

Ownership of experience and postmemory in postcolonial European literature /

Titularidade da experiência e pós-memória nas literaturas pós- coloniais europeias

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ABSTRACT¹

This paper focuses, from a comparative approach, on a selection of literary works from Portugal, France and Belgium. In these works, postmemory within a European postcolonial scope appears to be as a key element to understand the memories of colonial times transferred into subsequent generations. Considering a corpora studied within European project *MEMOIRS — Children of Empires and European Postmemories* (Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra) funded by the European Research Council (ERC). We seek to discuss the multiple textual strategies adopted by the offspring of colonial memories in order to achieve the appropriation, through fiction, of the traumatic experience. We will analyse the different ways adopted by the heirs of the traumatic memories in order to achieve the ownership of experience, according to the kind of relationship which may exist with the direct witness. The latter, since the appropriation of the colonial past undertaken by the writers studied here varies depending on whether the transmission corresponds to a biographical or to a cultural scenario. We will therefore study works by Portuguese writer Paulo Faria, by Belgian author Laurent Demoulin and by French writers Thierry Crouzet and Éric Vuillard.

KEYWORDS: Postmemory; Postcolonialism; Memory transfers; Ownership of experience; European literature.

RESUMO

Este texto analisa, numa perspectiva comparada, uma seleção de obras literárias de Portugal, França e Bélgica, em que o tema da pós-memória no âmbito pós-colonial europeu se apresenta como fulcral para compreender a transmissão do passado colonial. O nosso ponto de partida é um corpus que tem vindo a ser analisado no âmbito do projecto europeu MEMOIRS — Filhos do Império e Pós-memórias Europeias (Centro de Estudos Sociais,

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Universidade de Coimbra), financiado pelo Conselho Europeu de Investigação (ERC). O nosso objectivo é comentar as diferentes estratégias textuais utilizadas pelos herdeiros destas memórias coloniais para dar conta da apropriação, pela ficção, da experiência traumática. Analisar-se-á a maneira como o destinatário das memórias traumáticas acede à titularidade da experiência, conforme o tipo de relação que se tenha com a testemunha directa. Isto, já que a apropriação do passado colonial por parte dos escritores aqui estudados varia em função de se a transmissão é de tipo biográfico ou cultural. Serão abordadas obras do Português Paulo Faria, do Belga Laurent Demoulin, e dos Franceses Thierry Crouzet e Éric Vuillard.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Pós-memória; Pós-colonialismo; Transferências de memórias; Titularidade da experiência; Literaturas europeias.

1 Introduction

In one of the most enlightening chapters of her book *Le mal de vérité ou l'utopie de la mémoire* (2015), Catherine Coquio analyses the transmission of the “duty of memory”, which constitutes one of the fundamental features of western culture in the 20th century, according to the author. Coquio relates the duty of memory to the “ailment of truth” (“*le mal de vérité*”) phenomenon, an inevitable consequence of the various dimensions of the culture of memory. In the chapter entitled “the passage of testimony” (“*le passage de témoin*”), the author mentions the notion of postmemory as introduced and developed by Marianne Hirsch.

Although Coquio’s position is partly critical in relation to some of the limits of the notion of postmemory itself, what interests me here is the manner in which *Le mal de vérité ou l'utopie de la mémoire* integrates the question of transmission to future generations in her panoramic study upon cultural representations of memory. Coquio approaches the epistemological operation of the transmission of testimony in such terms:

With the “passage of testimony”, in turn, it is as if it would (also) be sought to be a witness, it is as if the struggle of substitution would become a *desire for incarnation*. The materialisation of this substitution supposes an interior transformation, an almost *conversion*. This moral mutation of the “witness of witness” derives from its meaning of responsibility, as much as from the virtues of its own testimony, which *per se* translates its receiver as a *witness*. Thus, it vests to the survivor’s testimony a translation strength which allows the “witness of witness” to have credibility to speak in their name: such as a witness as an art or poetry, and therefore, a witness “in spirit”, that is, an authentic witness, the one that might reach the first testimony in its essence. (COQUIO, 2015, p. 149).²

² “Avec le « passage de témoins » il semble qu’on cherche à *devenir témoin* à son tour, et que *l’effort du relais* tourne au *désir d’incarnation*. Assurer ce relais suppose une transformation intérieure, presque une *conversion*. Cette mutation morale, le « témoin de témoin » le doit à son sens de la responsabilité ainsi qu’aux vertus du témoignage, censé œuvrer à la *mutation en témoin* de son destinataire. On prête ainsi au témoignage du survivant une puissance

This extensive excerpt – at some moments intricate, although worthwhile – reflects, in my opinion, the essence of the “ownership of experience” (RIBEIRO and RIBEIRO, 2013, p. 30), which defines the many offspring’s positions of the traumatic testimonies. For Coquio, the transmission goes through a transformation (or mutation) of the heirs of the traumatic memory into a hand-me-down witness who, in turn, produces a mediated testimony. That is the way in which the ownership of experience is achieved in the context of postmemories.

In the European postcolonial context, this ownership of experience renders itself paramount when one wishes to approach the colonial trauma to further generations. In Europe, a “colonial rupture” (BANCEL et al., 2005) has been identified, that is, the incapability of contemporary societies to assume the colonial heritage that constitutes one of the foundations of European culture nowadays. In this respect, Margarida Calafate Ribeiro speaks of “postcolonial ghosts”, and affirms that:

For instance, if in Europe generally exists an official memory cultured in relation to the Great Wars, the same cannot be said in relation to the European colonial heritage, in many cases dramatized by military processes and sudden decolonisation with great popular movements. (RIBEIRO, 2016, p. 20).

My intent is to comment on the different forms in which the ownership of experience materialises in the realm of literature, and more specifically in the works of many European writers who approach the memory of colonialism. Thereby, I will focus on literary cases from Portugal, France, and Belgium, which have been studied within the framework of the project *MEMOIRS – Children of Empires and European Postmemories* (Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra). In a comparative perspective, I will approach the works of the Portuguese writer Paulo Faria, the Belgian author Laurent Demoulin, and the French writers Thierry Crouzet and Éric Vuillard. These authors enact, in the space of writing, the passage of testimony mentioned by Coquio. Moreover, in the selected *corpus* I will seek to develop fictional strategies that deal with the ownership of experience in their own contexts.

de conversion dont le « témoin de témoin » peut se prévaloir pour parler en son nom : celui d'un témoin en art ou en poésie, témoin donc « en esprit » et à ce titre authentique témoin, celui même par qui peut aboutir le témoignage premier dans sa vocation".

In postmemory literature, the transmission to the heirs is carried out in multiple forms. This transfer implies a series of linking processes, which António Sousa Ribeiro has explained in the following terms:

The notion of remembrance, of remembering or of recollection in the sense of a simple transmission of past experience gives way to notions of investment, negotiation and reconstruction that allow to establish modes of communication overcoming the unbridgeable gap separating the real actor – victim or perpetrator – from those who, not having participated and being, thus, unable to witness in the strict sense of the word, have taken the decision to delve into the experience of others, be it at the family scale, be it at the broad scale of society at large. (RIBEIRO, 2019).

As Sousa Ribeiro explains, the reconstruction of an unconcerned past materialises whether in a more intimate family scale or in a broader scheme, that is the one belonging to a social group. Thus, in order to agree with the ownership of the traumatic testimony, the witness seeks for the experience on the victims and establishes a real or an imaginary dialogue with them. For the purposes of this analysis, I will name the first situation as “biographical postmemory” and the second situation as “cultural postmemory”. In the works of the aforementioned writers, the two dimensions of postmemory are clearly present according to the context of each author.

2 The attempt to incarnation and the appropriation of the father's memory by writing

In cases portraying biographical postmemory, i. e., in writings elaborated by authors whose family history highlights a genealogical link with the direct witness, one can often notice an attempt to fill the father's place with fiction. The heirs take on a hindsight work which leads them to the experience lived through by their progenitor, in a way to appropriate that in the space of writing. Now, the realm in which these hand-me-down testimonies appear has a great deal of invention, inherent to whom is upon the naming of the unconcerned experience.

In Portugal, Paulo Faria (born in 1967) is perhaps the writer who has more tangibly formulated the ownership of experience from the heir's perspective of a convulsive colonial memory. Faria, son of an old Portuguese soldier in the colonial war in Africa (Mozambique), has

constantly questioned the reappropriation of the father's past, in the two novels he published until date and in the chronicles he writes regularly for the Portuguese press.

In the chronicle *O rosto que falta*, published on October 6th, 2019, in the newspaper *Público*, Faria references a photograph of the colonial war that one of his father's colleagues shared with him in the course of an interview. Like all war images, the photograph is charged with the violence inherent to the context in which it was taken. It shows, on a first plan, a Mozambican soldier murdered by the Portuguese military. *O rosto que falta* is an acute text about the ownership of experience of the traumatic situations linked to the armed conflicts and specifically of the end of the Portuguese colonialism in Africa, as violent as the war had made it³. In his chronicle, Faria faces the difficulty not only to write about a shocking image, but also the complexity to describe – a posteriori – a situation he himself did not experience:

“This is war”, he told me when he showed me the photograph. [...] As if this image would expel the words and make them superfluous. Or, even worse, noxious. But I, who was not in the war, only have words to oppose to this image. (FARIA, 2019, p. 22).

According to Faria, the photograph symbolises the distance that separates the direct witness from the writer, who approaches himself to the reality of the colonial war through the testimonies of others in the postmemorial perspective.

In his position as an offspring of a reality he did not live, Paulo Faria tries to understand, through writing, the reason why this photograph represents “the verge of the inhuman” (FARIA, 2019, p. 22) to the ensign. In other words, the writer wants “to understand what is it that has taken him to trace the line here, at this threshold, and not further ahead or back” (FARIA, 2019, p. 23). However, the writer is in face of the difficulty of overcoming the obstacle of (no) ownership:

I cannot speak of “us”. [...] “And what if, before pressing the shutter, we asked someone to hold up the corpse, so that we could get a better photograph?” It has no results. There remains between me and the ensign the moat the photograph dug out. I seek for a common ground between myself and the grammar of this photograph. (FARIA, 2019, p. 23).

³ I return, here, in a larger perspective, to some of the arguments in my text entitled *Nós, eles, porque?*. See: Cammaert (2019a).

Here, the distance that separates the ownership of experience is formulated in terms of language: between the “us” who witness a situation which is inherent to them (some “us” group, which affirms itself by the war situation) and a “them” (an utterance from who can only refer to these facts as an observer), there is a gap so wide that the questioning would seem doomed to failure.

In *Estranha Guerra de Uso Comum* (2016), Faria’s first novel, the ownership of experience had already been approached with surprising lucidity. The book (although it is difficult to qualify it as a novel, it is neither a non-fiction work...) alternates between testimonies of the father’s partners in the Overseas War and the letters from the narrator son to his absent progenitor⁴. In the second letter, Carlos, the narrator, describes in the following terms the essence of his initiative consisting of reappropriating his father’s memory: “I am eager to know the stories precisely *because you are no longer here to tell them*” (FARIA, 2016, p. 55). It is as if the absence of the father was a *sine qua non* condition so that the son could appropriate his traumatic past through the act of writing. Now, Paulo Farias’s narrator can distinguish, in his own memory, the different categories of remembrance which constitute his narrative as a “witness of witness”:

The stories you told, those from Africa and the others, repeated over and over had a fixed structure in your head, a perfect architecture that did not allow reversals or jumps. [...] There were stories from Africa that had something Borgesian, hinted with magical realism, stories that I do not remember to have heard you tell me in person, that perhaps I have known by my mother’s mouth secondhandedly, that perhaps I myself have invented even in my childish reveries. Stories full of details that the others with a certificate of origin do not have in my own memory. (FARIA, 2016, p. 59-60).

In a reflection which denotes the addressee’s lucidity over a testimony mediated by family transmission, the narrator of *Estranha Guerra de Uso Comum* establishes a clear distinction between his father’s stories, with defined frames, and more intimate stories, therefore, subject to a (conscious or unconscious) personal construction. The “moral mutation” (to remind us of Coquio’s expression) in the work of Faria is materialised in the elaboration of a personal memory, more detailed than the one shared by the father and which is somehow fed by fiction possibilities. Here, the fiction filter not only expresses the ownership of experience, that is, makes the writer

⁴ These considerations were partially developed in my text *Da guerra colonial: memórias e pós-memórias, transmissão e imaginação*. See: Cammaert (2019b).

the “authentic witness” (Coquio), but also makes this appropriated experience to seem increased, as if it were seen by a magnifying glass.

In the French postcolonial context, the ownership of experience in the examples of biographical postmemories lead to an interrogation over the offspring’s role seemingly to that one we may see in the Portuguese context. The recent book of the French writer Thierry Crouzet, *Mon père, ce tueur* (2019), shows in a very significant manner how the fiction realm transforms itself, in the offspring’s vision, into the stage of the colonial conflict. Crouzet’s father, called Jim in the novel, fought in the Algerian war for the French army⁵. In the novel, the son metaphorically travels into the war scene in which his father lived. In a very close reflection to that one which appears in the aforementioned case of Faria, Crouzet’s narrator states: “With his death, Jim gave me the right to remember” (CROUZET, 2019, p. 21). The book equally develops an attempt of identification to the late father, which does not differ much from that one Faria elaborates in *Estranha Guerra de Uso Comum*. In this case, the passage of testimony is depicted in a more explicit manner (and more fictionally, so to speak) than that on Faria’s book: “I must put myself on Jim’s place, to feel the shock that crossed his spirit and body [...] I’m a murderer, I can restart, I changed my name, I’m Jim”, we read⁶. (CROUZET, 2019, p. 130). Here, the ownership of experience resides in a quest for the origins of the father’s violence by the heir’s part: “Only now that he’s not here I can get closer him. Then I’m in the GMC van with his colleagues. I depart with them” (CROUZET, 2019, p. 136), the narrator states⁷. In fact, this excerpt reminds of the letter to the father in *Estranha Guerra de Uso Comum* mentioned previously, in which death marks the beginning of the memory transmission materialised in the act of writing⁸.

Nevertheless, the attempt to own his father’s memory reveals itself partially failed for the narrator of *Mon père, ce tueur*: “I didn’t know how to meet him, but he didn’t resign to his role as Jim to come meet me, too. [...] I was only me, he had become Jim” (CROUZET, 2019, p. 131)⁹. However, the impossibility of supplying the dead father’s image through writing does not imply the total interruption of the transmission of the past. In the same moment of the transitory

⁵ The Algerian War of Independence, which took place between 1954 and 1962, had the character of an armed guerrilla warfare between the Algerian independentists (among them the FLNA) and the colonial French State. I return here, in a larger perspective, to the reflections published in a recent review. See: Cammaert (2020a).

⁶ “pourtant je dois me mettre à la place de Jim, ressentir la secousse qui a traversé son esprit et son corps [...] «Je suis un meurtrier, je peux recommencer, j’ai changé de nom, je suis Jim»”.

⁷ “Je ne peux me rapprocher de lui que maintenant qu’il n’est plus là. Alors je le suis dans son GMC, avec ses compagnons. J’embarque avec eux”.

⁸ “Avec sa mort, Jim m’a donné le droit de me souvenir” (“With his death, Jim gave me the right to remember”).

⁹ “Je n’ai pas su aller vers lui, mais il n’a pas su renoncer à son rôle de Jim pour venir à moi. [...] Je n’étais que moi, il était devenu Jim”.

identification between father and son, the latter confesses to have inherited, despite him, the father's violence (but, also, his mother's), and concludes: "I channelled this flow into writing. In writing, I try to imprison the monster that seeks to escape from its cage" (CROUZET, 2019, p. 133)¹⁰. In one of the clearest excerpts of the novel, Crouzet's narrator reflects on the power of writing as a central element of an individual catharsis:

When he introduced me to hunting, Jim tried to offer me his solution so that I could control my congenital violence. I didn't want to follow his medication, and adopted another: writing. If most authors start their career settling accounts with the past, I wrote to deny this past, I spoke of everything, except of my bad experiences. I wrote to survive, to bury the monster I had inside me. It was necessary over thirty years of struggles so that I finally would dare to write about my father. (CROUZET, 2019, p. 186)¹¹

Thus, Thierry Crouzet's book is based on an attempt of appropriating his father's traumatic experience, whose final aim is the salvation of the offspring through some writing as much painful as necessary.

In Paulo Faria's most recent book, *Gente Acenando para Alguém que Foge* (2019), the narrator moves to Mozambique in search of the memory track of the father's colonial war. There we find a very similar reflection:

I wrote my novel about the war in order to deprive my father from the exclusive of the military narrative, to dethrone him, to write the book he himself was not able to write. To rewrite his war stories, to eradicate them from the subsequent lie. To ennoble him. [...] With the bait of the colonial war, I wrote my novel to tell the seniors another war, mine. Who goes in search of war already has one inside of themselves. (FARIA, 2019b, p. 156)

Both Crouzet and Faria carry out, in the realm of writing, a catharsis of the traumatic experience from the position of the "witness of witness". As it happens with Crouzet, the war by Paulo Faria precisely consists in breaking free from the traumatic memory of his father through literature. Nonetheless, when the works of Crouzet and Faria are seen by the postmemory

¹⁰ "J'ai canalisé ce flux dans l'écriture. Avec elle, je tente d'enfermer un monstre qui cherche à s'échapper de sa cage".

¹¹ "En voulant m'initier à la chasse, Jim a tenté de me proposer sa solution pour endiguer ma violence congénitale. Je n'ai pas voulu de sa médication. J'en ai adopté une autre : l'écriture. Si la plupart des auteurs commencent leur carrière par régler leurs comptes avec le passé, moi, j'ai écrit pour nier ce passé, j'ai parlé de tout sauf de mes mauvaises expériences, j'écrivais pour survivre, pour enterrer le monstre en moi. Il aura fallu trente ans de lutte avant que j'ose écrire sur mon père".

standpoint, writing breaks through as another form of violence that could perpetuate, in a different perspective, the transmission of the colonial trauma. The last words of Crouzet's book seem to reveal the proof of the impossibility of the son to completely erase the memory of violence associated to the father:

I finished this work of memory so as to rupture my heredity, yet all I did was to reinforce it. Instead of cursing it, I celebrate it, and the more I shiver, the more I'm pleased with our stunning perspectives. There must be in ourselves a powerful root of perversion. (CROUZET, 2019, p. 214)¹²

Likewise, Paulo Faria is aware of the consequences associated to the fact of reliving the father's war by writing. In *Gente Acenando para Alguém que Foge*, Carlos, the narrator, states:

Perhaps, after all, I came to heal myself from my eagerness of compartmentalisation. And leave my dead here, if I am able. [...] All that I can do is to keep on telling the story, to make new victims, to reopen old wounds, to prevent the healing. It was not me who began to spread blood, but now I'm not able to stop. It was not me who set the fire, I'm trapped in a corner. I start a counterfire, sit down and suffocate. The struggle goes on. (FARIA, 2019b, p. 34-35, and 167)

In other words, and as Margarida Calafate Ribeiro, Roberto Vecchi, and António Sousa Ribeiro state, "... postmemory might be set up not simply as a founding discourse on the identity of the second generation [...] but also – and by the opportunities for sharing which it offers – in carrying out a traumatic scene for whoever experienced it" (RIBEIRO, VECCHI, RIBEIRO, 2012, p. 19). In the cases of autobiographical postmemory, such as the ones approached here, the writing, seen as an act that allows to reach the ownership of experience, reveal two major consequences: on one hand, it provides a cathartic process, and, on the other hand, it starts a new experience which, in turn, reveals to be disturbing.

3 The reappropriation of a colonial memory: from mythification to the demythification of collective experience

¹² "J'ai entrepris ce travail de mémoire pour briser mon hérité et je ne fais que la renforcer. Au lieu de la maudire, je la célèbre, et plus je m'horripile plus je jouis de nos perspectives éclatantes. Il doit y avoir en nous un fond puissant de perversion".

In the second type of postmemory works, the transmission of memory in a postcolonial context presents itself with no direct biographical relation to the owner of the traumatic experience. We are faced with another variation of the ownership of experience, in which the appropriation by the writer is constituted through some other mechanisms of identification, of a cultural nature. In these cases, the level of imagination in the literary works is – necessarily – higher, once there is no biographical link to make the writer to decide on appropriating of a convulsive past. In other words, the intergenerational witness reveals a collective duty of memory that makes the transmission to acquire a higher level of fictionality.

A very significant example of this variation of postmemory is the book *Ulysse Lumumba* (2014), by Belgian writer Laurent Demoulin. As the title indicates, Demoulin decides to revisit the colonial past of Congo, the great postcolonial trauma associated to the figure of king Leopold II in Belgian society, through the Greek myth of Ulysses¹³. The hero of this story is Patrice Lumumba, Prime Minister of the independent Congo in 1960, after the end of the Belgian colonial empire. In *Ulysse Lumumba*, a multiform work in which prose and poetry coexist, the Homeric intertext is used with the aim of proposing a new reading of the colonisation (and of the decolonisation) of Congo in light of one of the most popular western myths. In the first pages of the book, in an unequivocal reference to the violent death of Patrice Lumumba, the narrator throws a question to his compatriots of the colonial times:

White man / [...] by what rights did you cut into pieces / your history of flesh and blood? / Why did you lay its remainders / in the disfiguring acid of your Greek mythology? / White man / Pale man / Did you think the hero was not part of the legend but of History? (DEMOULIN, 2014, p. 39)¹⁴.

With this first association between the murder of Lumumba and the western mythological tradition, the colonial history is not only an element of Belgian national historiography, but becomes part of a greater narrative inherent to the whole human race.

In the chapter entitled, very meaningfully, *Pourquoi?*, Demoulin's narrator reminds of his father's narrative over the Belgian colonial past in Congo. In a narrative contrary to the public

¹³ The current Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) was, in the beginnings, a personal possession of king Leopold II, who received it as a consequence of the Berlin Conference (1884). Afterwards, the territory was given by the monarch to the Belgian State, which governed it until 1960, when the African country reached its independence.

¹⁴ "Homme blanc / De quel droit as-tu découpé en morceaux / son histoire de chair et de sang? / Pourquoi as-tu jeté sa dépouille / Dans l'acide déformant de ta mythologie grecque? / Homme blanc / Homme pâle / As-tu pensé que le héros n'appartenait pas à la légende mais à l'Histoire?". I had the opportunity to analyse this book, in a summary manner, in my text *As figuras agitadoras na pós-memória*. See: Cammaert (2019c).

version, and in which the disclosure comes inserted in the family private domain, the narrator concludes that “... this surprising story did not respect the assumptions of all historical narratives: Belgians were not in the right side” because the real “unfortunate hero” of this story is actually Patrice Lumumba (DEMOULIN, 2014, p. 46)¹⁵. The transmission of this public memory in a family context causes a deep rupture in the heirs of the European colonialism: “Suddenly, I wasn’t ignoring it anymore. Arising from childhood, from prehistory and from myth, my spirit decolonised itself, debelgified itself, denationalised itself”, he confesses (DEMOULIN, 2014, p. 46)¹⁶. At this point, the *ex post facto* link between the Homeric myth and the family narrative breaks through as a reasonable answer of the son to the historical consciousness of colonisation. The end of this travelling, which goes from the demythification to the remythification, is very meaningful:

Our small homeland only exists historically because of this crime: to have invaded, plundered, mapped, militarised, deculturized, belgified, christianised, maimed a country one thousand times bigger than that. Belgium is Congo’s child, its colony topsy-turvy, its legitimate child, its morganatic baby, its white satellite rotating around unexplored clouds. (DEMOULIN, 2014, p. 48)¹⁷.

At this point of the narrative, the national myth of a kind and prosperous Belgium childhood is replaced by the postcolonial myth of Ulysses-Lumumba, which makes an epistemological inversion to occur in the narrator’s consciousness. According to it, the very existence of the European homeland depends on the treasures of the ancient African colony. Moreover, the hero of the myth becomes the African national figure. After all, Demoulin wants, by a very sarcastic humour, to expose the colonial discourse that still echoes in some segments of Belgian society nowadays.

As Roberto Vecchi states, “[m]yth functions not to cover things up, but instead to deform and condition them by naturalizing their decay and artificiality. Thus mythology offers a powerful magnifying glass that can enlarge hidden and less visible aspects of modern societies.” (VECCHI, 2018, p. 2). In Demoulin’s work, the appropriation of the traumatic memory achieves, on one

¹⁵ “... les prémices mêmes de tous les récits historiques n’étaient pas respectées par cette histoire inouïe: les Belges n’étaient pas du bon côté”.

¹⁶ “Émergeant de l’enfance, de la préhistoire et du mythe, mon esprit se décolonisait, se débelgifiait, se dénationalisait”.

¹⁷ “Notre petite patrie n’existe historiquement que par ce crime, avoir envahi, pillé, cartographié, militarisé, déculturalisé, belgifié, christianisé, mutilé un pays mille fois plus grand qu’elle. La Belgique est l’enfant du Congo, sa colonie à rebours, sa fille illégitime, son bébé morganatique, son satellite blanc tournant dans des nuages inexplorés”.

hand, the resignification of the past based on tutelary national figures (or rather, on their “stirring figures”, to reuse Christiane Chaulet Achour’s expression). On the other hand, it is on this disclosing transmission that is possible, for the author, to find a fertile path of mediation with the European colonial memory. In *Ulysse Lumumba*, the ownership of experience is made real through the construction of a changing myth, in which the blending of Greek-Latin roots in Belgian culture with the colonial past of this country produces a prominently postcolonial narrative.

A second example of this latter variation of postmemory is the book *Congo* (2012), by French writer Éric Vuillard. Based on a detailed historiographical and documental research, Vuillard draws the origins of Belgian domination on this African territory, and by doing so he critically describes the practices and abuses related to the colonial exploitation. However, as it happens in his other books, his interest is not much in the official History, but actually in the details of the specific context where these events took place. His criticism over History is up to mock on the great figures, adding to them what is missing in the public facet: humanity¹⁸.

Vuillard, who has no biographical link with the Belgian past in Congo, approaches the European colonial memory through an imaginary portrait of the politics backstage at the crucial moment in the Berlin Conference in 1884. The historical figures like the greedy king Leopold, the mercenary exploiter Stanley, and Léon Fiévez, responsible for establishing the practice of cutting hands of Africans, are all mocked in their cruelty: “I bring them to life and show them over there, like monkeys of a circus, big victorious monkeys in an ocean of misery”, says the author in the preliminary note (VUILLARD, 2012, p. 9)¹⁹. Thus, such as the French writer creates a realm at the same time real and false, and in which the memory of colonialism is an object of judgement, it also happens in Demoulin’s book. Nonetheless, in this case there is no appeal to the myth, but, on the contrary, a methodical demythification based on a very strong fictional mechanism, according to which literature brings a liberation so that the historical facts might be approached in the scope of an imaginary intimacy.

The central chapter of *Congo* is entitled *Tristesse de la Terre*. On that, Vuillard refers, among other things, to the geographical conference that took place on the Laeken palace by initiative of king Leopold in 1876, and whose result was the creation of the *Association Internationale Africaine*, an allegedly philanthropic institution, but that was actually not much more

¹⁸ For a preliminary approach on this subject, see: Cammaert (2018).

¹⁹ “Je les ressuscite et je les montre, là, comme des singes de cirque, grands singes vainqueurs dans un océan de misère”.

than an instrument to savage colonisation. Considering composition, this chapter works like a *collage* related to the ex-colony. The author subverts the thread of the colonial history through writing²⁰.

In one of the few occasions when the narrator ignores the ironic picture of the leading figures of the sad colonial history in order to explore the freedom he has as a writer, we can read:

... however, if I want to put next to those geographers in uniform a black from Congo and, if I want to put a basket on the chariot's seat, and if, in this basket, I want to put some of these small maimed hands I've seen on the always touching photographs, who will prevent me from doing so? And if I want to shove a portrait of general Wahis, Governor-General of the Independent State of the Congo, and just below that, like a glimpse in the dark, the photo of the children of amputated hands I saw in a book [...]?
(VUILLARD, 2012, p. 70-71)²¹

Based on a work of documentation in the silenced historical archives, Vuillard makes of his writing a space for the creation of another narrative in which, though the imagination inherent to fiction, a "false" private memory of the main characters of the exploitation of the African continent breaks through the narrative. More precisely, Vuillard recovers the most horrible episodes from Belgian colonialism, such as that one on Africans, especially on the children whose hands were cut by colonisers. In fact, the real motivation of the writer is to make justice to the victims of the colonial atrocities:

When we look at these photographs of children with cut hands, corpses, small baskets full of fingers, and palm of hands, fear dominate us, and we're trespassed by some massive pain, and this is the pain that brings medals and stumps closer, this is the pain invoking us to see the chariots, the cabins, the knick-knacks that strut on these legendary photographs for them to devour that completely. (VUILLARD, 2012, p. 71)²²

²⁰ My first version for the analysis of Vuillard's book was recently published in an inter-arts perspective. See: Cammaert (2020b).

²¹ "... pourtant, si je veux mettre à côté de ces géographes en habit un nègre du Congo et si je veux, sur la banquette du carrosse, déposer un panier et si, dans le panier, je veux mettre quelques-unes de ces petites mains mutilées que j'ai vues sur les photographies les plus émouvantes du monde, qui peut m'en empêcher? Et si je veux foutre un portrait du général Wahis, gouverneur général de l'État indépendant du Congo et juste au-dessous, comme un clou de ténèbres, la photo de ces enfants amputés que j'ai vue dans un livre [...]?"

²² "L'effroi nous saisit en regardant ces photographies d'enfants aux mains coupées, les cadavres, les petits paniers pleins de phalanges, les tas de paumes, l'effroi, mais surtout une peine immense, et cette peine, c'est elle qui rapproche les médailles et les moignons, c'est elle qui réclame de voir les carrosses, les loges de théâtre, toutes ces babioles jetées à la face des photographies légendaires pour qu'elles les dévorent."

In the textual logics, the pain the narrator feels in face of the images of torture serves as the justification for the writer to try swerving the history and, on his narrative, to oppose these brutal images to the illusory happiness of the official photographs, such as that one of the portrait of general Wahis mentioned.

However, Vuillard is perfectly aware that his struggle comes too late, so to speak. The past portrayed on the photographs can no longer be erased. Referring to the children victims of the Belgian colonial horrors, he writes:

But children don't devour the images of the past. The images continue to be what they are, casual images, trifles. Children indifferently look at the images with their paper eyes. And these paper eyes make us feel something too strong inside of us, something that, at the same time, suffocates, sucks and shouts at us for the immensity that our smallness is capable. (VUILLARD, 2012, p. 71-72)²³

However, these "paper eyes" of maimed children are the reason why the narrator of *Congo* decides on voicing one of the identified children on the photo, a boy named Yoka:

With head bowed, little Yoka screams, screams in silence, for others to tell him another story, to tell him, perhaps, that all this didn't happen, that Congo doesn't exist, that Fiévez doesn't exist, and that he can finally go back to the river. But this can't be real. And little Yoka keeps on standing, on his photograph, with his head down for over a hundred years. And, over a hundred years, he waits for them to call him Yoka, waits for them to pronounce his name, and hopes that the curse is broken so that he can go back to his mother. (VUILLARD, 2012, p. 72-73).²⁴

Vuillard describes nothing but the dialogue between an artist like himself and an archive image, and, above all, his attempt to write another colonisation history through fiction. After all, in *Congo*, Vuillard is breaking that harm of centenary silence, and by the same course, in a narrative mediated by revisiting the images of colonial history, he is up finally voicing a child named Yoka.

²³ "Mais les petits enfants ne dévorent pas les images du passé. Elles restent ce qu'elles sont, désinvoltes, pacotille. Et eux, ils les regardent, indifférents, à travers leurs yeux de papier. Et leurs yeux de papier nous font sentir si fort une chose dedans, qui à la fois étouffe et aspire et crie notre petitesse capable d'énormité."

²⁴ "Tête baissée, il hurle, le petit Yoka, il hurle en silence pour qu'on lui raconte une autre histoire, pour qu'on lui dise, peut-être, que tout cela n'a pas eu lieu, que le Congo n'existe pas, que Fiévez n'existe pas, et qu'il retourne enfin à la rivière. Mais ça ne se peut pas. Et il reste debout, sur sa photographie, la tête baissée depuis cent ans. Et depuis cent ans, il attend qu'on l'appelle, Yoka, il attend qu'on prononce son nom et que le maléfice se rompe et qu'il retourne voir sa mère."

In Vuillard's book, the ownership of experience manifests itself by the juxtaposition of two languages: the historical images and the literary text.

In these cases, which I named cultural postmemory, we notice that the reappropriation of the Belgian colonial offspring (made by a Belgian writer and a French writer, by the way) is based either on a mythification (or rather, a remythification, given the adaptation of Ulysses' myth to the Belgian context) of the past, such as in Demoulin's case, or on a demythification, such as in Vuillard's. In the examples of the literary works of postmemory in which the biographical link of the offspring is not a *sine qua non* condition for the materialisation of the transmission, the ownership of experience is achieved through some moral mutation of the witness "*en esprit*", as Coquio says. And this mutation consists of transforming the historical reality into an autonomous narrative, appropriating on the historical national traumas. Anyhow, both in *Ulysse Lumumba* and in *Congo*, the rewriting of the colonial history carries out a greater charge of fictionality, that is, of invention by the writer's part, in a way of achieving the transmission of the duty of memory.

4 The ownership of experience as translation

In order to conclude, I will briefly mention two aspects of theoretical nature related to the postmemory from the viewpoint of the creators. The multiple variations of postmemory works studied here refer firstly to the means by which external discourses are enacted in the construction of a fiction realm. In his commentary over the postmemory theory and praxis, António Sousa Ribeiro states the following:

Under this light, the "post" in 'postmemory' comes to signal not so much continuity, but, instead, a gap, a reflexive moment, it is a mark of distance, pointing at something that is never simply "already there", but is the product of a particular kind of labour through which the contemporary relevance of the past can be enacted. Thus, postmemory literally represents an act of translation, if one understands translation as being an epistemological model for strategies of relating to and incorporating discourses and experiences that belong to a framework of reference that is by definition strange and inassimilable. (RIBEIRO, 2019)

In fact, one could think that, more than a simple succession of facts, postmemory literature perform a rupture narrative, given that the transmission of a traumatic past is, after all, more of an act of construction than only a passage of testimony. However, this does not mean

that there is no continuity in the transmission of memory. What Sousa Ribeiro emphasises is that postmemory is not only a state of things in which the receiver acts in an automatic and passive manner. On the contrary, this type of writing necessarily sets on the creative and transformative role of the authors in order to succeed in relating the offspring's memories by the current discourses that are their own. And, by this meaning, the words of Sousa Ribeiro match with the purposes of Coquio, since the ownership of experience implies a real moral mutation from the actor.

Whether in the variations of biographical postmemory, shown in the instances of Thierry Crouzet and Paulo Faria, or in those ones of cultural postmemory, shown in the cases of Éric Vuillard and Laurent Demoulin, it is clear that the ownership of experience is achieved due to a conscious epistemological construction by the writer. That said, Sousa Ribeiro clearly defines this type of discourse as an act of translation. In other words, when postmemory writers appropriate their traumatic past (whether it is determined by a biographical link, or not), they are translating, in the space of the text, the cultural codes inherent to the direct witness according to their own epistemological horizon. For that matter, this is how fiction acquires a fundamental importance on the construction of a personal language, as it can be observed in the works commented here.

Secondly, this idea of postmemory narratives as a translation of cultural codes has a highly relevant spatial-temporal dimension. Besides being a prominently retrospective act (like all experiences related to the memory), postmemory equally has a forecasting dimension. In her book, Catherine Coquio briefly mentions the “afterward testimony” (“*après le témoignage*”) in the context of the studies on the Holocaust, and states: “this means that all fiction over the Holocaust must go back to the historical experience and to the narratives of the witnesses, but seeking for the forms of an “after life” in different cultures” (COQUIO, 2015, p. 148)²⁵. And, further on, commenting on the postmemory witness in the specific universe of fiction, Coquio adds:

This update upon the past by fiction is the imaginary place where the witnesses and those others who write “afterwards”, that is, the vertical and horizontal memories, intersect with each other. However, this intersection may be performed in two different manners: by turning mourning into a (witnessing) transmission mode to elaborate another (cultural) mode, or by

²⁵ “Cela signifie ici que toute fiction en matière d’Holocauste devra revenir à l’expérience historique et aux récits des témoins, mais en cherchant les formes d’une ‘vie après’ dans différentes cultures”.

seeking to perpetuate the testimony *in its own* cultural process, by transforming the offspring author into a witness. (COQUIO, 2015, p. 149)²⁶

In Coquio's terms, the "post" of postmemory becomes real in the space of fiction, which confirms Sousa Ribeiro's meaning of this prefix. That is, literature functions as the place of intersection between two discourses of memory, the vertical (intergenerational) and the horizontal (writer-reader). Moreover, Coquio explains that from the moment the testimony integrates the cultural process, the heir becomes a new witness, and at this point the moral mutation discussed in the beginning of this analysis takes place. In doing so, Coquio suggests that the elaboration of the artistic representation itself is decisive for the survival of these testimonies.

In the literary works studied here, one can observe that the "author's gesture" (RIBEIRO, VECCHI, RIBEIRO, 2012, p. 17) is the determining element to transpose a memory from the European colonial period into public domain. Either in the act of breaking through the silence of the children with cut hands by Vuillard, or in the epistemological inversion proposed by Demoulin (which makes Belgium to appear like the colony topsy-turvy of Congo), or in the cathartic writings of Crouzet or Faria in relation to their father, the writing emerges as the point of intersection of a private memory and a public discourse.

I will conclude with an excerpt from Paulo Faria's last novel that, in my opinion, remarkably illustrates, this idea of postmemory writing as an interstitial space. In *Gente Acenando para Alguém que Foge*, the writer clearly unveils his intermediary position, which places him as both the receiver of convulsive memories and the creator of a narrative no less effervescent. Speaking of what his father's colonial war represents to him, Faria states:

The Overseas war meant the ideal matrix for my belonging to hand-me-down things: [...] An apocalypse in mild flames whose chronicle I have made myself the offspring. Shortly, a place where I can be inside and outside at the same time, to be the main character and the observer, to concede others the downstage and still do not disappear from stage. A place where others are always up for the first word. A place where, after all, I deeply have savoured the taste to be and not to be at the same time. (FARIA, 2019b, p. 88)

²⁶ "Cette actualisation du passé par la fiction est le lieu imaginaire où se croisent les témoins et ceux qui écrivent 'après', la mémoire verticale et l'horizontale. Mais ce croisement peut s'effectuer de deux manières différentes: en faisant le deuil d'un mode de transmission (testimonial) pour en élaborer un autre (culturel), ou en cherchant à éterniser le témoignage *dans* le processus culturel lui-même, en transformant l'auteur héritier en témoin".

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