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SEZIONE MONOGRAFICA

NARRATING WORLD WAR II.
TRANSCULTURAL ARTICULATIONS
OF POSTMEMORY IN LITERATURE
AND OTHER MEDIA

a cura di Alice Balestrino e Paolo Simonetti

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 critics³ 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 Gribaudo 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 ‘typicality,’ 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 Améry'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 Brocqy, Claudio Parmiggiani and Roman Opalka.

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.

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