RECONSTRUCTING HISTORY: POSTMEMORY AND ECTOPIC LITERATURE[1]

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ABSTRACT: This paper deals with the possible ways of understanding the relation between the reconstruction of history and literary fiction (postmemory and ectopic literature). The transmission of memory across generations – postmemory, and the composition of literary works out of the place of the origin – ectopic literature – facilitate the formation of historical discourse, which is inevitably accompanied by modern interpretation. As interpretation is understanding reality in a subjective manner, literary fiction takes its place in the reconstruction of historical events. And *ectopic literature* is one of the main narratives, which helps to understand the relation between facts and fantasy.

KEY WORDS: History; Postmemory; Narrative; Ectopic literature.

Reconstruyendo la historia: Posmemoria y literatura ectópica

RESUMEN: Este artículo aborda las posibles formas de entender la relación entre la reconstrucción de la historia y la ficción literaria (posmemoria y literatura ectópica). La transmisión de la memoria a través de las generaciones —posmemoria— y la composición de obras literarias fuera del lugar de origen —literatura ectópica— facilitan la formación del discurso histórico, que va inevitablemente acompañado de la interpretación moderna. Como la interpretación es la comprensión de la realidad de forma subjetiva, la ficción literaria ocupa su lugar en la reconstrucción de los acontecimientos históricos. Y la literatura ectópica es una de las principales narrativas, que ayuda a comprender la relación entre los hechos y la fantasía.

PALABRAS CALVE: historia; posmemoria; narrativa; literatura ectópica.

INTRODUCTION

The formation of historical discourse is different from the formation of other text types, linguistic, literary, philosophical, etc. What makes historical discourse unique is the peculiarity that it is formed not only from the «true story» (of what indeed happened) but also based on the relation between a story (or the past) and a public present, as was noted by Hegel (1970: 83). Indeed, within the historical framework, time is filled with now-time, as ancient Rome was for Robespierre (Benjamin, 1996: 395). On its road to formation historical discourse is filled with imaginary structures: at first, the referent (content of discourse) is exterior to

discourse and only in the second stage does it (the referent) enter into a relation with the signifier, allowing not only to tell the *story* that happened but also adding some imaginary structures to the discourse (Barthes, 1989, 138-139). Thus, the question of the subjectivity of the historian or of a certain mistrust of historical facts arises.

What is subjectivity, and how is it related to the phenomenon of the mistrust of historical facts? Is the question of narrative influential in contemporary historical theory, –? How are ideology and politics linked to the reconstruction of the historical past? The answers may be decisive for understanding the main chain of the evolution of human mind regarding the acceptance and recognition of national and universal history.

Traditionally, objectivity meant the professional abstention of the «story teller» or historian, who adhered strictly to the content of their documents. The question of subjectivity or the evolution of the notion of impartiality may be presented historically in three phases: the ancient period, in which the main task of the historian was to observe and catalogue the facts, eliminating the historian's point of view; the modern age, in which the main characteristics of life drifted away from Homeric impartiality and Thucydidean objectivity, as the understanding of greatness changed in the Christian era, where immortality became the destiny of a single living individual forming basis for political life and acquiring importance by connecting history with real life (Arendt, 1968: 48-52); and a third phase may be distinguished from the middle of the 19th century, when the historian's *explanation* was added to the *story*. This is the so-called *dissertative mode* of address, that is, the professional interpretation of facts by the researcher (Gay, 1974; White, 1984). In Hayden White's words, one of the possibilities for *History* to be transformed into Science (in the early nineteenth century) «was by detaching historio*graphy* from its millennial association with rhetoric» (White, 2014: 8). This is where the main reason for mistrust appears: – «an imaginary elaboration» of historical discourse (Barthes, 1989: 138) results in doubts regarding the correctness of the historical facts.

Much has been written over the issue of ideology (Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, Slavoj Žižek, Terry Eagleton, Michael Billig and Jorge Larrain, among others) but here we shall highlight the links between ideology and discourse (Teun A. van Dijk), as the main focus of our investigation is historical discourse. In this approach, ideology is linked to politics, or institutions of power, which form truth based on past stories, which are interpreted in accordance with the current values of society.

Professor van Dijk defines ideology as «[…] the foundation of the social representations shared by a social group» (van Dijk, 2006: 729). As political groups need to be able to compete, they are inevitably ideologically organized. Hence arises the need for a political field to be ideologically conscious. Once ideology becomes part of politics, it expresses itself widely in political discourse. In van Dijk's words, «[…] discourses make ideologies observable in the sense that it is only in discourse that they may be explicitly expressed and formulated» (van Dijk, 2006: 732). Thus, according to the initial understanding of the ideology coined by Destutt de Tracy, it was the discipline that studied ideas. Later, this understanding changed, – and ideology came to be seen as part of the political sphere.

1.   Postmemory: how the past is handed down. The direct type of documentary sources

History is the cultural and chronological product of *bios politikos*. Hence, it may be transmitted and transmuted. The *transmission of facts into history* aims to preserve facts for future generations. It is an intentional action – ancient Greeks cultivated historical knowledge in order not to forget it. The notion of *authority* was developed in Rome, and later adopted by the Christian church to create its dogmatic truth. But the *transmutation of facts into history* can be an intentional action because the experience that is transmuted precedes the birth of the generations, which become the part of it. This type of historical experience is often traumatic in nature. Based on the «inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience», Professor Marianne Hirsch from Columbia University developed the term *Postmemory* (Hirsch, 2008: 106).

Reading written works of second generation writers and visual artists, Hirsch emphasizes the importance of historical events which change the lives of witnesses of cultural and collective trauma (mainly in the 20th century), and form the memory of the following generations «by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up» (Hirsch, 2008: 106). Hence, this is memory built on imagination and fantasy when a person feels that the effects of past continue in the present. Inspired by Art Spiegelman's photographs, the phenomenology of photography became crucial in Hirsch's understanding of the concept of postmemory, as well as its relation to Holocaust studies. In the footnote of her article, Hirsch made reference to the work of art historian Andrea Liss, who also used the term «postmemories» to refer to Holocaust photographs (Hirsch, 2008: 107). However, the Holocaust is not the only historical trauma, in which the notion of generation is an important standpoint. Intergenerational transmission is, as Hirsch observes, equally important in the studies of: American slavery, the Vietnam War, the Dirty War in Argentina, South African apartheid, Soviet and East European communist terror, and the Armenian and Cambodian genocides (Hirsch, 2008: 104).

Hirsch's work has been widely received. Her monographs: *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust; Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory* (with Leo Spitzer); *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory; Teaching the Representation of the Holocaust* (with Irene Kacandes), *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory* (with Nancy Miller), among others – are widely cited in the academic world.

2.   Narrative and ectopic literature: the place of fiction in historical discourse

With regard to the formation of the historical past as presented in history textbooks, the role of narrative (the methods of formation of historical discourse by historians) is both evident and complex. The tools, used by researchers to compose the relevant and acceptable story for the present generation, may vary according to the time when this view of history was written. Raw documentary materials, mostly found in archives and other depository sources, need to be transformed into a vital historical discourse acceptable both to the present institutions of power and to the audience at large. In short, this is a method of reconstructing history – and creating

national and universal memory – based on the theoretical areas such as epistemology (the epistemological approach makes history part of philosophy, the latter being the intellectual archive for the creation of the historical past)[2], methodology (the chosen methodology defines the approach for the reconstruction of the concrete historical event) and ideology (the epistemological and methodological perspectives are dictated by ideology, as the completed and manufactured story needs to be in accordance with the present political program because «History is never for itself; it is always for someone.») (Jenkins, 2003: 12, 21).

But the professional (historical) narration is not the only way in which historical discourse is formed. Different genres of literature play a crucial role in the understanding of historical fact. From this point of view, the cases of literary evidence conditioned by political reasons are of major interest. And one such literary paradigm is ectopic literature.

Edward Said's memoirs *Out of Place* may be considered to be a pattern for Ectopic literature. The term was coined by Professor Tomás Albaladejo Mayordomo from the Autonomous University of Madrid (Albaladejo, 2011; 2019). Making reference to writers who have moved from their place of birth to another place, Albaladejo distinguishes at least four possibilities of ectopic literature. These are: 1. Works written by ectopic writers who maintain their original language in a land whose language is different from theirs: e. g. Richard Zimler's *Guardian of the Dawn*; 2. Works written by ectopic writers in the target land's language: e. g. Joseph Conrad's *Under the Western Eyes*; 3. Works written by ectopic writers in a third language different both from their original language and from the target land's: e. g. Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes*; 4. Works written by ectopic writers in their own language in a land whose language is the same: e. g. Juan Ramón Jiménez's poetry written in Puerto Rico (Albaladejo, 2011: 144).

Albaladejo's notion of Ectopic literature was widely received. As the type of literature written outside of its original space, ectopic literature was distinguished from the literature of exile; in particular, literature of exile was considered as a type of ectopic literature with its peculiar characteristics such as the existence of special subsets of exile (exterior and interior), the possible of loss of one's maternal language during exile and the origin of the new literary genres during exile (such as the novel of exile and the novel of concentration camps), meanwhile the ectopic literature is a more broad definition which covers the role of *topos* in the composition of literary works by its nature not only geographical (as in case of exile), but also cultural. The formation of an «ectopic writer» need not be compulsory phenomenon, as the

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[2]   Here we can recall the note about the problematic historical relation between knowledge (as the term «epistemology» is derived from the Greek «episteme», meaning «knowledge») and ideology noted by Teun A. van Dijk: «[...] general, sociocultural knowledge, shared by an epistemic community, forms the common ground for all social representations of all (ideological) groups in the community. However, each group may develop specific group knowledge (e.g., professional, religious, or political knowledge) based on the ideology of the group. This knowledge is called "knowledge" within the group because it is generally shared, certified, and presupposed to be true. For other groups, such knowledge may of course be called mere belief, superstition, or religion. In other words, beliefs that are taken for granted, commonsense, undisputed, etc. *within* a community, and shared by different ideological groups, is are by definition non-ideological *within that community* (van Dijk, 2006: 729).

author can chose whether or not to transform his/her cultural micro- and macro-cosmos (Luarsabishvili, 2013).

David Amezcua Gómez from the CEU San Pablo University (Madrid, Spain) has reflected on Eva Hoffman's book *Lost in Translation. A Life in a New Language* that is a clear example of ectopic literature, or more precisely, of ectopic autobiography. At the same time, Amezcua Gómez considers translation as the key point for the in-depth study of the notion of ectopic literature (Amezcua Gómez, 2014). In his posterior publications, Professor Amezcua Gómez developed deeper the notion of ectopic literature (Amezcua Gómez, 2016a, 2016b).

Lucía Hellín Nistal from Madrid's Autonomous University (Spain) studied *Party im Blitz* by Elias Canetti in the framework of ectopic literature. Noteworthy is that writing in different and diverse ectopic conditions may facilitate the formation of rich, diverse and complex literary narratives (Hellín Nistal, 2015). Recently, Dr. Hellín Nistal published another work on ectopic literature which studied the work of displaced authors from the perspective of cultural rhetoric, paying attention to the relationship between the context of genesis of the texts and their final expression, as well as to the functioning of the literary mechanisms at play (Hellín Nistal, 2019).

Juan A. Rodríguez García from the National University of Distance Education (UNED) considered the literary work of Rafa Yáñez as an example of ectopic literature. Yáñez was a writer who never rejected his Galician origin and at the same time was deeply integrated in the new *topos,* where he actually found himself (Rodríguez García, 2016).

Montserrat Doucet from the Complutense University of Madrid used the notion of ectopic literature as a methodological framework to study the history and aesthetics of the *Bilbao Group* (Doucet, 2017).

Jorge Orlando Gallor Guarín from the University of Alicante analyzed the El *Diálogo de la lengua* of Juan de Valdés as an ectopic work (Gallor Guarín, 2020).

Sandra Mora López from Madrid's Autonomous University (Spain) investigated the possibilities of analysing ectopic literature in translation from the point of view of Rhetorics (Mora López, 2020).

2. 1.   *Vladimir Nabokov as an ectopic writer*

Vladimir Nabokov (pen name Sirin) was an American novelist of Russian origin. He was born on April 22,1899 in Russian Empire and died on July 22, 1977 in Switzerland. During his long life he lived in different cities – first in the Ucrainian Republic, later in Europe – Cambridge, Berlin, Paris – and in the United States – Wellesley, Ashland, Ithaca – and again in Europe – Montreux. Nabokov's nine novels are written in Russian and the following prosal pieces are composed in English.

Nabokov is an excellent example of an ectopic writer, being an author that created texts in different languages. His case meets 3 criteria from 4 that makes possible to define him as an ectopic writer:

1) During his Berlin years, Nabokov was composing in Russian, representing an ectopic writer which maintains his original language in a land whose language is different from his: Nabokov refused to write in English or in other language being afraid of forgetting his mother tongue. Even in Paris he continued to use Russian as main instrument of his artistic imagination.

2) In Paris Nabokov wrote *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* in English. From this point of view, we can consider him as an ectopic writer which composes in a third language different both from his original language – Russian – and from the target land's – French. The political situation in neighbour countries and economic difficulties which experiences Nabokov's family force him to change his mind and start composing in English.

3) The possibility to move to the United States and to escape from social and political complications, as well as the absolute need to find his place in English-speaking world, forms his decision to be converted in an American writer. Nabokov is once more converted into ectopic writer which writes in the target land's language: he starts composing his best novels in English, such as *Lolita*, *Pnin*, *Look at the Harlequins!* and others.

3. THE RECONSTRUCTION OF HISTORY: HISTORICAL TRUTH, POSTMEMORY AND ECTOPIC
    LITERATURE

Truth may be defined as the sum of beliefs acceptable for a concrete institution of power. Truth, due to its very nature, may vary from generation to generation, resulting in the creation of national memory. It is extremely uncommon to note a dualistic relation between truth and politics: on the one hand, truth is created for political purposes, while, on the other, truth in its primordial form is totally unacceptable to institutions of power. Thus, truth is fiction, a revelation made in a certain period of time, created to please someone (e.g. the government) or transmit personal experience, usually traumatic in origin. From this moment on, there has been a place for narrative (both documentary and literary) in historical discourse.

Acting as the desirable agent for reconstructing past, «historical truth» creates the present. The political program proclaims that the nation that has suffered millennial difficulties and survived has a future. Thus, the past is necessary for the present not because of objectivity, or to remember what and how something happened, but the sole purpose of revitalizing heroes buried under the dust of archives is to create modern ideologies.

As ideology is a social product, the transformation and diffusion of the reconstructed past is a key point to understanding the proper place and historical mission of a nation. Fortified by traditions and beliefs, ideology needs to be accepted in the citizen's long-term memory, related with dogmatic religious truth. The personification of power in one individual is a clear example of political ideology that is observed in totalitarian states. The mutual accordance between state and church has a rich tradition of governing nations. However, this was in gross violation of basic human rights.

Subjectivity is not the only obstacle which hinders the process of creating historical truth. One of the technical obstacles is that the historian selects a fragment from a chronological continuum and interprets it. Taken out of context, one concrete event does not give the whole picture, necessary for a detailed description of the story. In the process of filling the gaps with fiction and imagination, a historian

becomes a professional writer with the clear goal of representing their perception of what really occurred.

Bias makes sense when reconstructing history. Without it, the professional motivation of the historian would be lost. A historian may select a concrete period for investigation in order to nourish his faith and beliefs. In the case of small nations, studying dissident movements may become necessary to national dignity. Literature of exile reveals the ability to resist dictatorships. The past constructs the present, filling it with meaning.

A historian creates discourse based on two types of information: direct and indirect. The former may be represented by different sources of documentary depositories (such as historical archives, institutions which house manuscripts, museum collections, etc.). The latter, the transition between inter- and trans-generational experience (postmemory), is of literary character (ectopic literature).

In this regard, we suppose that *postmemory* is a type of source which may contain historical truth. Indeed, witnesses of different types of collective trauma have formed part of the historical past, and lack ideological motivation to falsify the truth. But here time itself plays a negative role in detailing the narrative. When describing tragedy, trauma or repressions, victims may forget or hyperbolize what happened. They picture themselves in the very center of the events and thus isolate and fragment the dynamics of historical discourse. When a father transmits his memories to a child, the reception of the story may sharpen the impression of what happened. From another point of view, the second generation, which has no personal traumatic experience, may understand the dramatic features of tragedy very superficially. Hence, *postmemory* is an important tool for reconstructing history, though it still lacks certain possibilities in order to document the historical past.

As has already been mentioned, history was traditionally linked to rhetoric. The formation of History as a science became possible only after its detachment from rhetoric. Nevertheless, literary aspects were not excluded from historical discourse, and the work of philosophers in History (beginning with Hegel) is an attempt to widen or systemize the work done and the conclusions reached by historian-scientists. From this perspective, literary imagination represents an indivisible part of historical discourse, as it aims to fill documentary gaps.

The role of the imagination in historical discourse became so important that the literary genre – the Realist novel – has been converted into a strong parallel of historical documentary sources. As professional historiography serves the state and is dictated by ideological demands, the literary narrative of historical events (memoirs, autobiographies, diaries of exile, etc.) also has the concrete aim to exaggerate or diminish the role of circumstances in the long chain of historical events. Hence, fact and fiction are two similar modes of transmitting the historical past.

Ectopic literature is a type of narrative which facilitates the understanding of the possible reasons for the creation of historical truth in the works of writers, exiled or not, who decided to create their text in unusual, complex reality. Frequent change of place of residence, as well as of themes, determines the formation of a new type of narrative –Ectopic Literature.

Conclusions

Thus, in coming to a series of conclusions concerning the reconstruction of history, let me offer two illustrations of why understanding the historical past is a complex reality:

1. «For the post-generation as a whole, the Second World War is the great event of that relevant past, the central point of reference, the referent, indeed, for the very idea of "history". The Holocaust is the most harrowing and philosophically pivotal heart of that cataclysm, the part of our larger past with which we have to struggle if we are to grasp something about our twentieth-century legacy, whoever we are» – noted Eva Hoffmann in her monumental *After such knowledge* (Hoffman, 2004: 155). Facts deeply rooted in history across generations are mostly of traumatic origin. Genocide is the type of collective trauma which is converted from history into culture. Time passes and new generations receive historical events as form of cultural heritage. Documents from concentration camps, e.g. archives, journals or diaries, may be lost or destroyed; witnesses may survive and pass their memories to the next generation, but after one generation this type of direct sourcing will no longer be possible. And grandchildren receive the Holocaust, for example, as a chapter in a history textbook or at an exhibition. Hence, trauma becomes memory, forming part of culture. The continuous education of new generations is an important step in reconstructing history. Nevertheless, once the impression has lost its sharpness, it cannot build the foreground of narrative. And different interpretations of historical truth may appear. In contemporary Russia we can still read about the Joseph Stalin who won the Second World War and eradicated parasitism from Soviet society. But there are no living witnesses of the Great Terror who can recount in detail the violence against the nation organized and directed by Stalin. Hence, the revitalization of Stalin is important in an ideological framework, omitting the concrete details of Soviet terror. The ideas, illustrated by Antonio Gramsci in his prison notebooks, concerning the transformation of revolutionary impulse by Stalin into an idolization of the totalitarian state, lost their actuality in dominant political discourse[3]. Time changes historical content, creating a new and desirable context for ideological «truth».

2. Literature can make a valid contribution to history. Narrative represents the interaction of human beings with their physical, historical and social world as it (narrative) responds to the necessity of representation of «concepts, acts and world status» (Aguiar e Silva, 1975: 607). Different types of historical narrative (epic poetry, novel, novella or short story) compose the story based on the real facts filled with imagination. The Spanish philosopher Maria Zambrano, in her essay *Poesía y Revolución* (*Poetry and Revolution*), describes the historical links between politics and literature, in particular the case of three revolutionary activities reflected in French literature (Zambrano, 1998: 201). Printing or the orally disseminated word (newspapers, bulletins, speeches pronounced on demonstrations) are useful

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[3]   See Gramsci (1994) y Gramsci (1977).

tools for the diffusion of political ideas. Different human values are spread in society during social cataclysms and political instability. Revolutionary rhetoric is accumulated in memory via literary texts and archival documents. Such historical narrative is exaggerated by nature and the degree reaches its peak during historical reconstruction.

Exiled or ectopic writers compose literature written in a different, extreme mode of composing. Historical facts are interpreted in quite a subjective manner, depending on the concrete context and the knowledge available. Autobiography becomes a fertile ground for giving birth to new ideas, supplied by personal childhood memories. Continuous change of place and work, difficulties with the new cultural ambience and the need to be a part of a forced reality condition the formation of new literary narrative, with different accents and spheres of interests. Here literary discourse interacts with the historical, blurring borders that distinguish one type of discourse from another. A new, hybrid narrative is formed, containing peculiarities of distinct text types and painting reality with bright historical, literary, and psychological inks.

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