Churchill, shown as a popular outsider determined to win the war, and his political opponents, the cold politicians aiming for appeasement. Churchill, histrionically played by Gary Oldman, is portrayed as an awkward and idiosyncratic old man often expressing himself with wit and mottos, whose faith in victory is opposed to the ambivalences of his political rivals. In this sense, the opposition that the movie creates is not simply between a strong, unconventional leader and weak politicians, but also between a man of the people (as the aristocratic Winston Churchill becomes over the movie) and royalty and upper-class politicians. Significantly, while Churchill undertakes sorties in London among the people, his adversaries are shown only in the bunker and the dark corners of the House of Commons as conspirators rather than political leaders.

The movie's climax focuses on Churchill's war cabinet's resistance to the decision to continue hostility towards the Germans. Chamberlain and Lord Halifax insist that Churchill explicitly refuses to consider peace negotiations, since Churchill's refusal would force him to resign, leading to the election of Halifax as Prime Minister. Contrary to their reasonable but short-sighted proposal of negotiations and their narrow-minded political intrigues, Churchill's faith proves unshakeable, if not in victory, at least in his ability to evacuate the troops. It is not a coincidence that the prudent proposals of Chamberlain and Halifax are contrasted with iconic phrases that either show Churchill's determination ("You cannot reason with a tiger when your head is inside of its mouth") or his sarcastic unconventionality ("Will you stop interrupting me while I am interrupting you?"). Churchill's wittiness as a tool of seduction and persuasion returns in the underground scene, and most importantly at the end of the film when he has to convince the members of the parliament to sustain his decisions.

Churchill's unconventional personal manners are opposed to the snobbish and stiff attitude of his opponents. Since his first appearance on the screen, there is a focus on the details of Churchill's eccentric private life that functions at times as comic relief. In fact, the first thing we learn about Churchill is his breakfast habits, which include a cigar and a glass of scotch. His distance from everyday life, made clear when he makes the mistake of showing the photographers a V sign with the back of his hand (unaware of its rude meaning), or claims he has never taken a bus, are portrayed as signs of idiosyncratic awkwardness rather than aristocratic snobbism. Churchill's role of outsider is also underlined by his relationship with King George VI, who initially strongly dislikes the manners and the fame of the new Prime Minister (compounded by his personal friendship with his rival Lord Halifax). Nevertheless, Churchill gradually gains the support of the King, who functions as a symbol of the unity of the nation. His support becomes a synecdoche for the support of the British people.

Most importantly, these personality traits are overcome and forgiven in the underground scene, in which Churchill descends to the underground to interrogate the citizens of London about his decision to reject the negotiations. Here Churchill verifies the willingness of the British people to continue the fight and symbolically receives the mandate to refuse the peace negotiations. This utterly fictional scene is so pivotal in Churchill's resolution that, towards the end of the movie when he addresses the members of parliament, he backs his claims by naming the people he spoke with on the underground. This scene serves to obscure the class struggles of British society, presenting an aristocratic Prime Minister receiving suggestions directly from everyday citizens. The film's depiction of Churchill as an egalitarian man of the people reaches its extreme when the Prime Minister converses with a person of colour, with whom he exchanges Shakespearean quotes. Here, we most clearly see Wright's attempt to colourblind as well as de-class British society and diminish the colonial responsibilities of the British Empire – and indeed of Churchill himself.

Moreover, the movie only shows us glimpses of Churchill's personal responsibilities in the disaster, as there is no mention of his initiative in the failure of the Norwegian campaign. Nevertheless, another military disaster is mentioned, one that occurred under Churchill's initiative: the Gallipoli campaign, during the Great War. Halifax accuses Churchill of being so vain he prefers risking another Gallipoli than giving up on his ideas, to which Churchill answers that Gallipoli was the navy's fault, and this affirmation ends the argument. In other words, while not highlighting Churchill's responsibilities in the defeat, Wright chooses to show his role in another, chronologically distant

iconic defeat, without insisting too much on it; and he does so to humanize his protagonist. As Calder argues, "the more the fallibility of Churchill is emphasised, the more lovable his heroic bearing becomes, and the more superhumanly he appears" (1994, 90).

Despite its focus on the evacuation of Dunkirk, the film does not dedicate much screen space to military issues, which are discussed rather simplistically and unproblematically. For instance, it is suggested that the defeat is France's fault, while in reality it also depended on the errors of the British army. France's acceptance of defeat in the allied colloquia is represented farcically, with Churchill struggling to speak intelligible French and the French heads of State mocking him for his belief in victory. Similarly, the responsibility for the success of the evacuation is shown as largely dependent on the civilian fleet; which, once again, is used to underline the united will of the nation against its internal and external enemies. In an important shot, the civilian vessels are shown in front of the cliffs of Dover, while no similar symbolical treatment is reserved for the military navy. The role of civilian boats is exaggerated in order to show Churchill as a man of the people. It is worth noting that, despite being presented in the closing credits as "Winston's civilian fleet," Churchill did not mention it in his 4th June speech.

In addition, the editing of the film suggests that Churchill's iconic "We shall never surrender" speech (forming the title of my article) is delivered while the evacuation is still being performed, but in fact it was delivered after it ended. By changing the chronology of the speech and the evacuation, the speech scene at the movie's end highlights once again how Dunkirk is portrayed in *Darkest Hour* as a moment of national unity and heroism, and also the direct effect of Churchill's effort alone, who received his task directly from the hands of the British people.

Although the brevity of this contribution does not allow me to treat it extensively, it is worth mentioning another movie by Wright, *Atonement* (2007), which shares some significant tropes regarding the representation of Dunkirk with *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour*, and which in many ways anticipates Wright's treatment of the evacuation in his later work. This becomes more obvious if we compare the movie with its literary source, Ian McEwan's novel with the same title (2001), in which the complex metafictional frame, paired with the narrator's unreliability, casts a shadowy light on the process of memorialisation of the Second World War. A central moment in the novel is, of course, the description of the Dunkirk evacuation. The importance of this passage becomes more significant by the ending, when the narrator Briony tells the readers that Robbie did, in fact, die there, and he did not manage to survive as we were previously

told. Nevertheless, the part of the novel dedicated to the Dunkirk evacuation is everything but propagandistic. McEwan carefully represents the conflict's chaos, classism and the internal struggles amongst the British soldiers, debunking the myth of the 'finest hour.'

Although faithful to the novel's plot, Wright's movie presents a version of the facts of Dunkirk more coherent with the national myth of the heroic evacuation. In the central part of the movie dedicated to Dunkirk, Wright tries to render the tragedy and the difficulties of the retreat, but he also tones down the more controversial issues raised by McEwan about the operation and the British army. For instance, it is significant that it is not specified that the men with Robbie are corporals, and there does not seem to be any conflict between them. In McEwan's novel, Robbie is more educated than they are, but lower in grade, and they outrank him but they follow him because they cannot read a map. On the contrary, in the film he simply appears to be their leader. In the novel, this conflict is highly symbolic of the class issues that pervaded British society: Robbie was lower class but had the chance to study at Cambridge thanks to a scholarship, and his manners and accent contrast with the corporals who, for reasons of class difference, despise him. However, in Wright's film the two men seem naturally prone to follow Robbie because of his intellectual superiority, and their relationship is not problematised.

Moreover, to suggest the unity of the Empire and the equality of its subjects, one of the corporals is a person of colour, a detail that was not specified in the book. Such an attempt to limit the colonial responsibilities will return in Wright's *Darkest Hour*. In the movie, the scenes of conflict between the soldiers and the officers that characterized the novel are also absent, and the scene of the RAF man nearly lynched by the crowd is omitted. In the squalor and danger that was the reality of Dunkirk and, indeed, McEwan's rendition of Dunkirk, the film's soldiers do not show signs of conflict among themselves, instead they help one another and sing patriotic songs to increase morale.

Finally, Wright's film inevitably lacks the metafictional complexity of the novel. Briony's unreliability as a narrator, although present in the film, is not as accentuated as in the novel. Her confession, for example, is shorter and simplified, taking the form of an interview instead of a private diary, thus allowing less space for recollection and reasoning. Most importantly, while the novel ends with Briony reflecting on the power and the ambiguity of fiction, allowing to recreate (for Cecilia and Robbie) the happiness that her childhood mistake prevented, the movie ends with a short sequence after the confession showing Robbie and Cecilia happy together on the beach.

The novel's metafictional frame retrospectively suggests that readers have inhabited one person's obsession and invites them to re-think the story with a sense of betrayal and claustrophobia. The movie, on the other hand, simply parallels the two possible endings and uncritically privileges the 'happy' version. The novel's profound reflection on the fragility of memory, the deceptiveness of fiction, and the narcissism of self-representation framing the account of the Dunkirk evacuation are intended to comment on the memory of the war itself. In other words, McEwan employs an unreliable narrator to invite the reader to doubt our knowledge of history, and, in complementarity with this purpose, he provides an anti-rhetorical debunking of the retreat. Not only does Wright, by contrast, provide less space for the metafictional frame, ending the movie on an alternate finale that reduces *Atonement* to a romantic love story, he also presents the evacuation as a moment of national unity and pride. By avoiding the representation of the class conflicts and abuse amongst the soldiers, Wright recreates an account of Dunkirk that is essentially coherent with its popular memory and the loosening of the metafictional frame of the novel sanitises McEwan's epistemological choices.

Conclusion

The two films analysed (together with *Atonement*) provide a pacific and mostly unproblematised interpretation of Dunkirk, in contrast with historical facts and other fictionalisations of the event. In light of the difficulties of the present, and on the verge of a new situation of isolation after Brexit (Jack 2018), these directors represent a United Kingdom ready to fight (to quote Churchill) "if necessary for years, if necessary alone."[2] Nolan and Wright choose to follow a widely popularised interpretation of Dunkirk without contradicting its mythologies, including the importance of the civilian fleet. Whilst the Second World War represented the end of global British hegemony and the rise of the American

[2] The directors, nevertheless, distance themselves from such a reading of their work. According to Nolan, who notes that Brexit took place while the movie was being shot, "as a filmmaker, you can't control the world that your film goes out into. It is a story about community. It's a story about people coming together in the face of evil. And I think different political groups taking that to mean different things means they're ignoring certain elements of the film" (Wiseman 2017). Similarly, Wright states that the parallels with Brexit "were there, but my job is to tell the story very specifically in the context of what was happening at that time. And to offer up scenarios and questions" (Sims 2017).

empire, it is interesting to note that these films do not consider this aspect of the conflict. Both filmmakers prefer to represent Dunkirk as a defense of the "island home" rather than centralising its imperialistic interests, thus confirming Gilroy's reading of the memorialization of war as a neurotic attempt to hide the nation's crimes. Although Churchill's peroration evokes the intervention of the American ally, symbolizing and foreseeing the dependency of England on the US, this effect of the war is never faced. At the same time, the army is never represented as an imperial, trans-national force, as the film fails to accurately depict soldiers from the colonies and the Commonwealth, and similarly omits non-English British nationalities, except for the aforementioned isolated case. Such omissions suggest a desire to erase the memory of a colonial past, a desire that projects itself very much onto the present. At the same time, the emphasis on the retreat of Dunkirk as a moral victory and a source of national pride functions as a repression of the collapse of the British Empire that the participation in the Second World War caused, unfolding across the decades that followed.

Filmography

Nolan, Christopher, dir. 2017. *Dunkirk*.

Wright, Joe, dir. 2007. *Atonement*.

Wright, Joe, dir. 2017. *Darkest Hour*.

Bibliography

Calder, Angus. 1994. *The Myth of the Blitz*. London: Pimlico.

Chapman, James. 2007. "Re-Presenting War. British Television Drama-Documentary and the Second World War." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1: 13-33.

Gilroy, Paul. 2004. *After Empire. Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* London: Routledge.

Eley, Geoff. 2001. "Finding the People's War: Film, British Collective Memory, and World War II." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 106, no. 3: 818-838.

Jack, Ian. 2018. "*Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour* fuel Brexit fantasies – even if they weren't meant to." *The Guardian*, January 27, 2018.

McEwan, Ian. 2001. *Atonement*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Naahar, Rohan. 2017. "Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk* forgot the Indian soldiers' contribution, but does it matter?" *Hindustan Times*, July 25, 2017.

Rapan, Eleonora. 2018. "Shepard Tones and Production of Meaning in Recent Films: Lucrecia Martel's *Zama* and Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk*." *The New Soundtrack*, vol. 8, no. 2: 135–144.

Sims, David. 2017. "Joe Wright on Creating a More Realistic Winston Churchill." *The Atlantic*, December 12, 2017.

Summerfield, Penny. 2010. "Dunkirk and the Popular Memory of Britain at War, 1940–58." *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 45, no. 4: 788-811.

Wiseman, Andreas. 2017. "Cristopher Nolan explains why 'Dunkirk' was a gamble that required a 'leap of faith'." *Screendaily*, December 11, 2017.

Marco Malvestio obtained a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature at the University of Padua in 2019. As a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the University of Toronto, he works on the ecological issues raised by twenty-first century Italian science fiction and weird fiction. His publications include articles on Philip Roth, William T. Vollmann, Roberto Bolaño, Jeff VanderMeer, Bret Easton Ellis, and Italian science fiction. He co-edited with Valentina Sturli the volume on contemporary horror fiction *Vecchi maestri e nuovi mostri. Tendenze e prospettive della letteratura horror all'inizio del nuovo millennio* (Mimesis 2019). *The Conflict Revisited: The Second World War in Post-Postmodern Fiction*, a book based on his doctoral thesis, is scheduled for publication by Peter Lang in 2020.

statuS Quaestionis
language text culture

Elia Romera-Figueroa
Duke University

Voiced Postmemories: Rozalén's "Justo" as a Case Study of Singing, Performing, and Embodying Mourning in Spain

Abstract

This article introduces the concept of "voiced postmemories" by analyzing the song "Justo" (2017), created by the Spanish singer-songwriter Rozalén, as well as the documentary that was released with it, *Conversaciones con mi abuela* (2017). The documentary portrays an intergenerational dialogue in which Rozalén asks her grandmother about the murder and "disappearance" of Rozalén's great-uncle, Justo, at the end of the Spanish Civil War. Justo's story stands as an archetype of many stories of victims of authoritarian dictatorships. The song shows the need to mourn Justo for four generations. Among the achievements of Rozalén's project is the exhumation of Justo's tomb, reactivating an ongoing debate about mass graves in Spain. The essay connects this example with others in Spain, Chile, Uruguay, Israel, and India, and it characterizes some features of voiced postmemories, those aural and oral particularities of postmemories found and expressed through music and sound.

1. Introduction

This essay adds to the emerging field of postmemory studies within the context of the Spanish Civil War (here referred to as "SCW")[1] and to the ongoing research regarding the intersections of sound studies, gender studies, and memory studies. As Marianne Hirsch asserts, the definition of "postmemory" has evolved since its first appearance in the early 1990s (2020).[2] The present article considers one additional layer in postmemory studies by exploring the inter- and trans-generational oral transmission of stories popularized, in this case, by singer-

[1] Sebastiaan Faber (2018) contributed a key chapter in which he summarizes the state of affairs of postmemory studies in Spain.

[2] The most updated definition of the term states: "[p]ostmemory describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma or transformation of those who came before–to events that they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images and behaviors among which they grew up. But these events were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (Hirsch 2019a, 172).

songwriters. This proposal goes beyond the visual media (photographs, paintings, documentaries, personal objects, etc.) through which postmemory has mainly been studied by examining a song in detail, and by connecting the case study with further examples. Answering the question of "what aesthetic and institutional structures, what tropes and technologies best mediate the complex psychology of postmemory" (2019a), Hirsch enumerates a number of specialists—"contemporary writers, filmmakers, visual artists, memorial artists and museologists" (2019a)—that have forged an aesthetic of postmemory. In my analyses, I will not survey *what* medium best facilitates the continuity of memory among generations. Instead, I will argue for the need to include music and sonic art in the aesthetics of postmemory, mapping out a tentative characterization of its aural specificities.[3] As I will explain further in the third section, this is not the first attempt to study the way subsequent generations in different sociohistorical contexts interacted with their traumatic past through songs (Meyers and Zandberg 2002; Kabir 2004; Friedman 2017; Lobos 2018). The concept of "voiced postmemories" proposed in the present article, however, connects these articulations under a common frame, highlighting their shared aural and oral natures without attempting to homogenize their singularities. I propose to classify as "voiced postmemories" those expressions of postmemory manifested through music and sound that could potentially help us mourn 'inherited' traumas, or to react to powerful collective experiences that preceded our birth.[4]

The song "Justo" will be the initial, guiding case study of this essay. It was written by the Spanish singer-songwriter Rozalén (1986-) for her album *Cuando el río suena...* (2017), and it was composed following a conversation with her grandmother, Ángeles. Rozalén stands out as one of today's most recognized Spanish singer-songwriters, especially after the release of "La puerta violeta"

[3] Laia Quílalez Esteve and José Carlos Rueda Laffond (2017) edited the first compilation of articles about postmemory in the SCW (1936-1939) and Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975). Among the aesthetics of postmemory that they study (TV, movies, photography, novels, theater, comics, social media) they include a chapter on radio, a good example of the sonic dimension of postmemory (Montagut Calvo 2017, 75-93). Earlier, in 2013, Irene Gómez-Castellano had studied lullabies and postmemory in a popular SCW film. Both essays are instances of the aural and oral components in Spanish postmemory studies that the present article examines.

[4] My thoughts on the emphasis given to the use of songs as a possible way to mourn and the importance of the act of verbalizing songs are influenced by Stephanie Siebuth's book *Survival Songs: Conchita Piquer's Coplas and Franco's Regime of Terror* (2014). Drawing from clinical psychotherapy, Sieburth studied the ways in which singing coplas (in particular, those by Conchita Piquer) during Franco's dictatorship could subconsciously help listeners mourn their dead safely.

(2017c), a feminist song that quickly gained popularity. Like other songs in the album *Cuando el río suena...*, "Justo" was released alongside a short documentary called *Conversaciones con mi abuela* (Conversations with my grandma) (2017a), which shows how Ángeles's traumatic story was transmitted. The documentary stages an intergenerational dialogue between a grandmother and her granddaughter, in which the women speak about the murder and "disappearance"[5] of Ángeles's brother, Justo, between 1938 and 1939. In this analysis, Justo's story stands as an archetype of the "disappearance" stories of Francoism's victims, and possibly the victims of other dictatorships as well. Cinta Ramblado-Minero explains that, most often, in the case of Spain, those revealing and engaging with the memories of the SCW are the third generation, that of the granddaughters and grandsons (2007, 95). The song "Justo" and its accompanying documentary constitute a powerful example of a new way in which younger generations are narrating, through lyrics, Spain's institutionally silenced past.[6]

To contextualize the need for this song and its relevance, one should consider the very controversial amnesty agreement reached by the nation's elites in 1975, during Spain's Transition to democracy. This was known as the "Pact of Forgetting" or "Pact of Silence." As Germán Labrador Méndez defends, and as it will also be proved here, this agreement was indeed a struggle for hegemonic control. In the streets, inside the home and in some cultural spaces, however, citizens of the Spanish state never stopped remembering (2017, 61). The goal of the pact was to avoid dealing institutionally with the legacy of Francoism and to move forward toward a "democratic future." It should also be remembered that, while most northern European countries have found ways to process the violence that arose from WWII, Spanish society has been left to grapple on its own with crimes committed with international complicity.[7] In 2007, thirty-two years after

[5] Justo was murdered, and his body was placed in an unknown mass grave. Today most of these graves have been located, even if the Spanish State has not yet invested the funds to exhume the bodies. The 2007 Historical Memory Law resulted in the release of a map of all SCW mass graves (Ministerio de Justicia 2007).

[6] Apart from the documentary, Rozalén also released a music video that offers a complementary recreation of Justo's story (2017b). A collage (made from broken photographs and different colored papers) provides the surface for the lyrics. The different broken pieces, of what seems to be Justo's face, come together in the music video, providing a visual analogy for the story narrated in the lyrics.

[7] It is well documented that Francoist Spain's official neutrality during WWII did not translate into a policy of zero intervention. Likewise, the unfolding of WWII greatly impacted the development of the regime. To read more, see David A. Messenger (2014); Sara J. Brenneis and Gina Herrmann (2020).

the Spanish parliament signed the "Pact of Forgetting," the law was finally revised, with the passing of the "Law of Historical Memory," which intended to invest funds in the exhumation of mass graves. The initial enthusiasm around the new legislation did not last, since its passing remained a pre-election gesture, and funding to enact the bill was never fully released. The 2007 Historical Memory Law uses the metaphor of "open wounds," one of the most recurrent tropes in discourses about the SCW: "This Law hopes to contribute to the closing of wounds that remain open within the Spanish people" (BOE 3 2007, my translation).[8] Rozalén also uses this formulation in the second verse of the first stanza of "Justo:" "Don't say anything, don't reopen old wounds, cry always in silence, don't spread resentment in this small town" (2017b, my translation).[9] These lyrics reproduce the institutional message, performing the instructions that, first under Franco's regime, and then mainly from right-wing positions, have always been repeated. However, Rozalén is doing quite the opposite of what her lyrics say: instead of remaining silent, she is singing.

As Jo Labanyi points out, "a major problem in the Law of Historical Memory is its preamble, which insists that memory is a private matter. This significantly fails to acknowledge that the 'historical memory' is a form of collective and non-personal memory" (2008, 120). In this regard, it could be fruitful to look at memory through a feminist lens. As explained by Mercedes Carbayo Abéngozar, a consequence of several gender-biased laws passed during the dictatorship—which intended to send women back to the private sphere—is that women once again become pillars of memory. These laws reinforced the convention that women needed to be the ones in charge of orally transmitting, from one generation to the next, traditions and family memories (Carbayo Abéngozar 2013, 510). Rozalén joins a long legacy of feminist activists who have fought to make private affairs political and public. Indeed, it must be noted that Justo's "received history" (Young 1990) is passed down across *four generations* of women that appear in the documentary: two speak (Rozalén and Ángeles), while two are presented as being quiet (Rozalén's great-grandmother is recalled by Ángeles, and Rozalén's mother appears behind them in the first shot of the documentary). Hence, in the song "Justo," we can recognize a gendered transmission of the past, which scholars[10] such as Hirsch, Andrea Petö and Ayşe Gül Altınay have been

[8] "La presente Ley quiere contribuir a cerrar heridas todavía abiertas en los españoles".
[9] "Calla, no remuevas la herida / Llora siempre en silencio / No levantes rencores, que este pueblo es tan pequeño…".
[10] For SCW gendered memory studies, see Sophie Milquet (2016) and Sarah Leggott (2017).

calling "gendered memories"[11] (2015), and which, in this essay, could potentially be referred to as "voiced gendered postmemories." By making this private history public, Rozalén engages in a feminist practice through the subversion of the Law of Historical Memory's concealed aim to keep memory out of the public sphere, and she therefore turns this song into an explicitly political act.

2. "Justo": From a Silenced Murder to Public Discussion

Rozalén graduated in Psychology and then obtained a master's degree in Musicology. This background makes her particularly sensitive to the use of music both as a platform for political communication and as a form of psychotherapy. A significant feature of music is the power, not found in photographs, paintings, documentaries, exhibits, etc., to allow others to *verbalize* the lyrics. This enables the articulation of stories that may be close to the experiences of those listening.[12] Many (either familial or affiliative) postmemories have been shown to arouse feelings of empathy, having a beneficial impact on the processes of individual and collective mourning.[13] In Rozalén's song, postmemory interacts with the audience in a way that differs from other cultural forms, because it requires the listener's *voice* and *bodily* involvement with the story and the work of art. The specific engagement that songs enable is a core feature of what I am identifying here as voiced (gendered) postmemories. This characteristic is even more emphasized in Rozalén's "official video performance" (Rozalén 2018a). Here, the translation of the song into sign language, interpreted by Beatriz Romero, hints at the centrality of the lyrics—Justo's story—over the music. Moreover, the use of sign language widens the audience that has access to Justo's story. "Voicing" and "performing" postmemory are ways of experiencing the weight of the inherited past that stimulate an active response in later generations—a response that could potentially help the audience come to terms with the past. Rozalén's music inspires others to engage in the story by inviting them to sing along or move

[11] This term questions if the "female witness or agent of transmission differs from that of her male counterpart" (Hirsch and Smith 2002, 2). Also see Hirsch 2019b, 20.
[12] See Sierbuth (2014, 37).
[13] Hirsch develops this distinction in her book *The Generation of Postmemory* (2012). In brief, while "familial postmemory" is associated with (grand)parents and their (grand)children, "affiliative postmemory" is used when there is an identification, an affiliation with a transmitted memory without the familial tie, but with a larger collective. Also see Hirsch (2019a, 173).

their body—a physical engagement that has perhaps not received enough attention in the theorizations of postmemory until recently.[14]

Justo's life and murder are described in the second stanza of the song. The stanza echoes the dialogue between grandmother and granddaughter in the documentary. Rozalén encourages Ángeles to talk about her oldest brother by showing her a photograph of him, as is often the case when evoking memories (Hirsch 2012, 36-40). The black and white photo reveals two men: an older man, who is Ángeles's uncle, and a young child, Justo. While looking at the picture, Ángeles remembers how Justo learned to write at school. This allowed Justo to send letters when he was away at war, and it was precisely the sudden absence of this communication that alerted his family that something had happened to him. The song explains: "After thirteen days without news, a joy that lasted one second. / Another letter arrives, from one of Justo's comrades. / The news said it was a bullet" (2017b, my translation).[15] In the documentary, Ángeles reads the date on one of his last letters, "26th June 1938," and then explains that he died in 1939, so he was not away from home for a long time. As it is narrated in the second stanza, Ángeles remembers that he left town singing, since, according to Ángeles, young men like her brother did not always recognize the risks of joining the war: "He used to happily sing a song down the street. / At the end of 1938, they were called to go to war [...] They jumped onto the truck as if there was a party" (2017b, my translation).[16] According to Ángeles, Rozalén inherited her passion for singing from her great-uncle Justo, thus strengthening the link between the two. Indeed, the last stanza of "Justo" is part of a Puerto Rican *habanera*, "La caña dulce," a song popularized in Spain at the time by Sara Montiel, and one of Justo's favorite songs. Including a stanza of "La caña dulce" in "Justo" becomes another way to interact with his memory. Rozalén, as well as her listeners, can now verbalize and repeat what Justo used to sing. The audience *voices* Justo's favorite song, making this personal homage a collective one: a public and embodied tribute to a victim of Francoism.

In the fourth stanza, performance plays an important role. The lyrics concentrate on how the family realized that Justo had been murdered – as previously mentioned, because his correspondence ceased. In the documentary, Ángeles unconsciously reenacts the events that took place the day Justo died.

[14] See other recent examples in Hirsch 2019b.
[15] "Tras trece días sin noticias, la alegría de un segundo / Llega una carta de vuelta. Otra de su compañero / Fue una bala, nos leía el diario."
[16] "Él cantaba por las calles, siempre alegre una canción. / Al final del 38 son llamados a la guerra / [...] Se subieron al camión como si fuera una fiesta."

When Ángeles remembers the traumatic moment when she found out that her brother was gone, she goes back in time and *voices* her mother and her younger self. She narrates the episode in a highly personal way (almost through role-playing), as she represents the scene speaking in the first person singular when she recalls what her mother said that day: "This letter is not from my son! It says, 'Return to sender'! The worst must have happened to my son!" (2017a, my translation).[17] Then, she remembers her own reaction, when she "could not utter any words" (2017a, my translation),[18] except for his name: "Justo, Justo, Justo;" and she repeats it again, just as she did when she first realized that Justo was gone. Rozalén preserves this recreation in the song's lyrics; she reproduces this way of narrating the story by screaming, as if she were Ángeles's mother: "Bastards, you killed my son!," which in Spanish is "¡Canallas, me lo habéis matao!" (2017b). By keeping the colloquial turn of phrase, "matao," Rozalén circulates a mode of speech and communication that derives from the standard form ("matado"), thus raising the level of authenticity of this performance, in which she is giving *voice* to her great-grandmother's sorrow. "Quoting" her grandmother's embodied experience is a powerful process of personification, a way to bring her voice back. As Diana Taylor notes in her extensive study on the subject, "embodied performances have always played a central role in conserving memory and consolidating identities" (2003, XVIII). The fourth stanza invites Rozalén's audience to play a vital part in the performance of the song: as she shouts this line, the listeners briefly inhabit the frustration of Justo's mother. The audience is then able to insult the dictatorship by shouting "Bastards!", and to articulate the tragedy of losing a son to the war ("You killed my son!"), which allows for a liberating speech that many generations have been prohibited from uttering. The integration of the echo of "lost voices" in the song thus becomes another distinguishable feature of voiced postmemories. The song provides a medium to recover the voices of those who are absent, through singing.

The inclusion of archival material in the fourth stanza of the song hints at the strong family involvement in the creation of postmemory. In the documentary, Rozalén and her grandmother look at a family album that Rozalén's father gave as a gift to Ángeles when he was a child. One of the pages in this album was devoted to Justo. Since Rozalén's father did not have any photographs of Justo's dead body, he creatively used magazine pictures and drawings to recreate an obituary for Justo. This was a significant act because, at the time, families from

[17] "¡Ay que es de vuelta / esta carta, que no es de mi hijo, /que es de vuelta. A mi hijo le ha pasado lo que sea."
[18] "No me salía el habla."

the defeated side in Spain could not usually publish obituaries in newspapers (Fernández de Mata 2009). In this unofficial obituary, Rozalén's father wrote: "Justo Tomás Suárez died because of man's hatred. His body has no known grave. As many others, he never received flowers. His only grave is in the heart of his loved ones. Rest in peace" (2017a, my translation).[19] In her song, Rozalén uses the sentence "his only tomb is their heart," quoting and *voicing* her father's words. Subsequently, the song demonstrates how the second generation also tried to interact with this trauma, even though this was something that remained in the private sphere of the family. Hence, in this case, the third generation publicly discusses Justo's murder but, in doing so, their words interweave with the previous generations' reactions to the murder, thus rendering visible the ongoing dialogue with this family ghost.

Justo had a phantasmagoric presence in the family for 77 years, and this impacted both Rozalén's composition process and the resulting song. After Justo was murdered, his body "disappeared." It is only while Rozalén was working on this project that, with the aid of the Spanish Historical Memory Association, Justo's mass grave was finally located and exhumed (Rozalen 2018b, 117). Even then, however, the ghost of "Justo" seems to continue to accompany the singer, *haunting* her, to use Labanyi's terminology (2000). In Rozalén's words: "At times, I have even considered that Justo helped me finish the song. I have never believed in spirits, but this time I have felt very powerful things" (Neira 2017, my translation).[20] Rozalén makes this "spiritual" or "spectral" encounter explicit, and she includes it in the chorus, singing: "And now I can hear you sing / I see you in this harmonious place. / If you don't heal the wound, it will hurt, it will fester, there will not be peace" (2017b, my translation).[21] The identification of Justo's mass grave has given weight to his ghostly existence, since now there is a material site associated with his memory. Labanyi explains:

> the exhumation and reburial of the remains of those killed by the Francoist repression and left lying in unmarked mass graves since that time has a major therapeutic value for the relatives concerned, in addition to the fulfilling and ethical obligation to honour the victims of injustice. (2008, 121)

[19] "Justo Tomás Suarez murió por culpa del odio de los hombres. Su cuerpo no tiene tumba reconocida. Como a tantos otros, nunca le llevaron flores. Su única tumba: el corazón de los suyos. Descanse en paz."
[20] "He llegado a pensar que me la terminó escribiendo él mismo. Nunca había creído en los espíritus, pero esta vez sentí cosas muy fuertes."
[21] "Y ahora yo logro oírte cantar / Se dibuja tu rostro en la armonía de este lugar. / Si no curas la herida duele, supura, no guarda paz."

Rozalén shared her grandmother's relief after they found Justo's remains. Rozalén says that, when Ángeles visited Justo's grave, her grandmother became someone else (Cifuentes 2018). However, even then, Ángeles only thinks about her mother, who did not live long enough to be able to bury her son: "Oh, I wish my mother was here... My mother... How many times she wondered where her child's bones were... It's very painful" (2017a, my translation).[22] This scene breaks down the ways in which different generations reacted to this inherited pain. The second generation—Rozalén's parents—and third generation—Rozalén—found relief once Justo was buried. Ángeles, on the contrary, oscillates between her own memory and the inherited anguish that she recalls. While she has found personal peace, she cannot let go of the fact that her mother died without being able to bury her son. The uneven reaction that Ángeles experiences highlights the urgency to find ways to mourn the victims of Francoism since, in most cases, at least one generation has already passed away without having found justice for their loved ones.

Rozalén's influential song is more than a "canción con historia," as José Colmeiro refers to those songs written and sung "against the constant danger of the erasure of the past" (44). Voiced postmemories such as "Justo" are capable of *doing* something once voiced, acquiring the power to affect and transform, in this case, the destiny of the victims of Francoism, their relatives, and the public debate. Sieburth draws from J.L. Austin's examples in *How to Do Things with Words* to suggest that, sometimes, singing a song (in her case study, "Tatuaje") has been "an act that *brought into being*, or achieved, what it declared" (Sieburth 2014, 139). In the song "Justo", Rozalén not only tells the story of a missing great-uncle, but her lyrics also *impact* others, including: Rozalén's family, Justo's remains, and her wider audience, as this essay has explored. Indeed, the song has managed to both reactivate the debate about the Spanish mass graves, and to make possible the discovery of the remains that this family was looking for since 1939, offering hope to those who are still looking for their "missing" ones. Ultimately, "Justo" *creates* the milieu for a homage during concerts, when Rozalén takes time before singing it to allow both silence and applause, since she is aware that this might be the first time many people in the audience are collectively and publicly honoring those murdered.

[22] "Ay mi madre si estuviera aquí, si mi madre... Que cuántas veces decía: '¿Dónde estarán los huesos de mi hijo?' Claro, eso es muy doloroso."

3. Expanding postmemory studies: voiced (gendered) postmemories

In the previous section, I suggested that Rozalén's "imaginative investment" (Hirsch 2012, 5) in the past may allow her listeners to project their own stories onto Justo's. Furthermore, by singing it (especially at a concert, by rupturing the solitude through collective voices and bodies), they could even begin to personally work through their own trauma. In a country where, almost a century after the start of its civil conflict, far right parties seem to hope that time will finally erase the remaining traces of this large-scale violence, it seems crucial to study the SCW from a highly interdisciplinary approach, exploring different media and looking for tools that disciplines such as Holocaust studies, WWII studies, gender studies, etc. offer to examine a democratic debt that is owed to the victims of the dictatorship. Therefore, it felt important not to limit myself to a singular case study, but to look beyond it in order to locate similar examples that could consolidate and expand the understanding of voiced postmemories.

Rozalén's 2017 album includes two other songs that we could identify as voiced postmemories. The first is "Amor prohibido" ("Forbidden Love") (Rozalén 2017c), a song that narrates the complicated love story of Rozalén's parents. Her father was a Catholic priest for ten years, making the relationship with her mother a completely unimaginable situation during Francoism. Their marriage resulted in social rejection and guilt, but Rozalén transforms and overcomes those negative feelings by working through them in the song (Rozalén 2020). The other instante is the song "El hijo de la abuela" ("Grandma's Son") (Rozalén 2017c). Here, Rozalén shares the story of how her grandmother harbored Miguel—a young man who was tortured and exiled from the Basque Country in 1968—in her house. Miguel was forced to go to Letur (Albacete), as part of a strategy implemented by the regime to disband the emerging resistance to Francoism in the Basque Country. After some years, their lives drifted apart, but this song brought them back together, since Rozalén was able to locate Miguel with the assistance of a mutual friend who heard the song and put them back in touch.

In 2019, two years after the release of the album studied in this essay, Rozalén collaborated with Pedro Pastor: together they sang "Sin flor," a song that emphasizes the ongoing need to remember Spain's violent past. However, Rozalén is definitely not the only Spanish singer-songwriter to have engaged with

the memory of the SCW.[23] Since the country's transition to democracy, several generations have used different technologies of sound (ranging from radio to *Spotify* and *YouTube*) to build their own inclusive and counter-hegemonic narratives, and to give voice to the "memory crisis" that still afflicts Spain's democracy and, more broadly, Europe as a whole. The following list of songs does not intend to draw an exhaustive map, but rather offers a persuasive constellation of examples that could be studied as voiced postmemories of the SCW and Francoism.[24] These other contributions include Ismael Serrano's album *La memoria de los peces* (1998) ("The Memory of Goldfish"), with songs such as "Al bando vencido" ("To the Defeated Spain"). This may be one of the best-known examples of a singer-songwriter who wants to highlight, through his music, Spain's repression of its recent past. The song "Huesos" (2004) ("Bones"), written by singer-songwriter Pedro Guerra, describes the story of those who, like Justo, were killed during the civil conflict and whose bones remain spread all over Spain. Other instances could be Luis Pastor's "Los hijos de España" (2009) ("Spain's Children"), written in memory of the Spaniards who fought in WWII. More recently, Maria Arnal and Marcel Bagés's album *45 cerebros y 1 corazón* (2017) was composed after a group of researchers unexpectedly found "45 brains and 1 heart" in a mass grave. María Arnal explains that the whole album was intended to address silence that has been passed down from one generation to the next (Cano 2017).

All these songs feature original lyrics written out of inherited collective or personal histories. However, projects like the album *Allez, allez...!* (2017), recorded by Luisa Pérez and Cuco Pérez, question the need to consider other varieties of voiced postmemories. These siblings collected lyrics sung by Spanish exiles of the SCW, starting with the songs their mother could remember and then researching and interviewing many other survivors. Their "creative involvement" lies in the curation and performance of these older lyrics, not to mention the important archival work they have made available to all. They compiled a CD-book full of features that could potentially enrich the understanding of voiced postmemories, the most important being that "voiced postmemories" could include both 'new' lyrics as well as 'recuperated' songs.

---

[23] To have a general picture of the history of singer-songwriters in Spain, see Esther Pérez-Villalba (2007). Also, my doctoral dissertation will reevaluate this history by including the work of the female singer-songwriters of 20th-century Spain that preceded Rozalén.

[24] A fruitful area to expand this analysis in Spain would be to look at the use of voiced postmemories that invoke 1960s transformative political movements, such as uprisings and revolutions—a good example being "Papá, cuéntame otra vez" (Serrano 1997). For an analysis of this song, see Colmeiro 2004.

These are all persuasive cases of singers voicing postmemories in a variety of ways. The presence, and persistence, of lyrics that engaged with lived or inherited stories related to the SCW or Franco's dictatorship shows signs of a possible cultural trend. Voicing postmemory through songs is not a new practice, but rather music has constantly been a *lieu de mémoir* in the Spanish tradition. With these observations in mind, one could reflect on the presence of voiced (gendered) postmemories beyond the SCW, in other contexts. In Holocaust Studies, Oren Meyers and Eyal Zandbering have already identified *Ashes and Dust*, produced by two sons of survivors of the Holocaust, as the most influential Israeli music album ever recorded (2002, 389).[25] In the Southern Cone context, Marcela Lobos has explored postmemories through the music of Chilean-French singer Ana Tijoux and the Uruguayan Jorge Drexler (2018).[26] As a third example, Ananya Jahanara Kabir talks about "musical recalls" when she studies how "music offers certain therapeutic possibilities for traumatized subjects that go beyond those offered by narrative, or the telling and reading of stories" (2004, 175) in the context of the Punjab region, which was particularly affected by the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. While the list of songs that could be included exceeds the constraints of this essay, the aforementioned examples are among those that critics have already engaged with and, therefore, they prove that this aural/oral trend in postmemory studies exists and is considered productive well beyond the Spanish context.

This essay has begun a theorization of "voiced postmemories" based initially on the interpretation of one song about a victim of the SCW and the visual medium that accompanies it. However, considering the extensive examples provided, it seems certain that its methodology and field of inquiry ought to be expanded in order to diversify the types of voiced (gendered) postmemories that have contributed to the transformation, and mending, of powerful past collective experiences. In these and further cases to come, it would also be relevant to acknowledge that (as suggested throughout the essay) studying postmemory in songs (rather than in written or visual works) aims at exploring the ways in which songs expand the embodied resonance of textual mimesis, through multisensory stimulation, motor responses to rhythm, and the breaching of solitude through

[25] For further examples in the context of Holocaust studies, see Jonatchan Friedman (2017).
[26] Voiced postmemories in the context of Latin America would certainly include songs about the colonial past – Café Tacvba's "El fin de la infancia" (1994) being an illustrative example, among many. In the case of Spain, there is a much-needed study to be done around those songs that challenge, through music, the other long-lasting "Pact of Silence" – that of their violent imperial past. This project would likely echo Silvia Bermúdez's study of songs that challenged Spain's notion of homogeneity, boundaries, accommodation, and incorporation (2018).

collective voices. Future analyses will need to consider the shared features, as well as the unique characteristics, of voiced postmemories, those qualities that resemble, and differ from, other aesthetics of postmemory.

Bibliography

Arnal, Maria, and Marcel Bagés, vocalists. 2017. *45 cerebros y 1 corazón*. Fina Estampa, compact disc.

Bermúdez, Silvia. 2018. *Rocking the Boat: Migration and Race in Contemporary Spanish Music*. Toronto Buffalo London: University of Toronto Press.

BOE 310. *Ley 52/2007*. 2010. 24 March.

Brenneis, Sara J., and Gina Herrmann. 2020. *Spain, the Second World War, and the Holocaust: History and Representation*. Toronto: Toronto Press.

Café Tacvba, vocalists. 1994. "El fin de la infancia". *Re*, Warner Music, compact disc.

Cano, Carlos G. 2017. "El disco que Franco no querría escuchar: En el estremecedor debut de Maria Arnal i Marcel Bagés conviven el amor, la crítica social y las fosas comunes." *SER*.

Carbayo Abéngozar, Mercedes. 2013 "Dramatizando la construcción nacional desde el género y la música popular: La copla." *Anales de la literatura española contemporánea* Vol. 38, no. 3: 509-33.

Cifuentes, Lourdes. 2018. "Rozalén se une a Amnistía International en la búsqueda de 'justicia' para las víctimas de la Guerra Civil." *Eldiario.es*.

Colmeiro, José. 2003. "Canciones con historia: Cultural identity, historical memory, and popular songs." *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 4 no. 1(Aug): 31-45.

Faber, Sebastiaan. 2018. "Postmemory and Other Premises." *Memory Battles of the Spanish Civil War: History, Fiction, Photography*, 171-79. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.

Fernández de Mata, Ignacio. 2009. "In memoriam... esquelas, contra-escuelas y duelos inconclusos de la Guerra Civil Española." *Historia, Antropología y Fuentes Orales* no. 42: 93-127.

Friedman, Jonathan C. 2017. "Performing grief: the music of three children of Holocaust survivors-Geddy Lee, Yehuda Poliker, and Mike Brant". *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* Vol. 16, no. 1 (July): 153-67.

Gómez-Castellano, Irene. 2013. "Lullabies and postmemory: hearing the ghosts of Spanish history in Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (El laberinto del fauno, 2006)." *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* Vol. 14, no. 1 (Oct.): 1-18.

Guerra, Pedro. 2004, vocalist. "Huesos." *Bolsillos*. Ariola, compact disc.

Hirsch, Marianne and Valerie Smith. 2002. "Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction." *Gender and Cultural Memory Special Issue* Vol. 28, no. 1 (Autumn): 1-19.

Hirsch, Marianne. 2012. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hirsch, Marianne. 2019a. "Connective Arts of Postmemory." *Analecta Política* Vol. 9, no. 16 (January-June): 171-76.

Hirsch, Marianne. 2019b. "Introduction: Practicing Feminism, Practicing Memory." *Women Mobilizing Memory*, 1-23. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hirsch, Marianne. 2020. *Postmemory.net*. https://www.postmemory.net/

Kabir, Ananya Jahanara, and كبير أنانيا جاهانارا. 2004. "Musical Recall: Postmemory and the Punjabi Diaspora / الاستدعاء الموسيقي : الذاكرة الما بعدية والشتات الپنجابي." *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* no. 24: 172–89.

Labanyi, Jo. 2000. "History and Hauntology; or What Does One Do with the Ghosts of the Past? Reflections on Spanish Film and Fiction of the Post-Franco Period." *Disremembering the Dictatorship*, edited by Joan Ramon Resina, 65-82. Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi.

Labanyi, Jo. 2008. "The Politics of Memory in Contemporary Spain." *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* Vol. 9, no. 2 (September): 119-25.

Labrador Méndez, Germán. 2017. *Culpables por la literatura: Imaginación política y contracultura en la transición española (1968-1986)*. Akal.

Leggott, Sarah. 2017. *Memory, War, and Dictatorship in Recent Spanish Fiction by Women*. Bucknell University Press.

Lobos, Marcela. 2018. "Posmemorias del Cono Sur: de Ana Tijoux a Jorge Drexler'" Proyecto 'CANTes." *Salamanca24horas*.

Mantagut Calvo, Marta. 2017. "El rol de la radio pública española en la construcción de la memoria de la segunda generación: Del poder evocativo a la estandarización del medio." *Posmemoria de la Guerra Civil y el Franquismo: Narrativas audiovisuales y producciones culturales en el Siglo XXI*, edited by Laia Quílez Esteve and José Carlos Rueda Lafforn, 75-93. Granada: Constelaciones.

Messenger, David A. *Hunting Nazis in Franco's Spain*. 2014. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

Meyers, Oren and Eyal Zandberg. 2002. "The Sound-track of memory. *Ashes and Dust* and the commemoration of the Holocaust in Israeli popular culture." *Media, Culture & Society* Vol. 24, no. 3 (May): 389-408.

Milquet, Sophie. 2016. "Women's Memory of the Spanish Civil War: The Power of Words." *Gendered Wars, Gendered Memories*, edited by Ayşe Gül Altınay and Andrea Pető, 189-201. New York: Routledge.

Ministerio de Justicia. 2007. *Map of Graves*.

Neira, Fernando. 2017. "Rozalén alza la voz del compromiso." *El País.* Accessed January 23rd, 2020.

Pastor, Luis, vocalist. 2009. "Los hijos de España." *YouTube video*, 03:23, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8H2q2beScoo

Pastor, Pedro and Rozalén, vocalists. 2019. "Sin Flor." *YouTube video*, 03:38, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1aNwnWMzDQ

Pérez, Luisa and Cuco Pérez, vocalist. 2017. *Allez, Allez...!* Cuco Pérez, compact disc.

Pérez-Villalba, Esther. 2007. *How Political Singers Facilitated the Spanish Transition to Democracy, 1960-1982*. Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press.

Pető, Andrea and Ayşe Gül Altinay. 2015. "Gender, Memory and Connective Genocide Scholarship: A Conversation with Marianne Hirsch." *European Journal of Women's Studies* Vol. 22, no. 4: 386-96.

Quílez Esteve, Laia, and José Carlos Rueda Lafforn, eds. 2017. *Posmemoria de la Guerra Civil y el Franquismo: Narrativas audiovisuales y producciones culturales en el Siglo XXI*. Granada: Constelaciones.

Ramblado-Minero, Cinta. 2007. "Buscando el pasado en el presente: Posmemoria y cultura audiovisual en la España contemporánea." *Posmemorias de la guerra civil y el franquismo: Narrativas audiovisuales y producciones culturales del siglo XXI*, edited by Laia Quílez Esteve and José Carlos Rueda Lafforn, 93-108. Granada: Constelaciones.

Rozalén [María de los Ángeles Rozalén Ortuño]. 2017a. *Rozalén - Justo - Conversaciones con mi abuela (Documental).* YouTube video, 04:46, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtvX4PXWMds

Rozalén [María de los Ángeles Rozalén Ortuño]. 2017b. "Rozalén - Justo (Lyric Video)." *YouTube video*, 04:11, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jy_7Ufwgv6Y&list=PLCJCqHem50ci32TbSCkBleTWHTYyMWSbV&index=8&t=0s

Rozalén [María de los Ángeles Rozalén Ortuño]. 2017c, vocalist. *Cuando el río suena*. Sony Music, compact disc.

Rozalén [María de los Ángeles Rozalén Ortuño]. 2018a. "Rozalén - Justo (Live) | Vevo Official Performance." *YouTube video*, 04:09, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zB5Bg7CoTXY

Rozalén [María de los Ángeles Rozalén Ortuño]. 2018b. *Cerrando puntos suspensivos*. Aguilar.

Rozalén [María de los Ángeles Rozalén Ortuño]. 2020. "Cómo una charla con tu abuela te puede marcar la vida". *Rozalén Rozalén | TEDxCadizUniversity*. *YouTube video*, 17:27, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7ohYOIYgXI

Serrano, Ismael, vocalist. 1997. "Papá cuéntame otra vez." *Atrapados en azul*. Universal Music Spain S.L, compact disc.

Serrano, Ismael, vocalist. 1998. "Al bando vencido." *La memoria de los peces*. Universal Music Group, compact disc.

Sieburth, Stephanie. 2014. *Survival Songs: Conchita Piquer's* Coplas *and Franco's Regime of Terror*. Toronto: Toronto Press.

Taylor, Diana. 2003. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Young, James E. 1990. *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Elia Romera-Figueroa is a PhD candidate in Iberian Cultural Studies at Duke University. She is also a Fellow Researcher at the Duke Social Movements Lab (directed by Michael Hardt and Sandro Mezzadra), as well as a Graduate Fellow at the Duke Kenan Institute for Ethics. Her current research focuses on female singer-songwriters in the Spanish State from the late 1950s onwards, reevaluating the ways to study this genre in light of the singers that her research recovers. Her interests include 20th-century Spanish popular culture, performance studies, cultural icons in Spain and Latin America, gender and sexuality studies, social movements, memory and postmemory studies. She has participated in numerous international conferences, such as *MLA International Symposium*, *Memory Studies Association*, *American Comparative Literature Association*, *Northeast MLA*, and *Rocky Mountain MLA*.

statuS Quaestionis
language text culture

MISCELLANEA

statuS Quaestionis
language text culture

Andrea Fenice

Analysing Epistemic Disparity: The Use of Possible-World Theory in the Identification of Rhythmic Strategies

Abstract

This article discusses the integration of semiotic rhythm analysis with the theory of possible worlds. The complex issue of analysing rhythm in narrative texts has been tackled by Daniele Barbieri with his theory based on 'textual relief', an adaptive theoretical tool for identifying and investigating rhythmic strategies at all textual levels and across different media. Narratology, with its in-depth description of narrative strategies concerning worldbuilding, can contribute to a great extent to this endeavour. Merging the two theories, a detailed analysis of narrative choices can be performed, with a specific focus on the narrator's strategies concerning withholding and divulging information to the recipient. Offering a theoretical overview and specific examples of different narratorial strategies, this paper examines several ways in which narrators can exploit the epistemic disparity between the recipient's knowledge and their own to manage tension and suspense, thus creating textual relief.

1. Introduction

Rhythm. The word is familiar to any recipient that ever enjoyed an aesthetic text: music has rhythm, and poetry. There is rhythm in narrative discourse, be it an everyday oral storytelling, a novel, a film or any other story told in any medium. Even architecture, when considering its aesthetic implications, can be said to have its own rhythms. Yet, when it comes to analysing such an omnipresent concept, scholars struggle: rhythm is as easy to grasp intuitively as it is hard to pin down to a precise definition. Narratology, despite its thriving evolution of theoretical approaches, has issues dealing with the topic, as spelled out by Mieke Bal when she notes: "Much as narrative media, especially film, work with rhythm, the analysis of it has not been successful at all. [...] Narrative rhythm, although quite characteristic and effective, will remain the most elusive aspect" (Bal 2009, 98). Here, Bal refers to the predominant theoretical approach to rhythm analysis, the

Genettian model based on anisochrony.[1] Such method has several drawbacks, which led to it gradually being neglected. The result is that rhythm analysis has almost disappeared from narrative studies since, surprisingly, very few narratologists have transformed discontent into new theoretical proposals.[2]

In contrast with the standstill of narrative studies, semiotics has experienced growing interest on rhythm at large. Giulia Ceriani, for instance, starts from the assumption that "rhythm is not an ineffable phaenomenon: it is a complex morphology, which requires considering the consistency of its natural as well as psychic, cultural or discursive manifestations" (Ceriani 2003, 8).[3] What appears to be a purely theoretical approach, however, hides a key practical intuition: rhythm analysis cannot disregard the recipient's role in the meaning-making process. In particular, the recipient's expectations create a perceptual necessity; "satisfying such necessity results in the pleasure of recognising a rhythm, the pleasure of an expectant subject joining their object. [...] Thus, rhythm is a cognitive move combined to an emotional involvement" (Ibid., 116). Rhythm is then defined by Ceriani as a "narrative strategy" (Ibid., 127), aimed at modulating expectation at discourse level. In more technical terms, it is "a salience susceptible of becoming pregnant" (Ibid., 121).[4] Such definition evokes the notion of 'textual relief' which is the core concept of Daniele Barbieri's rhythm analysis. The following two sections present the fundamentals of Barbieri's approach to rhythm, which will then be expanded upon, using the theory of possible worlds; the aim is showing how the two methods can be integrated to refine the analysis of narrative rhythms in a text. In order to do so, I will introduce the concept of 'epistemic disparity', a narrative strategy relying on the mechanisms of fictional worldbuilding to manage the readers' expectations and, in turn, the rhythm of the text.

[1] Gerard Genette defines "effects of rhythm" as the relationship between the duration of the story and the time of discourse, i.e. the textual space dedicated to it. See Genette 1980, p. 87.
[2] Rhythm in narratology is assimilated to duration and, often, even completely ignored. Monika Fludernik, for instance, in her *Introduction to Narratology* (1996) does not mention rhythm at all when discussing narrative speed and pace. A sort of vicious circle is created: on the one hand, the study of rhythm is neglected, perhaps because the definition is considered outdated and unusable in modern narratological analysis while, on the other, the concept itself remains anchored to old standards thus becoming increasingly obsolete. Among the very few exceptions, it is worth mentioning Marco Caracciolo, who worked on rhythm as an experiential phaenomenon. See, for instance, Caracciolo 2014.
[3] All quotations from Ceriani 2003 are my translations.
[4] For a thorough discussion of the concepts of salience and pregnance see Thom 1990.

2. Rhythm and Tension

Barbieri's theory of rhythm analysis[5] has the advantage of being detailed and comprehensive, while also being extremely concrete and text-oriented. He starts form the simple assumption that rhythm is the iteration of a pattern in time (see Barbieri 2004, 65). Usually, when referring to rhythm in this common definition, those patterns are detected in prosodic or phonetic aspects. Think, for example, about the regular alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables in an iambic pentameter; or consider the pattern created by alliterations, or the rime scheme in a poem. Such rhythms are intuitively recognisable and engender expectations in recipients: a form is recognised and a tension arises towards its prosecution and completion. Thus, tension and rhythm are complementary and interlinked, and every aesthetic text is built around a variable balance between confirming and frustrating the reader's expectations. The alternation of tension and distension is the basis of rhythmic patterns:

> Rhythm is a fundamental aspect of the tensive mechanisms. The simplest kind of tension possible is the expectation for the following element in a rhythmic repetition. Rhythm is the modulation of tension, the organisation of elements in relief to create and resolve expectations. Vice versa, rhythm is engendered by the effects of tensive devices. Without tension, one cannot attribute any relief to specific textual aspects, and elements in relief are the essential rhythmic elements (Barbieri 1996, 5).

Therefore, enjoying an aesthetic text is not a passive activity: what we read, watch or listen always creates expectations and, provided that our attention is kept, we are likely to try and predict the consequences of what we are reading, or anticipate the evolution of the patterns we encounter. When reading a sonnet with the ABAB rhyme scheme, for instance, past the first two lines we expect a repetition of the final sounds of the next two. This is due to the strict formal structure of that particular form of poetry. Even in everyday speech sentences have 'expectation markers'. A simple 'however', for example, creates in the reader several expectations: the prospect of a sentence, for one; then expectance for a clause which is in contrast with what previously expressed. Finally, when reading

[5] Daniele Barbieri has been dedicating most of his research to the study of rhythm. His 2004 book, *Nel corso del testo*, merges most of his previous research in a unified theoretical discourse, while following works focus on rhythm in specific media and genres, such as poetry and visual storytelling.

'however', we expect a possible turning point in a reasoning or narration. While analysing the rhythm of Leopardi's poem *L'infinito*, Barbieri identifies as many as seven different levels that contribute to the rise of tension: metric, syntactic, metric-syntactic, prosodic, lexical-prosodic, lexical-syntactic and semantic-narrative.[6] At every level there are elements that create expectation in the reader. Barbieri uses the phrase 'perceptual term' to indicate "any textual element thanks to which it is possible to make predictions, i.e. any textual element that can rise expectations" (Barbieri 2004, 43). Such expectations can range from very short (e.g., syntactic expectations about the closure of a phrase) to extremely long-term (e.g., the solution of the initial mystery in a detective novel). It should be clear that almost any textual item can be considered a perceptual term, under certain circumstances. Barbieri associates to perceptual terms the concept of 'form', defined as "a perceptual or conceptual configuration to which we can ascribe some sort of completeness [...], a formal closure" (Ibid., 48).

What distinguishes the two notions is the requirement for a form to have closure, which implies an autonomy that is absent from the perceptual term. Noticeably, some perceptual terms are forms by themselves, depending on the level considered. The 'however' mentioned in the previous example, for instance, is a perceptual term generating expectation on the syntactic level, but it is also a form on the lexical level, since it is an autonomous word. In that regard it is complete and fulfils expectations. This, of course, is not true for all perceptual terms; as an immediate example, consider an expression such as 'once upon a...', which, unlike 'however', is incomplete (and thus generates tensions) on all formal levels where it exists. It could be maintained that a perceptual term is the incomplete version of the form it recalls, but this would be an oversimplification, not taking into account that not all perceptual terms point to a form actually present in the text; meaning is a process, evolving during the reception of a text. Indeed, the recipient's expectations can be more or less specific, based on the tensive devices developed by the text. Perceptual terms references can range from very specific to generic and subtle. Moreover, expectations can be shaped by the overall textual form, which depends on the genre it belongs to; in other words, narrative conventions can affect interpretation.

[6] See Barbieri 2004, 45. Such distinction into levels is functional to the analysis of expectations in a poem. Some of those levels are almost insignificant in other textualities, such as the metric and prosodic in prose fiction, while other levels acquire much more importance and new levels need to be considered; thus, other means of identifying elements creating expectations (relief) must be devised to analyse, for instance, a novel. Cf. next sections.

3. Textual Relief

While identifying the rhythmic patterns that trigger interpretative tension may be easy on some textual levels (see previous examples about poetic texts), when narrative texts are considered in their entirety, the operation is not so straightforward. Although a rhyme scheme creates an evident repetition of a pattern in time, the same cannot be said for the elements of narrative discourse. As mentioned before, the classic narratological approach unsuccessfully relied on anisochrony, the relationship between time of the story and time of discourse; however, one must agree with Barbieri's remark: "Our experience as readers makes us suspect that rhythm in narration may be completely independent from the quantity of time recounted. A good narrator can obtain the effect of a fast-paced, intense, pressing rhythm either telling the evolution of human race or describing a swift fighting scene" (Barbieri, "Tempo e ritmo nel racconto per immagini", 2-3). Hence, the concept of 'textual relief' is introduced. The term should be intended in its 'spatial' sense of an element that stands out against the others, as in the sculpting technique of high relief. Textual relief is described as follows:

> [A] textual feature appearing at all levels, contrasting marked textual zones with zones that are not or less so; somewhat reintroducing at all levels the gestalt opposition between foreground and background. [...] In order to understand what relief is, the simplest and self-evident example is the stress on syllables in spoken language, opposing stressed and unstressed sounds (Barbieri 2004, 72).

Relief is what makes textual elements come forward to be noticed and interpreted and even though it is always engendered at a specific level, its effect can propagate to other levels, provided that they have similar complexity. Moreover, several levels can show elements in relief at the same time, magnifying the resulting effect. It follows that a text does not have a single rhythm, but several co-occurring ones that contribute to the overall rhythmic effect. Depending on the type of textuality, however, one or more formal levels can emerge as more relevant to the general rhythm. In poetry, for example, the syntactic level is extremely important, while in narrative texts (novels and short stories, but also most drama and films) it is far less relevant and the narrative structures are privileged. This does not mean that other levels do not participate in the creation of rhythmic/tensive patterns, but that the narrative rhythm is 'prominent'. In

other words, in a narrative text, the recipient's attention is mainly devoted to character relations, sequences of events and other narrative structures, but other features such as symbolic patterns, word choices or other 'style' effects have their importance as well. Consider, for instance, the fundamental role of the soundtrack in films. Prominent and background levels work together towards the creation of the overall rhythmic intensity, which is the sum of the quantity of relief present in a given portion of text.

The paragraphs above outline the mechanisms that regulate tension and how relief can function as an indicator of the rhythmic patterns inside a semiotic level and as a coordinating element between levels. What has intentionally been overlooked is how relief emerges from textual structures. This issue is central, since it is identification of elements in relief that allows for patterns to be recognised and rhythm analysis to be performed. Relief can be generated in most disparate ways, depending on the formal level and the specific features of each textuality; however, Barbieri divides the creation of relief in two main categories, position and novelty:

- Novelty is related to the concept of markedness. Each textual level has its own unmarked configurations, standard arrangements that do not create surprise. As usual, consider as an example the less complex syntactic level. The unmarked sentence structure in English is SVO; such word order is perfectly predictable and generates no surprise. Deviations from the standard create a novelty, which in turn generates an interpretative tension. The same reasoning can be applied to other textual levels where, however, deciding what is unmarked can require a more advanced analysis.
- Positional relief, on the other hand, is usually codified in the form's structure. This can easily be seen thinking about the story-form, where the most obvious positions of relief are the beginning and the end. Most forms have one or more positions that put elements in relief independently from what they are.

The two modalities of *mise en relief* are cumulative: if an element of novelty occurs in a position of relief, the effect will be magnified; conversely, where a positional relief is filled with an expected element, tension will decrease. This effect can be exploited to modulate tensive effects. Moreover, the two general conditions for textual relief – position and novelty – recall to a certain extent the Saussurean distinction between the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes, since positional relief depends on the relation with co-occurring elements, in *praesentia*, while novelty concerns various possible alternative outcomes of a

perceptual term, in *absentia*. The mechanism that allows rhythms to be perceived, in other words, seems to be based on a distinction deeply embedded into the structure of language. This notion agrees with the intuitive idea that no act of communication can exist without having a rhythm. However, while rhythms pervade every aspect of a text, not all of them are relevant. If we consider rhythm as an isotopy,[7] it requires a selective process to be recognised and every text adopts specific strategies to induce such recognition in its audience.

The following sections will discuss some of those strategies, focussing on narrative devices that rely on worldbuilding and exploit the mechanisms that allow recipients to fill-in the inevitable gaps in the fictional world. Making use of possible-world theory, one can schematise narrative discourse and outline how the creation of fictional worlds interacts with the recipient's expectations, putting narrative elements in relief. Furthermore, possible-world theory is especially suitable for discussing story beginnings, one of the main sources of 'positional relief' in a narrative form. Before moving to the main topic of this article, however, a brief example might help review the key points of rhythm analysis discussed so far.

The following is a revisitation of a classic example, proposed by Paul Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative;* while discussing the role of verb tenses, he mentioned that "the impression of rapidity is explained by the concentration of values in the foreground, as in the famous expression *Veni, vidi, vici*" (Ricoeur 1984, 71). Such claim can be discussed in terms of rhythm analysis, without even changing the original statement. The assumption is that foregrounded elements are not actions in the simple past (perfective) as Ricoeur implied, but rather what Barbieri calls textual relief. With this difference in mind, it can be said that in Julius Caesar's renowned expression the sense of extreme rapidity is conveyed by the great amount of information given in such a short sentence. The phrase, in fact, is a full-fledged story condensed in three words. As such, a great narrative relief is created. In Genettian terms, a long story time (a whole military campaign, although brief) in a very short discourse time. However, there is much more in this sentence as far as rhythm is concerned. Considering the story-form, both novelty and position relief are detectable. The latter is given by the presence of the beginning and the end of the story, and further enhanced by the close

[7] Barbieri notes that rhythm could be considered as a specific instance of isotopy, which is a detectable recurrence of meaning traits (semes). Just like rhythm, an isotopy is an open form, not tending towards a closure but rather perpetuating until substituted by another one or by a temporary absence. Rhythms are a subset of isotopies, in that the recurrence also needs some sort of regularity to generate expectation. See Barbieri 2004, 70.

proximity of the two; novelty is detectable in the unusual structure of a story told eliding all the information but the essential verbs. This prominent narrative relief comes alongside reliefs on several background levels. Firstly, there is the prosodic pattern of the alliteration of the 'v' sound; then, on the syntactic level, the repetition of three consecutive verbs in the same tense creates an iteration, a source of rhythmic regularity. In addition, the semantic level presents a crescendo, a series of actions growing rapidly to the archetypical climax of victory. In conclusion, if we consider '*veni, vidi, vici*' as a story, thus assigning the prominence to the narrative level, an intertwining of reliefs on several levels can be detected, creating a cooperation of background rhythms that contribute to enhance the prominent narrative rhythm. The result is a sum of rhythmic patterns which creates an extreme overall intensity.

Since even a three-word narration has so much to offer to rhythm analysis, it's easy to understand that the rhythmic complexity of a novel or film requires some theoretical devices to schematise the narrative level and highlight rhythmic and tensive patterns. Thus, expanding the methods for identifying elements in relief becomes essential.

4. Possible Worlds and Rhythmic Strategies

This section introduces the theory of possible worlds, a concept that analyses the content of a fictional text as a modal system built on logic relationships between its elements. Such system – the fictional universe – is inherently incomplete, since it is created by a narrative which is necessarily finite. The mechanisms through which the recipients make up for such incompleteness can be exploited by the text to create tensions and rhythms. Recognising those strategies allows for the identification of narrative relief, thus complementing the method for rhythm analysis presented in the previous sections.

Umberto Eco defines a possible world as follows:[8]

[8] Eco bases his formalisation of possible words on Jaakko Hintikka's theoretical framework (see especially Hintikka 1973) from which he draws most of the logic relationships that control the behaviour of possible worlds, the individuals and their properties. The following definition is originally presented in chapter 8 of *Lector in fabula* (Eco 1979), many parts of which were directly translated in The *Role of the Reader* (Eco 1984).

[A] possible state of affairs expressed by a set of relevant propositions where for every proposition either p or ~p. As such it outlines a set of *individuals* along with their *properties*. Since some of these properties or predicates are actions, a possible world is also a *possible course of events*. Since this course of events is not actual, it must depend on the propositional attitudes of somebody; in other words, possible worlds are worlds imagined, believed, wished, and so on" (Eco 1984, 219).

Moreover, eco maintains that a text "is *a machine for producing possible worlds* (of the *fabula,* of the characters within the *fabula,* and of the reader outside the *fabula*)" (Eco 1984, 246).The core concept behind possible worlds is neatly summarised by Marie-Laure Ryan: "The literary text establishes for the reader a new actual world which imposes its own laws on the surrounding system, thereby defining its own horizon of possibilities. In order to become immersed in this world, the reader must adopt a new ontological perspective, thereby entailing a new model of what exists and what does not" (Ryan, "Possible Worlds").

Thus, according to possible-world theory, every fictional story takes place in a fictional world, however similar it might appear to the real one. Such world model is necessarily incomplete since, as Lubomír Doležel points out, the human mind cannot encompass a single object in its entirety – let alone a whole world (see Doležel 1998). Consequently, every fictional world presents areas of radical indeterminacy. Therefore, as noted by Eco, "no fictional world could be totally autonomous, since it would be impossible for it to outline a maximal and consistent state of affairs by stipulating *ex nihilo* the whole of its individuals ad of their properties" (Eco 1984, 221).

Since only a subset of the possible world, its individuals and their properties can be described, a text must rely on recipients to 'fill in the gaps'. Therefore, possible worlds are subject to the so called 'principle of minimal departure': if something is not explicated, it is usually assumed to be as it is in the recipient's actual world (the real world). In Ryan's words, "whenever we interpret a message concerning an alternate world, we reconstrue this world as being the closest possible to the reality we know" (Ryan 1980, 403). If not for this principle, the narrator would have to describe in detail every single fictional object or event. On the contrary, excessive description is felt as marked by most readers. This fact alone can be exploited to engender relief: unusual emphasis on individuals – or some of their specific traits – may trigger a recognition as perceptual term and the beginning of tensive patterns related to the hypothetical form(s) associated to it.

Given that "it would take a text of infinite length to construct a complete fictional world" (Doležel 1998, 169), Doležel introduces 'saturation', a concept to

express the completeness and definiteness of possible worlds. According to Doležel's model, texts can deal with fictional entities in three ways, that he calls textures.[9] The text can present something explicitly, thus creating a fictional fact (explicit texture); if nothing is written (zero texture), a gap originates in the fictional world. There is a third and more subtle option, which involves implying the existence of the fictional entity (implicit texture). As a matter of fact, according to Doležel, "implicitness based on presupposition is a major source of fictional-worlds construction and reconstruction. [...] an entity is often introduced into the fictional world by way of existential presuppositions" (Doležel 1998, 175). Doležel illustrates this point citing the first sentence of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, which mentions a train to Warsaw, and he claims that the existential presupposition is that trains exist in that specific fictional world. I argue that the reader may also infer the existence of stations, rails, ticket collectors and so on, and that this assumption does not imply a gap, since those fictional entities are required by the existence of a train as he/she knows it. An 'actual' gap, on the contrary, corresponds to something never mentioned. The implicitness, in other words, corresponds to a blurry domain in between what is explicitly stated and what is not mentioned at all. This distinction might seem purely speculative in realistic storytelling, but it becomes essential for the analysis of tensive devices in other genres. While a train is something undisputable,[10] the effect of mentioning, for instance, a ghost can create a remarkable interpretative tension. Is the ghost a real supernatural entity, a trick of the mind, a clever ruse to conceal a murder? In such cases, the principle of minimal departure allows a fictional text to play with the recipient's expectations. The examples in section 5 present this idea in detail.

The three types of textual statements (textures) correspond to different fictional domains: "the explicit texture constructs the determinate domain, the implicit texture the indeterminate domain, and zero texture the domain of gaps" (Doležel 1998, 182). Saturation establishes the density of the fictional world; the determinate domain constitutes the core, surrounded by a zone of indeterminacy, which in turn is surrounded by the gaps of unsaid.

[9] "A texture is the exact form of expression, the original wording in which the motif appears in the literary text". What in Eco's terms would be a proposition defining an individual and/or some of its properties. In other words, what the text says (or does not) about a specific fictional entity or fact. See Doležel 1998, 35.

[10] Then again, it depends on the audience's expectations. If a train was to be mentioned in a science fiction while describing a character commuting to the moon, the principle of minimal departure would be challenged, arising several interpretative tensions.

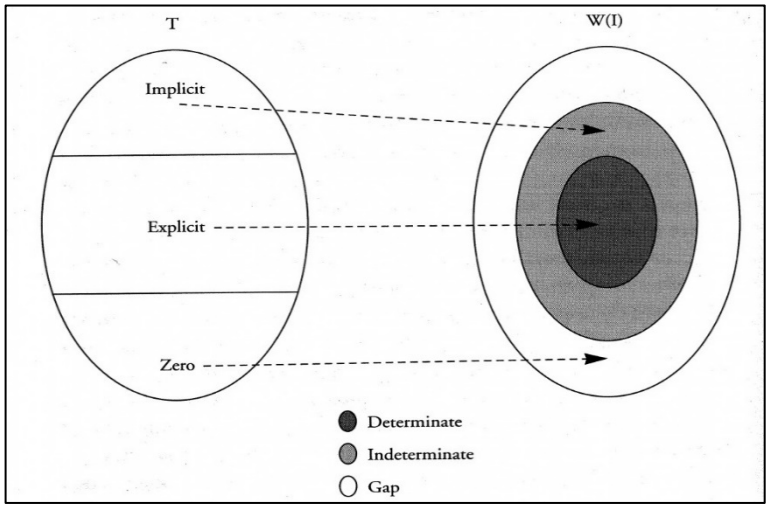

Figure 1 – Saturation and domains, in Doležel 1998, p. 182

All three domains are fundamental as far as rhythm analysis is concerned, given how the principle of minimal departure works, i.e. how readers (but the same is true for recipients of all textualities) can fill in the gap domain and presuppose existence in the indeterminate domain.

Let us return to the previous example about Dostoevsky's novel and examine a random zero texture and the corresponding gap. In *The Idiot* the sea is mentioned for the first time in chapter XV. However, even before that point, the reader was perfectly aware that the fictional world *did* include the sea and thus, obviously, its being mentioned after fifteen chapters does not constitute relief. In fact, it is irrelevant that the sea is mentioned at all. Even if it were not, I believe that no reader would have claimed that in *The Idiot* the sea doesn't exist. This is due to the principle of minimal departure, which functions recurring to what Eco calls textual cooperation, while defining the text as "a lazy machine asking the reader to do some of its work. What a problem it would be if a text were to say everything the receiver is to understand – it would never end. If I were to phone you and say, 'I'll take the highway and be with you in an hour,' you would not expect me to add that I shall use my car along the highway" (Eco 1995, 3). Eco's example summarises the incompleteness of possible worlds detailed so far and stresses the essential role of the recipient. The gaps in the possible world are filled by recurring to a pool of shared knowledge, which Eco calls *encyclopedia*, and which varies with society, culture and historical period. Given a model reader, thus, existential presuppositions are expected to be consistent. Therefore, even

though the domain of gaps constitutes great part of every fictional world, it may be said that such world is the same for most readers. And so are the expectations arising from such unsaid elements. This conclusion is essential: otherwise the rhythm analyst could only come to personal conclusions. Conversely, minimal departure allows a certain degree of generalisation. Moreover, Doležel suggests an extension of the concept of encyclopedia, to account for the multiplicity of possible worlds: "The actual world encyclopedia is just one among numerous encyclopedias of possible worlds. Knowledge about a possible world constructed by a fictional text constitutes a fictional encyclopedia. Fictional encyclopedias are many and diverse, but all of them to a greater or lesser degree digress from the actual-world encyclopedia".[11] Thus, when a recipient approaches a new text, he will recur to the encyclopedia he *expects* will better adapt to the still unknown possible world. The process taking place in the aforementioned examples is now much easier to describe: in the case of the train, the reader correctly applies the real-world encyclopedia, while with the ghost, several encyclopedias may conflict creating a perceptual term with several hypothetical meanings. Readers will need further information to narrow down their expectations to a single form. Therefore, depending on the reader's familiarity with genres and authors, when reading Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and Lovecraft's *The Hound,* the presence of the spectral beast may or may not lead to a different set of expectations and tensions. Eco calls this process of educated guessing based on pre-existing knowledge 'inferential walks' and claims that a text "not only tolerates, but anxiously awaits these inferential walks in order not to be obliged to tell too much" (Eco 1984, 214). What is more, texts can exploit the clichés and tropes to throw the audience 'off the scent' and then subvert their set of expectations, thus creating strong novelty relief. In more formal terms, "at every disjunction of probability, the reader can venture several hypotheses and it cannot be excluded that discursive structures may maliciously steer them towards hypotheses which are to be discarded" (Eco 1979, 120).[12] Hence, texts make

[11] Doležel 1998, 177. According to Eco, the reader's encyclopedia is the sum of all the knowledge of a certain reader, drawn from real life but also fictional works which, in turn, is a part of the shared knowledge of a culture/historical period/social group, which Eco calls Global encyclopedia and corresponds to an image of what we consider the real world. Doležel's version might be less accurate, since knowledge is indeed an organic ensemble and not something that can be comparted, but his assigning a different encyclopedia to every possible world seems to be a useful simplification worth adopting, since it helps the recognition of expectation patterns in rhythm analysis.

[12] Translation mine. It is worth noting that Eco's 'disjunction of probability' is much akin to Barbieri's 'perceptual term', since they both refer to textual elements that can drive predictions and expectations. This is

constant use of minimal departure to create their possible worlds by drawing into their recipient's encyclopedias. This is generally an unmarked feature (i.e., there is no relief in discovering that the sea is part of the fictional world of *The Idiot*); however, narrators can exploit the way in which textual cooperation works to create relief in the construction of possible worlds. This device is especially effective in correspondence of narrative turning points (novelty relief) or at the beginning of narrative discourse (positional relief), since the fictional world is still 'empty' and any information given or withheld generates higher narrative relief.

5. Epistemic Disparity

In case of a homodiegetic narrator or strong internal focalisation, for instance, tension can arise from what I call 'epistemic disparity': the relationship between the knowledge the narrator has about the fictional world and that of the text's recipient. The different relative epistemic stances a narrator can adopt lead to different approaches in disclosing the fictional world in which the story is set, creating diverse constructions of narrative tension:

- A first possibility is the audience having access to information unavailable to the homodiegetic narrator. This is usually the case in realistic or historical fiction, or when the narrator is young or inexperienced of the world.
- Secondly, the narrating voice can withhold information to the reader; in this case the homodiegetic narrator knows more about the fictional world than the audience does. This is true for instance, in most fantastic narratives, where real-world knowledge does not fully apply.
- Lastly, the fictional world can be disclosed in a more complex, mixed way, in which the recipient's knowledge is partially challenged and there might be the necessity of readjusting or shifting encyclopedias several times.

These different 'narrative stances' allow the text to enact opposite strategies in the construction of the fictional world, all with the purpose of engaging the reader by maintaining a constant tension throughout the narration. The result is unusual relief put on certain story elements. Three examples of contemporary novels, each adopting one of these strategies, will be discussed. Two texts feature

not surprising, considering that Barbieri has been one of Eco's students and their semiotic approach is closely intertwined.

a homodiegetic narrator, and one a heterodiegetic narrator focalised through the main character.

In Sara Nović's *Girl at War* (2015), the protagonist and narrator is Ana Jurić, who is ten at the beginning of the story. In the first section, the outburst of the Yugoslavian civil war and the following ethnic cleansing are depicted through the innocent and naïve eyes of the young girl. Even if historical data is seldom explicit, constant reference is made to the several factions involved and, more or less indirectly, to historical facts or figures such as Milošević. Thus, it is quite easy for the reader to place the story in its spatial and temporal framework. Despite the presence of fictional characters and some historical inaccuracies, the fictionality of the world is not self-evident to the reader, who builds around the narrator's propositions drawing from his/her real-world encyclopedia: a basic command of contemporary history (or a quick search on the Internet) is enough to 'fill the gaps', reconstructing the fictional world as being similar to the reader's actual world in the early 1990s. In such structural context, narrative tension arises from the extreme divergence between the narrator's and the reader's knowledge of the world. While young Ana is new to the concept of war and violence and lives in a playful, cocoon-like world throughout the first section of the novel, external knowledge creates in the reader a series of expectation patterns concerning possible negative outcomes for the events narrated. Even if the narrator's voice is constructed to mitigate this sensation, the result is a constant feeling that something horrible is imminent. Tension arises from the reader's epistemic superiority over the narrator and from her inability to recognise the clues of what is happening around her.

This narrative device culminates in chapter 7 of Part I, when Ana's family is captured by Serbian soldiers at a roadblock and her parents are shot, together with other Croatians. She survives thanks to her father, who makes her feign her death. Thus, the passage is charged with extreme relief: the initial lack of understanding of the protagonist/narrator is counterbalanced by the reader's recognition of the narrative pattern (ethnic cleansing) that had been envisaged from the beginning, thanks to the extratextual knowledge injected in the possible world's indeterminate domain. The long-constructed tension is discharged as the reader's worst expectations are fulfilled. Therefore, adding to the emotive shock of the event, the novel manages to create a 'structural shock' as well: the massacre of Ana's family and the consequent collapse of her idyllic world corresponds to the end of the reader's epistemic superiority. From this point on, both Ana Jurić and the reader are deprived of any certainty. It may be said that the reader's epistemic superiority functioned as a proxy of the narrator's false sense of security,

enveloping them both in a safe cocoon. Now that the readers' expectations have been fulfilled, they must cope with a new possible world, as Ana does in the story. This destabilising effect works alongside other devices, such as the strong emotional immersion due to the homodiegetic narrator, to increase the narrative relief of this central event.

In the post-apocalyptic novel *Zone One* (2011), by Colson Whitehead, the epistemic stance is reversed. While in *Girl at War* non-mentioned features of the fictional world can be inferred from real-world encyclopedia, in a sci-fi narration it is impossible to do so. The text takes advantage of this feature by making Mark Spitz – the focalising character and source of the narrating stream of consciousness – hold back information that cannot be obtained recurring to the personal encyclopedia. The novel's opening is set in a fictional world which mirrors the actual world, then, with no explanation and without so much as a paragraph change, an everyday memory of New York turns in a war scenario: "When his unit finally started sweeping beyond the wall—whenever that was—he knew he had to visit Uncle Lloyd's apartment [...] only a few blocks past the barrier. [...] He slung his assault rifle over his shoulder and parted the blinds at the end of the corridor" (Whitehead 2011, 6). The setting is overturned, and the reader is flung in a completely unknown post-apocalyptic fictional world. The narrator mentions fictional entities such as "The time of the ruin", "the incident", "the disaster", and then gradually "the advent of the plague", "the skels", "the sweeper units": these are all implicit textures that can lead to partial existential presuppositions only, since the reader's encyclopedia is still missing those 'entries'. The narrator has a complete knowledge of the fictional world, but provides only sparse glimpses about the new configuration of reality, and the reader is left alone to scramble a few tiles, struggling to compose a mosaic image without knowing the general picture. This device has a strong rhythmic effect, since unknown entities are assigned increased relief as the reader strives to infer their meaning from the narrator's report of his everyday life in a post-apocalyptic world. Thus, epistemic disparity here creates a regular pattern of interpretative tensions, one for each implicit texture awaiting to become explicit. This is what Barbieri calls a "second-order rhythm" (Barbieri 2004, 99), a rhythm which does not directly arise from textual elements, but from a perceived regularity of the tensive patterns themselves; in simple words, a rhythm of tensions.

Yet, readers are not thoroughly lost: since the novel came out after many post-apocalyptic zombie narratives, they can recur to fictional encyclopedias to make partial sense of the new world. Beginning the story in a world similar to the actual one tricks the reader and requires an encyclopedic shift. This creates a sense of

alienation that mirrors the involvement in a global upheaval. In the same way as the novel's survivors, readers face a world of devoid signifiers, like "an insect exploring a gravestone: the words and names [are] crevasses to get lost in, looming and meaningless" (Whitehead 2011, 7). Once again, although in a reverted way compared to *Girl at War*, the epistemic disparity fuels the narrative tension, creating positions of extreme relief; the principle of minimal departure is actively exploited and the result is a fictional world which unfolds gradually, where placing an explicit texture is a difficult feat, and a sudden update in the proprieties of a fictional object can make the reader reconsider all his expectations.

The 'stragglers' are a poignant example; they are mentioned several times before the narrator gives the following explanation:

> There were your standard-issue skels, and then there were the stragglers. Most skels, they moved. They came to eat you [...] The stragglers, on the other hand, did not move, and that's what made them a suitable objective for civilian units. They were a succession of imponderable tableaux, the malfunctioning stragglers and the places they chose to haunt throughout the Zone and beyond. An army of mannequins, limbs adjusted by an inscrutable hand (Whitehead 2011, 41-42).

Despite the fact that these strange harmless skels (zombies) are the targets of the civilian squads the main character belongs to, the stream of consciousness technique allows the extremely focalised narrator to delay this explanation more than 40 pages into the novel. Thus, before this passage, the reader has only a vague idea of what stragglers are: the focalising character has no reason to think about them in detail, since they are part of his everyday routine; on the other hand, every time stragglers are mentioned, there is an increase of attention in the reader, who is trying to fill in a gap in the fictional world. This corresponds to a series of textual reliefs which culminate in the quoted passage, an extreme relief due to the closure of an interpretative tension towards the understanding of the term. The rhythmic role of this device, however, does not end here. Towards the end of the novel, Mark Spitz's squad is attacked by a straggler and his teammate Gary is killed. This event is naturally in great relief, since it is a narrative turning point; however, I maintain that the worldbuilding based on epistemic disparity contributes to an even higher relief. The fact that stragglers are motionless is not a regular explicit texture, mentioned as a fact by the narrator in the first pages; in fact, it is a hard-earned entry in the specific fictional encyclopedia the reader is constructing for this possible world. This knowledge was an achievement, and thus it being challenged in correspondence with a major narrative event makes it

even more significant. Just as in *Girl at War, Zone One* builds a deep engagement with the reader, a 'structural immersion' that goes beyond the simple emotional identification with characters. It works on a rhythmic and tensive level to fulfil and disrupt expectations in order to modulate the relief of narrative elements.

Finally, a good example of the third kind of epistemic disparity is Philip Roth's novel *The Plot Against America* (2004); it is an alternative-history fiction that builds its possible world with a strategy that can be considered a blending of the two just analysed. The reader thinks he/she knows the fictional world, but it is a false belief. The knowledge that the plot is set in the 1940s immediately conjures in the reader's mind historical knowledge to complete the fictional world, drawn from the real-world encyclopedia. The fact that the novel unfolds in an *alternative version* of the 1940s, however, undermines the reader's convictions and opens the ground to the uncertainty of speculative fiction, managing narrative tension through lack of information. However, unlike in *Girl at War*, the narrator in *The Plot Against America*'s is by no means naïve. Even though the focalising character is indeed the boy Philip Roth, the narrator is an adult Philip, recounting memories of his childhood. Furthermore, the fact that the main character and the narrator share the name with the author plays with the readers' expectations, complicating the relationship between the actual world of the fiction and the real world, blurring the borders between possible-world domains: thus it's easy for the reader to superimpose the indeterminate domain of the fictional world with the real world. This strategy is an intentional mechanism to stimulate the principle of minimal departure. The text tricks the reader into adopting the epistemic stance of superiority given by historic knowledge of the real world, although it is clear from the very beginning that this is an alternative history, since the 'point of departure' is presented in the opening sentences: "Fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear. Of course no childhood is without its terrors, yet I wonder if I would have been a less frightened boy if Lindbergh hadn't been president or if I hadn't been the offspring of Jews" (Roth 2004b, 1).

The opening words also show that the narrator is writing from a later time span. This is an essential difference from the construction of the fictional world in *Girl at War*, since it allows the narrator to describe and comment on (alternative) historical events with insightful details that a child could not muster. The result is a narrative tension arising from both the recognition of an historical crisis, namely the rising of a fascist government in a country, and the 'what-if effect' caused by the alternative events. As in *Zone One*, the reader must adjust his understanding of the fictional world every time a contradicting proposition is

given. The unsettling effect, however, is even greater, because the starting point is not a fictional encyclopedia – which a reader is always prepared to modify – but, apparently, the real world encyclopedia. Thus, when an explicit texture appears, rather than filling the indeterminate or gap domains, it often causes a shift, a surprise due to the realisation that knowledge taken for granted was actually just an inference. And yet, the narrative is constructed to make the reader forget the fictionality aiming, as Roth himself stated, "to alter the historical reality by making Lindbergh America's 33rd president while keeping everything else as close to factual truth as I could" (Roth 2004a). The narrator seems constantly to linger on this deceptive epistemic stance, thus giving increased relief to elements that diverge from real-world history while the narrative crescendo of the story unfolds.

The three world-building strategies exemplified are based on distinctive epistemic relationships between the narrator and the reader. The saturation of the possible worlds is used either to create expectation patterns in a reader who knows more than the narrator does, or to force him/her to continually adjust their limited understanding of the fictional world, or else to shift from real to fictional every time a new fictional fact overwrites the 'filler knowledge' taken from the reader's real-world encyclopedia. "The readers have to be ready to modify, supplement or even discard the actual-world encyclopedia" (Doležel 1998, 181), and when this happens a sharp relief is put on the narrative element that caused the knowledge shift. The examples also showed that homodiegetic narration is particularly effective in exploiting the principle of minimal departure because it lacks the absoluteness of the heterodiegetic narrator, which Doležel calls 'authoritative narrative'; while "entities introduced in the discourse by the anonymous third-person narrator are *eo ipso* authenticated as fictional facts" (Ibid., 149), the possible world created by the homodiegetic narrator's discourse can be challenged to a certain extent. Just as it happens with characters, the reader feels he/she is allowed to question the truth value of statements. This sort of equality allows the enactment of the epistemic disparity strategy. On the contrary, "authoritative narrative is prisoner of its authentication force: it cannot lie or err" (Ibid., 149), and thus the text must recur to different devices to create tensive patterns related to the structure of possible worlds. A similar effect, as seen in *Zone One,* can be achieved through focalisation: the reader has access to a fictional person's knowledge, desires and beliefs. However, this is only possible when the focalising devices are extreme – as in the case of the stream of consciousness – and alter the depiction of reality significantly. Otherwise, unlike narrators, characters do not have the 'authority' to participate in the construction

of the actual world, but can only build their own versions of possible worlds, based on their knowledge, intentions, wishes and so on. Those too may be analysed for tensive or rhythmic patterns, but further venturing into this topic requires notions of the modal structure of narrative universes,[13] which would exceed the scope of this paper.

6. Conclusions

All things considered, merging the semiotic approach with the methods of narratology has proven to be not only possible but also extremely productive. In this paper, I have outlined Barbieri's theory of rhythm analysis based on textual relief and then complemented it with elements of possible-world theory to achieve a better identification of tensive and rhythmic patterns arising from fictional worldbuilding. I have discussed how different 'textures' composing the possible world domains can engender textual relief on the narrative level if the principle of minimal departure is actively exploited. Introducing the notion of 'epistemic disparity', I have illustrated three such approaches by different narrators, and the effects they have on the reader's expectations that lead to the recognition of rhythmic patterns related to story elements. The management of information concerning the fictional world works better as a rhythmic device at the beginning of narrative discourse, when the indeterminate and gap domains are vaster. In this situation the principle of minimal departure governing the recipient's expectations is constantly activating to complete the narrator's worldbuilding. If the type of narration allows withholding information – such was the case in the three examples analysed – the narrator can create tensive patterns exploiting the epistemic disparity with the reader. This is possible when the reader knows more about the world than the narrator does (young/naïve homodiegetic narrator), or when the latter refuses to disclose information about an unfamiliar fictional world (homodiegetic or extremely focalised narration); finally the narrator can exploit the apparent similarity of the fictional world with the real one to cause constant shifts in the reader's encyclopedia: a series of

[13] According to this model, from the actual world depart a series of relative worlds, which constitute the characters' domains, i.e. the projections of their beliefs, wishes, intentions and so on (see, for instance, Ryan 1985). The modal structure of the characters' possible worlds can be analysed at any given world-state to identify expectation patterns and narrative tensions arising from non-actual worlds.

'surprises' that cast some textual elements in sharp relief. All these strategies seem to require a non-authoritative narrative for the epistemic disparity to work.

In conclusion, despite lagging behind on original rhythm analysis, narrative studies can give a significant contribute to existing theories. Thanks to the extreme flexibility of the notion of textual relief, one can adapt rhythm analysis to different media, genres and textual levels, choosing from the cornucopia of available theories the one that best suits each specific need. In this case, possible worlds proved to be an excellent tool to deal with narrative tensions and expectations that arise from the reader's relationship with the story-worlds, giving a more detailed indication about the mechanisms of novelty and positional relief.

Bibliography

Bal, Mieke. 2009. *Narratology*: *Introduction to the Theory of Narrative (Third edition)*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Barbieri, Daniele. "Tempo e ritmo nel racconto per immagini." Unpublished. http://www.danielebarbieri.it/texts/temporitmoraccontoperimmagini.pdf.

Barbieri, Daniele. 1996. *Questioni di ritmo. L'analisi tensiva dei testi televisivi*. Roma: ERI-RAI.

Barbieri, Daniele. 2004. *Nel corso del testo. Una teoria della tensione e del ritmo*. Milano: Bompiani.

Caracciolo, Marco. 2014. "Tell-Tale Rhythms: Embodiment and Narrative Discourse." *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 6, no. 2: 49-73.

Ceriani, Giulia. 2003. *Il senso del ritmo.* Roma: Meltemi Editore.

Doležel, Lubomír. 1998. *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP.

Eco, Umberto. 1979. *Lector in fabula. La cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi.* Milano: Bompiani.

Eco, Umberto. 1984. *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.

Eco, Umberto. 1995. *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*. Cambridge (Massachusetts): Harvard UP.

Genette, Gérard. 1980. *Narrative Discourse, an Essay in Method. Portion of Figures III*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin, Ithaca & New York: Cornell UP.

Hintikka, Jaakko. 1973. *Logic, Language-Games and Information*. London: Oxford UP.

Nović, Sara. 2015. *Girl at War.* New York: Random House.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1984. *Time and Narrative Vol. 2 - Time in Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Roth, Philip. 2004a. "The Story Behind *The Plot Against America*." *The New York Times Online, Sept. 19.* https://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/19/books/review/the-story-behind-the-plot-against-america.html.

Roth, Philip. 2004b. *The Plot Against America: A Novel*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. 1980. "Fiction, Non-Factuals, and the Principle of Minimal Departure." *Poetics* 9, n. 4: 403-422.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. 1985. "The Modal Structure of Narrative Universes." *Poetics Today* 6, no. 4: 717-55.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. "Possible Worlds." In Hühn, P. et al. (eds.). *The Living Handbook of Narratology*. Hamburg University. http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/possible-worlds.

Thom, René. 1990. *Semio Physics: A Sketch*. Translated by Vendla Meyer. Boston: Addison-Wesley.

Whitehead, Colson. 2011. *Zone One.* New York: Doubleday.

Andrea Fenice has recently completed his Ph.D. in Scienze del Testo – Anglistica (English studies) at Sapienza University in Rome. In his thesis he devised a theory of rhythm analysis based on narratology and semiotics, with a specific focus on the cognitive turn in narrative

studies and how such theories can merge with more traditional semiotic approaches. Such method was then applied to Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and its adaptations in several media such as theatre, film, graphic novels and television. On this topic, he has also published in Italian and English, exploring with different focusses the complex rhythmic devices of the novel. He is currently working on refining his theoretical approach in order to create a method that can be applied to a wider variety of texts and media, and can be used to compare rhythmic strategies in intersemiotic adaptation.

statuS Quaestionis
language text culture

Domenico Pio Chirico
Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II

Lettura pirandelliana di una trilogia lorchiana

Abstract

The paper starts focusing on Pirandello and García Lorca's trilogies "theatre in the theatre" and the conceptions of theatre in the society between the two World Wars for the two authors. It underlines how the same antagonism versus the bourgeois spectators and the same metatheatral technique was used in different ways in *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, *Ciascuno a suo modo*, *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* and in *El público*, *Así que pasen cinco años* and *Comedia sin título*. The basic idea of this work is that through the reading of Pirandello's plays, we can better understand Lorca'a plays. The last part of the work analyses the unfinished work of Pirandello *I giganti della montagna* and the impossibility of poetry in the massificated society for the Italian author just as Lorca's play *Comedia sin título*, in which the theatre collapsed under the force of revolution.

1. Negli anni tra il 1929 e il 1935 Federico García Lorca concepisce una trilogia teatrale, rimasta in gran parte incompleta e mai rappresentata, che ha come argomento portante proprio il teatro. Ricadere nella definizione di trilogia del "teatro nel teatro", con esplicito riferimento a Pirandello, non è una novità se si pensa che già Vitale 1991 e Soufas 1996 parlano di una trilogia metateatrale lorchiana. Quello che si tenterà di fare in questa sede è dare una lettura pirandelliana di questa trilogia spagnola costituita da *El público* (1929), *Así que pasen cinco años* (1933) e *Comedia sin título* (1935) in modo da capire quali sono i punti di contatto e divergenza tra i due autori nell'utilizzo delle tecniche metateatrali e come questi siano entrambi influenzati dalle avanguardie. Questo approccio non significa cercare di uniformare il prodotto drammaturgico lorchiano a quello pirandelliano, ma capire in che modo si muovano nella nuova complessità organizzativa dell'arte tra le due guerre e illuminare alcune caratteristiche della trilogia lorchiana ancora poco chiare. In via preliminare si deve sottolineare una conoscenza critica dell'opera pirandelliana da parte di Lorca. Egli subì, probabilmente, il dibattito culturale spagnolo intorno alla figura

del siciliano negli anni della sua formazione alla *Residencia de estudiantes*. Infatti sappiamo che nel gennaio 1924 Ricardo Baeza tenne una conferenza nell'istituto madrileno a cui, probabilmente, partecipò lo stesso García Lorca (cfr. Muñiz Muñiz 1997, 116). L'interesse per l'autore siciliano sembra acuirsi in coincidenza con la stesura del testo di *El público*. Durante il soggiorno americano alla Columbia University, come si evince dalle lettere ai genitori (García Lorca 1984), l'autore spagnolo frequenta gli stessi ambienti accademici di Prezzolini, che era reduce dall'esperienza del Teatro d'Arte (cfr. Bontempelli 1993, 58-64) sotto la direzione di Pirandello e che stava tenendo un corso proprio su quest'ultimo e Verga (Ragusa 1995, 67) nell'università newyorkese. L'autore si reca spesso a teatro dove gli spettacoli del nostro erano reinterpretati da compagnie locali. Negli ultimi anni i contatti tra i due autori si infittiscono a tal punto che Pirandello invita varie volte il granadino a rappresentare *Yerma* in Italia con la compagnia di Margherita Xirgu (cfr. Morelli 2016, 172-173 e Millán 1987, 10-34). Dal canto suo García Lorca (2016, 255-256) menziona il collega italiano nel 1935 all'interno della *Charla sobre teatro*.

Il luogo in cui avviene la citazione non è casuale e offre uno spunto di riflessione, poiché il drammaturgo nel contesto italiano diventa l'emblema dell'autore teatrale che è riuscito ad insegnare al pubblico, a essere un innovatore; ma soprattutto il costruttore di un nuovo teatro che viene fuori dalle idee delle avanguardie. A questi intenti programmatici si richiama esplicitamente Lorca. Pirandello diventa il ricostruttore del teatro a partire dall'edificio demolito dalle avanguardie. La visione del drammaturgo è molto simile a quella che ne dà Enzo Lauretta negli anni '70:

> Non credo che si possa inquadrare Pirandello nell'economia di un'avanguardia di rifiuto e di totale dissacrazione [...] Pirandello in realtà non ha appiccato l'incendio, se n' è rimasto a guardare tra l'impietoso e il divertito; ma una volta adoperato il bulldozer per buttare giù un edificio decrepito che continuava ad ergersi malinconicamente in mezzo a costruzioni ardite e persino ingegnose, si è adoperato per mettere ordine, ridare logica ad una trama smagliata, restituire slancio ad una scena logora e svogliata anche se applaudita dal pubblico e da una critica colta e conformista (Lauretta 1975, 9).

Questo assunto può fare da punto d'inizio del lavoro lorchiano nella sua trilogia: il metateatro infatti è un modo per tirare le somme sullo stato dell'arte teatrale sul finire degli anni Venti, oltre che per spiegare quasi didascalicamente il valore che ha l'opera scenica nella società.

L'idea di un teatro che si presenta come specchio di se stesso e che si commenta da solo in maniera programmatica prima ancora di andare in scena,

dunque prima che sia il pubblico in sala a commentarlo, non appartiene solo a questa trilogia. I primi passi nella creazione di una struttura metateatrale si vedono nella *Tragicomedia de don Cristóbal y seña Rosita* (1922) dove un personaggio, el Mosquito, in un lungo prologo illustra la differenza tra l'opera che si sta per rappresentare e quella a cui è abituato il pubblico dei teatri cittadini. Si contrappone in maniera quasi manichea la cultura popolare delle classi umili alla pedanteria di una borghesia ancora legata a moduli teatrali ottocenteschi. Il discorso lorchiano quindi è già in una fase preliminare permeato dall'idea di rottura con una certa cultura tradizionalista del passato.

In García Lorca il discorso sulla fierezza e sanità delle classi più umili in contrasto col pubblico è già nel *Poema del Cante Jondo* (1921) e nel *Romancero Gitano* (1925-1927), ma si esacerba proprio nelle opere teatrali. Infatti vediamo da una parte l'autore col suo bisogno di verità e dall'altra la platea riluttante ai cambiamenti repentini. Una situazione, questa, che non riguarda solo l'autore spagnolo: in quegli anni la scena europea è squassata dai conflitti tra drammaturghi e pubblico; basta guardare allo scritto di Marinetti *La voluttà di essere fischiati* (1915) oppure alle grida "Manicomio! Manicomio!" che animarono il Teatro Valle nel 1921 durante la prima di *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*.

2. Esaminando la trilogia metateatrale di Federico García Lorca soprattutto alla luce del contesto europeo e in particolare attraverso una lettura contemporanea delle opere di Luigi Pirandello si può percepire come il confronto col pubblico sia un elemento portante. Lo stesso autore spagnolo, nel parlare di un testo rimasto inedito come *El público*, sottolinea come questo sia uno "espejo del público" (Laffranque 1956, 312). L'espressione "specchio del pubblico" (su cui cfr. Monegal 2000, 21), con cui l'opera è presentata, cela il largo uso della tecnica metateatrale con modalità molto simili a quelle pirandelliane: infatti anche qui, come in *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, la scena si apre sulla figura di un direttore teatrale che è alle prese con una "commedia da farsi". Se nel testo pirandelliano ci troviamo davanti alle prove del *Giuoco delle parti* durante le quali sopraggiungono i Sei Personaggi, in quello lorchiano la scena si apre con il direttore teatrale nel suo ufficio che, dopo aver rappresentato *Romeo e Giulietta*, in seguito all'arrivo prima di tre cavalli bianchi e poi di tre uomini cede all'idea di mettere in scena uno spettacolo diverso, una storia nuova in cui il teatro stesso deve essere portato sul palco.

Ci si concentra, in modo molto simile a *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, sulla scissione tra realtà e finzione scenica. Nel testo pirandelliano la Figliastra non si ritrova nella ricostruzione improvvisata fatta sul palco del retrobottega di

Madama Pace e scoppia a ridere nel veder riproposta dagli attori la scena, allo stesso modo nel Quadro Quinto dell'opera lorchiana degli studenti discutono sul fatto che l'attore che interpretava Giulietta nell'opera appena vista non era la vera Giulietta, ma un attore maschio travestito. Attraverso il racconto dei giovani studenti si viene a sapere che il pubblico in sala ha scoperto l'inganno del direttore teatrale, poiché si sono resi conto durante la rappresentazione, che la vera Giulietta era sotto le poltrone, legata ed imbavagliata. Di conseguenza gli spettatori hanno ucciso gli attori travestiti sul palco e poi anche Giulietta: "Por pura curiosidad, para ver lo que tenían dentro" (García Lorca 1978, 139). L'uccisione della vera eroina shakespeariana per capire di cosa fosse fatta, ci fa presupporre che il personaggio lorchiano abbia con sé la stessa connotazione ultraterrena ma allo stesso tempo di "realtà creata" dalla fantasia che hanno i Sei personaggi pirandelliani soprattutto nella versione del 1925. Si legge infatti nelle didascalie dell'autore siciliano:

> Chi voglia tentare una traduzione scenica di questa commedia bisogna che s'adoperi con ogni mezzo a ottenere tutto l'effetto che questi Sei Personaggi non si confondano con gli attori della compagnia [...] I Personaggi non dovranno apparire come fantasmi, ma come realtà create, costruzioni della fantasia immutabili: dunque più reali e consistenti della volubile naturalità degli attori (Pirandello 2007, 678).

In secondo luogo il linciaggio dell'intera compagnia da parte del pubblico perché sconvolto dalla scoperta della finzione scenica e dalla rappresentazione falsata del reale ci riporta al dramma pirandelliano *Ciascuno a suo modo* (1924). Nell'opera in cui viene portato sulla scena il caso dell'attrice Delia Morello e del pittore Giorgio Salvi che per amore della Morello si è ucciso. Ai due atti di cui si compone la commedia da camera, si alternano degli intermezzi in cui il sipario viene rialzato e vengono rappresentati i corridoi, il foyer e l'ingresso del teatro in cui si trova la vera Morello, il suo amante il Barone Nuti e una serie di critici che commentano lo spettacolo. La donna è sdegnata e dichiara di non riconoscersi affatto nella vicenda messa in scena e nell'attrice che la sta rappresentando a tal punto che la commedia si chiude con la Morello che sale sul palco e schiaffeggia la prima attrice.

Il personaggio pirandelliano mette insieme quello che è stato impedito al personaggio lorchiano della vera Giulietta, preventivamente imbavagliata, e la furia del pubblico nello scoprire la finzione scenica. Sia nel testo di un autore che in quello dell'altro si fa molto attenzione ad evitare che il vero pubblico intervenga nella rappresentazione. Tutto avviene sul palco, il racconto del linciaggio è messo

in bocca a degli attori; nel primo caso dei finti spettatori, nel secondo caso dei finti studenti. Secondo uno dei più acuti interpreti dell'opera pirandelliana:

> Pirandello in *Ciascuno a suo modo* si limita a tracciare un affresco della teatralità futurista, guardandosi però dal riprodurla sul serio. [...] Pirandello così non apre affatto lo spettacolo alla partecipazione e alla contestazione del pubblico. Ma cerca piuttosto di esorcizzare le reazioni negative e tumultuose innescate dal suo teatro, integrandole nel testo scritto della commedia, per riportarle sotto il suo controllo (Vicentini 1993, 99).

Ciò che Vicentini scrive a proposito del testo pirandelliano potrebbe avere pieno valore anche per il testo lorchiano. Quello che possiamo presupporre è che l'esigenza di fare un nuovo teatro, di rifondare un genere, alla luce delle avanguardie nello spazio tra le due guerre è pressante per i due autori ma contrapposta con il timore di doversi rapportare con un pubblico riottoso e refrattario all'innovazione. Proprio in questa congiuntura in cui il metateatro trova la sua piena espressione, esso diventa il modo per esorcizzare la critica e allo stesso tempo aprire uno spazio di riflessione sul teatro stesso, sulla sua natura ibrida e sulla smagliatura tra realtà e finzione nell'opera teatrale.

3. L'idea di dover far fronte ad un pubblico così poco propenso alle innovazioni e alla nuova veste che si vuole dare al teatro nella società delle due guerre è evidentissima sia nell'ultimo testo della trilogia metateatrale di García Lorca sia in quello di Pirandello. Parliamo rispettivamente di *Comedia sin título* e *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* (1929). Le due opere teatrali hanno un incipit molto simile: in entrambe lo spettacolo inizia con una feroce discussione tra l'autore e degli attori confusi tra gli spettatori in platea e in galleria (nel caso della commedia spagnola), e tra il regista e gli attori anche qui confusi tra il pubblico (nel caso della commedia italiana). In entrambe le *pièce*s il dialogo si fa acceso sin dalle prime battute:

> AUTOR. [...] Pero ¿cómo se llevaría el olor del mar a una sala de teatro o cómo se inunda de estrellas el patio de butacas?
> ESPECTADOR I. [en butaca]. Quitándole el tejado.
> AUTOR. ¡No me interrumpa!
> ESPECTADOR I. Tengo derecho. ¡He pagado mi butaca! (García Lorca 1978, 323).

Nel testo pirandelliano, invece, leggiamo:

> IL SIGNORE ANZIANO, DAL PALCO. (congestionato) Io credevo per chiederci scusa dello scandalo inaudito di quei rumori. Del resto, le faccio sapere che non sono venuto per ascoltare da lei una conferenza.

IL DOTTOR HINKFUSS. Ma che conferenza! Perché osa credere e gridare così forte ch'io sia qua per farle ascoltare una conferenza?
(Il Signore Anziano, molto indignato di quest'apostrofe, scatta in piedi ed esce bofonchiando dal palco).(Pirandello 2007, IV, 302).

L'inizio molto simile, che nuovamente sembra affrontare il problema del pubblico e della sua reazione all'opera teatrale, non deve trarre in inganno. Come ben sottolinea ancora Vicentini (1993, 141), il battibecco con gli attori confusi nella platea era una tecnica già utilizzata dalle avanguardie futuriste e dadaiste che non si erano solo limitate a dare vita ad un modello di spettacolo teatrale basato sullo scontro diretto tra attori e spettatori, ma anche a descriverlo. Negli spettacoli di queste avanguardie infatti veniva narrato lo scontro con il pubblico: in molti dei loro brevi testi teatrali compaiono come personaggi già previsti da copione due o più attori nel ruolo di 'spettatori' che danno vita a degli scambi di battute tra platea e palco. Queste scene mostravano una nuova visione dello spettacolo teatrale d'avanguardia, dove l'opera d'arte si fa malleabile e non passivamente fruibile dallo spettatore di cui è richiesto esplicitamente l'intervento. In quest'ottica va ricordata una breve sintesi futurista di Marinetti nel 1916 in cui degli attori esasperati dalle critiche del pubblico chiamavano sul palco due attori confusi tra gli spettatori e li costringevano a recitare al loro posto. Lo spettacolo si chiudeva con l'uccisione di uno dei due tramite un colpo di fucile. Nel 1920, durante una serata dadaista, Breton e Soupault mettevano in scena un dramma chiamato *Per favore* in cui il quarto atto si riduceva fondamentalmente alle proteste di tre spettatori di platea (due uomini ed una donna) e uno spettatore in un palchetto[1]. L'ipotesi che potremmo formulare è che queste forme di spettacolo abbiano influenzato i due autori in maniera molto simile sino a dare esiti quasi identici. Entrambi, dopo risultati cronologicamente antecedenti come *El público*, *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* e *Ciascuno a suo modo*, sono riusciti a includere nella rappresentazione del dramma la presenza autentica e reale del pubblico, senza doverlo nascondere, ricostruire sul palco o camuffarlo. Finalmente i due drammaturghi col terzo spettacolo delle loro trilogie utilizzano la platea rendendola quel che è durante la rappresentazione: una sala affollata di spettatori. Come sottolinea Harretche (2000, 143) riferendosi proprio al dramma lorchiano in questione, l'effetto di sfondamento della quarta parete si trasforma in uno specchio e la rappresentazione non è nulla di più che un'immagine cruda e vera

[1] Nella *Comedia sin título* la coincidenza di personaggi con il testo dadaista è impressionante. Infatti abbiamo due spettatori con le rispettive mogli e uno spettatore in palchetto nella prima parte del testo, a cui successivamente si aggiungono due operai e due donne.

della platea in cui si registrano i frammenti di vita degli spettatori realmente accomodati in sala. In questa situazione l'azione scenica può prendere avvio solo dalla partecipazione attiva degli spettatori e l'opera, fuori d'ogni convenzionalità, diventa uno specchio della vera sala in cui gli spettatori non sono una forza oppositiva da esorcizzare come era stato nei precedenti drammi, ma diventano il motore necessario perché la rappresentazione abbia inizio. Infatti, se guardiamo ai due testi teatrali di Pirandello, *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* e *Ciascuno a suo modo*, o il teatro è vuoto, e quindi pur avendo una rottura della quarta parete la presenza degli spettatori viene ignorata, oppure i luoghi degli spettatori vengono ricostruiti sul palco. Nelle opere lorchiane invece il pubblico o è spettatore passivo, come in *Así que pasen cincos años*; o le sue azioni sono raccontate dagli attori sul palco come in *El público*. D'altro canto, le somiglianze finiscono qui perché l'uso che si fa della distruzione della quarta parete e delle tecniche metateatrali è molto diverso tra i due.

4. Quest'ultima considerazione è fondamentale ai fini interpretativi poiché ci dà l'idea di come di fatto due testi molto simili in un primo livello interpretativo e apparentati da influenze comuni siano asserviti, nell'economia del testo letterario, ad esigenze piuttosto diverse. Il battibecco sul palco è gestito nel testo italiano dal Dottor Hinkfus che è il regista e non l'autore dell'opera che si sta mettendo in atto. Il testo pirandelliano alla vigilia degli anni Trenta si confronta con una figura delle compagnie teatrali che si era affermata pian piano in tutta Europa e in particolare nella Germania della Repubblica di Weimar: il regista. La regia in questo periodo significava, per molti aspetti, utilizzare mezzi d'avanguardia per riuscire a dare all'opera teatrale delle connotazioni che il testo non prevedeva o non poteva dare (cfr. Forte 2001, III, 435 ss.). Lo stesso Pirandello ne era divenuto cosciente quando nel 1923 vide rappresentata a Parigi la prima versione dei *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* sotto la direzione di Pitoëff. Nella versione parigina i Personaggi venivano calati dall'alto attraverso un sistema di montacarichi e illuminati da una luce verde rendendo ancora più marcato l'effetto di estraneità dei personaggi in confronto agli attori della compagnia. *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* è figlia del viaggio compiuto nel 1928 a Berlino. Nella capitale tedesca gli effetti di regia avevano raggiunto il loro massimo sviluppo con gli spettacoli di Piscator in cui luci, proiezioni cinematografiche, palchi ruotanti creavano effetti inimmaginabili in un contesto teatrale come quello italiano. L'ottica di Pirandello è positiva nei confronti di queste tecniche ma per lui avevano la funzione modale di rendere al meglio la magia teatrale, creare un luogo dell'immaginario in cui il testo si potesse esprimere al massimo, quindi rimanendo nell'ottica di gerarchia

teatrale in cui il testo ricopre un ruolo insostituibile e imprescindibile per la realizzazione dell'opera.

Su questi temi si sviluppa *Questa sera si recita a soggetto*. Il Dottor Hinkfuss pretende di gestire lo spettacolo facendo ricorso solo a «questo rotoletto di poche pagine» e continuando «una novelletta, o poco più» (Pirandello 2007, IV, 302), palesando una prospettiva antigerarchica del regista che sminuisce il ruolo del testo e pretende di gestire 'a soggetto' la messa in scena. L'esperimento si rivela fallimentare già a metà spettacolo e gli attori cacciano il regista stufi delle sue interruzioni. Dopo ciò questi che sotto la direzione del Dottor Hinkfuss si erano sparpagliati tra i palchetti e i corridoi del teatro tornano a gravitare verso il palco sul quale la rappresentazione si svolge diretta dagli attori. Anche quest'esperimento è però destinato a fallire poiché la prima attrice nell'ultima scena accusa un malore sul palco. La conclusione cui arrivano gli stessi teatranti è che nella rappresentazione un ruolo essenziale lo devono svolgere il testo e l'autore per evitare le derive del regista e una troppo intensa immedesimazione degli attori. La scelta di concepire un'opera metateatrale ci mostra un Pirandello costruttore di un ordine nuovo teatrale, che cerca di sistemare e ridare logica a una scena scossa dai conflitti e dai rivolgimenti delle avanguardie. La sua costruzione non esclude le innovazioni, anzi le sfrutta nella logica dello spettacolo, pur dando vita a un ordine gerarchico in cui la volontà dell'attore e del regista è sottomessa a quella dell'autore e del testo. In questo senso il metateatro è un modo per fare *teatro del teatro*, per esternare le tensioni di questa forma d'arte tra le due guerre; ma anche per trovare soluzioni e riuscire a superare l'*impasse* in cui si potrebbe arenare.

5. *Comedia sin título*, invece, pur avendo gli stessi presupposti non sembra prevedere discussioni sulle soluzioni di regia. La commedia ha uno svolgimento del tutto diverso: essa inizia con un lungo prologo in cui l'autore (e non il regista come nel testo pirandelliano) prende la parola ponendo al centro del prologo il ruolo del teatro nella vita di tutti i giorni e imbastendo una discussione su cosa il palco debba raccontare. L'opera che si sta per realizzare "va a tener, no el gusto, sino el sentimiento de enseñaros esta noche un pequeño rincón de realidad" (García Lorca 1978, 319); ancora una volta il tema è far cadere la barriera tra realtà e finzione, ma siamo lontani ideologicamente dagli esiti del *Público*. Non esiste più l'inganno di Giulietta, si avverte anzi il pubblico "que nada es inventado" (ibid.). Si ribadisce con forza che la teatralità leggera e finta non può più trovare spazio: il sipario non si aprirà "para alegrar al público con un juego de parablas" (ivi, 319), ed è inconcepibile che la "gentes de ciudad, que vivís en la más pobre y triste de las fantasías" (ivi, 321) venga a teatro "con el afán único de divertiros"

(ibid.). Se guardiamo alla *Charla sobre teatro*, dello stesso anno, è evidente che García Lorca ha le idee molto chiare: "Un teatro sensible y bien orientado en todas sus ramas, desde la tragedia al vodevil, puede cambiar en pocos años la sensibilidad del pueblo" (García Lorca 2016, 255). Il teatro riveste quindi per l'autore un valore educativo imprescindibile nei confronti degli spettatori. La teatralità va riorganizzata, ma va riorganizzata come scena didattica. Questo valore si esterna nella produzione di spettacoli che abbiano come temi la denuncia della finzione drammatica e l'imposizione della realtà circostante. L'autore spagnolo lavora nella stessa smagliatura con cui Pirandello chiudeva *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* ("ma che finzione! Realtà, realtà, signori! Realtà!": Pirandello 2007, IV, 757). La tecnica metateatrale in Lorca è sicuramente un metodo per indagare la smagliatura tra realtà e finzione, ma è anche un modo per denunciare al pubblico ciò che viene 'venduto' sui palchi e sostituirlo con un teatro in cui il drammaturgo "no quiere que os sintáis en teatro, sino en mitad de la calle" (García Lorca 1978, 323), poiché solo la strada e pertanto la rappresentazione della vita vera, può essere realmente educativa. Questa idea di rifiutare le convenzioni teatrali e di capovolgere quelli che uno studente nel Quarto Quadro del *Público* chiama "las sedas y los cartones que el poeta levanta en su dormitorio" (ivi, 129) è parte della base metodologica che García Lorca propone più volte sia in quest'opera, sia nella *Commedia sin título*. Una base programmatica che si esplica in espressioni come *teatro al aire libre e teatro bajo la arena*: con la prima si intende la volontà del drammaturgo di spostare l'attenzione scenica verso la vita vera, raccontando quello che accade nelle strade, nelle piazze e nelle campagne e rendendo cosciente il pubblico di quella che è la vita (di questa impostazione troviamo traccia anche nella *Charla sobre teatro*, lì dove Lorca parla di un teatro che sappia contenere "el latido social, el latido histórico, el drama de sus gentes y el color genuino de su paisaje y de su espíritu": García Lorca 2016, 255); nell'espressione *teatro bajo la arena* invece, si sottintende il concetto per cui bisogna denunciare le finzioni teatrali e portare sulla scena argomenti scomodi che non piacciano al pubblico e che possano provocare quella reazione violenta di cui si è detto precedentemente. Non a caso il direttore nell'ultimo quadro del *Público*, dopo che il teatro è stato distrutto dalla rivolta degli spettatori, dice: "Pude haber elegido el Edipo o el Otelo. En cambio, si hubiera levantado el telón con la verdad original se hubieran manchado de sangre las butacas desde las primeras escena" (García Lorca 1978, 153); e poi, in maniera più netta, "Era imposible hacer otra cosa; mis amigos y yo abrimos el túnel bajo la arena sin que lo notara la gente de ciudad. Nos ayadaron muchos obreros y estudiantes que ahora niegan haber trabajado a pesar de tener las manos llenas de heridas. Cuando llegamos al sepulcro levantamos el telón" (ivi,

157). Nella *Comedia sin título* si converge su tematiche simili (cfr. Laffranque 1978) che spesso emergono nel dialogato e creano una strutturazione contrastiva tra l'autore, gli attori e gli spettatori. Spesso l'autore esordisce con battute come: "yo quiero echar abajo las paredes para que sintamos llorar o asesinar o roncar con los vientres podridos a los que están fuera, a los que no saben siquiera que el teatro existe" (García Lorca 1978, 325), a cui gli spettatori rispondono con espressioni quali: "Estoy demasiado cerca de la realidad para hacerle caso" (ivi, 327); oppure battute degli attori come: "Pero te cantaría la mentira más hermosa. A mí me gusta también la verdad, un momento nada más. La verdad es fea, pero si la digo, me arrojan del teatro" (ivi, 343). Pur non ricorrendo nel testo le espressioni *teatro al aire libre* e *teatro bajo la arena* la concettualizzazione programmatica dell'opera non sembra differire di molto dalla base teorica che contraddistingue il testo del *Público*.

Poste queste basi metodologiche con la *Comedia sin título* Lorca cerca di includere lo spazio fisico della platea e del loggiato teatrale nella rappresentazione con una rottura netta della quarta parete, per esorcizzare gli effetti del pubblico indocile come quello pirandelliano. Lo spartiacque con quest'ultimo in *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* è dato dal fatto che la riflessione lorchiana non si sofferma sulla riforma dei suoi mezzi e sulla messa in opera degli esperimenti di regia, ma sul ruolo didattico del teatro come mezzo sociale impegnato nell'educazione del pubblico. Inoltre all'altezza cronologica della *Comedia sin título*, quindi nel 1935, García Lorca sembra aver concettualizzato una divisione tra pubblico e popolo, mettendo da una parte la borghesia cittadina e dall'altra i contadini delle campagne e gli operai. Il teatro lorchiano con il procedere degli anni si rivela sempre più scritto per quello che lo scrittore spagnolo definisce l'ingrato compito di provare a educare la borghesia cittadina. Proprio per questa ragione lo spettacolo arriva a squadernare i contrasti tra classe operaia cittadina e borghesia a tal punto da prevedere l'uccisione di un operaio che inneggia alla rivoluzione da uno dei palchetti. Evidentemente a tutto ciò collabora la partecipazione dell'autore spagnolo al governo democratico del 1930-36 come direttore del teatro itinerante *La Barraca*.

6. La dialettica espressa da Lorca attraverso l'utilizzo delle tecniche metateatrali è molto più politicizzata e veemente di quanto sia quella di Pirandello. Il siciliano è ricostruttore e sistematizzatore; l'andaluso è un incendiario. Ma il suo ruolo è per lo più quello di un incendiario in potenza poiché nessuna delle due opere presentate qui ha mai visto la luce mentre l'autore era in vita. *El público* fu rappresentato per la prima volta a Milano nel 1981, sia a causa della resistenza dello

stesso autore nel mettere in scena l'opera, sia per alcune difficoltà sceniche che il testo presenta. *Comedia sin título* fu messa in scena per la prima volta solo nel 1989 a Madrid e fu ritrovata solo molto tempo dopo tra le carte di García Lorca, che ne parlò pochissimo nelle sue numerose interviste[2]. Più che un autore incendiario, in ultima analisi, potremmo parlare di un incendiario castrato[3].

L'unico testo della trilogia metateatrale che possiamo ritenere davvero finito e che il drammaturgo considerava pronto per la messa in scena è *Así que pasen cinco años*. Il testo infatti si sarebbe dovuto rappresentare nel 1936 a Madrid, ma gli sconvolgimenti politici e la morte dell'autore resero la cosa impossibile. Lo spettacolo presenta gli stessi temi degli altri due testi ma con tono più lieve e, pur non abdicando a un ruolo didascalico, è nella trama e nell'uso delle tecniche teatrali che questo si esplica, più che nei dialoghi tra i personaggi o su feroci contrasti inscenati. Nei tre atti dell'opera abbiamo prima l'incontro del Giovane e della Dattilografa che, pur essendo promessi sposi, devono, soprattutto per volontà del Giovane, aspettare cinque anni. Nel secondo atto il tempo è passato e la giovane, ora innamorata di un giocatore di Rugby, respinge il promesso sposo. Nel terzo i due si rincontrano e si vorrebbero amare ma si rendono conto che ciò non è possibile. L'opera si completa con una partita di poker tra il giovane e tre uomini che dopo averlo battuto lo uccidono. Anche qui viene continuamente marcata la differenza tra realtà e finzione e, ancora di più, quella tra essere e dover essere. Nel terzo atto viene montato un piccolo palchetto con due scalette ai lati sul palco vero e proprio e i due protagonisti si muovono scendendo e salendo la scaletta da un palco all'altro, a seconda della diversa dimensione temporale in cui recitano. Il palco piccolo, infatti, ha come sfondo la biblioteca del primo atto, mentre il palco grande ha come sfondo un bosco.

Il primo riferimento che potremmo fare è ovviamente al teatro simultaneo così com'è presentato da Marinetti nel manifesto del 1916: è la configurazione 'concettuale' di un teatro in cui allo spettatore viene offerta la visione di molteplici scenari contemporanei tra cui può scegliere quale parte della trama seguire. Nel teatro futurista la molteplicità di palchi è legata alla resa della contemporaneità delle azioni nella vita reale. Qui invece la distanza tra i due palchi serve a creare dimensioni spaziali e temporali diverse: da una parte il bosco e il presente, dall'altro la biblioteca del primo atto e il passato. La struttura metateatrale è organizzata in questo caso effettivamente come un dramma nel

[2] Probabilmente è il testo definito "un drama social, aún sin título" durante un'intervista del luglio 1936 a Antonio Otero Seco, pubblicata poi come *Una conversación inédita con Federico García Lorca* in «Mundo Gráfico», Madrid, 24 febbraio 1937.
[3] Si vedano su questa definizione Kosma 1996 e Belamich 1988, 107-116.

dramma attraverso l'incasellamento, fisico ed epistemologico, dei due palchi. A questa situazione va aggiunta la presenza di un pagliaccio e di Arlecchino sul palco più grande: essi suonano e canticchiano scandendo i dialoghi tra i due protagonisti. La loro presenza mette in guardia il pubblico sull'inverosimiglianza di ciò a cui stanno assistendo. Le due figure hanno valenze allegoriche che vanno interpretate proprio perché ci si muove nel ridotto e onirico spazio delle costruzioni teatrali (cfr. Harretche 2000, 136-158 e Gómez 2016, 333-362). Non è casuale che questi personaggi, inoltre, non entrino mai nel palco più piccolo in cui la marcatura realista è più forte. Lo spettacolo trova la sua accettabilità proprio nella riproposizione così velata dei suoi temi ed a ragione di ciò probabilmente veniva ritenuto da Lorca l'unico della trilogia pronto ad essere inscenato.

7. Alla luce delle sei opere fin qui prese in analisi potremmo quindi parlare dell'utilizzo comune da parte di Lorca e di Pirandello della tecnica metateatrale in funzione sicuramente teorizzante; ma se comune sembra il punto di partenza lo spartiacque è creato dal diverso rapporto che instaurano col pubblico. L'autore siciliano lo teme, ma ne cerca l'esorcizzazione attraverso la resa scenica. Mentre Lorca, pur utilizzando le stesse strutture del siciliano, sposta la prospettiva verso il valore schiettamente didattico del teatro e di conseguenza trova il rapporto con gli spettatori un punto centrale e non arginabile. Questa conclusione, che potrebbe essere giusta, è purtroppo parziale poiché non tiene conto dell'ultimo Pirandello: l'autore dei *Giganti della montagna.* L'opera teatrale ripercorre quelle lunghe gestazioni castranti di lorchiana memoria: infatti l'autore pur mettendo mano al testo nel 1929 la lascia incompleta alla sua morte. L'incompiutezza del dramma può presuppore una ritrosia dell'autore nel trattare determinati argomenti. Sappiamo, inoltre, che il proposito di finirla e di farla rappresentare non fu dello stesso Pirandello ma di Mario Labrioca che gli chiese di presentarla al Maggio Fiorentino del 1937[4].

Nel primo atto la magra Compagnia della Contessa che ha portato in lungo e in largo per il mondo l'opera della *Favola del figlio cambiato* si ritrova distrutta e affaticata alle porte della villa degli Scalognati del mago Cotrone a metà tra la montagna e il paese. La situazione presentata è quella di una compagnia di attori convinta della straordinarietà dell'opera che portano in scena da due anni, ma coscienti allo stesso tempo di non essere compresi dal pubblico e quindi di essere condannati a morire di fame. Giorno dopo giorno sono stati costretti a rinunciare

[4] Sulla genesi e sull'interpretazione dell'opera si vedano "Notizia - I giganti della montagna", in Pirandello 2007, IV, 810-842 e Sbrojavacca 2019, 209-229.

ai costumi e alla messa in scena di alcuni parti del dramma oppure "vendersi" al miglior offerente. Ciò che viene fuori dai primi due atti è un'opera in cui per sopravvivere ai commedianti (metafora del mondo teatrale *in toto*) viene offerta da Cotrone come unica soluzione il nascondersi nello spazio protetto della villa degli Scalognati, tra le cui pareti i trucchi di magia rendono ancora rappresentabile lo spettacolo. La dimensione del teatro è costantemente fusa con quella magica, sino al punto che gli attori sono spesso accostati ai fantasmi della villa il cui magico artificio è sin dall'inizio "preso per teatro" (Pirandello 2007, IV, 851).

Persino i costumi di scena rendono difficilmente distinguibili gli Scalognati dagli attori. Le due dimensioni per Pirandello coincidono quasi. Gli attori, nel mondo, sono inconsistenti ed invisibili come fantasmi, ma proprio per questo riescono a compiere prodigi di cui sono gli unici depositari. Nel testo è evidente il rifiuto dell'opera "perché d'un poeta" (ibid.); e anche l'idea dell'opera messa in scena "in mezzo alla gente" (ibid.). Esattamente come per Lorca (si pensi all'esperimento della *Barraca* come attuazione pratica del teatro tra la gente) la compagnia teatrale si muove e vive tra le persone e tale desiderio è uno dei fattori determinanti della loro rovina. Pirandello alla fine dell'esperienza del Teatro d'Arte è quindi completamente sfiduciato nei confronti della prospettiva del teatro *al aire libre*, al punto che la valuta come nient'altro che un fattore di rovina. La perdita del luogo fisico del teatro, della centralità del palco e del distacco dal pubblico è stata la rovina del teatro. Un ragionamento opposto a quello di Lorca, la cui *Comedia sin título*, dopo una prima fase di battibecco tra Autore, attori e spettatori, prende una piega improvvisa, allorché lascia vedere lo scoppio della rivoluzione nelle strade fuori dal teatro e la repressione della polizia. L'Autore fa spalancare le porte del teatro dando inizio all'ecatombe di spettatori e compagnia poiché è convinto che l'arte debba aprirsi al mondo esterno.

Lorca in maniera diametralmente opposta vede sì, nell'apertura verso un mondo più ampio di quello delle mura di un edificio, l'unico modo per uscire dall'*impasse* della contestazione da parte degli spettatori del dramma, ma con l'uccisione della compagnia lascia anche presagire che questo comporta la distruzione e la rovina. Sul filo della stessa consapevolezza si pone, nei *Giganti della montagna*, la proposta di rinchiudersi nello spazio chiuso e rassicurante della villa dove può vivere la compagnia ridotta all'osso dal mondo e dai "fischi che ne tremarono i muri" (ibid.).

Solo lì si può consentire all'infinito la rappresentazione della *Favola del figlio cambiato*. La *conditio sine qua non* per cui ciò si possa realizzare è il rimanere trincerati, evitando l'arrivo dei visitatori attraverso una serie di incantesimi e

trucchi e soprattutto tenersi lontani dai Giganti, come fa notare Andrea Camilleri*:*

> Verso i Giganti l'atteggiamento è di estrema prudenza, le norme di comportamento indicano primario l'evitare ogni possibile contatto e sommamente ideale il mostrarsi, il non apparire, addirittura fingere di non esistere. Quando infatti alla fine della quarta scena la cavalcata squassa la casa, Diamante, che appartiene ai nuovi arrivati, alla compagnia della Contessa, e che dunque è ignaro degli usi, vorrebbe uscir fuori a vedere i Giganti, ma Cotrone lo ferma: "Nessuno si muova! Nessuno si faccia vedere!" (Camilleri 1975, 90).

Abbiamo una reazione simile a quella di Cotrone da parte dell'Attrice nella *Comedia sin título* che, messa di fronte alla prospettiva paventata dall'Autore di aprire il teatro alla rivoluzione e di far rifugiare gli operai all'interno, urla: "¡Cierren las puertas, cierrenlas!" (García Lorca 1978, 347) poiché gli operai "Romperán las vajillas reales, los libros fingidos, la luna de vidrios delicados. Verterán elixires maravillosos conservados a través de los siglos y destrozarán la máquina de la lluvia" (ibid.).

Senza dubbio un'analogia tra i rivoluzionari lorchiani e i Giganti sarebbe discutibile, poiché rappresentano due cose diverse: da una parte la rivoluzione, gli operai e il popolo, dall'altra la classe dominante di bruti edificatori. Ma in entrambi i casi essi rappresentano anche il grosso e violento flusso della Storia di massa degli anni Trenta del Novecento. Una Storia che può distruggere il teatro se quest'ultimo non si nasconde e non si arrocca in luoghi sicuri.

Alla proposta ed ai dettami di Cotrone si oppone Ilse che è convinta che la sua missione, e quindi quella dell'arte scenica, sia di portare la poesia nel mondo, tra la gente. La divergenza di pensiero è evidente già dalle prime scene, in cui l'attrice vorrebbe dormire sulla panchina fuori la villa piuttosto che entrare, oppure più avanti quando si oppone all'idea di dormire nella camera con le coperte tarlate che a lei e al Conte ha offerto il mago. Il finale che Stefano Pirandello ci dà è del tutto in continuità con quest'immagine della donna, poiché egli decide di far rappresentare lo spettacolo ai servi dei Giganti nonostante l'evidente assenza di una qualunque educazione teatrale da parte di questi. Ilse è pronta "con supremo sacrifizio e decisa a lottare con tutta la sua energia per imporre la parola del poeta" (Pirandello 2007, IV, 1049). Nella rappresentazione vengono uccisi molti attori e la stessa Ilse spira poco dopo, poiché i servi si oppongono alla rappresentazione e vogliono invece che "la Contessa smetta di declamare così ispirata parole incomprensibili, e faccia loro qualche bella cantatina e un balletto" (ivi, 1050). Non si può non notare una certa vicinanza con l'incipit della *Comedia sin título* in cui l'Autore dice: "No voy a abrir el telón para

alegrar al público con un juego de palabras, ni con un panorama donde se vea una casa en la que nada ocurre" (García Lorca 1978, 319).

8. Ilse e il personaggio lorchiano sono entrambi convinti che l'obiettivo del teatro sia di imporre la parola poetica con un intento didattico, di aprire l'arte scenica e non lasciarla trincerata in uno spazio fisico chiuso e remoto. L'unica e fondamentale differenza sta nel fatto che l'Autore di Lorca si rende conto che l'apertura del teatro significa anche la distruzione dello stesso, l'uccisione del pubblico borghese e riconoscere implicitamente l'impossibilità di educarlo. Nel testo lorchiano possiamo far coincidere la voce dell'Autore con gli intenti dello scrittore e possiamo riconoscere come evidentemente per questo la storia con tutta la forza brutale della rivoluzione sia un modo per distruggere e uscire dall'impasse epistemologico in cui il metateatro si era confinato. La situazione è notevolmente complicata nei *Giganti della montagna*. Il testo è molto più dialettico di quello spagnolo e Ilse è contrapposta alla molteplicità di opinioni degli altri attori, dei fantasmi e del mago Cotrone. Quello che risulta pregnante, però, in questa sede è come sia evidente che due autori nella stessa congiuntura cronologica, dopo un percorso fatto di trilogie metateatrali, arrivino a valutare le medesime opzioni per il futuro del teatro. Quello che possiamo sicuramente ipotizzare è, che pur non essendo Ilse portatrice delle idee di Pirandello, l'autore siciliano dopo le tendenze riorganizzatrici dello spazio teatrale di *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* si riavvicina tematicamente alla produzione lorchiana riconoscendo gli stessi problemi, almeno per quanto concerne l'azione teatrale.

Nel 1936 muoiono sia Federico García Lorca che Luigi Pirandello. Entrambi lasciano due opere inedite e non finite in cui arrivano a una conclusione comune: il teatro deve rinunciare a qualsiasi ruolo educativo o superiorità ideologica nei confronti della società a cui si rapporta. I drammaturghi possono scegliere tra due alternative: o distruggersi e farsi distruggere dalla società, oppure abdicare a qualsiasi ruolo, ritirarsi in autoesilio nella villa degli Scalognati e lì sopravvivere alienandosi dal mondo. La congiuntura degli anni Trenta del Novecento non è casuale, al volubile pubblico borghese dell'Ottocento si sono sostituite le «folle oceaniche» della società di massa. In un clima politico e sociale che si va inasprendo, mentre il fascismo e il nazismo iniziano a dilagare in tutta Europa, mentre la Spagna sprofonda nella guerra civile, due autori nati dall'avanguardia si trovano a domandarsi se il "nuovo mondo" che sta venendo ha ancora spazio per la poesia. Evidentemente la risposta non è positiva, e la soluzione di una distruzione del teatro non è più così lontana. Due autori che hanno fatto della

drammaturgia la loro forma ultima di partecipazione all'industria culturale se ne vanno sbattendo la porta e tirando giù il teatro.

Bibliografia

García Lorca, Federico. 1978. *El público y comedia sin título: dos obras póstumas*, a cura di R. Martínez Nadal y M. Laffranque. Barcelona: Seix Barral.

García Lorca, Federico. 2016. "Así que pasen cinco años", in *Federico García Lorca. Teatro*, a cura di Miguel García-Posada, 299-367. Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg.

García Lorca, Federico. 1994. *Lettere americane*, a cura di Gabriele Morelli, Venezia: Marsilio.

Pirandello, Luigi. 2007. *Maschere nude*, a cura di A. d'Amico, Milano: Mondadori.

Belamich André. 1988. "Claves para 'El Público'", in *Federico García Lorca. Saggi critici nel cinquantennio della morte*, a cura di Gabriele Morelli, Fasano: Schena, pp. 107-116.

Bontempelli, Massimo. 1933. "Il Teatro degli Undici o Dodici", in *Scenario*, n. II, pp. 58-64.

Camilleri, Andrea. 1975. "Appunti per la lettura dei 'Giganti'", in *I Miti di Pirandello*, a cura di Enzo Lauretta, Palermo: Palumbo, pp. 89-95.

d'Amico, Alessandro (ed.) 2007. "Notizia-I giganti della montagna". In *Maschere nude*, a cura di Alessandro d'Amico, Milano: Mondadori, , vol. IV, pp. 810-842.

Felici, Glauco, ed. "Introduzione". In *Federico García Lorca, Il Pubblico*. 5-14. Torino: Einaudi, 2006.

Forte, Luigi. 2001. "Il teatro di lingua tedesca, ovvero l'universo della contraddizione". In *Avanguardie e utopie del teatro. Il Novecento, Storia del teatro moderno e contemporaneo*, a cura di Roberto Alonge e Guido Davico Bonino, Torino: Einaudi, vol. III, 435–565.

García Lorca, Federico. 1997. “Charla sobre teatro”, in Federico García Lorca, *Prosa*, a cura di Miguel García-Posada. Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, pp. 255-256.

García-Posada, Miguel. 1997. “Prólogo”, in Federico García Lorca, *Teatro*. Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, pp. 9-33..

Gómez, Michael A. 2016. “Playing with time: relativistic reverberations and entropic echoes in Lorca's ‘así que pasen cinco años’”, in *Anales De La Literatura Española Contemporánea* 41, n. 2, pp. 333-62.

Harretche, María Estela. 2000. *Federico García Lorca. Análisis de una revoluzión teatral*. Madrid: Gredos.

Kosma, Julio Huélamo. 1996. *El teatro imposible de García Lorca Estudio sobre «El Público»*. Granada: Universidad de Granada.

Laffranque, Marie. 1956. *Federico García Lorca. Déclarations et interviews retrouvés*. In *Bulletin Hispanique 58*, n. III, pp. 301-343.

Laffranque, Marie. 1978. “Introducción”, in *El público y Comedia sin título*, Barcelona: Seix Barral, pp. 275-316.

Lauretta, Enzo (ed.). 1975. “Pirandello e il teatro”, in *I Miti di Pirandello*, a cura di Enzo Lauretta, pp. 9-18.

Macchia, Giovanni. 1981, *Pirandello o la stanza della tortura*. Milano: Mondadori.

Macchia, Giovanni. 2007. “Premessa”, in *Maschere nude*, a cura di A. d’Amico, Milano: Mondadori, 2007, pp. 13-22.

Martínez Nadal, Rafael. 1978. “Introducción”, in F. García Lorca, *El público y Comedia sin título. Dos obras póstumas*. Barcelona: Seix Barral, pp. 9-29.

Millán, María Clementa. 1987. “Introducción”, in *Federico García Lorca. El público*, 10-34. Madrid: Cátedra.

Monegal, Antonio. 2000. “Introducción” in Federico García Lorca, *El público, El sueño de la vida*, 7-42. Madrid: Alianza, pp. 7-42.

Morelli, Gabriele. 2016. *García Lorca*. Roma: Salerno Editrice.

Muñiz Muñiz, M. de las Nieves. 1997. “Sulla ricezione di Pirandello in Spagna”, in *Quaderns d’Italià*. vol. II, pp. 113-148.

Newberry, Wilma. 1969. "Aesthetic Distance in García Lorca's El público: Pirandello and Ortega", in *Hispanic Review*, vol. 37, n. 2, pp. 276-296.

Otero Seco, Antonio. 1937. "Una conversación inédita con Federico García Lorca", in *Mundo Gráfico*, n. 1321, p. 10.

Puppa, Paolo. 1978. *Fantasmi contro giganti. Scene e immaginario in Pirandello*. Bologna: Patron.

Ragusa, Olga. 1995. "Italian Department and Casa Italiana at Columbia University: The Prezzolini Years", in *Italian Americana*, v. 13, pp. 60-74.

Sbrojavacca, Elena. 2019. «I giganti della montagna. Genesi, storia e fortuna» in Luigi Pirandello, *La nuova colonia, Lazzaro, I giganti della montagna*, 209-229. Milano: Rizzoli.

Soufas, C. Christopher. *Audience & Authority in the Modernist Theatre of Federico García Lorca*, Tuscalosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996.

Vicentini, Claudio. *Pirandello. Il disagio del teatro*. Venezia: Marsilio, 1993.

Vicentini, Claudio. *L'estetica di Pirandello*. Milano: Mursia, 1985.
Vitale, Rosanna. *El metateatro en la obra de Federico García Lorca*. Madrid: Editorial Pliegos, 1991.

Domenico Pio Chirico has obtained a Master Degree in Modern Philology at University of Naples Federico II. He recently published the essay "Zoomorfizzazioni e comparse da pastiche poi in Zerocalcare" in the collection "Ridere ridere ridere ancora" (Naples, 2020).

statuS Quaestionis
language text culture

Lorenzo Graziani
Università degli Studi di Trento

Il topos del "giardino dei sentieri che si biforcano" e le sue declinazioni espressive postmoderniste

Abstract

Among all Borges' brilliant ideas, the most famous is perhaps the one around which the short story *The Garden of Forking Paths* is constructed; in this short story is described the structure of an imaginary novel in which there is no selection between alternative possibilities and every possible thing is actualized in a different universe line: in some cases, these lines can rejoin after splitting and then break up again. However, even if the "forking paths" seem to be inextricably linked to Borges' short story, in this case we can say that the Argentinian writer, rather than inventing something new, has contributed in great measure to fix in the popular imagination what appears to be an ancient topos. The main goal of this essay is to analyze how this topos is adopted and developed in its own expressive potential by a consistent number of postmodernist writers.

1. Borges, Everett, Lewis

Tra le geniali trovate borgesiane una delle più famose è sicuramente quella attorno a cui è costruito *Il giardino dei sentieri che si biforcano*, racconto – incluso nella raccolta *Finzioni* – dove viene descritta la struttura di un immaginario romanzo nel quale non vi è selezione tra possibilità alternative perché tutto ciò che è possibile si realizza in differenti linee di universo. Tuttavia, anche se quando si parla di "sentieri che si biforcano" il riferimento a Borges appare inevitabile, si può dire che, in questo caso, lo scrittore argentino, senza inventare nulla, abbia piuttosto contribuito in maniera decisiva a fissare nell'immaginario collettivo quello che si presenta come un topos molto antico, il cui principio strutturale è implicitamente attivo ogni qualvolta s'immaginano storie alternative, storie fatte con i 'se' e con i 'ma': già Tito Livio, in un famoso passaggio (*Ab urbe condita*, IX, 17), immaginava come si sarebbe sviluppato il regno di Alessandro Magno se

egli si fosse diretto verso ovest anziché verso est. Non vi è, dunque, niente di cui stupirsi se nella cultura del Secondo Novecento, data la sua peculiare ricettività per quello che Musil chiamava il "senso della possibilità" (Musil 1957, 12), le tracce di questo topos si scorgono anche in ambiti a prima vista alquanto lontani da quello letterario: non ci si spiegherebbe altrimenti, ad esempio, il ruolo centrale che quest'ultimo ha assunto tanto nella metafisica quanto nella fisica teorica contemporanee.

Per quanto riguarda la metafisica, l'idea dell'esistenza di una molteplicità di realtà parallele è alla base del 'realismo modale' o 'concretismo' di David Lewis, uno dei maggiori filosofi analitici del Novecento. La proposta concretista – secondo cui ogni modo in cui un mondo potrebbe essere è un modo in cui qualche mondo è – ambisce a spiegare i fatti modali presenti nel nostro linguaggio senza assumerli come primitivi; in altre parole, dato che la nostra capacità di formulare ipotesi su eventi non accaduti non può derivare dall'esperienza del solo mondo attuale, tale attitudine deve provenire dal fatto che possediamo il concetto di mondo possibile, e possediamo tale concetto in quanto i mondi possibili fanno parte della totalità immanente a cui noi stessi apparteniamo: il mondo di cui facciamo parte, dunque, non è che uno di una immensa pluralità di mondi concreti, abitati da individui altrettanto concreti, e questi mondi sono tutti causalmente e spaziotemporalmente isolati tra loro. Tale teoria, nonostante abbia accumulato negli anni innumerevoli critiche, presenta ancora oggi numerosi vantaggi teorici, esposti in particolare nel fondamentale volume del 1986, *On the Plurality of Worlds*.[1] Il topos del *giardino* emerge ancor più esplicitamente nel saggio *The Paradoxes of Time Travel* dove Lewis, nell'atto di analizzare il problema della persistenza degli individui nel corso del tempo, senza escludere a priori alcun tipo di continuità causale, individua in questo topos una delle soluzioni più semplici ed eleganti degli esiti paradossali a cui sembra destinata l'esperienza del crononauta: viaggiare nel tempo – afferma Lewis – è possibile, cambiare il passato non lo è, almeno in un universo a tre dimensioni spaziali e un'unica dimensione temporale. Infatti, se qualcuno, viaggiando indietro nel tempo, modificasse il passato, avremmo un medesimo stadio temporale del mondo in cui un certo fatto accade e non accade: poiché si tratta di una palese contraddizione, ciò non può avverarsi; qualsiasi crononauta sembra pertanto costretto a ripetere all'infinito il suo viaggio rinnovando la sua frustrazione. Lewis, tuttavia, suggerisce una soluzione per rendere coerente la storia in cui il viaggiatore temporale riesce a portare a termine la sua missione: allorché il passato

[1] Lewis 1968, 1973 e 1986; Borghini 2009, 42-53; Vetter 2015.

viene 'modificato', il mondo si biforca in due ramificazioni, una in cui il fatto sussiste e il crononauta decide di viaggiare nel tempo per alterarlo e una in cui il crononauta porta a termine la missione; in tal caso, però, egli, più che viaggiare nel tempo, si sposta 'tra un sentiero e l'altro' dello spazio-tempo. Questi sentieri si presentano come porzioni spaziotemporali distinte senza essere completamente isolate: nel momento in cui un viaggiatore temporale si sposta nel passato e compie un'azione che modifica il corso degli eventi, allora le catene causali si separano in due serie che differiranno sempre di più; abbiamo così – adottando la terminologia di Lewis – un mondo formato da più sotto-mondi isolati per tutti gli abitanti tranne che per i viaggiatori temporali, i quali possono invece passare dall'uno all'altro.[2] Non è difficile vedere come questo tipo di viaggio nel tempo mostri in filigrana la sua affinità con la struttura del romanzo composto dall'immaginario filosofo cinese Ts'ui Pên nel celebre racconto di Borges:

> Quasi immediatamente compresi; *il giardino dei sentieri che si biforcano* era il romanzo caotico; le parole *ai diversi futuri (non a tutti)* mi suggerirono l'immagine della biforcazione nel tempo, non nello spazio. Una nuova lettura di tutta l'opera mi confermò in quest'idea. In tutte le opere narrative, ogni volta che s'è di fronte a diverse alternative ci si decide per una e si eliminano le altre; in quella del quasi inestricabile Ts'ui Pên, ci si decide – simultaneamente – per tutte. Si *creano*, così diversi futuri, diversi tempi, che a loro volta proliferano e si biforcano. Di qui le contraddizioni del romanzo. (Borges 1984, 668)

La rivendicazione di Ts'ui Pên è simile a quella formulata nel contesto dell'atomismo antico e in quello del concretismo: in qualsiasi modo un mondo possa essere, in tal modo un mondo è (vedi Warren 204, 359); ma in questo caso non si tratta dei differenti *kosmoi* immersi in un unico universo descritti dagli atomisti, né dei mondi completamente isolati causalmente e spaziotemporalmente postulati da Lewis: si tratta piuttosto di un certo tipo di

[2] Lewis distingue tra "divergenza" e "ramificazione": mondi identici fino al momento in cui divergono e mondi all'interno dei quali lo spazio-tempo si biforca. I primi non hanno nessuna relazione a unirli al di fuori della somiglianza e sono quindi mondi possibili isolati a tutti gli effetti, mentre i secondi formano ciascuno un unico mondo con differenti biforcazioni. Questi ultimi presentano un primo stadio temporale in comune con due differenti futuri ai quali il troncone iniziale è legato da relazioni spaziotemporali e causali. Dunque, mentre intrattengono relazioni causali col medesimo passato, i due futuri, invece, sono separati tra di loro e appaiono isolati causalmente poiché il tessuto spaziotemporale del mondo a cui appartengono permette che, a partire dall'ultimo evento in comune, questi "coesistano senza interazioni" (Lewis 1976 e 1986, 71-2, 206-9). Dal momento che un viaggiatore temporale può compiere delle azioni precluse agli altri abitanti del suo mondo, le narrazioni che lo vedono protagonista seguono le modalità narrative descritte da Doležel nel caso in cui sia presente un "alieno aletico" (Doležel 1999, 124-25).

mondi previsti dal realismo modale, ovvero quelli all'interno dei quali lo spazio-tempo si "ramifica" (Lewis 1986, 209) in maniera molto simile a quanto succede nell'"interpretazione dei molti mondi della meccanica quantistica" formulata nel 1957 da un dottorando di Princeton, Hugh Everett III, dove la realtà globale non cessa di suddividersi in una molteplicità crescente di mondi paralleli – anzi, divergenti.[3] Anche nell'opera del filosofo cinese descritta da Borges in ogni istante si sviluppano serie spaziotemporali divergenti, ma, se per Everett le ramificazioni, una volta divise, non hanno più modo d'interagire, qui, invece, le molteplici linee di universo, dopo essersi separate, possono talvolta ricongiungersi per poi disperdersi nuovamente in un groviglio "quasi inestricabile". Come infatti il sinologo Stephen Albert spiega al narratore: "il suo antenato non credeva in un tempo uniforme, assoluto. Credeva in infinite serie di tempo, in una rete crescente e vertiginosa di tempi divergenti, convergenti e paralleli" (Borges 1984, 700).

Date le premesse, è dunque chiaro come l'impiego di strutture narrative imparentate con quella de *Il giardino dei sentieri che si biforcano* sia da imputare in larga parte a motivi d'ordine extra-letterario e addirittura extra-estetico: in altre parole, in molti casi è piuttosto difficile – quando non addirittura futile – tentare di stabilire se l'adozione di questo topos sia da imputare maggiormente alla volontaria emulazione dell'archetipo borgesiano, a suggestioni provenienti da altri campi del sapere o ad altre esperienze. Siamo consapevoli che, in tal modo, allargheremo l'analisi a testi che hanno apparentemente poco a che fare con il racconto di Borges, ma il nostro obiettivo principale non è qui quello di render conto dell'influenza – peraltro già ampliamente sviscerata – di alcuni luoghi dell'opera dello scrittore argentino sugli scrittori del Secondo Novecento, bensì quello di mappare le potenziali declinazioni espressive di una struttura che Borges si è limitato a fissare in un'immagine memorabile. Infatti, non solo troviamo attivo questo principio strutturale in diverse epoche e discipline fin dall'antichità, ma è rilevante notare come molti autori contemporanei si spingano ben oltre Borges: ciò che l'argentino si era limitato a immaginare e descrivere, i postmodernisti lo realizzano, sviluppando le potenzialità espressive intrinseche al

[3] Su questo tema si vedano Greene 2012 (242-303) e Tegmark 2007 (99-125). Il lavoro di Everett – sia per l'esotismo dell'immagine del mondo proposta, sia per l'opposizione di Bohr, sia per la poca notorietà del suo promotore che fu costretto a pubblicarne una versione molto ridotta rispetto all'originale – venne inizialmente ignorato: perché questa interpretazione entrasse nel dibattito scientifico ci volle il sostegno di un celebre fisico come Bryce DeWitt che scoprì e divulgò le idee di Everett una decina di anni dopo.

fatto che i sentieri, una volta biforcatisi, possano o meno ricongiungersi.[4] Se la maggior parte degli autori tende a porre più o meno esplicitamente l'accento sul movimento di perpetua congiunzione e disgiunzione che crea 'improbabili intrecci di mondi', non manca chi fa emergere la sensazione di perdita e frustrazione legata all'"isolamento' dei vari sentieri. Va inoltre sottolineato che non sempre i due aspetti si escludono vicendevolmente: vi sono infatti opere nelle quali domina 'un'unione senza contatto',[5] poiché l'intreccio non fa altro che sottolineare l'incolmabile lontananza delle entità che appartengono a mondi diversi.

2. Improbabili intrecci di mondi

Per quanto riguarda l'intreccio tra mondi differenti, il topos borgesiano, sebbene latente, è attivo ogni qual volta siano presenti due mondi che scorrono l'uno nell'altro 'senza soluzione di continuità', formando una sorta di nastro di Möbius in cui un confine, che si suppone invalicabile, risulta invece – con un termine dickinsoniano – "illocalizzabile" (Dickinson 1997, 1034): nel momento in cui si vuole dimostrare la solidità, infatti, ci si trova sempre dall'altra parte senza averlo attraversato – o, viceversa, quando si crede di averlo superato, ci si trova invece ancora molto distanti da esso.[6] Si ha una situazione di questo tipo, ad esempio, in *Ubik* di Philip K. Dick, in *The Third Policeman* di Flann O'Brien, in *The Atrocity Exhibition* di James G. Ballard e in *Surfacing* di Margaret Atwood (Dick 2003c; O'Brien 1967; Ballard 1970; Atwood 1998). Mentre nei primi due a sfumarsi vicendevolmente, senza barriere percepibili, sono il mondo dei vivi e quello dei morti, in *The Atrocity Exhibition* di Ballard il paradosso topologico è dato dalla fusione di mondo interiore (mentale) ed esteriore (fisico); in *Surfacing* di

[4] A togliere l'esclusiva a Borges è, ad esempio, Deleuze 1990, 135-36: nel suo saggio dedicato a Leibniz e il Barocco, l'azione del principio strutturale de *Il giardino dei sentieri che si biforcano* viene rintracciata non solo in molti scrittori nei quali l'influenza borgesiana è da escludere per ragioni cronologiche, ma anche in musicisti e pittori.

[5] Questo tipo di relazione è ispirata a quella che, secondo Lévinas, lega l'Altro con il Medesimo, ma se in Lévinas esso si configura come un rapporto positivo che, salvando la libertà dell'ente, impedisce la completa riduzione dell'Altro al Medesimo, nel nostro caso, come vedremo, prevarrà la negatività (Lévinas 1977).

[6] Anche se esemplate sulla forma di un nastro di Möbius, non si prendono in considerazione le narrazioni caratterizzate dalla presenza di una 'curva causale o paradosso della predestinazione' in quanto, in tal caso, non sono interessati più mondi o sotto-mondi differenti, ma circolarità ripetitive all'interno del medesimo mondo: ad aggrovigliarsi in tal caso sono la freccia del tempo e la gerarchia causale.

Atwood, invece, si assiste alla doppia fusione parallela, da una parte del mondo civile con quello delle forze ctonie e ancestrali, dall'altra del corpo e della mente della narratrice con il mondo non-umano e con quella che Deleuze e Guattari chiamerebbero "vita non-organica" (Deleuze e Guattari 1996, 183).

Rientrano in questa categoria anche i testi caratterizzati dal fenomeno della metalessi, presente ogni qual volta vi è una trasgressione della gerarchia narrativa, ovvero quando un elemento appartenente a un livello superiore si ritrova ad agire in qualche modo a uno inferiore. Ponendo la questione in termini più generali, si può dunque dire che "vi è metalessi [...] quando il passaggio da un 'mondo' all'altro si trova, in qualche maniera, mascherato o sovvertito" (Lavocat 2016, 117). Facendo riferimento ai mondi possibili, non bisogna tuttavia dimenticare che, affinché vi sia metalessi, non basta un semplice passaggio da un mondo all'altro, ma vi deve essere quello che Douglas R. Hofstadter chiama un "attraversamento paradossale di livelli" (Hofstadter 2008, 132), elemento essenziale perché una semplice circolarità diventi uno "strano anello" – altro nome con cui egli indica tutti gli oggetti che presentano qualità affini alle peculiarità topologiche del nastro di Möbius. L'esito di siffatte trasgressioni è la coabitazione coatta di entità appartenenti a diversi mondi narrativi.

Come sottolinea Gérard Genette nel suo saggio *Métalepse*, uno dei più antichi generi – almeno potenzialmente – metalettici è quello dell'*ekphrasis*, ovvero la descrizione di una raffigurazione pittorica o scultorea, immaginaria o reale, all'interno di una narrazione. L'esempio più famoso – e all'origine di una vastissima tradizione imitativa; cfr. Genette 2004, 82-89 – è sicuramente quello della descrizione dello scudo di Achille, presente nel XVIII canto dell'*Iliade*, dove i personaggi scolpiti da Efesto prendono vita, si muovono ed esprimono i loro sentimenti. Nondimeno, per quanto riguarda il periodo premoderno e moderno, gli oggetti dipinti prendono vita seguendo quasi sempre il classico topos degli *spirantia signa* – ovvero di figure dipinte tanto bene da sembrare vive – senza varcare effettivamente la soglia ed entrare nel mondo diegetico che li contiene per interagire direttamente con l'osservatore o osservatrice. Infatti, sebbene Denis Diderot in *Salon de 1765* si spinga fino a far chiudere la bocca all'osservatore da parte del personaggio rappresentato nel quadro di Greuze *La Jeune Fille à l'oiseau mort*, affinché le potenzialità metalettiche dell'*ekphrasis* vengano sfruttate a pieno bisogna attendere la scrittura postmodernista[7] di Alain Robbe-Grillet: in *Dans le labyrinthe* i personaggi oscillano continuamente tra azione e fermo-immagine,

[7] Ad assimilare la poetica di Robbe-Grillet a quella postmodernista è, ad esempio, McHale 1989, 13-14. Per quanto ci riguarda, accettiamo l'inclusione di Robbe-Grillet all'interno della galassia postmodernista in virtù delle strategie narrative volte a sottolineare problematiche ontologiche.

entrando e uscendo da una stampa intitolata *La disfatta di Reichenfels*, mentre ne *La maison de rendez-vous* scene ambientate nella sontuosa villa di Lady Ava prendono vita da copertine di giornali illustrati cinesi e "*L'assassinio di Edouard Manneret*" è allo stesso tempo delitto 'reale', attorno a cui ruota l'intera frammentaria vicenda, e soggetto del dramma, scritto dal commediografo intradiegetico di nome Jonestone, in cui la stessa Lady Ava sostiene il ruolo di protagonista (Robbe-Grillet 1959 e 1965); quest'ultimo procedimento costituisce una *mise en abyme* dell'intero romanzo e, anche se la *mise en abyme* non è di per sé un procedimento intrinsecamente metalettico, in questo caso porta a un cortocircuito dei livelli narrativi poiché non è possibile distinguere il mondo del romanzo di Robbe-Grillet e quello dell'opera di Jonestone: i due mondi si includono reciprocamente in un (potenziale) regresso infinito.

Per quanto riguarda, invece, il fenomeno della metalessi dell'autore, ovvero l'illecita incursione dell'autore nel mondo della sua stessa finzione, esso si presenta endemico soprattutto nel romanzo – o metaromanzo – postmodernista americano. Uno degli esempi più noti si trova in *Breakfast of Champions* di Kurt Vonnegut, in cui l'autore incontra, alla fine del romanzo, un suo fedele personaggio per comunicargli che ha deciso di liberarlo dal dovere di comparire ancora nelle sue future opere (Vonnegut 1973, 293). Simili colloqui paradossali si trovano pure in *Take it or Leave it* di Raymond Federman, una sorta di condensato di tutte le forme di metalessi finzionale che comprende, quindi, non solo i rapporti tra autore e personaggi, ma anche tra questi e i lettori. Insoddisfatto della performance del narratore, il narratario fa scendere un proprio rappresentante a livello della diegesi al fine di affiancare il protagonista nelle sue avventure e avere un resoconto migliore, scavalcando così il narratore. Non a caso il protagonista, esibendo anche una certa competenza in fatto di strutture narrative, commenta stupito: "How the hell did you manage to pass from the level of the present to the level of the past? From outside to inside this very personal recitation? Doesn't make sense! Normally such transfers are not permitted. They go against the logic of traditional narrative techniques!" (Federman 1997, cap. XVII). Nel capitolo seguente l'inviato scompare improvvisamente, di fronte allo sguardo sempre più sbalordito del protagonista, per essere rimpiazzato da un altro emissario meglio qualificato, in quanto bilingue, a comprendere il bilingue protagonista. I due, per una "strana coincidenza", che non fa che aggiungere un ulteriore *calembour* metaletterario, si chiamano Claude e Simon, e vanno così d'accordo che il nuovo venuto finisce per sedurre e sodomizzare l'inesperto protagonista che si concede soltanto "for aesthetic reason or for the sake of literature" (Ibid. cap. XVIII): la violazione dei

livelli narrativi – commenta Brian McHale – "genera ulteriori violazioni di tipo differente" (McHale 1989, 124). Tale episodio sembra fare il verso a ciò che accade in *At Swim-two-birds* di Flann O'Brien – opera peraltro citata in esergo a *Take it or Leave it* – in cui Dermot Trellis, uno dei personaggi creati dallo studente di letteratura protagonista del romanzo, essendo uno scrittore a sua volta, crea un personaggio femminile che finirà per stuprare poiché – sfoggiando una mentalità misogina non ancora del tutto sconfitta – lo trova tanto seducente da "perdere il controllo" (O'Brien 1993, 31): il figlio nato da questa unione – illecita a più livelli – si alleerà quindi con gli altri personaggi inventati da Trellis allo scopo di vendicarsi dei soprusi perpetrati dal "padre" nei loro confronti.

Dato che – come abbiamo precisato – l'esito delle trasgressioni metalettiche è la coabitazione coatta di entità appartenenti a diversi mondi, sebbene in molti casi esse abbiano come effetto quello di sovvertire l'autenticazione dei mondi finzionali rivelandone il carattere smaccatamente artificiale, talvolta siffatte trasgressioni non hanno la forza di appiattire completamente i mondi che mettono in comunicazione, ma si limitano ad aprire delle 'brecce': è ciò che succede ogni qual volta un testo di finzione incorpora un personaggio storico, il quale, poiché viene percepito dal lettore come appartenente al proprio livello di realtà, introduce una zona di differenza ontologica in un mondo finzionale altrimenti omogeneo (vedi McHale 1989, 28). Le opere postmoderniste, tuttavia, estremizzano questa possibilità narrativa ritraendo un joyciano "caosmo" popolato da entità *weird* di varia origine: oggetti fuori posto che si presentano come frammenti provieniti da altri mondi. Sono quelle che Thomas Pynchon definisce suggestivamente "another world's intrusion into this one. [...] An anarchist miracle" (Pynchon 2000, 91): miracolo laico, irruzione dell'alterità che ci ricorda come la realtà si estenda ben oltre la linea del nostro orizzonte. Si tratta sempre di un'intrusione, dunque, ma non di un'eccezione divina che esula dalle leggi di natura: è semplicemente la traccia lasciata dalla casuale collisione di un altro mondo con il nostro. Qui il tessuto della nostra realtà appare lacerato: sono proprio tali brecce, incongruenze inspiegabili con le leggi del nostro mondo, a metterne in crisi la stabilità. Talvolta, come nel caso di *The Crying of Lot 49*, questo mondo alternativo mantiene uno statuto ontologico incerto, in bilico tra esistenza e non esistenza: infatti, alla domanda se il "Tristero System" – sorta di sistema postale clandestino da cui è ossessionata la protagonista Oedipa Maas – sia una truffa appositamente architettata, una proiezione paranoica, una strategia d'uscita immaginaria o un'autentica realtà parallela, il romanzo di Pynchon non fornisce risposta definitiva (Ibid. 131-32). Lo stesso accade nei racconti *The Pedersen Kid*, *Mrs Mean* e *Order of Insects*, inclusi nella raccolta *In the Heart of*

the Heart of the Country di William Howard Gass, in cui i fenomeni apparentemente soprannaturali si limitano a macchiare il mondo altrimenti ontologicamente omogeneo della realtà quotidiana (Gass 1980, 3-98, 99-147, 203-15). In altri testi, invece, il mondo alternativo finisce per sostituire completamente il mondo di partenza. Tale eventualità è esemplificata nel romanzo di Muriel Spark *The Hothouse by the East River*, dove la strana ombra proiettata dalla protagonista rappresenta il primo indizio della natura 'artificiale' del mondo in cui vivono i personaggi, e in *Time Out of Joint* di Dick, dove Ragle Gumm vede gli oggetti della realtà quotidiana letteralmente svanire sotto i suoi occhi per essere sostituiti da bigliettini su cui è scritto il nome dell'ente scomparso; in modo analogo a quanto accade nell'opera di Spark, le anomalie che segnano il mondo dell'America degli anni Cinquanta, in cui crede di vivere Gumm, finiscono per annientarlo completamente: ne rivelano, infatti, la natura di realtà artificiale costruita assecondando la regressione infantile del protagonista (cfr. Spark 1988 e Dick 2003a).

Nonostante i testi presi precedentemente in considerazione rappresentino due mondi in collisione o che scorrono l'uno sull'altro, l'influenza del topos borgesiano – che prevede "una rete crescente e vertiginosa di tempi divergenti, convergenti e paralleli" – emerge con ancor maggiore evidenza in racconti come *Quenby and Ola, Swede and Carl* e *The Babysitter* di Robert Coover, entrambi inclusi nella raccolta *Pricksongs & Descants*. Il primo racconto vede protagonisti, appunto, Swede, la sua famiglia – composta dalla moglie Quenby e dalla figlia quattordicenne Ola – e Carl, l'amico invitato a trascorrere qualche giorno nella casa sul lago. La tranquilla vacanza sembra tuttavia perennemente sull'orlo di trasformarsi in tragedia. Si può infatti dedurre che Carl abbia avuto un rapporto sessuale con Ola e che Swede, avendolo saputo, abbia trascinato Carl su una barca in mezzo al lago per vendicarsi, ma i dettagli forniti si contraddicono vicendevolmente, come se appartenessero a ramificazioni differenti della medesima realtà: in alcune versioni il rapporto sessuale si è consumato all'aperto, in altre all'interno della casa, in altre ancora nello scandalo è coinvolta non solo Ola, ma anche Quenby. Al cambiare del sentiero muta anche il punto di vista: infatti, mentre nella maggior parte delle scene il narratore rimane esterno e onnisciente, quando viene ricordato il momento in cui uno dei personaggi maschili, presumibilmente Carl, ha avuto rapporti sessuali con almeno uno dei personaggi femminili, si passa dalla terza alla seconda persona ("you"), quasi si volesse apostrofare il lettore (maschile) che non vuole ammettere come i suoi bassi istinti non siano talvolta molto diversi da quelli che muovono Carl. Può altresì essere la voce accusatoria di Swede che sta per vendicare l'onta subita dalla figlia

uccidendo Carl in mezzo al lago, oppure la voce della coscienza di Carl o di un altro uomo qualsiasi che rimpiange ciò che ha fatto o che, forse, ha solo pensato di fare: "Swede, Carl, Ola, Quenby... one or more may soon be dead. Swede or Carl, for example, in revenge or lust or self-defence. And if one or both of them do return to the island, what will they find there? Or perhaps Swede is long since dead, and Carl only imagines his presence. A man can image a lot of things, alone on a strange lake in a dark night" (Coover 2011, 141). "Talvolta i sentieri di questo labirinto convergono" (Borges 1984, 698) – scrive Borges – ed effettivamente così avviene nel racconto di Coover: nel caos delle possibilità mutualmente esclusive, infatti, la scena della barca, che sia reale o meno, si trova all'incrocio di tutte le linee temporali comprese nella storia. Lo stesso intrico si ritrova nel più famoso *The Babysitter*, che si svolge tutto nell'arco di una serata in cui Jeannie, la babysitter, è chiamata a tenere Bitsy e Jimmy, i due figli dei coniugi Tucker che stanno trascorrendo la serata a casa dei genitori di Mark, amico di Jack, il ragazzo di Jeannie (Coover 2011, 182-212). La narrazione è completamente destrutturata: sebbene il punto di vista rimanga sempre quello di un narratore esterno e onnisciente, non solo la linea temporale balza avanti e indietro, ma gli eventi narrati sono incompossibili; ad esempio, mentre Jeannie è al telefono con Jack, ha la sensazione che ci sia qualcuno fuori a spiare: secondo le differenti versioni della storia questo posto sarà occupato rispettivamente da Mark, Harry Tucker e dallo stesso Jack, sia da soli sia congiuntamente. All'interno delle varie sezioni compaiono esclamazioni o frasi identiche, come delle *coblas capfinidas* che apparentemente servono a legare il testo, ma in realtà non fanno altro che attirare ancor di più l'attenzione sulla sua incongruenza: sono infatti pronunciate da voci differenti o sono poste in contesti che contraddicono quelli in cui erano precedentemente state utilizzate. Se in *Quenby and Ola, Swede and Carl* i vari sentieri si incontravano nella scena della barca, in questo caso le differenti ramificazioni si suddividono in due gruppi: nel primo alle 21 Jeannie appare in bagno a farsi la doccia o a farla ai bambini, nel secondo allo stesso orario la babysitter si trova in soggiorno a guardare *soap-operas* dopo aver messo i bambini a letto. Nessuna storia appartenente al primo gruppo va a finire bene né per Jeannie, che finisce violentata e/o ammazzata da Jack e Mark oppure da Harry, né per Harry che, se non compie l'omicidio, scivola su una saponetta e muore, né per (almeno) uno dei bambini che viene ucciso da Jeannie. Il secondo gruppo, invece, prevede un esito positivo: Harry torna a casa, ma trova Jannie, Jack e Mark a guardare la tv e se ne va. Se nel finale *Quenby and Ola, Swede and Carl* tutto sembra accadere nello stesso momento, allo stesso modo, nell'ultimo paragrafo di *The Babysitter* le possibilità alternative si intrecciano l'una con l'altra: tutto il

testo, poiché realizza esiti di azioni precedentemente presentate come incompossibili, si avvolge su se stesso cancellandosi.

3. Isolamento

L'isolamento, derivante dalla separazione dei differenti mondi, e i sentimenti a esso correlati – quindi, in particolare la sensazione di perdita e frustrazione – sono esemplarmente espressi dalle poesie di Jacques Roubaud, raccolte nella silloge *La pluralité des mondes de Lewis*, che fin dal titolo si ispira palesemente all'opera del filosofo americano. Il poeta cerca rifugio dalla sofferenza causata dalla perdita della moglie nelle risorse offerte dalla possibilità dell'esistenza di altri universi che si estendono al di là del muro della morte. Tuttavia, l'atto d'immaginare controparti di se stesso e della propria amata, alle quali è concesso di continuare a vivere assieme partecipando della medesima attualità, trasferisce l'impotenza provata nel saggiare l'invalicabilità del confine tra vita e morte sull'altrettanto insuperabile interstizio che separa colui che vive nel mondo del lutto dai suoi 'altri io' a cui sono toccate in sorte circostanze più felici: "Là-bas, pas plus qu'ici, nous ne sommes plus au monde ensembles / (tu y mourras, moi ici) / en contrepartie tu es, tu es, là, encore. C'est la / seule consolation. je ne la nommerai pas survie" (Roubaud 1991, 34). Stesso copione viene seguito da Philippe Forest nel suo romanzo *Le chat de Schrödinger*, salvo che il posto della moglie è in questo caso occupato dalla figlia, morta prematuramente di cancro:

> Se fosse ancora viva. Vent'anni. Oggi avrebbe vent'anni. Ma chi, lei? Una giovane donna, ormai, senza che nessuno possa farsi la minima idea di quello che sarebbe diventata, bensì solo sognare l'esistenza che forse conduce in universi paralleli a migliaia. Ma non in quello in cui sono io. E chi, io? Uno che, se lei fosse vissuta, sarebbe diventato a sua volta un altro, di sicuro almeno altrettanto incomprensibile, e del quale non c'è niente che io sappia. [...] Ed è allora una ben misera consolazione, anzi una beffa molto crudele, dirsi che altrove, in un'altra realtà della quale non si sa nulla, vive un altro da sé cui è spettata una felicità che rappresenta l'esatta contropartita del dolore che è toccato in sorte a voi. [...] Se la mia vita fosse diversa. Se mia figlia non fosse morta. Se non si fosse ammalata. Se non fosse nata. Se io avessi avuto altri amori. Se avessi vissuto la vita di un altro. Se fossi nato essendo un altro. Se non fossi nato. Come tutti gli uomini, secondo la saggezza della tragedia antica, dovrebbero augurarsi. (Forest 2014, 245-47)

Vi sono eventi che si verificano indipendentemente dalla nostra volontà o che non possiamo fare nulla per evitare che accadano. Eppure, talvolta appaiono così gratuiti e contingenti che li neghiamo e ci immaginiamo come sarebbe stato il mondo se le cose fossero andate diversamente: rimpiangiamo implicitamente di

non vivere in quella realtà parallela – allo stesso tempo così vicina e così lontana – in cui le cose sono andate diversamente. Il topos del "giardino dei sentieri che si biforcano" consente, dunque, di trasferire quello che di solito è un problema interiore in un ambiente esterno formato da un groviglio di tempi che si diramano in tutte le direzioni, accogliendo così simultaneamente "tutta l'umanità errante, [...] tutti gli uomini, tutte le donne e tutti i bambini che [vagano] all'infinito" (Vonnegut 2003, 61).

Sebbene alla fine il 'mondo del sogno di una vita possibile' collassi totalmente su quello della 'morte', è una sensazione di perdita e frustrazione a emergere dalle pagine del già citato *The Hothouse by the East River* di Spark, in cui Paul e Elsa vivono la vita che Paul avrebbe potuto (e voluto) vivere se fossero sopravvissuti fino agli anni Settanta e le loro speranze non fossero state infrante dall'esplosione della V2 che ha colpito il treno su cui viaggiavano in compagnia dei loro amici nella primavera del 1944; tale sensazione domina anche *Alfred and Emily* di Doris Lessing, dove si narra, in due sezioni separate, la storia dei genitori di Lessing, ma nella prima parte si tratta di una ricostruzione fantastica della loro vita, di come avrebbe potuto svolgersi se non fosse scoppiata la Prima Guerra Mondiale, mentre nella seconda viene narrato il resoconto reale di due esistenze segnate dal conflitto (Lessing 2008). Sono sempre sentimenti di questo tipo sia quelli che spingono il 'personaggio' Federman – protagonista di *The Twofold Vibration* di Raymond Federman – a compiere il suo personale viaggio nel tempo solo per finire col rendersi conto dell'incolmabile vicinanza che lo separa dalle sue controparti (Federman 2000), sia quelli che innescano l'intreccio onirico di *Valis*; in questo testo di Dick, Horselover Fat – chiara ipostasi dello stesso Dick la cui scissione schizofrenica della personalità viene esplicitamente dichiarata nel corso dell'opera – vive in sogno la vita delle sue controparti, in particolare quella di un facoltoso individuo che vive con la bella moglie in una villetta in riva al lago: la sensazione che il mondo descritto sia differente da quello in cui vive il protagonista è accentuata dal fatto che "nessun lago del genere esiste nella California del Nord", luogo in cui è chiaramente ambientato il sogno (Dick 2010, 179, 206 e 126). Se in *Quenby and Ola, Swede and Carl* le varie linee di universo passano tutte attraverso l'episodio della barca, la sovrapposizione delle coscienze è qui innescata da una proprietà in comune: la Ford Capri rossa posseduta da Fat/Dick è proprio la macchina che avrebbe posseduto qualora avesse vestito i panni della sua controparte. Tuttavia, nonostante l'apparente breccia aperta tra differenti mondi possibili, il protagonista non può che giungere alle medesime malinconiche conclusioni di Roubaud e Forest:

Vorrei possedere la grande villa vicino a casa nostra. Davvero vorrei? Nella vita reale, non vorrei possedere una grande villa neanche morto. Quella è gente ricca; io li detesto. Chi sono io? Quante persone sono io? Dove sono io? Questo piccolo appartamento di plastica nella California meridionale non è la mia casa, ma adesso sono sveglio, presumo, e qui vivo, con la mia TV (ciao Dick Clark) e il mio stereo (ciao Olivia Newton-John) e i miei libri (ciao nove milioni di titoli stantii). A paragone della mia vita nei sogni interconnessi, questa vita è solitaria, falsa, inutile; inadatta a una persona intelligente e colta. *Dove sono le rose? Dov'è il lago? Dov'è la donna sorridente e attraente, che arrotola il tubo verde dell'acqua?* La persona che io sono adesso, paragonata alla persona nel sogno, è stata frustrata e sconfitta e si immagina solo di godere di una vita completa. Nei sogni vedo cosa sia una vita veramente completa, e non è quello che ho in realtà. (Ibid. 129-130)

4. Unione senza contatto

È ancora un testo di Dick che prendiamo in considerazione per illustrare il caso in cui sono presenti entrambi gli aspetti del topos borgesiano analizzati precedentemente. In questo caso l'intersezione tra sentieri differenti non fa altro che acuire la solitudine delle entità le cui linee di vita, pur appartenendo a mondi diversi, finiscono per incrociarsi.

In *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* la terribile droga "Chew-Z" ha l'effetto di staccare l'anima di colui che la assume dalla sua sede spaziotemporale. Il tempo dell'allucinazione, infatti, non scorre più velocemente di quello reale: i due sono piuttosto incommensurabili e un'eternità in sogno può equivalere a una frazione infinitesimale nel mondo reale. Di fatto, quindi, la coscienza viene trasportata in un mondo il cui spazio-tempo è indipendente da quello in cui si trova il corpo: il legame causale tra il mondo della droga e quello di partenza è dato solo dall'assunzione della stessa e dalla volontà di porre fine al suo effetto; ma, vista la soluzione di continuità temporale tra i due mondi, il ritorno volontario appare alquanto problematico, se non impossibile: "[u]na volta che hai preso il Chew-Z ne sei prigioniero" (Dick 2003b, 205). Strappato al suo *hic et nunc*, chi fa uso di questa droga si trasforma in un fantasma, una presenza infestante che passa attraverso le differenti ramificazioni temporali, comprese quelle in cui le proprie controparti non hanno assunto "Chew-Z" e la loro vita continua felice. Con ironico ribaltamento, dunque, i tossicodipendenti non 'hanno' allucinazioni, ma 'sono' allucinazioni intersoggettive in grado di interagire, seppur limitatamente, con gli abitanti delle altre linee di universo: in un certo senso, il "Chew-Z" 'cambia' la loro natura. Barney Mayerson, protagonista del romanzo, intravede in questa sua nuova abilità di poter viaggiare da un mondo all'altro la possibilità di rimediare al disastro della sua vita e

riallacciare i rapporti con Emily, la ex moglie; ma se è vero che la peggior prigione è quella che, nonostante l'evasione non sia possibile, non smette di nutrire nel recluso la speranza di potersi liberare, così la sensazione d'invalicabilità del confine che divide i mondi emerge con più forza nel momento in cui questi sembrano sovrapporsi: sebbene i fantasmi possano manipolare oggetti materiali, le loro mani passano attraverso il corpo degli esseri coscienti. Chi ha fatto uso di questa droga, quindi, è ridotto alla funzione di mero spettatore: può contemplare all'infinito i suoi errori senza mai poterli emendare. I *chooser* – come vengono soprannominati i consumatori di "Chew-Z"[8] – condividono il destino di tutti i *revenants* (spettri, zombi e sopravvissuti): "sono stati sputati fuori da ogni mondo possibile" (Ronchi 2015, 88), esclusi da qualsiasi tipo di relazione; sono occupanti senza posto, raminghi dei sentieri temporali, resi fantasmi dalla logica dei mondi e costretti a vagare per l'eternità in solitudine. Infatti, come lo stesso Eldritch fa notare a Barney, sconvolto per la sua nuova condizione, "dato che questo è il tuo futuro, ti sei già insediato qui. Quindi non c'è posto per te; è una questione di pura e semplice logica. Per chi dovrei far cadere in trappola Emily? Per te? O per il Barney Mayerson legittimo che è vissuto naturalmente fino a questo momento? [...] Sei un fantasma" (Dick 2003b, 210).

5. Il topos del "giardino" nel contesto culturale postmoderno

Attraverso una rassegna che non mira di certo all'esaustività, abbiamo visto come il topos del "giardino dei sentieri che si biforcano" venga sfruttato dagli scrittori postmodernisti in due direzioni espressive principali, a seconda che l'accento venga posto sulla possibilità che i sentieri, una volta biforcatisi, possano o meno ricongiungersi. A ben vedere, la terza modalità – una sorta di figura d'interferenza data dalla sovrapposizione delle prime due – non è altro che un'acutizzazione della seconda poiché, in questo caso, la ricongiunzione di mondi separati non è che apparente: le interazioni concesse al viaggiatore dei sentieri temporali con gli abitanti degli altri mondi non fanno che ricordargli la sua impotente estraneità.

Certamente la fortuna di questo topos è legata a motivi d'ordine extra-letterario e addirittura extra-estetico, non ultimo il successo presso il grande pubblico delle varie ipotesi multiversali previste da diverse teorie fisiche, nelle quali molti artisti sembrano aver trovato una sorta di *vademecum* per i più arditi voli della loro fantasia. *A fortiori*, va sottolineato che i fisici teorici non sono di

[8] Chew-Z è omofono di *choosy*, "esigente".

certo gli unici a parlare di mondi possibili: l'argomento – che risale ai primordi della metafisica occidentale – è stato con forza reinserito nella *koiné* filosofica del secondo Novecento, soprattutto americana, nell'ambito del dibattito sulla metafisica della possibilità che ha portato allo sviluppo della logica modale. Se è vero che la maggior parte dei filosofi considera i mondi possibili come un utile strumento euristico per esaminare la semantica di specifiche affermazioni e il valore di determinati concetti, senza mettere pertanto in discussione l'esistenza di un solo mondo, non è mancato chi – come il già citato Lewis – ha sostenuto, spingendosi ben oltre Leibniz, che tutti i mondi possibili esistono allo stesso modo: l'argomento riguardante l'esistenza di una pluralità di mondi, dunque, si è manifestato nella nostra epoca tanto in veste fisica quanto metafisica. Accanto a queste formulazioni, il concetto di mondi possibili è stato utilizzato nel secondo Novecento per esprimere come vi possano essere differenti e attuali organizzazioni della realtà, le quali affermano verità tra loro incompatibili. Già da tempo, infatti, è stato messo in evidenza che tutto ciò di cui abbiamo esperienza non è una realtà immediata, bensì frutto di una serie di condizioni che precedono tale conoscenza, fondandone la possibilità stessa. Se, intuitivamente, riteniamo plausibile l'esistenza di schemi concettuali alternativi, che occupano un ruolo affine ai nostri nell'organizzare, in un sistema articolato, gli oggetti dell'esperienza, dovremo concludere che "esistono molti mondi attuali" (Blais 1997, 6 e 150). Tale ipotesi è stata avanzata sia in ambito metafisico sia nel campo semiotico e delle scienze sociali, per poi fare da pivot ai moderni *Cultural Studies* americani (cfr. ad es. Goodman 1988; Berger e Luckmann 1969; Bhabha 2001).

Non bisogna tuttavia dimenticare che l'atto di mettere in relazione la fortuna del topos del "giardino dei sentieri che si biforcano" con quella di teorie fisiche e filosofiche non impone, tra le due, una connessione rigidamente consequenziale: poiché – come sostiene Nelson Goodman – "i mondi che abbiamo li ereditiamo dagli scienziati, dai biografi o dagli storici quanto dai narratori, dai drammaturghi o dai pittori" (Goodman 1988, 121), non vi è, dunque, niente di cui stupirsi se ogni agente culturale sarà influenzato da una molteplicità di sfere differenti e se ogni suo prodotto risentirà di tale interferenza costruttiva. Sottolineare, quindi, come l'immaginario pluralista che caratterizza il contesto socio-culturale postmoderno renda ragione della diffusione di questo topos – il quale si presta a sviluppare in forma narrativa determinate problematiche – contribuisce piuttosto a mettere in luce il fatto che la letteratura in generale e il romanzo in particolare hanno continuato anche nella stagione postmoderna – al contrario di ciò che comunemente si pensa – a porsi interrogativi profondi sulla natura del reale e,

con i propri mezzi, hanno sondato molte delle questioni che hanno caratterizzato la temperie culturale del Secondo Novecento.

Si può infine notare – senza aver modo qui di approfondire – che l'influenza di questa struttura narrativa, a differenza di altri giochi cari ai romanzieri degli anni Sessanta e Settanta, è talmente forte da oltrepassare i convenzionali confini della letteratura postmodernista finendo così per fornire alimento a una serie di prodotti della cultura mediatica (serie TV e *blockbusters*) contemporanea, i quali l'hanno sfruttata tanto ampiamente da depotenziarne la carica espressiva.

Bibliografia

Atwood, Margaret. 1998. *Surfacing*. New York: Anchor Books.

Ballard, James G. 1970. *The Atrocity Exhibition*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Berger, Peter L. e Thomas Luckmann. 1969. *La realtà come costruzione sociale*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Bhabha, Homi. 2001. *I luoghi della cultura*. Roma: Meltemi.

Blais, Andrew L. 1997. *On the Plurality of Actual Worlds*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Borges, Jorge L. 1984. "Il giardino dei sentieri che si biforcano." In *Tutte le opere*, vol. I, edited by Domenico Porzio, Milano: Mondadori, pp. 690-702.

Borghini, Andrea. 2009. *Che cos'è la possibilità*. Roma: Carocci.

Coover, Robert. 2011. "Quenby and Ola, Swede and Carl." In *Pricksongs & Descants*. London: Penguin Classics, pp. 129-45.

Coover, Robert. 2011. "The Babysitter." In *Pricksongs & Descants*, pp. 182-212.

Deleuze, Gilles. 1990. *La Piega. Leibniz e il Barocco*, Torino: Einaudi.

Deleuze, Gilles e Félix Guattari. 1996. *Che cos'è la filosofia?* Torino: Einaudi.

Dick, Philip K. 2003a. *Time Out of Joint*. Translated by Anna Martini, Roma: Fanucci.

Dick, Philip K. 2003b. *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*. Translated by Umberto Rossi, Roma: Fanucci.

Dick, Philip K. 2003c. *Ubik*. Translated by Paolo Prezzavento, Roma: Fanucci.

Dick, Philip K. 2010. *La trilogia di Valis*. Roma: Fanucci.

Dickinson, Emily. 1997. *Tutte le poesie*. Edited by Marisa Bulgheroni, Milano: Mondadori.

Doležel, Lubomir. 1999. *Heterocosmica. Fiction e mondi possibili*. Milano: Bompiani.

Federman, Raymond. 1997. *Take it or Leave it. An exxaggerated second-hand tale to be read aloud either standing or sitting*. New York: Fiction Collective Two.

Federman, Raymond. 2000. *The Twofold Vibration*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press.

Forest, Philippe. 2014. *Le chat de Schrödinger*. Translated by Gabriella Bosco, Roma: Del Vecchio Editore.

Gass, William H. 1980. *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*. Translated by Vincenzo Mantovani, Torino: Einaudi.

Genette, Gérard. 2004. *Métalepse. De la figure à la fiction*. Paris: Seuil.

Goodman, Nelson. 1988. *Vedere e costruire il mondo*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.

Greene, Brian. 2012. *La realtà nascosta. Universi paralleli e leggi profonde del cosmo*. Torino: Einaudi.

Hofstadter, Douglas R. 2008. *Anelli nell'io. Che cosa c'è al cuore della coscienza?* Miliano: Mondadori.

Lavocat, Françoise. 2016. *Fait et fiction. Pour une frontière*. Paris: Seuil.

Lévinas, Emmanuel. 1977. *Totalità e infinito. Saggio sull'esteriorità*. Milano: Jaca Book.

Lessing, Doris. 2008. *Alfred and Emily*. London: Fourth Estate.

Lewis, David. K. 1968. "Counterpart Theory and Quantified Modal Logic." In *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 65, no. 5, 1968, pp. 113-26.

Lewis, David. K. 1973. *Counterfactuals*, Malden-Oxford-Carlton: Blackwell Publishing.

Lewis, David. K. 1976. "The Paradoxes of Time Travel." In *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1976, pp. 145-52.

Lewis, David. K. 1986. *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Malden-Oxford-Carlton: Blackwell Publishing.

McHale, Brian. 1989. *Postmodernist Fiction*. London: Routledge.

Musil, Robert. 1957. *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. Translated by Anita Rho, Torino: Einaudi.

O'Brien, Flann. 1967. *The Third Policeman*. London: MacGibbon & Kee.

O'Brien, Flann. 1993. *At Swim-two-birds*. Translated by J. Rodolfo Wilcock, Milano: Adelphi.

Pynchon, Thomas. 2000. *The Crying of Lot 49*. London: Vintage.

Robbe-Grillet, Alain. 1959. *Dans le labyrinthe*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit.

Robbe-Grillet, Alain. 1965. *La maison de rendez-vous*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit.

Ronchi, Rocco. 2015. *Zombie Outbreak. La filosofia e i morti viventi*. L'Aquila: Textus.

Roubaud, Jacques. 1991. *La pluralité des mondes de Lewis*. Paris: Gallimard.

Spark, Muriel. 1988. *The Hothouse by the East River*. Translated by Mariagiulia Castagnone, Milano: Feltrinelli.

Tegmark, Max. 2007. "The multiverse hierarchy." In *Universe or Multiverse*, edited by Bernard Carr. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 99-125.

Vetter, Barbara. 2015. *Potentiality: From Dispositions to Modality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Vonnegut, Kurt. 2000. *Breakfast of Champions (or Goodbye blue Monday)*. London: Vintage.

Vonnegut, Kurt. 2003. *Cat's Cradle*. Translated by Delfina Vezzoli, Milano: Feltrinelli.

Warren, James. 2004. "Ancient atomists on the plurality of worlds." In *Classical Quarterly*, vol. 54, no. 2, pp. 354-65.

Lorenzo Graziani received his PhD in Literary Critics and Comparative Literature at the Università degli Studi di Trento. His work in the field of Theory of Literature focuses on the ontology of fiction. He conducted research at Columbia University (Philosophy Department).

statuS Quaestionis
language text culture

RECENSIONI

statuS Quaestionis
language text culture

Valentina Sturli, *Estremi occidenti. Frontiere del contemporaneo in Walter Siti e Michel Houellebecq*, Milano-Udine, Mimesis, 2020, 252 pp., € 24,00.

Il titolo non tragga in inganno: *Estremi occidenti. Frontiere del contemporaneo in Walter Siti e Michel Houellebecq* non è uno di quei saggi in cui, a partire dagli stralci più citati di qualche scrittore di grido, si riflette sul nichilismo dell'Occidente, o si usano le sue pagine a pretesto di un discorso politico sull'evoluzione della letteratura e sulla trasformazione delle società di oggi. Anzitutto, a differenza di quelli, non è venato di moralismi sull'inevitabile e indimostrata decadenza dei tempi presenti rispetto a una grande civiltà (non solo letteraria) del passato; altro motivo di distacco, è scritto in modo chiaro, asciutto, senza retorica. In ultimo, l'autrice del saggio non appartiene alla razza di chi fa critica militante. Dopo un lento apprendistato di classicista, ha virato negli ultimi dieci anni sulla letteratura comparata e sulle teorie freudiane della letteratura (in particolare è curatrice e studiosa dell'opera critica di Francesco Orlando) e ha trovato qui una dimensione congeniale. Al pari di altri classicisti passati alla comparatistica e agli studi intermediali (come, restando in Italia, Massimo Fusillo e Alessandro Grilli), prendere un'esplicita posizione polemica sulla propria materia per fare storia del presente le interessa meno di sviluppare un discorso plurale che dall'analisi dei testi parta e lì ritorni, in cerca di legami inediti fra parole e scrittori che, in apparenza, non hanno contatti diretti fra loro. Se c'è una teoria (del romanzo, della letteratura), non esce direttamente da Sturli, ma viene ricavata e dedotta dal *close reading* sui testi. In filigrana, si può leggere l'appoggio, oltre che alla lezione di Orlando, alla *Teoria del romanzo* di Lukács, quando Sturli afferma che Siti e Houellebecq "si mantengono gli eredi di quello slancio cognitivo che ha caratterizzato fin dalla sua nascita il romanzo moderno: l'indagine su un'umanità che si è emancipata da Dio e prova ad auto-conoscersi mentre si fa, senza ricorrere a spiegazioni metafisiche bensì, appunto, *iuxta sua propria principia*" (p. 26).

Siti e Houellebecq offrivano un'opportunità di riflessione allettante, perché il confronto non è dettato da una vicinanza concreta fra i due, ma

dall'accostamento suggerito dalla sensibilità critica del lettore italiano: in particolare il lettore formatosi, come Sturli, all'Università di Pisa, dove sin dalla fine degli anni Novanta sono state proposte interpretazioni destinate a durare su questi due autori (Mazzoni, Simonetti, Donnarumma, Grilli, Stara). Siti ha letto Houellebecq sin da *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994, l'anno in cui anche *Scuola di nudo* usciva per Einaudi) e, pur continuando a seguirlo nei decenni, si è, per sua stessa dichiarazione, disamorato progressivamente del nichilismo (apparente?) senza spiragli dell'autore francese; Houellebecq non ha mai letto Siti e, per quanto ne sappiamo, forse non ne ha nemmeno sentito parlare. Sgombrato il campo da reciproche influenze e contaminazioni, Sturli imposta il suo libro come una lettura scandita in due parti (*Michel Houellebecq: una semplicità fin troppo complessa* e *La funzione Walter Siti*), in cui legge in sequenza tutte le opere narrative dei due autori (con l'esclusione dell'ultimo romanzo di Siti *La natura è innocente*, uscito per Rizzoli a marzo 2020 e rimasto fuori dall'analisi). Anche se sembra una giustapposizione due blocchi non comunicanti, non lo è. C'è almeno un elemento comune grazie al quale Sturli entra nelle opere e ci spiega come Siti e Houellebecq ci mostrino "esseri umani che vivono nel nostro stesso tempo, vengono posti davanti a sollecitazioni cui anche noi possiamo essere sottoposti nel quotidiano; vivono vite per certi versi non troppo dissimili dalle nostre" (p. 15): è chiaramente l'eros. Dispiegato in modo estremamente diverso in Houellebecq (dove è regressivo, eterosessuale, gioiosamente meccanico e anti-intellettualistico) e in Siti (dove è *camp*, cerebrale, coltivato come culto di un solo fedele), l'amore sensuale è comunque per entrambi la migliore lente d'osservazione del mondo; lo strumento irrinunciabile di demistificazione di un'ideologia inconsapevole dell'Occidente, improntata al godimento nichilista, al consumo ansiogeno, alla repressione ipocrita di verità antisociali. Contro questa ideologia che non sa dire il proprio nome Houellebecq si è sempre schierato e, nella parte di libro a lui dedicata, Sturli riflette principalmente su ciò.

Il primo merito della parte dedicata a Houellebecq è bibliografico. Ci sono ancora pochi studi italiani su di lui (su tutti, si ricordino quelli di Zanotti e Tamassia) e praticamente nessuno con la conoscenza approfondita della bibliografia francese che Sturli dimostra: chi vorrà condurre uno studio su Houellebecq in futuro dovrà, in qualche modo, passare da qui. Il secondo merito è, come accennato, la capacità di individuare *un* nodo in un'opera tanto ricca e analizzarne ogni piega: l'immoralismo, con cui Houellebecq esprime, in un colpo solo, la sua inclinazione a contravvenire al senso comune della libertà individuale in ogni campo, finendo con il "mostrare quanto poco gli uomini

reggano la libertà che hanno scelto" (p. 40) e il suo sguardo *naïf* di utopista regressivo rispetto a un mondo troppo complicato "cui non si riesce più a star dietro" (p. 120). I discorsi di Houellebecq, generalmente bollati come 'provocatori', sono sottoposti a una disamina capillare che dà risultati perché sa essere fedele al testo (è il caso dell'esemplare studio del ruolo dell'avverbio *simplement*, 'semplicemente', nelle opere houellebecqiane, pp. 60 e ss.). Il bene e il male, rigidamente separati nelle premesse teoriche dell'opera di Houellebecq già dalla dichiarazione di poetica *Rester vivant* (1991), vengono svelati da Sturli nella loro difficile, perché in apparenza aperta, comprensibilità. A un primo sguardo, Houellebecq incoraggia letture 'letterali' e lineari, nonostante ciò impedisca di coglierne tutta la profondità. Lo sguardo di Sturli è invece sempre 'secondo', insistito e consapevole: a volte persino troppo, tanto da rendere Houellebecq più obliquo di quel che è. Difficile convenire con la considerazione che nella sua opera "*i*l dolore, l'amore, la colpa sono [...] più allusi che descritti" (p. 63). A ben vedere, la resa esplicita e immediata delle emozioni, retaggio dell'amata letteratura del romanticismo tedesco e francese primo-ottocentesco nel segno del rifiuto dell'elusività impersonale del postmoderno francese (da Robbe-Grillet a Echenoz), è un tratto di stile evidente in tutto Houellebecq, che è stato accusato, a ragione, di enfasi patetica e scarso senso della misura nel mettere in scena gli stati d'animo dei suoi personaggi. Succede di rado, ma Sturli sovrainterpreta. In un passaggio, isola una tirata del protagonista anonimo di *Extension du domaine de la lutte* contro le donne che vanno in analisi e la giudica così:

> [...] il ritratto non solo non è esaustivo, ma è incredibilmente e disperatamente parziale. Il che costituisce l'esibizione di un difetto logico-argomentativo sia sul piano della forma sia del contenuto: sul secondo perché è evidente l'enormità e il tasso di scorrettezza di ciò che il narratore afferma, e tanto più risalta perché lo propone come si trattasse di una constatazione fondata su prove evidenti; sul primo perché il tenore del ragionamento è tutt'altro che degno di fiducia, ma procede per rincari, iperboli e generalizzazioni indebite (p. 44).

Sturli decostruisce – con un tono professorale che non torna altrove – qualcosa che nel testo originale non c'era: un contorno di scientificità alla propria avversione alla psicanalisi freudiana. L'invettiva del protagonista non necessita di evidenze o appoggi scientifici ed egli non finge di disporne (perché mai una considerazione del genere dovrebbe essere "esaustiva"?): la sua è un'opinione che nasce dall'incompletezza delle sue conoscenze e dall'esperienza personale (l'uomo è stato appena lasciato dalla sua compagna, diventata arrogante e sicura di sé dopo un periodo in analisi), per poi allargarsi a considerazione

generale. È qualcosa che in quasi ogni romanzo moderno (in particolare nel romanzo-saggio, a cui il libro si può ricondurre) succede: ed è perfettamente verosimile, dentro e fuori dalla pagina, che si abbiano opinioni forti e indimostrate sul mondo, sugli altri, su noi stessi.

La parte dedicata a Siti è altrettanto ben riuscita, ma meno incentrata su un singolo aspetto. Al centro non c'è più solo lo studio poliprospettico e demistificatorio dell'uomo "allo stesso tempo schiavo e fruitore compulsivo del contemporaneo" (p. 33). L'architettura procede per letture di testi piuttosto che, come in precedenza, attraverso l'esame di una dicotomia concettuale (semplicità – complessità) che ne cela un'altra (bene – male). Un primo capitolo è dedicato al Siti della trilogia *Il dio impossibile* (*Scuola di nudo*, *Un dolore normale* e *Troppi paradisi*), alle sue posture autofinzionali e alla parabola di un tipo umano e intellettuale di *boomer* sessantottino a cui Siti guarda con ambiguità (p. 126). Questa prima sequenza è anche un'introduzione alla sua idea di eros assoluto, infinitizzante e antirealistico, che ossimoricamente si incarna nei corpi sublimati dei culturisti ("quando Siti parla di nudi maschili parla *sempre* di una realtà più ampia", p. 132). Un secondo capitolo è dedicato al *Canto del diavolo* (2009) e al legame a distanza con i *reportage* di Pasolini. Il terzo, *Marcello come Lolita* (pp. 167-192) è un confronto-matrioska con Nabokov dentro il più largo accostamento con Houellebecq. In questo capitolo, che da solo vale la lettura del libro, lo smascheramento delle ipocrisie dell'Occidente si proietta attraverso il prisma di un oggetto d'amore ingenuo e permeato dalle logiche di consumo che quell'ingenuità dovrebbero distruggere: Marcello per il Walter Siti di *Troppi paradisi*, Lolita per Humbert Humbert di *Lolita* (1955). Il ragionamento, rigoroso e puntuale, si chiude così:

> Marcello e Lolita sono due figure paradossali di corrotti che mantengono una segreta innocenza, la stessa di Pinocchio che crede agli alberi di zecchini e al Paese dei Balocchi. Si crea così un corto circuito: da una parte le fenomenologie dell'estremo Occidente consumistico sono corruttrici, dall'altra chi sa abbandonarvisi con vero trasporto, chi da esse è incantato davvero ha conservato un barlume di grazia precluso all'intellettuale (p. 190).

Né è l'unico momento intertestuale della parte su Siti. Nell'ultimo capitolo, dedicato all'interpretazione di *Scuola di nudo* e *Bruciare tutto* (2017), è di particolare interesse proprio l'antinomia suggerita fra il Walter autofinzionale del romanzo pisano e il don Leo del romanzo milanese. I due sono accomunati da una tensione antisociale all'assoluto e all'estremismo politico, che li rende insofferenti ai compromessi della realtà e alle buone maniere ipocrite con cui le persone si raccontano versioni di comodo sull'esistenza. Approfondendo:

In entrambi i personaggi questa tensione vuole oltrepassare una realtà percepita come frustrante, grigia, opprimente – eppure si presenta anche come un desiderio che ha in sé il marchio dell'impossibilità di soddisfazione, dell'incapacità a trovare uno sbocco . L'assoluto è dato da Walter stesso come irraggiungibile, se non per brevissimi sprazzi e manifestazioni intermittenti; la spiritualità di Don Leo è un'altalena tra auto-esaltazione e tortura (p. 197).

Ma, come spiega Sturli, la differenza fra i due è il riflesso di un modo radicalmente diverso di raccontare una stessa storia di inesistenza: Walter in *Scuola di nudo* è un personaggio comico, costretto allo sfogo autocompiaciuto e frustrante di fantasie di distruzione e immoralità che non toccano la realtà. Don Leo è la declinazione tragica dei tratti dell'io mostruoso del Walter autofinzionale; è colui che, dal pulpito, incarna ciò che il personaggio di Walter Siti non ha mai osato essere, che rimane inascoltato e si condanna all'inferno per aver voluto fare agli altri un bene che non erano capaci di accettare. È per questo che Walter Siti come autore, all'altezza del 2017, si distribuisce in don Fermo (il parroco amico di don Leo, capace però di improntare la sua condotta a una ragionevole infrazione degli imperativi che il "radicalismo esaltato", p. 202, di don Leo invece prevede), Emilio e Roberto (la coppia borghese che con i progetti di vacanza e gestione di coppia chiude *in minore* un libro abissale e disperato). Ormai è sceso a compromessi con la realtà, preferendo esporre i suoi personaggi al fuoco della tragedia e della colpa: tuttavia "si percepisce chiaramente che tutto questo è pagato a prezzo della dismissione di una postura propositiva o attiva, che voglia fornire una qualsiasi risposta o prospettiva al mondo" (pp. 206-207), al prezzo, vale a dire, del nichilismo verso cui inclina sempre più la scrittura sitiana (come hanno notato Zinato e Donnarumma in letture speculari: rispettivamente "Il 'realismo d'emergenza' di Walter Siti, tra teoria e romanzo", in *Contemporanea* 16, 2018: 111-118, e "Presentazione" in "Gli immoralisti: narrativa contemporanea ed etica", a cura di Raffaele Donnarumma, *Allegoria* 80, n. II: 2019).

Da un resoconto così schematico, restano fuori molti tratti determinanti di *Estremi occidenti*. Alcuni sono dichiarati sin dall'approccio di Sturli, come l'equilibrio estremo nel prendere posizione 'fuori dal testo' e l'arbitrarietà del confronto. Nella *Conclusione*, dove Sturli riflette un'ultima volta sulla descrizione *e contrario* del bene in due narratori così affezionati alla rappresentazione mimetica della negatività del mondo, il discorso a tale riguardo si complica. Quando *Bontà* (2018) di Siti e *Sérotonine* (2019) di Houellebecq vengono messi in parallelo, il confronto, finora condotto a rispettosa distanza, si fa molto ravvicinato e balena lo spettro dell'arbitrio ermeneutico. Basta davvero radunare

due romanzi sotto il segno del bene, "un bene in sordina e anti-sublime, che contrasta con l'impero dell'egotismo desiderante e può essere articolato solo sotto forma di occasione persa per sempre, o tentazione minimizzata e negata" (p. 233), per definirli vicini? In *Bontà* Siti raffigura con un racconto breve sghembo e sottilmente parodico l'autodistruzione scientificamente programmata (e quindi fallita) di un ceto intellettuale-editoriale da cui vuole prendere congedo; *Sérotonine* è un *conte philosophique* grottesco in cui il protagonista Florent-Claude, in un percorso circolare di attesa spaurita nel segno dell'obnubilamento da antidepressivi, incontra in giro per la Francia, secondo le modalità canoniche della letteratura picaresca, alcune persone significative della sua vita (che ci viene, in parallelo, raccontata per sommi capi). A differenza di *Bontà*, *Sérotonine* gira consapevolmente a vuoto, e il finale, un *hapax* in Houellebecq per irresolutezza dell'autore e insoddisfazione generata nel lettore, lo dimostra. La riflessione sull'etica di *Bontà* manca in *Sérotonine*, dove antidepressivi e religione sono palliativi per aspettare la morte liberati dal fardello della libertà: qualificare tutto ciò come 'bene', soprattutto alla luce di un confronto con Siti, pare eccessivo.

Ci sono poi due aspetti per così dire 'metodologici' che vengono dalla scelta dell'approccio comparatistico. Uno è il senso a volte un po' labile della diacronia testuale, che tradisce una vaga diffidenza per la storiografia del presente: Siti e Houellebecq si stagliano nel buio, senza che emergano i lineamenti di un contesto o, cosa che a volte può stupire, le differenti circostanze alla base della composizione delle singole opere. L'autore delle *Particules élémentaires* (1998) è diverso da quello di *Soumission* (2015), chi ha scritto *Scuola di nudo* non è l'identico uomo che ha composto *Resistere non serve a niente* (2012): i tempi cambiano e con loro le situazioni, gli obiettivi, gli stili, i contenuti, ma a volte non è facile intuirlo dalla prospettiva costruita in *Estremi occidenti*. L'altro risvolto metodologico è ben più significativo: oserei dire che è il frutto della scelta di leggere assieme due autori molto diversi. Quando Sturli legge le riflessioni sulla prostituzione contenute in *Plateforme* (2000), il suo giudizio ha una risonanza curiosa. Houellebecq attuerebbe, parlando in termini positivi del turismo sessuale

> il rovesciamento che ormai ben conosciamo: un rapporto mercenario sarebbe più spontaneo in quanto privo per definizione di tutte le complicazioni e vuote ritualità che fanno parte del rapporto amoroso. La libertà, che avrebbe dovuto facilitare il contatto tra gli individui, l'ha reso solo più penoso e difficile. Il che, ancora una volta, non vuole costituire una réclame della prostituzione o del matrimonio combinato, quanto piuttosto una maniera di

provocare il lettore – che, ricordiamolo, in quanto democratico, colto e istruito è presumibilmente assai contrario a queste pratiche (p. 83).

Qualcosa non quadra, però. Nel romanzo, la prostituzione nei paesi del Terzo mondo è accettata praticamente da tutti fuorché da qualche femminista esaltata di mezza età (e sorvoliamo pure sull'inverosimiglianza di un simile scenario). *Plateforme* non propone un'apologia della prostituzione per rovesciare il buonsenso borghese sulle false gioie dell'amore consenziente fra adulti: nell'idillio sessuale fra Michel e Valérie, il cuore del romanzo, si vede che l'amore autentico in un quadro di libertà sfrenata e competizione economico-sessuale è possibile. La prostituzione va in realtà nella stessa direzione dell'amore fra Michel e Valérie (i due infatti introducono volentieri l'eros a pagamento nella dinamica del loro rapporto): un amore senza ipocrisie e ricatti, facilitato, ma non falsificato, dalla transazione economica. Dov'è la provocazione al lettore «democratico, colto e istruito» (che non presupporrei in blocco e a priori contrario alla prostituzione, se non in qualche parola di circostanza per tutelarsi dalle critiche)? Il mio sentore, del resto impossibile da dimostrare, è che Sturli proietti l'alone 'provocatorio' della prostituzione di *Troppi paradisi* e *Il contagio* su *Plateforme*. Nei libri di Siti, il rapporto con Marcello è visto come scandaloso e inaccettabile: in un primo momento da Walter, poi soprattutto dal suo ambiente medioborghese di appartenenza, che è respinto da ciò che Marcello rappresenta (*escort*, cocainomane, vagamente fascista). Nell'immoralità del suo rapporto con lui, Walter riesce a inventarsi un equilibrio e una nuova morale in cui, finalmente, non è più costretto a fingere secondo i modi mistificatori dei 'professori' che lo circondano. Leggendo Houellebecq, Sturli ci ha detto qualcosa su Siti.

L'esempio più chiaro è nel capitolo su *Scuola di nudo* e *Bruciare tutto*. Quando Sturli parla del personaggio di Walter Siti e di don Leo, li definisce "due gemelli che prendono strade antitetiche" (p. 211). Questa definizione non è esattamente intuitiva, dato che Sturli sta scrivendo di due libri che distano vent'anni l'uno dall'altro, riuniti *da lei* sotto la lente critica. Ma è un giudizio azzeccato e dà il via a una serie di considerazioni 'gemellari' su don Leo e don Fermo, don Leo e don Ettore, don Leo e Andrea, che accrescono di molto la nostra comprensione dell'opera sitiana. Mi pare che la formula ("due gemelli che prendono strade antitetiche") sia filtrata dalla lettura di Houellebecq: non è forse perfetta per definire in una riga la trama delle *Particules élémentaires* e della scissione della biografia di Houellebecq fra il poeta sessuomane Bruno e lo scienziato isolazionista Michel? È in questo risvolto segreto che Siti e

Houellebecq s'incontrano con più originalità. Sturli ha talvolta sovraimpresso strumenti e concetti per leggere uno scrittore su un altro a cui quegli strumenti e concetti non appartenevano: chissà con quanta intenzione, di certo con risultati convincenti. *Estremi occidenti* può essere anche visto quale dimostrazione della serendipità della critica comparata al suo meglio.

LORENZO MARCHESE

statuS Quaestionis
language text culture

Claudio Gigante, *Una coscienza europea. Zeno e la tradizione europea.* Roma, Carocci, 232 pp., € 23,00.

Una coscienza europea è uno di quei rari libri che riescono contemporaneamente a ridefinire il paradigma interpretativo dell'opera che sceglie come suo oggetto di indagine e a presentarsi al lettore non esperto come perfetta introduzione a un universo narrativo. In questo caso l'autobiografia, fittizia e sgangherata, di Zeno Cosini, sulla quale in meno di un secolo si sono addensate decine di letture critiche.

In poco più di duecento pagine, Claudio Gigante ridefinisce la figura di questo piccolo eroe del secolo passato, sgravandolo dei luoghi comuni che le letture e le antologie scolastiche gli avevano gettato addosso. Il saggio procede su due direttive e dopo aver compiuto un rapido affondo nei rapporti fra Svevo e la psicanalisi, porta il lettore a interrogarsi sui rapporti fra la *Coscienza di Zeno* e la grande letteratura europea nel lungo passaggio fra Otto e Novecento. Un quadro in cui il capolavoro dello scrittore triestino si inserisce perfettamente come tessera mancante di un puzzle.

Così Gigante ricostruisce l'impegno e lo zelo col quale Svevo/Schmitz ha provato a divincolarsi dai suoi debiti con la psicanalisi e con la scuola di Freud, sia in occasioni pubbliche, come la conferenza *Soggiorno londinese* che in scritture private, come il carteggio con Valerio Jahier. Malgrado la conoscenza e la curiosità verso differenti declinazione dell'esercizio psicanalitico, la figura di Sigmund Freud resta centrale per Svevo, quasi un Moloch che lo scrittore, con notevole dispendio di energia, attacca di continuo, ora definendolo grand'uomo più per i romanzieri che per gli ammalati, come si legge in una lettera a Jahier, ora aggirando vistosamente i suoi interdetti, come il divieto dell'autoanalisi, a cui Svevo si è a lungo sottoposto. Ma se la prassi di consigliare ad un paziente di scrivere le proprie memorie può sembrare piuttosto exatravagante da parte di un analista, Gigante riconduce l'opera del Dottor S. non solo ad una prassi accertata e attuata sia dallo psichiatra triestino Eugenio Tanzi che, nel 1904, da Cesare Lombroso, ma persino discussa dallo stesso Freud che nel

1911 aveva pubblicato le sue *Osservazioni psicanalitiche su un caso di paranoia (dementia paranoides) descritto autobiograficamente.*

Freud, e il suo *Ricordo di infanzia di Leonardo* – continua Gigante – è determinante per Svevo nell'indurlo a riflettere su alcuni nodi che saranno centrali poi nel suo romanzo. Scrivendo dell'illustre vinciano, Freud insiste sulla mistificazione dei ricordi di infanzia e sulla impossibilità di distinguere nettamente salute e malattia nell'uomo contemporaneo. Si comincia a definire una nuova concezione di memoria, che «non è il 'libro' dove sono incisi eventi immobili», ma «una facoltà dinamica, uno "strumento meraviglioso ma fallace", come avrebbe scritto Primo Levi, che permette di vivere e trasfigurare il passato cogliendone di volta in volta anche aspetti diversi» (p. 25). Nella stesura della *Coscienza*, la memoria funziona «come una facoltà attiva che trasforma il tempo trascorso in una trama». Messo in ordine dalla riflessione e «applicati i nessi casuali di un racconto[,] al passato è attribuito un senso prima sconosciuto» (p. 43).

Questa conoscenza del dibattito psicanalitico dei suoi anni, sempre sminuita e negata, distingue l'opera di Svevo da quella del suo più illustre, anche per il vieto accoppiamento scolastico, contemporaneo: Luigi Pirandello. Nel siciliano, come nell'immenso Tozzi, l'anima cova sotto forme imposte dal vivere associato che le impediscono di vivere l'avventura della sua molteplicità. Per Svevo, che in questo è incomparabilmente più moderno, la coscienza vive in tensione con le parti rimosse dell'individuo.

Nelle celebri pagine conclusive dell'*Interpretazione dei sogni*, Freud aveva mostrato come l'inconscio, lo «psichico reale», ci venga avventurosamente restituito dalla coscienza nello stesso modo incompleto con cui i nostri sensi ci restituiscono il mondo reale. Sulla scorta di Eduardo Saccone, Gigante non solo conclude che «il romanzo di Zeno è il romanzo della sua "coscienza"», ma che questa coscienza è «la zona luminosa di un inconscio oscuro, è un "organo di senso" in grado di percepire frammenti, spogliati di un significato apparente, di una verità che non è l'altra faccia della medaglia, ma la medaglia stessa. Non la negazione del principio di realtà, ma la realtà stessa» (pp. 50 -51).

Perché per Svevo la malattia non è offuscamento momentaneo, ma condizione essenziale dell'essere vivente: «E perché voler curare questa nostra malattia? – si chiede ancora una volta in una lettera a Jahier – Davvero vogliamo togliere all'umanità quello che essa ha di meglio?». Così, Zeno vive perennemente alla ricerca di una impossibile salute, ma questa tensione è il suo equilibrio: va dallo psicanalista e non dallo psichiatra, non è certo «il tipo d'uomo destinato – come usava – a marcire in sanatorio» (p. 36).

Ma Svevo accompagna il suo personaggio 'dallo psicanalista', disegnando un'analisi, come abbiamo già detto, solo in apparenza poco ortodossa rispetto ai metodi del tempo. Gigante ricorda come Freud, all'inizio della storia di Dora, quello che è forse il più famoso dei casi clinici o dei suoi romanzi d'analisi, riveli di chiedere ai suoi pazienti di iniziare il dialogo terapeutico con la ricostruzione della propria storia e della storia della propria malattia. Dopo un ventennio di analisi e ricerca psicoanalitica, Svevo si mostra capace di riformulare artisticamente modi e prassi di una disciplina che si sta consolidando. Ne esce un personaggio credibilissimo che è contemporaneamente un abile narratore che, nel gioco di bugie e (doppie) verità, fa continuamente emergere le proprie contraddizioni, fino a sfiorare l'autodenuncia e un paziente che si mostra violentemente refrattario al percorso di rieducazione che la terapia comporta.

Una volta fissati gli snodi essenziali del rapporto fra Svevo e la psicanalisi, Gigante legge la vita e le opinioni di Zeno Cosini personaggio nel contesto della letteratura del lungo passaggio dall'Otto al Novecento. Sono comparazioni e accoppiamenti a volte già noti agli studiosi (si pensi a Schopenhauer cui è dedicato un densissimo capitolo), altre volte invece più sorprendenti. Se Flaubert e Mann fanno parte dell'album di famiglia di un narratore italo-tedesco del ventesimo secolo, altri accoppiamenti risultano più singolari ad un lettore non specialista ma assai convincenti, come l'incontro col pingue, struggente, Oblomov di Gončarov e con l'elegante e stralunato Matte Laundris Brigge di Rilke.

Questa lettura *europea* del capolavoro sveviano, inizia da uno dei temi più incandescenti dell'universo romanzesco di primo Novecento: il rapporto fra le generazioni e in particolare la conflittualità fra i padri e i figli. Padri ancestrali, bestiali, virili e violenti come il Domenico Rosi di *Con gli occhi chiusi*, e padri più flebili, ripiegati, deprimenti emanazioni di un vecchio ordine, come Cosini senior. Entrambi, Rosi e Cosini, convinti dell'incapacità dei propri figli di prendere un giorno il loro posto. A partire dal confronto con Tozzi, e poi col Joyce del *Ritratto di artista da giovane*, Claudio Gigante inscrive Zeno in quel mondo di figli incompleti e malinconici, ma – somigliando in questo più a Stephen Dedalus che a Pietro Rosi, Zeno Cosini smitizza la figura paterna. Guidandoci fra le righe di questa finta autobiografia, lo studioso mostra come la figura paterna venga ridotta a quella di un commerciante incapace di gestirsi autonomamente. Padri ipocriti, il signor Dedalus e il signor Cosini, con la differenza che le debolezze che Zeno imputa a suo padre sono eminentemente di natura finanziaria ed economica. «Il conflitto fra padre e figlio, nel romanzo di Svevo, non nasce perché il secondo non sia all'altezza del talento imprenditoriale del primo [...] ma si sviluppa all'interno di un quadro rassicurante dal

punto di vista economico, in cui necessità dell'attività sono subentrati la rendita e l'usufrutto passivo» (p. 61). I Cosini insomma, vivono senza lavorare, ma sotto tutela di un amministratore, il vecchio Olivi, che li tiene in pugno. «Zeno eredita un sistema di vita nel quale non è previsto, anzi è finanche interdetto, uno spazio d'azione» (p. 61). La gabbia d'acciaio della borghesia dei commerci, ci porta in un'altra zona nevralgica del libro: il capitolo 7, significativamente intitolato *Degenerazioni*, in cui – oltre a un interessante confronto con *Au Rebours* –, la *Coscienza* è letta in parallelo all'altra inchiesta sui mercanti e la loro interiorità: *I Buddenbrooks*. E il nostro Zeno che, malgrado tare e tic, è un uomo riuscito negli affari prova per il fallimento commerciale del ridicolo Guido Speier la stessa ripugnanza di Thomas Buddenbook per chi non resiste al fallimento, in quel mondo in cui nessuno «ha diritto alla compassione non solo per i propri sbagli, ma per l'incapacità di essere al passo» (p. 159).

Rapporto col mondo dei padri, etica dei commerci, la figura di Guido, ci riportano al salotto dei Malfenti nel quale Zeno va a cercare un padre putativo e ne esce con una moglie. Gigante studia le logiche del desiderio di Zeno, ne mostra le movenze girardiane, nel suo desiderio di donne proibite. Ada e Carmen, la moglie e l'amante del cognato. L'*Educazione* è l'enciclopedia dei possibili romanzeschi come lo studioso dice più volte mentre sovrappone il rapporto fra Zeno e Guido con quello dei protagonisti maschili del capolavoro di Flaubert. Zeno ha una fantasia omicida nei confronti di Guido, come Frédéric Moreau prova la tentazione di assassinare il suo rivale M. Arnaux. Ma è soprattutto la complessa amicizia fra Frédéric e Deslauriers, fatta di meschinità, reciproche avversioni, slanci fraterni e comuni perplessità, a descrivere il complesso rapporto fra i cognati Cosini, Speier.

Rapporto denso di reticenze, di cui conosciamo solo la versione di Zeno – e si ricordi il famoso dubbio di Lavagetto che, a partire da un piccolo indizio verbale, ha ipotizzato persino che la vicenda sia andata in tutt'altro modo e che forse Guido non si è mai suicidato – che fra le righe ammette di aver tentato di sedurre la segretaria Carmen – altra donna del desiderio triangolare, si diceva, nonché versione procace di Ada.

Lo scambio di funerali, con Zeno che perde il seppellimento del congiunto (non si può dire amico) è una delle scene più celebri, nonché uno dei pochi debiti freudiani – un atto mancato – riconosciuti da Svevo.

Nel mondo di Svevo e di Zeno, si diceva, la salute e la malattia non sono distinguibili, anzi l'esistenza è minata alle radici. Il Cosini senior era stato un personaggio 'tolemaico', «la terra era per lui immobile», dice di lui il figlio e Gigante commenta: il vecchio «non è depositario di alcun sapere, ma [è]

acriticamente ancorato a poche idee ricevute che prevedono non solo, come sarà il caso anche di Augusta, un'adesione superficiale alla morale corrente, essenziale per mantenere un'impagabile quiete, ma anche un approccio monotamente serio» (p. 63).

Agli antipodi di un figlio che confessa, nell'ultimo capitolo della sua autobiografia di aver amato la sua malattia, che gli aveva reso la vita più bella di quella dei cosiddetti sani. È la piccola epifania che illumina i pensieri di Zeno mentre guarda scorrere l'Isonzo e intorno a lui, nella finzione romanzesca, avanzano le ombre della grande guerra. Il volume di Schopenhauer trovato nella biblioteca di famiglia, aveva stravolto il vecchio Thomas Buddenbrook e la lettura del filosofo di Danzica (stessa aria anseatica e baltica) aveva consolato il senatore di Lubecca facendogli immaginare un destino comune verso cui tutte le forze dell'umanità sono condotte alla pace. L'epifania di Zeno è in fondo più piccola, sciolta nelle vicende di una esistenza non eroica, fatta di vizi irriducibili, piccole seduzioni, consuete simulazioni.

Abbiamo già visto Svevo chiedersi perché curare la malattia: «Davvero vogliamo togliere all'umanità quello che essa ha di meglio?» Se il mondo è malato dalle fondamenta, se la vita è *originale* perché priva di scopo, allora il malato non solo può fare pace con se stesso, ma considerarsi a pieno titolo parte della di una natura che non procede per bivoche contrapposizioni fra ciò che segue e ciò che fa eccezione alla regola. Anzi, «alla natura non appartiene soltanto ciò che è sano ma allo stesso titolo tutte le forme di diversità più o meno distanti da paradigmi sociali della norma» (p. 195). Se la fine apocalittica del romanzo può essere letta come l'autodistruttivo approdo di una umanità che non accetta di restare nei propri limiti naturali; Zeno, di fronte all'Isonzo, sembra scoprirsi uomo fra gli uomini e trovare, se non un senso, una giustificazione alla propria presenza. Perché la malattia è connaturata all'uomo e fino a quando un maledetto (?) ordigno non farà esplodere questo globo, e noi con lui, il contemplatore e il lottatore – si legge in una riflesione di Svevo su Schopenhauer – sono entrambi prodotti finiti della natura. E «non c'è cura» (p. 195).

MARCO VISCARDI