



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS
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FAMILY MEMORIES AND PUBLIC MEMORIES: BATTLEFIELDS

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Literature - and Portuguese literature is no exception - opens deep cracks in the unfathomable worlds of memory and familial relationships. Made up of resistances, and with all its slipperiness, familial memory is one of the most complex archives. It is an antidote to the total loss of the past. Effective or symbolic images of lived experiences - pleasant or painful - lurk in this intimate and private space. The evocation of family memory always evokes those discursive and lived, affective and familiar relationships between generations. Those relationships are guarded and nurtured in the domestic sphere, where gestures, affect and symbols are more important than the order and foundation of discourse.



As ancient philosophy already grasped, the house is separate from the city and the community. But individual or family memory can actually become collective and public. The house can transcend its private limits and open itself to the city. This is particularly important to reflect upon in the face of uncertain and faded pasts, and at such a critical stage for testimony as the present: those who bear witness constitute an ever-smaller group, destined sooner or later to be extinguished.

We live in an era of extreme and macroscopic subjectivization of experience. Only an eyewitness is understood to have a direct relationship with the past. In such a context, the depersonalization of the past offers the possibility of its rewriting in a broader collective register. It might be a step towards constructing a less singular and more shared vision of the past. In fact the problem is how to penetrate the sensitive tangle of subjectivities, affections, gestures and conflicts that characterize family relationships. The opaque domestic space is fundamental because it is the site of significant voluntary and involuntary transfer of personal memory, and of the transmission of individual memories, that could open to a wider fruition.

This transmission is neither documentary nor objective. Outside influences interfere. Other sources, other versions, other images, including the media, exert external pressures and alter and mould the porous images of the domestic space. And so, mediated elements of direct experiences – confessed inside the family – become confused with imagination and common sense.

A working definition of art helps to clarify the deep connection that we can establish here with a familial “art of memory.” Through art, through the work itself as an aesthetically constituted fact, it becomes possible for others to appreciate the intimate sphere of the personal and the private.

In the work of art, the transmission of personal or intimate or even unconfessed content and its reception creates an unexpected channel. The channel is impersonal, and more aesthetic than communicable. The philosopher Jacques Rancière, in defining the relations between politics and aesthetics, elaborates the concept of “distribution of the sensible” as a combination that unites and distinguishes singular and exclusive parts from a shared, common part.

This definition emphasises how art functions in terms of a double regime: the private and singular combine with the public act of sharing. We might observe that literature works by analogy: it systematically converts the private into the public. Writing is the epidermis where private feelings come into close contact with open sharing, through reading.



To generalise, we could say that the archives of Portuguese literature overflow with examples of how family memories can translate into public facts and therefore become accessible. I turn now to two twentieth century cases. The first is a chronicle by António Lobo Antunes, “078902630H +” from his *Third Book of Chronicles*. The first scene, that bears witness to the trauma of the colonial war bursts though as an excess of images. “Fucking literature.” Only in the end does space open for the transmission of a shared and bequeathed memory. A challenge is laid down: “Complete this chronicle, you, who remain here 078902630H+. Daughter.” In this abrupt ending, the task is delivered to the next generation.

A novel that shows the complexity of the exposition of family memory is *Let the stones talk*, by David Machado. Three generations confront each other and each offers its conflicting memories. A grandfather arrested by the PIDE and who suffered the violence of the tormented 20th century history of Portugal leaves a memory that the grandson seeks to assume, half a century later. At stake is a love lost but never forgotten and a truth that always escapes and never settles. The versions that confront the past, even within the family itself, diverge and do not recompose themselves. The narrative shows these disagreements, and becomes itself a meditation on the losses and deformations of the past. The bodily scars of the grandfather, the witness, shows us how deciphering traces is always problematic. Or affectively mediated. (“You did not see the scars? – Of course I saw the scars. – And? Are you going to say they are not true either?”). Nevertheless, it is literature that offers a means of sharing of the personal that brings us closer to an impersonal, incommensurate past otherwise in danger of extinction. By its inscription memory can be made readable and open to us, readers and strangers, guaranteeing some transmission even if it is problematic, partial and subjective: “For now this is my story.”

Translated by **Alexandra Reza**

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