

MEMORY AND NATIONHOOD IN TIMES OF "POST-". "DIARIO DE UNA PRINCESA MONTONERA" BY MARIANA EVA PÉREZ AS A CASE-IN-POINT

Cecilia Policsek

Senior Lecturer, PhD, Technical University of Cluj-Napoca

*Abstract: The current paper suggest a comparative look at the expression of violence, as crystalized in the works of authors such as Ana María Shua, Tununa Mercado and Luisa Valenzuela, for whom the exposure to political violence was part of their experience, and that configured in the writings of those for whom the political violence is a matter of the past that affects present, as it is the case of the Argentine "returnees". By considering paratextual remarks on a work such as *Diario de una princesa montonera 110% verdad* by Mariana Eva Pérez, the paper focuses on the role played by the humoristic embrace of the past in the case of the latter category of authors. This leads to the conclusion that the configuration of memory has been permeated--as shown by the artistic works of some of the Argentine "returnees"--by tendencies that illustrate a profound change in terms of the understanding and cultivation of memory. The aim of this paper to point to this shift of paradigm, and prove that it is a topic worthwhile considering for further analysis in a context that aims to frame the interconnectedness between globalization and national identity.*

*Key words: postmemory; nationhood; *Diario de una princesa montonera 110% verdad*; Mariana Eva Pérez; literature and the use of humor*

Introductory Remarks: New Literacies and Memory as Cardinal Points

The current paper considers the case of *Diario de una princesa montonera 110% verdad* by Mariana Eva Pérez in order invite to a reflection upon the extent to which the imposition of the new literacies has been affecting the status and value attached to "narratives", as defined by rather traditional standards. While it pinpoints to the fact that narratives are some of the most important tools by which identities can be asserted and shared, it also acknowledges that the

media in which narratives are being articulated are visually rich and diverse, and that the literary discourse, once the dominant type of discourse that housed the narrative machine, can no longer be viewed as a privileged *locus* of narration (Page and Bronwen 2011). Thus, this paper pleads for a consideration of the shift from the literature-centered narrative paradigm to the one governed by constellations of social media, in an attempt to capture the esthetical, epistemological and social implications of this profound change. Rather than mourning the death of the channels of literary narrative, as we used to know them, the current paper aims to suggest that the narrative process has undergone a metamorphosis whose mechanisms are organically related to the literary, as it cherishes the narrative's role in negotiating identities.

While it is not rooted in a nostalgic understanding of the past, nor is it in a skepticism *vis-à-vis* what has been regarded as “utopian” projects, the reason that explains the deep concern of our times with memory and the past stems out of the belief that present, past and future are inextricably related, and that no overcoming of the “crisis of the future” is possible without coming to terms with the past. In Pagni's words, “Las experiencias políticas de renovación de los últimos años—más allá de sus múltiples diferencias pienso aquí en los procesos de redemocratización en el Cono Sur de América Latina, en la reunificación alemana y las diversas manifestaciones del postcomunismo—no han sido vividas unánimamente por sus actores sociales como cortes que relegan al olvido lo que dejan atrás, como si ese pasado (que no es monolítico y está hecho de experiencias individuales y sociales heterogéneas) hubiera dejado de pesar y de incidir. En los últimos años ha ido ganando, o recuperando terreno la convicción de que esa ‘crisis de futuro’ en que vivimos no podrá ser superada sin el trabajo político y social contra el olvido” (2001: 73). [The political experience of renovation of the recent years—beyond its various differences, such as the redemocratization of the Southern Cone, the German reunification, and the various manifestations of post communism—were not lived unanimously by its social actors as courts that relegate to oblivion what they leave behind, as if this past (which is not monolithical and is made of heterogeneous individual and social experiences) had ceased to be make its presence felt and to influence. Lately, there has gained, or regained terrain the belief that it will be impossible for us to overcome this “crisis of the future” unless we start upon a political and social fight against the oblivion”, *the translation is mine*].

The reference to the interconnectedness between past, present and future is symptomatic of nowadays' tensions in mapping the memory question, where from the insistence upon the fact

that the relevance of memory transcends the national cultural realms, and the call to consider it through transnational lens. The explanation of this vivid interest raised by the question of memory as a transnational construct lies partly, in the European case, with the political and juridical efforts to condemn the authoritarian legacies, in order to call for historical justice. From this point of view, claims have been made that there is a “cosmopolitization of memory” taking place, triggered by a desire to shape a mnemotic identity in Europe (Mälksoo 2014). On the other hand, with regard to the dynamics of memory outside the European context, it has been remarked that the debates around the question of memory in Argentina have permeated the way the memory question is addressed in Spain, and that it is legitimate to speak about “an Argentinization” of the politics of memory (Elsemann). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to assess the appropriateness of this practice, the above mentioned claims show that the treatment of memory is articulated by a back-and-forth movement from universalist to particularistic claims.

Among the countries that aimed at coming to terms with their violent past and laid thus the foundation for reconciliation, Argentina has established itself as a landmark, due to its being the first country in Latin America which managed to bring its military to court for violations of human rights committed during military rule as shortly as two years after the end of the regime of violence. While the process of justice seeking in relation to the violence unleashed between 1976 and 1983 in Argentina is permeated in substantial ways by principles underlying children rights, due to the painstaking effort of “Madres de la Plaza de Mayo” and “Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo”, recent research has put on the theoretical map the lack of vigor of youth-centered approaches and the problematic issues involving the youth in post-dictatorial times. Among them, the case of the children of “the disappeared” who return to Argentina in democratic times and who often face fear as well as difficulties of reintegration (Aruj and González 2008).

Given that the choreography of the memory practices reveals its interstitial force only when approached by interdisciplinary tools, the effort to capture the dynamics of memory practices should go beyond the fractured fashion of consideration by means of individual subjects, in order to focus on the protagonism of the nodes of intersection and influence between different fields, such as the literary, the educational/curricular, the political, and the judicial. The grafting of the literary onto the political and the judicial has to do with the contention that the former acts has been, by excellence, an area of questioning, dissolution and counterargument

with regard to the official discourse on memory, as shaped by political and judicial standards. The way in which the new literacies have been reshaping recently the cultural territories imposes then that the understanding of the literary as a privileged space of narration and, implicitly, of identity coagulation, be questioned, and the implication for the negotiation of memory, unveiled. Based on this logic of the insistence upon the shift from the notion of literary, seen in its potential to articulate identities, to the mechanism of identity-structuring governed by the new literacies, any consideration meant to shed light on the way in which the mnemonic legacy is constantly being redefined should be observant both of the intergenerational dynamic and the impact of digitalization upon the construction of memory.

The Logic of “Hic et nunc” vs. that of “Post-” with Regard to the Literary Discourse

The literary field has been traditionally seen as an adequate barometer of the way in which the representation of violence at the social level is being shaped. Works of contemporary Argentine literature such as *Soy paciente* by Ana María Shua, *En estado de memoria* by Tununa Mercado, or *Realidad nacional desde la cama* by Luisa Valenzuela are emblematic cases of works that explore medical metaphors as national allegories and have memory at their core (Policsek 2013 and 2014). Although it is difficult and reductionist to group the novels that were written by authors that had a direct experience of violence in the same category, and under the same sign, claims have been made that they perform what has been called “the task of mourning” (Avelar 1999), meeting with the basic principle of post-transitional justice, according to which no solid future can be built without the acknowledgement and confrontation with a traumatic past.

While these novels provide an invaluable insight into the way in which the generation of Argentine writers who lived in times of violence dealt with the past, they lead to questions such as: to what extent is the literature written by the younger generation of writers, those that did not have a first-hand experience of the dictatorship, but upon whose lives as “retunees” it has had an indirect impact that cannot be obliterated, is different to that of that of the former generation? Perspectives such as the ones articulated in representative works by authors such as Mariana Eva Pérez, Laura Alcoba or Félix Bruzzone, for instance, along with other literary interpretations of the past voiced by the “hijos”, stand as a proof in this sense.

This comparative approach by generational standards of this type is reinforced by the belief that the understanding of the way in which memory is shaped, at the level of important entities, such as the family, the school, or the media, should be informed by the contrast between the memory and the pardon discourse, as defined on the side of those who lived in times of state terror, and that (re)produced in recent times by the youngsters. The latter operate, as “digital natives”, with a different notion of “community”, one that is symptomatic of the way in which the digitalized public space alters the understanding of post-transitional justice and national identity, as well as of the way in which the channels of the literary and those of the political and judicial function as communication vessels, and exert a mutual influence, from the point of view of the way in which memory is being orchestrated and defined.

Mariana Eva Pérez, born in 1977, elaborated a work that epitomizes the approach to the violence of the past by means of a poetics of irony and self-irony, *Diario de una princesa montonera 10% verdad* (Logie and de Wilde, 2013). As the author puts it, “el format de blog me ayudó mucho a encontrar un lenguaje y un registro, que es una de las apuestas más interesantes de cómo hablar de esto con palabras que no sean solemnes y con humor” (the format of a blog helped me a lot in finding a language and a register, which is one of the most interesting bets on how to approach this without using solemn words, humoristically, *the translation is mine*) (Pérez, 2012). Thus, in her humouristic approach to the question of memory, and an attempt to invalidate and ridicule the formerly used syntagms and fashions of approach, Mariana Eva Pérez makes reference, for instance, to “a Disneyland des Droit de l’Homme” (2012).

By embracing a poetics of irony, the author articulates a discourse that challenges, from the area of the social media, in the beginning, and that of literature, later on, the resistance of the edifice of the judicial discourse and claims. In her interpretation of this practice, Cecilia Sosa underlines that without the intervention of humor the question of memory would have been assigned to the realm of the genetic bonds, of family relationships. By contrast, the use of the tongue-in-cheek remarks opens it up to all those who have suffered a loss. Interestingly enough, due to intricacies related to readings through biographical lenses, however, the irony in relation to the past is considered legitimate only if it is supported by a personal loss, that is if it can be read as self-irony (Logie and de Wilde 2013).

On the other hand, the film *Los rubios*, directed by Albertina Carri, starts with the image a pieces of LEGO, as a possible allusion to the narrative construction of the past, the multitude of

combinations that are possible when trying to reconstitute the past. Conversely, the series *25 miradas, 200 minutos*, one of the films of bicentennial celebration, imposes itself as a filmic discourse that emphasizes, through its disruptive nature, the impossibility of a lineal understanding of the past, and the artificial nature of any narration of the past, as it explores towards its end a relevant quote: “Acumular imágenes es una forma de memoria. Hacerlos disponibles es necesario para destruir la huella por lo que seguir andando” (Accumulating images is a form of memory. Making them available is necessary in order to destroy the trace by which one should continue the journey. *The translation is mine*). Thus, the perspectives gleaned from watching *Los rubios* by Albertina Carri complement the ones reached by reading *Diario de una princesa montonera 110% verdad*, as they tend to reinforce a seemingly Hayden White-styled claim of history as a narration. However, this occurs, at least in Pérez’s case, in close relation to self-irony, and after the practice of a “tough and well-structured” discourse: “Para mí, una cierta manera de llevar adelante una militancia de Derechos Humanos terminó siendo nociva, porque terminó ahogando mi subjetividad. Me crié dentro de un discurso muy fuerte y estructurado, y terminó ahogando mi capacidad de pensar en otras cosas [...]. Hoy por hoy estoy militando, formo parte del colectivo HIJOS, pero lo encaró desde otro lugar, con otra alegría, y abro todo el tiempo preguntas que a mí me interesan hacerme, en lugar de ofrecer todo el tiempo respuestas”. (For me, a certain way of endorsing the militancy for the Human Rights ended up being harmful, given that it has put an end to my subjectivity. I grew up within a tough and well-structured discourse, which exhausted my capacity to think of other things [...]. Nowadays I’m militating, I am part of the group HIJOS, but I approach it from a different place, with a different joy, and I open up questions that I am interested in, instead of offering answers all the time. *The translation is mine*) (Pérez 2012).

Paratextual clues of this type reveal that Eva Mariana Pérez meets in unexpected ways, in spite of the generational and poetical divide, the *credo* of Luisa Valenzuela, as expressed in *Peligrosas palabras* (2001)—a convincing assertion of the power of humor in shattering dogmatism and clichés, including the ones about the past: “Si tuviera que escribir mi credo empezaría por el humor:/ creo en el sentido del humor a ultranza/ creo en el humor negro, acérrimo/ creo en el absurdo/ en el grotesco/ En todo lo que nos permita movernos más allá de nuestro limitado pensamiento, más allá de las censuras propias y ajenas, que pueden ser letales. [...] Un paso imprescindible para que la visión de una realidad política no se vea contaminadas

por dogmas y mensajes” (2001: 133). (If I had to write my creed I’d start by mentioning the humor: I firmly believe in the sense of humor/ I believe in dark, poignant humor/ I believe in the grotesque/ In everything that allows us to move beyond our limited thinking, beyond our own censorships, and those imposed by others, which can be deadly. A mandatory step to impede that the vision of a political reality be contaminated by dogmas and messages. *The translation is mine*).

Concluding Remarks

Postmemory, defined as “the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic experiences that preceded their birth but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (Hirsch 2008), has gained terrain and has become a fertile topic of scrutiny. In the light of this attention, many have discovered the tension between the metamorphosis of memory and the understanding of nationhood and the past. The look, from a literary angle, at the young citizens’ attitude towards impunity and accountability, in contrast to that of the preceding generations, reveals the different understanding of history and a metamorphosed concept of post-transitional justice. The fact that the artistic work of “the returnees” is rooted in a traumatic experience imposes a reconsideration of the relationship between the realm of the biography and that of esthetics, one that has at its core the reflection upon the remark *Non idem est si duo dicunt idem*. To what extent—we ask ourselves as readers—is the humoristic approach to the past more legitimate if it is articulated within the work of a “returnee”, that is to say someone that is entitled to reparatory claims ? An interesting topic in this sense, one that stems from the association of the construction of memory with the tools of humor, concerns the extent to which the claims of the discourse of reparation, as shaped, by excellence, within the judicial area, erupt within the territory of the literary, especially when there is a dissatisfaction with the instantiation of the reparatory discourse in relation to the judicial. The reflection upon these matters unveils, once more, the invisible, but tight connections between the realm of the literary and that of the judicial, an interrelatedness that has acquired, with the work of the Argentine “returnee” authors, a new dimension, one that requires that the relationship between the biography and esthetics be revisited, as part of larger effort to attentively consider nowadays’ Argentine intergenerational negotiation of memory and the impact of digitalization upon the discourse-related memory construction. The rationale of the

brief reference to these matters in the context of the current conference has thus to do with the belief that when trying to grasp the dynamics of the national identity in times of globalization under the sign of “post-“ no meaningful approach can elude the Argentine case and the poetics of the “returnees”.

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