

**Review of *Life Writing and Politics of Memory in Eastern Europe*, Edited by Simona Mitroiu, Palgrave, 2015**

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**Narratives of Belonging, Traumatic Histories and Politics of Memory<sup>1</sup>**

Explicitly departing from the concept of “collective memory” and the necessity to discuss it in specific contexts, the collective work titled *Life Writing and Politics of Memory in Eastern Europe* approaches the topic of memory mainly departing from this idea of collectiveness. Thus, the volume discusses the manners in which the community – in this case the post-communist Eastern European countries on which the studies are focusing – deals with the issue of memory (mostly in its traumatic form) and remembrance. The topic of memory, in its relation with History – either *completed* or *competed* by these personal *histories/herstories* – has stirred increasing interest, mainly from historians (and particularly oral history specialists) but also from adjacent areas, cultural studies (focusing on identity), researchers of literary/crossroad genres, gender studies, discussing the trauma filtered through the lens of gendered-experience (Cozea 2005, Cormoș 2006, 2009, Fătu-Tutoveanu 2015) and other perspectives. The editor of this volume herself confesses the necessity to approach the topic based on interdisciplinary methodologies: “using different methods of recollecting the past, from oral history to cultural and historical institutions, and by drawing on various political and cultural theories and concepts, (Mitroiu 2015: 1).

In this context, in which we discuss the use of scientific approaches and methodologies, a clarification becomes necessary. Thus, when discussing the issue of memory in relation to History (as a grand narrative) and, moreover, in forms that contest official narratives, the

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question of reliability arises. Two contrasted understandings have opposed the idea of *experience*, as container of the “ultimate truth” to that of memory as a relative and fluid form of narrative. “The person who remembers, in this model, is able to know and tell the truth of the event, because s/he was there at the time. Experience is the guarantee of certainty; distortion an ideological weapon, opposed to the real facts, and imposed by ideological means (media, academy...). But for history as for other disciplines the answer cannot be so straightforward. ... Not only the reliability of memory and experience as exact records of the past, but also the very notion of historical truth, have come into question; the past is constituted in narrative, always representation, always construction.” (Hodgkin 2003: 340, 2) From the perspective of a cultural studies scholar, interested in gender studies and with a background in comparative literature, I consider that the value for research of the memory accounts, either written or oral, stands precisely in its specificity as a border genre and its subjective, deeply personal nature and in the fact that it offers not so much facts but the insight as well as the interpretation of the past filtered through experience (“how they think of their past, and how they connect it to their present, Walker 2000: 329).

The personal narratives can be placed on the border or at a crossroad of genres – “between literary and historical writing, between fictional and documentary” (Hellbeck 2004: 621), the relation with fiction being rather volatile. Therefore, despite the clear differences between them, one can identify an intricate connection between fiction and autobiographical writings. Following Irina Paperno’s thesis on such implicit similarities, Hellbeck argues that these border writings must be approached based on complementary methodologies: “Only a combined application of literary and historical tools of analysis can disclose a multidimensional, literary and extra literary, notion of self in the personal document.” (628)

Once accepted this relativity, the personal accounts can be understood as valuable pieces that help to the reconstruction of a complex historical jigsaw (“Remembrance results from a mix of individual and collective memories, and involves a *narrative structure* of the past remembered. [emphasis added]”, Mitroiu 2015: 1).

Moreover, one of the roles of such accounts is, as the editor, Simona Mitroiu argues, their “struggle to mediate between official and counter-narratives of the past, between the call to remember – the necessity to cope with a traumatic or even with a shameful past – and the desire to look forward to a better future. (Mitroiu 2015: 2)

The personal narrative and all that fits under the umbrella of the “autobiographical genre” was considered “the supreme cultural revelation after 1989” (Mihăilescu 2004:10), at least in the Romanian space. The inflation of titles and editions fed the readers’ pursuit to find out the untold “truth” and their “thirst for authenticity” (11), a “vital need to know as detailed as possible what happened, as a fundamental condition for exorcising the demons of the past” (Tismăneanu 2014, n.pag). This appetite that has remain constant over the years, as proven by the ceaseless publication or reprinting of memoirs, diaries, interviews, hybrid volumes (I discussed elsewhere the hybrid, “uncertain” nature of personal narratives, Fătu-Tutoveanu 2015: 1-10) and of significant book collections and series. In terms of history the specialists in oral histories have conducted complex research focused on communities and individuals whose experience has been recorded in addition to the mainstream archive research and the additional work on the transitional justice and politics of memory.

But returning to the particular interest in the memory as associated with experience and personal narratives, I agree that it has a therapeutic function for both writers/respondents and readers/listeners in coping with the traumatic past. As I wrote elsewhere, “I believe that the fascination for personal narratives ... can be explained in the light of this post-traumatic self quest. The personal narratives are, perhaps, the best suited genre for covering such a quest, as in the process of writing such accounts, ‘the mechanisms of existence are decomposed consistently and methodically and later recomposed so as to create and re-create a world’ (Cozea 2005: 13)”. (Fătu-Tutoveanu 2015: 2) It is more so in the current volume, in which the focus is laid on the collective memory and the “shared representation of the past, taking the shape of the community’s self-narrative”, integrating “perspectives of

different people who experienced the same event – as the ‘intersubjective past’ (Misztal, 2003).” (Mitroiu 2015: 1)

*Life Writing and Politics of Memory in Eastern Europe* is explicitly concerned with the traumatic past and the mechanisms of coping with this collective trauma: “For the majority of the Eastern European population, the collective memory includes traumatic episodes as seen from the perspective of both victim and victimizer, and sometimes the two roles coincide, which makes the entire process of reckoning with the past more difficult. ... These disturbing components even influence the generations that were not directly involved in past events – intergenerational transmission (Reulecke, 2010; Schwab, 2012) – and in a moderate form these traumatic memories pass on across generations alongside moral guilt.” (Mitroiu 2014: 4). Recollection is a mechanism of coping with this traumatic past, in order to accept or confront it (in terms of ethics, justice and lustration). The volume argues that “to confront the past means to clarify it, to practice recollection and to maintain an ethical public appeal to memory. Reckoning with the past firstly supposes the existence of direct testimony from those involved, both victim and victimizer, and this testimony and its ‘performative character’ (Humphrey, 2002) transforms the relationship between private and public spheres, bringing into the public/collective area the private/individual elements of the past. Society is not always ready for this kind of commitment; after disturbing and traumatic periods of history, the inherent tendency is to step forward in a precipitate attempt to surpass and leave behind the past” (Mitroiu 2014: 4).

The volume is interested in these mechanisms that involve the justice and the ethic approach, in terms of responsibility, discussed by an entire section of the volume: “Ferenc Laczo largely explores the topic of Hungarian co-responsibility in the Holocaust and the difficulties of the Hungarian society and political class to accept this type of narrative. ... Raluca Ursachi charts in this volume the society responses in identifying and punishing the past regime collaborators. They are considered the main perpetrators responsible for the social breaking of trust, which was deeply sensed after the change of the communist regime” (3). Ursachi’s text focuses on the Romanian Securitate within the archives and the post-communist transitional

justice, which is considered by the author as incomplete. In the same section of the volume, Michele Frucht Levy deals with victim narratives and the politics of memory in the Former Yugoslavia, departing from Helen Pohlandt-McCormick's view on the "fragmentary and disjunctive relationships between individual and collective memories and public, resistance, and official narratives" (2000: 10), applied to the Yugoslavian case, which she considers illustrative in this respect. Frucht Levy describes her endeavour as following: "by exploring the fates of four 'sites of memory' (see Průchová's chapter, this volume) within Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia, this chapter seeks to uncover the process whereby victimhood becomes political capital and to examine the consequences of that process. As in Kiss's study of Hungary's House of Terror, the post-World War II cases of Croatia's Jasenovac concentration camp complex and Serbia's Topovske Šupe and Sajmište concentration camps reveal how dominant local histories can silence counter-narratives, while the post-Bosnian War Srebrenica monument suggests the power of victim appeals to the global community, even as it problematizes what is then memorialized. Finally, these cases reflect how Croats, Serbs and Bosniaks have exploited the Holocaust to strengthen their own victimhood claims." (203).

The case of former Yugoslavia and more precisely of Croatia is also covered by Borislava Manojlovic, who focuses on schools as sites of memory production, discussing conflicting narratives (official *versus* individual testimonies). While to discuss contrasting memories – and the tension between the official discourse and personal narratives – is essential within the type of approach assumed by the current volume, the case of Croatia is even more interesting due to the interethnic background and classes: "the issue of which or whose version of the past is taught in schools has become for different communities a question of their cultural and social survival. This chapter shows that people do not simply replicate collective stories ..., [as] the way that individuals remember often contradicts official memory" (124).

The above-mentioned study by Csilla Kiss focuses on the Hungarian museum House of Terror as a case study illustrating the competing narratives on the past as well as the political divergences on how

such sites are currently regarded. Also, Andrea Průchova's text referenced before, focuses on sites of memory in relation to art, considering that "visual art can help to reinterpret and reconfigure many sites of memory previously known as having ideological and political charge. In this way, visual art can respond well to some questions raised in the field of memory studies. Thus, it offers various options for transmitting community/local narratives and for coping with the past, as she explores it in relation to post-communist countries in Eastern Europe." (5).

Another section of the volume regards the narratives of belonging, a very interesting topic being that covered by Irene Sywenky, who writes about memories of displacement in Ukraine and Poland. An essential theme associated with remembrance and trauma, the issue of displacement – and all the problems concerning the history of a community which loses part of its identity and its sense of belonging – stands as a major category, especially if one looks at the major redesigning of borders as well as massive deportations that took place in the last century. In the same context, we must mention Lidia Zessin Jurek's study, which presents precisely the trauma of the Polish deportees to Siberia. Katarzyna Kwapisz Williams discusses *belonging* in relation precisely to this constant redesign of the maps – which led to a reconfiguration of Europe, placing the very reference to this "primordial" European space under the sign of relativity – and interestingly associates memory and history with geography. Thus, she writes, "geography and history overlap. In spite of the efforts to dissect 'pure geography', it is impossible to separate them. Thus, for Stasiuk the most accurate answer to the question concerning belonging and territorial identification is actually a connection with and awareness of the past. He explains that there is a simple answer to the question 'Where are you from?', namely, 'you are from what you have remembered, from where you have been going, from who you have been in your life' (2010a). Stasiuk easily translates a geographic space into memory and back, reconciling his 'own biography with space' (2000: 85)." (78).

Although in a different section of the volume, Małgorzata Głowacka-Grajper is also interested in displacement and the trauma of losing one's "homeland" and the memory and social transmission of such

loss, discussing the case of Polish borderlands, former and current, an extremely relevant case study in recent history for the topic. Regarding deportation, Aigi Rahi-Tamm focuses on the Estonian deportation narratives over the traumatic experience, which includes the feeling of social isolation and deepens the idea of a shared, community trauma: “they feel that only those who experienced the same circumstances could understand them” (4). This perspective belonging to the people who narrate their traumatic experience is recurrent in their testimonies and can be described as a feeling of “un-transferability of emotions” as described by Małgorzata Głowacka-Grajper in the same volume, or absence of empathy from the listeners that did not share the experience. This contributes to the perspective that such experiences are community traumas, a group that has shared both the past and its recollection and memory.

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