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Time and memory: *Camí de sirga* and *Les veus del Pamano**

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Abstract

In this article, I will examine how historical memory is recovered and, in particular, how the issue of time is dealt with. I will explore how literary language, with its ability to penetrate and create contaminated situations, is the most suitable vehicle for presenting historical memory in a less ideological and emotional way and how it offers a means of reconstructing, filling in or setting straight the records provided in official accounts. Finally, I will argue that literature can be used to recover or recreate these official accounts and, in so doing, to give voice to previously suppressed memories, figures and realities.

Keywords

historical memory, time, Catalan novel, Jesús Moncada, Jaume Cabré

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Resum

En aquest article vull identificar la manera com la memòria històrica és recuperada i en particular de quina manera es juga amb el problema del temps. El que vull examinar és de quina manera el llenguatge literari, amb la seva habilitat de penetrar i crear situacions de contaminació, és el més adequat per a presentar de manera menys ideològica i emocional la memòria històrica com una manera de reconstruir, completar o corregir allò que han explicat les històries oficials. La literatura és capaç de recuperar o recrear el que ha estat explicat en les històries oficials i d'aquesta manera aconsegueix de donar veu a memòries, personatges i realitats que han estat suprimits.

Paraules clau

memòria històrica, temps, novel·la catalana, Jesús Moncada, Jaume Cabré

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Writers have a special responsibility to safeguard and transmit memory. In the case of communities mistreated by history, this responsibility is even greater. A good example is the writer Irene Némirovsky's *Suite française*, which narrates an alternative version of a complex episode in recent French history that few have been able to clearly explain: the widespread collaborationism with the German occupiers during World War II. Historians have reconstructed history and memory, but it is art – literature and film – that has excelled in the task of conserving and recreating (allowing us to relive) crucial moments from our collective (forgotten or expunged) memory.

In Spain, the use of memory has been explicitly politicized. Unlike in countries such as South Africa or Argentina, after the strong repression of the Franco dictatorship, the issue was not addressed; instead, the new authorities embraced a policy of amnesia and disremembering (Resina, 2003). Spain is a completely different territory, in which concepts such as reconciliation, memory and oblivion, in the senses used by Ricoeur, are rare. Efforts to recover memory in the country have arisen in part as a reaction to the distortions of Francoist historiography and the collective amnesia considered an acceptable norm during the democratic transition that followed the dictatorship. Recent studies have highlighted the challenges of recovering the country's past due to problems of representation, the elusive nature of the "truth", and the inevitably political (and subjective) nature of reconstructions (Aguilar Fernández, 2008; Colmeiro, 2005; Ferrán, 2007; Glenn, 2008; Santana, 2011).

In this article, I will examine how historical memory is recovered and, in particular, how the issue of time is dealt with. I will explore how literary language, with its ability to penetrate and create contaminated situations, is the most suitable vehicle for presenting historical memory in a less ideological and emotional way and how it offers a means of reconstructing, filling in or setting straight the records provided in official accounts. My thesis is that literature can be used to recover or recreate these official accounts and, in so doing, to give voice to previously suppressed memories, figures and realities.

Hayden White has written about Michel de Certeau's notion of fiction as the "repressed other" of historical discourse. Under this theory, historical discourse depends exclusively on "the true", whereas fictional discourse is interested in "the real", which it pursues in the realm of "the possible or imaginable" (White, 2005, p. 147). In White's words, "The real would consist of everything that can be truthfully said about its actuality plus everything that can be truthfully said about what it could possibly be." (Ibid.) He goes on to explain, "[De Certeau asserts] that the return of the

repressed other (fiction) in history creates the *simulacrum* (the novel) that history refuses to be" (Ibid.). As Hertzberger (1995) has noted, fiction approaches history by "scumbling" it, and this scumbling is one of the defining features of narratives seeking to recover historical memory.¹

Reliving time

The novel *Camí de sirga* by Jesús Moncada, originally published in 1988 and translated by Judith Willis in 1994 as *The Towpath*,² recreates episodes from the history of a town that was cut off by land for centuries, but connected to the outside world, the sea and civilization by the River Ebro. While the episodes Moncada recreates are drawn from a fictional history, they describe a real town, Mequinensa, that was swallowed up by the river's waters in 1971, a casualty of the Franco regime's reservoir building policy. As noted by Pere Calders, a colleague of Moncada's at the publishing house Montaner y Simón, the town's destruction was a pivotal event in Moncada's life and work (Calders, 1981, p. 5).

Moncada's novel narrates the loss and destruction of a space that was, at once, private (personal) and collective. In the complex process of recovery, he manipulates time, devising a new way of including it in the narrative. Thus, the memories of some characters seep into those of others, reflecting the weight of collective memory. Indeed, the novel is permeated by a sense of destruction. It can be found on nearly every page. It is particularly palpable, for instance, in the novel's first and final pages. While it is this personal use that Moncada makes of time that makes the story he is telling credible, this credibility is also heightened by the story's unity in time. Moncada recreates a sort of mythical time, which was cut short in 1971 by the disappearance of the original Mequinensa. In so doing, he both reconstructs the collective memory and manages to create a different sense of time in which the past and present are interwoven.

Novels in general are drawn to death and dying worlds. In this novel, that attraction is particularly strong: the gutted town reveals its inhabitants' most intimate secrets based on the half-demolished or already levelled houses. The chapters are structured around the evocation of specific objects, streets or characters in the present of 1971, the year the town was destroyed, which then serve as a springboard for a series of memories and open the door to analepses or flashbacks.

The first chapter begins with a detailed description of the first demolitions of houses in the town. Here, it is worth noting the careful attention paid to place names and local nomenclature.

1. In Hertzberger's words, "scumbling is both a creative device and a critical perspective: it overextends the folds of one thing (fiction) into those of another (history) without eliminating entirely the discreteness of each" (Hertzberger, 1995, p. 6).

2. All translations from the novel *Camí de sirga* appearing in this article are Willis's. All other translations, including those of excerpts from *Les veus del Pamano*, are the author's own.



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Likewise, attention should be called to the dust cloud, associated with the “long agony” that will be one of the narration’s *leitmotifs*, and the contrast between the pure weather (the “bright spring morning air”) and the pessimism implied by the agony, din and collapse of the first home. Moncada became interested in this issue shortly before the destruction began, well before he began writing the novel. A collection of photographs that he took of the town has been conserved that focuses on its homes and details of the buildings. None features a human figure. It is precisely this human element that he would include in the novel.³ Thus, immediately after this description, in the same paragraph, we first hear the voice of the chronicler-narrator. From the moment it appears, this voice underscores the difficulty of accepting the information that has reached the chronicler by way of collective memory as fact:

Years later, when the tragedy that began that day in 1970 had become a dim memory, time shrouded in cobwebs of mist, an *anonymous chronicle* collated a number of moving personal accounts of the event. The first in chronological order – though not the most poignant – related how the clock on the belfry had stopped the previous evening against a louring backdrop of purple and sickly yellow storm-clouds streaked with black. *For the chronicler* this was a clear omen of what was to pass on the morrow, a sign that *the past was gone for good*. Another lurid account which described the night that followed this uncertain dusk was full of suspense: it spoke of the eerie silence in the empty streets, a silence that was mirrored indoors as the townspeople prayed that dawn should not break. The most vivid of all these recollections, however, was of the sinister bang on Horseshoe Hill at eleven o’clock the next morning; according to the chronicle, the townsfolk were profoundly shaken by the *onset of the disaster*.

These accounts were certainly all very impressive. But this wasn’t the only factor they had in common; there was something else, something of maybe no significance, and yet it helps explain what happened that ill-starred day. *They were also all, without exception, completely false*. (Moncada, 1994, p. 3)⁴

The state of the sky is clearly reflected in the villagers’ mood. Both seem to suggest premonitions of death and destruction: the “onset of the disaster”, followed by the final twist regarding the falsity of the information. From the very start, the reliability of the information to be presented is cast in doubt. The chronicler-narrator is thus tasked with reconstructing the false accounts, adding, perhaps, another layer of falsehood:

The townsfolk deceived themselves when they persisted in seeing 12 April 1970 as a key date in their collective drama; similarly, they were wrong to feel guilty about not witnessing the event at first hand. Knocking down No. 20, Horseshoe Hill, which was the start of the whole town being demolished [...] *was merely the opening scene in the final act of a long nightmare*. By the time the bulldozers tugged at the steel cables attached to the columns and the building came down amid clouds of dust, *the destruction of the town had been going on for more than thirteen years*. (*Ibid.*, p. 6).

As Kathryn Cramerer has written, Moncada shows how the people of close-knit communities construct distorted versions of events based on rumours and gossip, consensually creating narratives whose details may not be strictly accurate. Moncada recognizes the manipulation in how communities’ stories are remembered. He deliberately emphasizes the unreliability and untruth of many of the myths of Mequinensa (Cramerer, 2003, pp. 353 and 357). One of his most frequent devices is to interweave time and characters by mixing up the characters’ memories. Hence, the evocation of the battle of Tetouan in the memory of someone who was not there:

Battle commenced beneath Nelson’s nostalgia-soaked eyes: cannons roared, guns cracked, bullets whistled, sabres, bayonets and daggers flashed. *Headlong gallops, terrifying charges, fights to the death, cries of victory and groans of agony were heard one after the other among the chairs, tables and cast-iron columns of the Quayside Café*. A furious Moor who had come from Heaven knows where, possibly from the tall shelves where the cobwebby bottles of spirits stood, his djellabah stained in fresh-spilt blood, ran over the counter towards Nelson. The old sailor saw him draw close with a fearsome scowl on his face and raising his scimitar.... *Somebody opened the café door; the glaring sunlight landed on the Moroccan, who crumbled and was scattered like dust*. The acrid smell of burnt gunpowder was the aroma of coffee once more, the cannon-balls were reduced to footballs from the Sunday league, and the light over the billiard table resigned itself to playing its usual role again after illuminating for a short while the battlefield of Tetouan in Morocco in 1860. (*Ibid.*, p. 22)

According to Cramerer, this excerpt “is a good example of a technique used frequently by Moncada: a chance remark, event, sound or sight sends a character off ... into a vivid reminiscence of the past—so vivid in fact that both the reader and the character are transported back into another time” (Cramerer, 2003, p. 358).

3. See Jesús Moncada. *Espais literaris.s*.

4. In the quotations of the novel, the emphasis mine (note of the author).



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I would add that this memory proffered by a character who could not possibly have experienced the event, who had not even been born when it happened, is ultimately more believable than the event itself. In part this is because it is a story that has been told hundreds of times in conversations at the local bar. However, it should be noted – and this is what makes this excerpt truly extraordinary and sets it apart from a simple evocation (a “vivid reminiscence of the past” in Crameri’s words) – that the scene from the past actually plays out again at the bar: “Headlong gallops, terrifying charges, fights to the death, cries of victory and groans of agony were heard one after the other among the chairs, tables and cast-iron columns of the Quayside Café”. When the bar door is opened, “sunlight landed on the Moroccan, who crumbled and was scattered like dust”. The smell of gunpowder recedes and becomes, once again, the aroma of coffee; the cannon balls shrink into footballs; the harsh sun softens into the light hanging over the billiards table. It is an extraordinary transformation of the bar, and a mix of past and present.

In the final pages of *Camí de sirga*, Moncada tells of the disappearance of Mequinensa, threatened by the waters of the River Ebro. He does so by reproducing the funeral procession for Carlota de Torres, which he links to the demolished buildings and shuttered bars. The town’s imminent total destruction is suggested by the replacement of human life with encroaching nature. What Moncada does in this novel is akin to what Marianne Hirsch has called “postmemory”. According to Hirsch, “[P]ostmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. [...] Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by [...] stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events...” (Hirsch, 1997, p. 22). Moncada uses postmemory in two ways: as the narrator and by imposing it on his characters.

In another example, Moncada blurs the boundaries between two times in a single location. One character is literally placed inside the memory of another for an event that happened in another time. The action takes place in the same place, but separated by several decades:

As he walked up Sun Alley, old Nelson didn't realize that he was cutting across Carmela's memories, focused on the exact spot where, in 1925, the Civil Guards had just charged at the rioting strikers. Had the gust of bitter memory taken hold of him, had it made him relive that moment, the old fellow would have instinctively moved his head as he had done, just in time to dodge the rifle butt which merely brushed against his left thigh. Instantly recovering his youthful energy, he would have punched the figure who had him pinned against a wall; the Civil Guard would have fallen like a stone, and a second later

the flash of a gun would have through the darkness above the shouts and scuffles of the writhing mass. (Moncada, 1994, p. 88)

The narrator resorts to a species of film screening, projecting Carmela’s memories, and thus creates a plausible situation, that of old Nelson reliving the confrontation with the law enforcement agents, that superimposes the past on the present.

Mixing time

Jaume Cabré’s novel *Les veus del Pamano* (2004) is also structured around an ensemble cast, such that the reader perceives reality through the eyes and accounts of multiple characters. This approach has been used in other contemporary novels that deal with complex realities like the Spanish Civil War and post-war period in order to offer highly critical views of that time and of Franco’s dictatorship. Multiple perspectives are a natural and ideal tool to depict a world that has been turned upside down and offers few alternatives beyond repression and suffering, keeping your head down and toeing the line, which was the reality of the early years of the Franco regime. According to Glenn, the novel is enriched by the author’s “sensitive treatment of the theme of the recovery of historical memory” and “the dialogic nature of his text” (Glenn, 2008, p. 51). She has likewise underscored Cabré’s innovative use of time: “Cabré employs a variety of temporal and spatial planes, analepses and prolepses, shifting points of view and levels of discourse, and fragmentation in his presentation of multiple stories that are entangled like a handful of cherries” (Ibid., p. 52). Indeed, it is one of the devices used in *Les veus del Pamano* to offer a “dark panorama of self-serving and cynical behaviour, moral degradation, corruption, and hypocrisy” (Ibid., p. 54).

The mixing of time is, thus, essential to the novel. In fact, it is one of the most effective literary techniques used by Cabré, as it allows him to place characters who may not even be aware of each other’s existence on the same level, thereby creating a mirror effect that allows them to share a single problem, gesture or feeling. This is similar to the technique used by Moncada, but Cabré adds another layer of sophistication. For Moncada, the goal was simply to relive the past, to offer a declaration of continuity between past and present. By the same token, however, it was also a way of showing that this past was over, that it had ended with the arrival of the destructive present, the narrator’s present, the present in which the old town of Mequinensa is destroyed. In contrast, in Cabré’s novel, the technique is used to subtly connect the past to the present and to re-read it, shining a light on its shortcomings. It is a way of establishing a moral connection between characters who are facing similar problems, who have to make difficult decisions, who have suffered betrayals or are forced to lead a double life. It is also a way of depicting the immorality of the present. While the Spanish Civil War and the dictatorship



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have ended, many of the morally questionable attitudes of those times live on in the present.

One of the main characters, Tina Bros, is critical to the recovery of memory. It is a dangerous and discomforting activity for her in a place like Spain, and she is ultimately killed. First, however, she discovers a box of notebooks written by Oriol Fontelles for the daughter he never met. The notebooks refute the official version of his life accepted as fact in the town of Torena, according to which Oriol was a staunch fascist (as the inscription on his 1944 tombstone reads), and reconstruct his collaboration with the Maquis. The character of Tina offers a window onto the use of memory and the mixing of time. At one point, while reading the words of Oriol, who was also a painter, she comes across a self-portrait. She reads about Oriol's true beliefs, which he had kept secret from his wife and which were one of the reasons she left him. The narrator shuttles us back and forth between two times, that of the writing of the notebooks in the early 1940s and that in which Tina is reading, showing us her feelings, which are a speculative reflection of Oriol's own. Thus, two different times are merged across a gap of sixty years:

Perhaps I can help you remember me a bit this way, Daughter. Tina copied it out exactly as Oriol had written it. The rest of the page, following that sentence, was taken up by a drawing of a man who probably had light eyes, with a young, proper, bland face and soft, undistinguished features. She studied it for a long time, struggling to imagine Oriol depicting his own sadness before a dirty mirror. For it was precisely that, a portrait of his pain, when Rosa left, disappointed and upset, and he, finding himself an unexpected hero, had no way of telling her I am no longer a coward, Rosa. (Cabré, 2004, p. 38)

At the end of this paragraph, Tina's reading in the present day of 2002 gives voice in the past to Oriol, who is once again able to speak directly to his wife, Rosa.

A second example takes us to the River Pamano. Again, two moments in time, decades apart, are mixed with no prior warning for the reader. A relatively routine school activity being carried out in the present – a joint experiment with the school in a neighbouring town to prove that the water flows downriver to the sea – is intercut with a previous time when the Civil Guard discovered a planned attack by the Maquis. The teacher has called the group waiting downriver to let them know that the experiment has been started:

"Yes, this is Tina Bros. The bottle just left. It should get there in about half an hour."

"How are they supposed to fish it out? Hey, Tina! How are they supposed to fish it out?"

"With butterfly nets," said Pep Pujol, who knew everything.

They did it with an ice pick, the long-handled type, because it had floated close enough to the bank, as if it had not entirely understood what its destiny was supposed to have been.

They laid the body down face up, to see if they recognized him, and exchanged glances.

"I don't know who that is. He's not from around here."

"He's definitely dead."

"We'll have to notify the Civil Guard."

"That will bring trouble. They'll want to know..." (*Ibid.*, pp. 269-270)

As the reader can see, the bottle from the experiment is replaced with the body of a dead Maqui found by farmers. They return the corpse to the river to float onward to the Civil Guard, who discover a message revealing the plans:

The Civil Guard patrol did find Morrot's body, they did take it out of the water, they did search it and they found a metal box, which they opened right there, eager to score points with their superiors. They unfolded the paper, and the shorter one nervously read it aloud, so that everyone – stones, pebbles, barbels and trout, Morrot and his patrol partner – could hear:

"Hello, fellow second-graders from the Ribera de Montardit school. This message proves that if we were to follow the river downstream, we would eventually reach the sea. On a map, we saw that we would have to pass through many towns like yours, as well as some dams, before joining the River Segre near Camarasa and, after, the River Ebro near Mequinensa. Then, straight to the sea. After the Easter holidays, we will make a three-day trip to the Ebro Delta. And you?" (*Ibid.*, p. 270)

We never learn what the message hidden in the metal box said. Instead, we read the message written by the school children. The suspense built up around the message is broken, and we return to the school children's experiment.

Moncada reconstructs the erased and vanished memory of a town that lies underwater. Like Cabré, he aims to vindicate a forgotten, poorly told past. Cabré wants to set the record straight and complete it, rejecting the distorted texts of the official accounts. He takes a monologic view and rounds it out with past realities that have long been silenced and that restore the memory of the vanquished. By blurring the boundaries of time, both authors offer a different sense of history. Both return to a specific past, to reconstructed and invented spaces. And they make us think in terms of time, with its essential continuity, a time in which the present is incorporated into a moment from the past. They do it using devices that are not available to historians, as a way of underscoring the continuity between the past and the present, which can be traced back to a past that is always with us, the discovery of an inconvenient truth. In this sense, both books call to mind Santana's words: "More than *memorializing history*, more



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than erecting monuments to preserve the memory of the past, the aim (...) is to reflectively historify memory" (Santana, 2011, p. 58).

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