

MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD: A WRITER AND HIS RECOLLECTIONS

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RESUMO: O artigo discute o caráter memorialístico do livro *As pequenas memórias*, de José Saramago, entendendo-o como um registro autobiográfico que questiona a relação entre escrita e existência, ao mesmo tempo em que desenha uma percepção crítica da sociedade portuguesa durante o salazarismo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: José Saramago; memória; salazarismo.

ABSTRACT: This article discusses the memorialistic character of the book *Small memories* by José Saramago as an autobiographical record that questions the relationship between writing and existence, while drawing a critical perception of the Portuguese society during the Salazarism.

KEYWORDS: José Saramago; memory; Salazarism

A few years back, while I was perusing two novels by Mário Cláudio to investigate how the central characters' memory was treated fictionally², I was drawn to a quotation of Nietzsche, which I bring back here today – memory always nourishing us – to commence my reading of *Small Memories* (2006), by José Saramago:

Man, on the other hand, braces himself against the great and ever greater pressure of what is past: it pushes him down or bends him sideways, it encumbers his steps as a dark, invisible burden which he can sometimes appear to disown and which in traffic with his fellow men he is only too glad to disown, so as to excite their envy. That is why it affects him like a vision of a lost paradise to see the herds grazing or, in closer proximity to him, a child which, having as yet nothing of the past to shake off, plays in blissful blindness between the hedges of past and future. Yet its play must be disturbed; all too soon it will be called out of its state of forgetfulness. Then it will learn to understand the phrase 'it was': that password which gives conflict, suffering and satiety access to man so as to remind him what his existence fundamentally is - an *imperfectum* that can never become perfect. (Nietzsche, 1997, p.61)

This text is from the *Second Untimely Meditation*, in which the German philosopher subsequently reminds us that while death ultimately deals man his long-awaited forgetfulness, it is also responsible for circumscribing the present and existence, constituting them as an uninterrupted "having been", like something which can be seen being consumed by its own denial. It would therefore not be an overstatement to say that the book Saramago wrote in search of his almost-lost childhood is arguably the possible gaze of a man who, facing the proximity of death, seeks the threads capable of tying together the loose ends of life, thus bringing back not so much a linear, organized, logical path as the hesitating steps of one who, little by little,

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² I am referring to JORGE, Silvio Renato. Viagens na memória, viagens na escrita: formas de saber na ficção de Mário Cláudio. In: FRANCO, Roberta Guimarães; MELONI, Otávio Henrique; KANO, Ivan Takashi (Orgs.). *A mesma palavra outra*. Niterói: Vício de Leitura, 2011, p. 13-25.

witnesses himself coming out of blindness and forgetfulness to contemplate the *imperfectum* of his existence.

This is, then, an autobiography that does not aim to cover a whole life, crowned as his was by public and institutional acclaim for his work, or even to reconstitute it as a showcase where a vain writer reveals to his avid readers tidbits about his great loves. Rather, what I see in his memoirs of his early years, from the time when, from child to youth, he underwent a course of learning whose primary fruit was the capacity to look, to perceive his place in life and before men, is a written account that questions at one and the same time existing and writing, the points of contact between what the author lived and the lives he set about creating through literature. In an article published in *Jornal de Letras, Artes e Ideias (JL)* on 26 September 2018, Carlos Reis reminds us how much Saramago's novel titles reveal about his will to subvert narrative genres, while also making reference to "relatively stable discursive strategies". As Reis puts it,

As is known, it is not uncommon for Saramago's titles to operate like paradigmatic allusions: memoir, history, biographical annuary, gospel or essay. Which does not mean subjection to pre-existing models, since these allusions themselves effect revisions or even subversions of narrative genres. [...] To sum up: Saramago's literary practice and metaliterary discourse are developed in parallel and in conjunction with his own reflections in search of a narrative order reworked many times. (Reis, 2018, p.11)

A closer look at the Portuguese writer's autobiography reveals that alongside the reference to the novels he came to write in later life, there is also a perceptible presence of a metanarrative discourse, which not only guides a series of discussions about the validity – or rather, the veracity – of what is recalled, but also indicates strongly the dialogue between what is recalled and fictional writing materialized in novel form to breathe life into Blimundas and Ligias. As I said, in the text, events experienced by the writer as a child are constantly being associated with experiences in his subsequent novels, especially in the second half of the book. Such is the case of his recollection of his first visit to the Mafra convent:

A combination of extreme youth, a complete ignorance of the world of statues and the dim lighting in the chapel meant that I probably wouldn't even have noticed that poor St. Bartholomew had been flayed had it not been for the guide's practised patter and his smugly eloquent gesture as he indicated the folds of flaccid skin (flaccid even though they were made of marble) that the poor martyr was holding in his hands. Dreadful. There is no mention of St. Bartholomew in *Baltasar and Blimunda*, but it is quite possible that the memory of that awful moment was still lurking in my mind when, in 1980 or 1981, I once again gazed upon the vast bulk of the palace and the towers of the basilica and said to the people with me: "One day, I'd like to put all this in a novel." I can't swear to it, I'm just saying that it's possible. (Saramago, 2009, p.68)

"It's possible"... we will return to this key expression shortly. But first, we must perceive the constitution of a map that relates the child's consternation at the saint's flaccid skin to the martyrs we read of in *Baltasar and Blimunda* (1998), just as, later on, this map will lead us to see traces of *Blindness* (1999) in Julio, a blind character related to the Barata family, whose "eyes were almost white and [who] had the look of someone who masturbated every day" and had "a rancid odor of cold, sad food and ill-washed clothes, a smell that would be associated

forever in my mind with blindness and which probably resurfaced later in my novel of that name” (Saramago, 2009, p.103), or even a young mother, who, on her way to the well, like the mothers in *Levantado do Chão* (“Raised from the Ground”; unpublished in English) (1980), is asked for her hand by the father (p.110). The memory portrayed in the book therefore fulfils the function of evoking something lived, yet it is constituted as a backward gaze, which, arising from the present, lends meanings, interprets situations, essentially fills out a life’s course, which, outside the time prescribed by the initial project of the text, is also a project for writing. And so, when he interrogates his own experience, he seems to discover in it a key to its meaning, a way of speaking of himself while speaking to the world, picking up on a time once lived to endow it with new significations. As such, if what happens is destabilized here by the very passage of time and the impossibility of repeating it, the narrative ploy to which it is submitted founds a new time, which, in the words of Beatriz Sarlo, “is actualized with each repetition and each variation”, since “the narration imprints the experience on a time other than the one when it happened” (SARLO, 2006, p.25), the time of writing, when remembering and forgetting are articulated.

In a letter to Eduardo Lourenço dated 17 August 1997, Saramago reproduces a passage from *Cadernos de Lanzarote* (“Lanzarote Notebooks”, unpublished in English; referring to December 31, 1996), in which he states: “One enters old age when one has the impression of occupying increasingly less space in the world. So there is nothing for it but to get back to work, which is, if possible, the only place we can really call our own” (JL, 2018, p.19). The reference to Adorno and his *Minima Moralia* (2008) is very clear here. The German philosopher, in the book in which he combines his meditations on the process of alienation, which, in post-war society, dictates freedom and the very existence of man, submits to scrutiny the possibility of a peaceful life after the Shoah, reaching the conclusion that we are never at home, that the only possible dwelling place for those who write is writing itself. That is, as Saramago puts it, the place we can call our own. If old age is what leads us to oblivion, all that is left for man is to work as an instrument of dignity, a form of work which, in his case, is expressed through literature, through (re)creation with the word of multiple existences, forever rejuvenated by the very newness of the utterances that make them, just as his life is renewed by being enunciated, told anew, but now as part of this same literary universe he created, a universe which, in the words of Reis, is “a world turned into narrative” (Reis, 2018, p.11): if what the writer presents us is a memory of what has been lived, we cannot forget that this memory is materialized by a process of narration, which makes it, at the same time, an account of what it was and a creation of what it is believed to have been.

Perhaps now is the right time to pick up on some lines and look again at a passage in which the narrator of *Small Memories* tells us: “I can’t swear to it, I’m just saying that it’s possible”. Together with this, we could choose other passages, where, in the text, memory ceases to be a narrative genre to become the theme, reinforcing the metatextual nature of what is being said:

I don’t really believe in so-called false memories, I think the difference between those and the memories we consider certain and solid is merely a question of confidence, the confidence that we place in the incorrigible vagueness we call certainty (Saramago, 2009, p.109)

Or this:

Sometimes I wonder if certain memories are really mine or if they’re just someone else’s memories of episodes in which I was merely an unwitting actor and which I found out about later when they were told to me by others

who had been there, unless, of course, they, too, had only heard the story from someone else. (Saramago, 2009, p.53)

These passages tell us more than perhaps our guilelessness, as eager readers, would have us believe. The metatextual references they contain reiterate very consistently what until here has been said about the narrative nature of these memories and their articulation with the rest of the author's oeuvre. Meanwhile, they insert doubt and forgetting as crucial elements in this interplay, questioning the validity of what is said and, furthermore, connecting the writer's narrative to other memory narratives – ones that, whether or not they witnessed what they retell, narrate *after the event* to the man who is writing about what he himself lived. What the text does is not so much problematize what is said so as to pick out what is true in it as draw us to question the very possibility of the existence of truth unmediated by discursive construction. The text places and displaces. It presents a route on the map of the households occupied by the Sousa family, always sharing the home with other families – often the Baratas, but not always –, to then review this order and point out the error in what was said. An error that could simply have been erased, amended, but which is there to fulfil a role in the text as a whole, signalling not only gaps and misapprehensions, but also doubts, deceptions, fiction, essentially operating as a fundamental instrument for any and all autobiographical text. The joys and woes of the small self, if we recall Costa Lima, are deliberately announced as subject matter constituting a broader process, for which the act of narrating is its most material and human limit. If we agree with the Brazilian theorist when he says that

[...] memories and autobiographies are substitutes for mirrors. While the latter, metal and implacable, show up the wear and tear of one's features, the torpor of one's eyes, the roundness of one's belly, we can protect ourselves against the cruelty of mirrors and seek to see ourselves anew in what we once were, as if journeying through the former landscape gave us the means to explain ourselves to ourselves. (Lima, 1986, p.244),

then we cannot rule out the idea that the relativization of Saramago's discourse, its problematization of the process of writing, creates a different level of reflection that is not completely alien to the allegory of the mirror, having some affinity with it. So am I saying that there is a definitive disconnect between what was lived and what is narrated? Absolutely not. If I raise an eyebrow in doubt at such a categorical statement as "This is a real, personal memory, picture perfect, complete with the satchel made from brown sacking with a piece of string attached so that I could wear it over my shoulder." (Saramago 2009, p.70), it is not to deny the possible truth embedded there, but simply to remember, together with the narrator, that there exists an *act of narrating*, and that this implies choices, eliminations, replications of what has been heard, because it is consistent with whatever else we can recall. It is on this fine line, on this knife edge, that *Small Memories* gains body to recount something that goes beyond the recollection of that ten-year space that is its subject matter, because it is the deliberate explication of the act of choosing as an implement for constructing the narrative text that reveals the author's ethical and aesthetic commitment, his present place of evaluation of the past, and his capacity to identify what it is, at the time of writing, that constitutes a fundamental corpus worth representing. It is about choice that we are speaking, both I and the book, and about how these choices make the text the text and the boy the man he became.

It is also this facet that lends the narrated material the possibility of transiting between a quasi-sensorial perception of the landscape that surrounds the boy or even the memory of moments of happiness and sadness in childhood and the quest to stake out the time in which he lived both socially and politically. At one point we come across the initial description of the

village of Azinhaga, where the author was born and where he returned every year throughout his childhood to spend his holidays, a description that takes the reader down the Almonda river until it joins the Tejo; which also leads him to contemplate the land, “flat, as smooth as the palm of your hand, with no orographic irregularities to speak of, and any dikes that were built served not so much to contain the powerful rush of the river when it floods as to guide it along a course where it would cause least damage” (Saramago, 2009 p.1). The other, a memory of cinemas that the little boy with his close-cropped hair was allowed into and the fact that they showed “comic cuts too, usually starring Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Lauren and Hardy, but the actors I like best were Long and Short, who seem to have been completely forgotten” (Saramago, 2009, p65). But there are also descriptions of domestic violence, contempt for the poor by those who were (are?) served by them, the presence of the Spanish Civil War on the radio news and in contact with neighbours that fled it. And the servile nature of the uncle, who was “a small, very upright man, a bit of a bully at home, but docility personified when it came to dealing with bosses, superiors or city-dwellers” (Saramago 2009, p.17). Rather than explicitly describing the impact of the Estado Novo throughout his formative years, the text pieces together what I would call a tenuous “atmosphere” of oppression, which appears in lieu of a plain, straightforward description – like what we find in different parts of *Levantado do Chão* – achieved by an accumulation of images, sensations and opinions, which end up not just highlighting this atmosphere, but also revealing an ethical choice for those who fell outside the curve drawn by the highly hierarchical social corporatism fostered by the regime. Poverty, hunger and illiteracy are described alongside a shadow that hovers over this whole period, like a phantasmic presence that cannot be shaken off:

Around this time (perhaps still in 1933 or possibly 1934, if I’m not getting my dates mixed up) as I was walking down Rua da Graça, on my accustomed route between Penha de França, where I was living, and São Vicente, where I went to school, I saw, hanging on the door of a tobacconist’s shop, right opposite the old Royal Cine, a newspaper whose front page bore a perfect drawing of a hand reaching out to grab something. Underneath were the words: “An iron hand in a velvet glove”. The newspaper in question was the satirical weekly *Sempre Fixe*, the artist Francisco Valença, and the hand was supposed to be Salazar’s. (SARAMAGO, 2009, p.129)

Criticism of Salazarism – expressed so clearly in the “iron hand in a velvet glove”, whose violence is revealed only when, by its proximity in the text, Salazar is placed alongside the Austrian dictator Engelbert Dollfuss and Hitler – is materialized like a backdrop that composes and brings out details of everyday city and country life to offset it against the affection expressed in the memory of his grandfather, shortly before he died, as he embraced the trees in his garden, one by one, or of his grandmother, “sitting on the sill outside [her] house, open to the vast, starry night”, saying “The world is so beautiful, it makes me sad to think I have to die” (Saramago 2009, p.121).

In these memories the author offers us, death is always present like a horizon we cannot escape. The imminent death of his grandparents; the death of his brother, about whom little is known, but who, upon leaving, takes with him what is left of his mother’s affections that she could have shared with him; the death of the cousin, who, despite repeated fights, holds a place of affection only possible in the space of the unsayable. Finally, the death that lurks at the back of the mirror, albeit largely out of sight at the time of writing, demanding the exercise of evaluating a life span at a time when it, life, begins to be manifested as self-awareness. Perhaps it is really this back of the mirror that is responsible for making a man in the twilight of his life

take stock of his political and literary legacy by wending himself into the web of affections that made him grow.

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Produzido no âmbito do projeto CAPES/PRINT/UFF *Production and Circulation of Discourses and Narratives*.

Submetido em 05/01/2019

Aceito em 20/04/2019