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Romaria | 2017 | Yuran Henrique (courtesy of the artist)



POSTMEMORY AND RESENTMENT

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The concept of postmemory can only be correctly put under perspective in the framework of a theory of emotions. When Marianne Hirsch, in her already classic definition, stresses that there is postmemory where certain memories were passed out to a second generation “so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (1), such a depth can only signify the inscription of those memories at the emotional level. The construction of postmemory is a complex process which may take place in very different ways and, as is worth repeating, is never simply based on transmission, but, rather, implies an active positioning, a decision, on the part of members of a second generation. Such a decision is never simply played out at a strictly rational level, it inevitably presupposes a high degree of emotional involvement.

As empiric work on postmemorial testimonies readily reveals, one of the emotions more strongly involved in the process of construction of postmemory is compassion (2). The concept, in this context, should be seen, not at the sentimental level, but at the cognitive level; in these terms, the emotion of compassion represents the drive to integrate alien suffering into the framework of our knowledge of the world and is, thus, indissociable from a performative impulse, and impulse to action.

But there are other emotions involved that regularly surface in testimonial discourse; among these, resentment plays a no less important part. Similarly to the concept of compassion, the concept of resentment has a long genealogy, one of whose decisive landmarks is Nietzsche’s critique, which theorizes resentment as a purely negative passion. If one, however, approaches the context of the Holocaust, whose paradigmatic relevance concerning the issues under discussion here does not need to be stressed, the question appears under quite a different light. For the Auschwitz survivor, the question may be formulated as follows: there cannot be forgetting, since the traumatic character of memory precludes it by definition. But can there be pardon and reconciliation, namely with the perpetrator?

The answers to this question may vary and are frequently ambiguous. A particularly relevant case is the Austrian author Jean Améry, whose important book *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne* (translated into English with the title *At the Mind's Limits*) includes a chapter entitled “Resentments”. Améry, arrested and tortured by the Gestapo in Belgium in 1943 and, subsequently, deported to Auschwitz, approaches the issue from the point of view of the subjective condition of the victim. In a previous chapter, entitled “Torture”, the author had undertaken the impossible task of representing his own suffering as a human being under torture. The essential mark of resentment, which various authors, like Tzvetan Todorov in his book *Face à l'extrême*, criticize in Améry's reflections, has its doubtless most deep roots in the ineradicable character of the memory of torture. But, while it is true that Améry presents a particularly uncompromising version of a refusal of reconciliation, resentment is a recurrent feature in many other testimonies and, in the end, expresses the rejection of tolerance, as a way of preserving the identity of the survivor. This refusal of indifference as the precondition of a moral attitude throws a disturbing light on the idea that the need for tolerance builds the most important lesson of the experience of the camps. From Améry's perspective, a society recomposing itself on the basis of amnesia, like the postwar German society, is indifferent to the subjective experience of the victim. It falls, then, upon the victim to nourish resentment as a sign of the refusal to forget:

But my resentments are there so that the crime becomes a moral reality for the criminal, so that he be dragged into the truth of his iniquity (3).

At the level of this resentment of the victim towards the perpetrator, the impossibility of forgiving is inseparable from the refusal to forget. It has, thus, nothing to do with a paralyzing fixation in the past, it amounts, rather, to the definition of a moral stance that allows the victim to refuse being nailed down to the status of the victim and to constitute him or herself as a subject. From this point of view, the resentful subject is the subject who has constituted himself through the affirmation of the persistence of memory. But one may, legitimately, ask: if such a process has clear contours when there is an unequivocal definition of the object of resentment, the unmistakable figure of the perpetrator, what is it that happens in contexts in which that definition is not that clear and is e.g. fueled by a problematic logics of victimization?

Consider e.g. such situations where resentment takes the form of the nostalgic perspective of a colonial unconscious of those who take on as their own the outrage of the first generation for having been allegedly unjustly expropriated or expelled. There are many grey zones, the diffuse areas where



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the construction of the right to resentment is not necessarily based on principles of historical justice and the right to reparation as defended by Améry. The study of postmemorial processes cannot, thus, fail to take into account the need to explore empirically the inevitable zones of ambiguity, in a way that is particularly aware of the political and ethical dimensions.

(1) Hirsch, Marianne (2008), “The Generation of Postmemory”, *Poetics Today*, 29(1), 103.

(2) Cf. António Sousa Ribeiro, “Pós-memória e compaixão – a razão das emoções”, [Jornal Memoirs, Público](#), 14/09/2018.

(3) Jean Améry (1988 [1966]), *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne. Bewältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten*. München: dtv, 90.

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