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Review/Reseña

Beatriz Sarlo, *Tiempo pasado. Cultura de memoria y giro subjetivo: una discusión*. Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 2005.

Memory and the “subjective turn”: Beatriz Sarlo’s *Tiempo pasado* (2005)

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For the last 25 years, Argentines have been attempting to come to terms with the trauma inflicted by the “Dirty War” (1976-1982) in which some 30,000 persons were either killed or “disappeared.” That the transitive use of this verb—“to disappear someone”—was coined into common language in those years, is an index of both the novelty and the enormity of what befell Argentine society. The project to erase not only the

lives and physical bodies of people, but also every trace of their socially inscribed existence was something new in Argentina. During the so-called Process of National Reorganization undertaken by the Argentine military, the victims of the torture centres and camps lost not only their lives, but also in a sense their deaths. To erase both the body and the body's semiotic link to the web of community is to suspend the social person in an indeterminate limbo; the person is thus socially excluded from death and therefore from remembrance. This opens a gaping and intolerable wound in the very tissue of bio-social continuity. Or, to push the "tissue" metaphor slightly further along a well-worn etymological pathway, the social *text* articulating family, community, society, and nation is rent asunder; the need to repair the damaged tissue, the torn text, immediately becomes an emergency. If memory is always a duty, in cases such as Argentina's, the duty to remember takes on an acutely heightened urgency, and the work of memory is to be carried out at many levels of society, from the juridical to the familiar, and in many forms of discourse, from the theoretical to the artistic to the non-fiction genre of personal testimony. The survivors of the detention centres must shoulder the work of memory at ground level and provide, as Primo Levi called it, the "raw material of indignation" (Sarlo 42).

None of the foregoing is in dispute Beatriz Sarlo's recent book, whose title I herewith translate into English: *Time Past. The Culture of Memory and the Subjective Turn: A Discussion* (2005). Sarlo, who in some circles is considered *the* dominant Argentine intellectual in both the public and academic sense of the term, calls her essay "una discusión," a term that Sarlo seems to propose in its non-polemical sense, equivalent to the English cognate "discussion"; however, embedded in her erudite discussion is a critical attack on what she calls the contemporary "culture of memory" and her *discusión* becomes polemical, an argument against a certain cultural dominant that she terms "the subjective turn."

Two specific aspects of this cultural turn come under fire. The first is the over-valuation of the genre of *testimonio* and the personal memoir, particularly as it has been pursued in recent years by victims of the state terrorism of the 1970s. The second is the theoretical notion of

“postmemory” brought into academic vogue by James Young¹ and Marianne Hirsch². I shall deal briefly with Sarlo’s objections to “postmemory” and examine in more detail her more problematic criticism of testimonial.

Sarlo’s critique is guided by Susan Sontag’s remark that “perhaps we are assigning too much value to memory and not enough to thought” (26). (Sontag was referring to Ireland and Serbia, where an excess of memory seemed to be leading to war). Sarlo turns Sontag’s suggestion into a principle: “understanding is more important than remembering, writes Sarlo, even though to understand one must remember” (26). How does the notion of “postmemory” stand up against this axiological criterion? How useful is it as a critical tool for understanding? The short answer is: not very. In Sarlo’s view, quite convincingly argued, the invention of “postmemory” to describe the memory work of a succeeding generation is a case of “theoretical inflation” (132). This is because memory is always “post”; Paul Ricoeur, Sarlo points out, has already laid the theoretical groundwork for us by showing that memory is structurally implicated in at least two temporalities: the present of its enunciation and the past to which it is directed. The claims made for postmemory by both Young and Hirsch are already satisfied by Ricoeur’s structural concept of memory *tout court*. Young argues that postmemory is vicarious and mediated (or “hypermediated” in Young’s formulation, a case of argument by hyperbole, according to Sarlo). But memory, too, is always mediated, and most of any person’s memory store has been gleaned vicariously. Hirsch, for her part, proposes the notion of postmemory to account for the layering of more than one level of subjectivity, usually the biographical and the cultural identitary. Here again a properly conceptualized notion of memory *sans* “post” is adequate to the theoretical task. Much nineteenth-century autobiographical literature, for example, that written by nation-building statesmen, depends for its efficacy on such a layering of subjectivities of different orders. Both Young and Hirsch adduce the *fragmentary* quality of

¹ James Young, *At Memory’s Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (2000).

² Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (1997).

postmemory, as though all discourse on the past, Sarlo rejoins, were not defined by its radical incapacity to reconstruct a whole (135). What truly disturbs Sarlo, however, is not the theoretical vacuity of the notion of “postmemory” but rather its narcissistic deployment, particularly in Marianne Hirsch’s book, within the general syndrome of the “subjective turn.” The chapters Hirsch dedicates to the analysis of family photographs, admonishes Sarlo, amount to a “storehouse of personal banalities legitimized by the new rights of subjectivity” (134).

Since “postmemory” has been invented within the field of Cultural Studies specifically for application to the second generation of Holocaust survivors, Sarlo decides to test this critical tool by applying it to recent filmic and literary narratives produced by orphaned children of Dirty War victims. She finds it to be quite incapable of distinguishing the ethical and political specificity of varying ways in which the children of the murdered and disappeared deal with the generation gap separating them from their militant parents. Albertina Carri’s film *Los rubios* (2003) is perhaps the most pathetic example. The filmmaker sets out to recuperate traces of the parents she lost when she was a two-year old girl. The overwhelming investment of Carri’s own subjectivity, determined by her own cultural moment, works to frustrate her search. In the end, the filmmaker’s voice, heard off-camera, complains that she just cannot understand why her parents abandoned her. Basically, she refuses to make any attempt to understand her militant parents in terms of their own historical moment. This wilful lack of understanding, Sarlo seems to imply, inheres in the very notion of “postmemory.” Thus, by this point in her polemic, the charge being brought against postmemory is no longer merely its pretentious uselessness, but rather that the term dissimulates a justification for an ethical failure. For Carri, in exercising her “new rights to subjectivity,” has actually blocked memory and effectively abdicated before “the duty to remember.”

The phrase “new rights of subjectivity” brings us to the heart of Sarlo’s argument, indeed of her epochal critique. Sarlo cites another Argentine, Paolo Rossi, who claims that “[m]emory... ‘colonizes’ the past and organizes it on the basis of the conceptions and emotions of the

present" (92). For Ricoeur, as indeed for any historiographer worth her salt, this constitutes a major epistemological problem, a problem that can never be truly resolved, but one that cannot in good conscience be ignored. Under the new cultural regime inaugurated by the "subjective turn," there is a new optimism, a new credulity extended toward first-person discourse, a tacit disavowal of the earlier "epistemologies of suspicion," whether they be Marxian, Nietzschean, or Freudian. In a word, the subjective construction of memory has come to be granted much greater licence to colonize the past. This, for Sarlo, is a problem.

The "subjective turn," in Sarlo's account, will have occurred in theoretical discourse in the 1970s and 80s when Marxist structuralism was giving way to post-structuralism, postmodernism, etc., the sea change Frederic Jameson called "the linguistic turn." For Sarlo, the subjective turn accompanies Jameson's "linguistic turn" as its shadow. She points out two landmark texts that inaugurate the subjective turn. One is Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), which, as it opens the way to study the construction of working-class culture in daily life, draws heavily on personal experience and thus performatively vindicates autobiography as a methodology; the other is Michel de Certeau's article "Faire la perruque" (1980), which brings to light the inventiveness of the subaltern—those small of acts of rebellion and resistance of factory workers, for example—that ingenious agency which had hitherto been invisible to academic intellectuals who focused only on the large collective movements, the macro-picture, and so were methodologically trapped in what Clifford Geertz³ was calling, in the field of anthropology, inadequately "thin" as opposed to the "thick" description he advocated. Thus, even as the wave of structuralism that in the 1960s and 70s swept across the human science disciplines was reducing subjectivity to an ideological illusion, the harbinger texts of Hoggart and de Certeau were sowing the seeds of the subject's rebirth. But not before Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida, in the fields of literary theory and philosophy respectively, nailed the final nail in the coffin of the subject with their radical critiques of the very possibility of

³ *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973). Chapter 1: "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture". Sarlo herself does not refer to Geertz in her book.

the representation of the subject. For de Man, the first-person pronoun “I” is not a representation of an existent subject but the “form of a representation,” a mask; the putative self has no ground in reality, but merely in the text (39). Derrida, for his part, demolishes the philosophical grounds for autobiographical testimony; one cannot construct knowledge on the basis of experience because we do not know what experience is. De Man and Derrida pushed the Nietzschean “epistemology of suspicion” to its final extreme. Meanwhile, of course, all grand narrative had been pronounced dead. Was it out of those smoking ruins, then, that the new subjectivity was able to assert itself with a positivity it hadn’t known since Hegel? Sarlo does not spell out just how it happened that the cultural and ideological conditions of late capitalism came to be characterized by a subjective tone. She does, however, enumerate its symptoms: against the by-then-discredited theory of class struggle, we find identity politics flourishing; against the backdrop of the death of the Subject, one witnesses the celebration of a proliferation of “subject positions.” (One might add to Sarlo’s list the licensing of “strategic essentialism” for subaltern actors from the periphery.)

Sarlo, however, is content merely to suggest with a few broad brushstrokes this epochal change; she is much more eager to launch her attack on what she sees as its latest symptom: the unquestioned privilege granted to first-person narrative and *testimonio*. The generally accepted model of testimonial was provided by Primo Levi. His writings serve Sarlo as a touchstone against which to measure what is wrong with the way first-person testimonial is being mobilized within what she calls the “theatre of memory,” that is, the total set of cultural and ideological conditions that determines the current historical epoch. The first lesson that Sarlo draws from Levi is his own insistence that he speaks vicariously, because he cannot truly speak for those who never left the camps. Though he speaks in the first-person, he virtually erases his own subjectivity from his text. He is *not* writing to tell his own story; he is there to serve an ethical purpose that transcends his own suffering. Time and again Levi insists that he can articulate no positive knowledge; instead, he aims only to provide the “raw material of indignation.” This contrasts with the tendency, prevalent in the

past twenty years or so, to insist on the moral right of everyone to tell their own story. Sarlo does not contest that right, but she is uneasy with the current vogue both in the academy and in the media to lend too much epistemological credit to first-person narratives told by victims of terrible injustice. Primo Levi wrote that the concentration camp experience does not ennoble its victims. Why, then, should the stories that victims tell be accorded a special, incontestable status? The answer, as Sarlo acknowledges, is clear: it feels morally wrong to question what has been said by someone who has clearly suffered a dreadful wrong. But, she counters, “there is no equivalence between the right to remember and the affirmation of a truth of the memory; nor does the duty to remember oblige one to accept that equivalence” (57). This, in a nutshell, is what Sarlo considers the epistemological problem of first-person testimony. She circles around and around the problem, and her argument in this long central section of her essay swings back and forth between neutral “discussion” and outright polemic, an oscillation of register that results in a lack of clarity.

Though she never actually says so in so many words—and here I am interpreting—it seems to emerge that, on balance, her critique is not really directed against first-person testimony *per se*. Indeed, when she cites concrete examples of the testimonial literature, she does so only to point out their virtues. For example, she cites Alicia Portnoy’s use of the third-person in *The Little School House* as an effective means of distancing her testimony from the sacrosanct prerogative of the victim’s status. Sarlo never actually analyses a concrete instance of truth being poorly served by a specific *testimonio*. Instead, she treats the problem in the abstract, inferring it from its influence on other narrative forms: the autobiographical novel (Cristina Zuker’s *The Train of Victory: A Family Saga* [2003]), the novelized non-fiction documentary (*The President Who Wasn’t* [1997], by Miguel Bonasso), and in academic discourse, of course, Marianne Hirsch’s “storehouse of personal banalities.” The problem, framed in the abstract, is that if the first-person narrator is protected by his or her moral status as a victim, and if her narrative remains crystallized and unapproachable, then there is no opportunity for dialogue: the communication goes only one way. But the damaged social tissue, the torn

text to be repaired, is a web of social relations, not merely an agglomeration of discrete individual egos—Margaret Thatcher’s wisdom notwithstanding; and if memory, according to the axiom Sarlo took from Susan Sontag, is meant to serve understanding, then it is equally axiomatic (for Sarlo) that truthful understanding is an ongoing dialogical process.

Perhaps the most trenchant part of Sarlo’s argument about first-person testimonial narrative is her analysis of two counter-examples, which, she asserts, have been largely ignored by Argentine society. Both are texts written by ex-victims of torture camps; in both cases the author entirely removes his or her personal experience from the account. Emilio de Ípola wrote “La bamba”⁴ (“The Rumour”) in 1978 after spending nearly two years in a clandestine detention centre. His article analyzes the discursive means and conditions of the production of rumours within the prison setting, drawing on the theory of Goffman’s *Internados* and Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*. What most impresses Sarlo is that “he uses analytical instruments to listen ‘scientifically’ to rumours. He does not enclose himself in his own experience, but instead analyses it *as though it were the another’s experience*, [thus] positioning himself at the extreme opposite pole of the testimonial narrative, even though his raw material is testimonial” (102).

The second counter-example is Pilar Calveiro’s book *Power and Disappearance: Concentration Camps in Argentina*, originally written as a doctoral thesis and published as a book in 1998.⁵ Again, Calveiro does not write about her own experience; rather, her method is to gather the testimony of others, analyze what they say, and to form hypotheses on the basis of reasoned argument. Calveiro, Sarlo writes, does not seek to legitimize her argument “with biographical reasons but with intellectual ones” (115); “therefore she exerts no particular moral pressure on the reader” (114). This leaves the reader free to evaluate Calveiro’s arguments, to agree or disagree or question: in a word, to enter into a dialogical relationship with the text.

⁴ Emilio de Ípola, “La bamba” in *Ideología y discurso populista*, Buenos Aires, 1983.

⁵ Pilar Calveiro, *Poder y desaparición; los campos de concentración en Argentina*. Buenos Aires, 1998.

Curiously, however, even as Sarlo develops her praise of Calveiro, she incurs in a performative contradiction: Sarlo in fact cites biographical details about Calveiro's experience as prisoner of military detention centres, details that Sarlo gleans from Calveiro's *first-person testimony* as collected by Juan Gelman.⁶ So *testimonio* has a role to play after all; Sarlo's recourse to first-person testimony shows that she recognizes that it has documental value and that she does not want to suppress first-person testimonial altogether. Her critique is directly instead against the "fetishization of testimonial truth" (63) that results from what Jameson would call a "cultural dominant." Even if at moments she seems to be leading a witch-hunt against an entire genre of testimonial literature, she *performatively* recognizes its indispensable function.

Unfortunately, however, the distinction I have just drawn has not been clearly acknowledged, much less reflected upon, by Sarlo herself. Her polemical tone leaves the unfortunate impression that first-person narrative is a form of discourse that is inherently unreliable, if not outright dishonest. The political consequences of such a misleading impression, in the context of Argentina, are obvious: Sarlo—unwittingly, one assumes—has handed a weapon to the right-wing apologists of the *Proceso*. One is left to wonder how an intellectual of Sarlo's status could be so politically careless, if not irresponsible. In sum, the book raises important issues and, in my opinion, makes a valuable contribution to the general discussion around memory, but one wishes that Sarlo had had the intellectual and ethical integrity to think through her argument to its logical conclusion.

⁶ Juan Gelman, "En el campo de detención estás en otra dimensión", *Página/12*, Nov. 1, 1998.