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## ***ROUND TABLE:*** **“UNBURIED MEMORY” – THE LITERARY RESPONSE TO HISTORICAL VIOLENCE**

## I.

It's been a long time since Adorno declared that “poetry is impossible after Auschwitz”. The original quote (always taken out of context and rarely footnoted) can be found in the concluding passage of a 1949 essay, *Cultural Criticism and Society*.

The more total society becomes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation (Adorno 1949, 34).

It is a difficult passage from a very difficult essay, particularly if considered out of context. Adorno's meaning, particularly what he means by the word “reification”, becomes clearer when read in light of two earlier sentences in this same page-long paragraph: “In the open-air prison which the world is becoming, it is no longer so important to know what depends on what, such is the extent to which everything is one. All phenomena rigidify, become insignias of the absolute rule of that which is” (Ibidem).

I assume the interpretation of the main sentences suggests that to persist, after Auschwitz, in the production of monuments of the culture that produced Auschwitz is to participate by denial in the perpetuation of that barbaric culture and to participate in the reification that renders fundamental criticism of that culture literally unthinkable. In his late work *Negative Dialectics* he offers this conditional revision, a revision that is, in

its own way, perhaps even more devastating than the final paragraph of *Cultural Criticism and Society*:

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living, especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared. By way of atonement he will be plagued by dreams such as that he is no longer living at all, that he was sent to the ovens in 1944 and his whole existence since has been imaginary, an emanation of the insane wish of a man killed twenty years earlier (Adorno 1966, 175).

His “request for silence” was not only a public call for shame; it was a lucid account of a dialectical short-circuit. The issue with poetry concerns the bourgeois self and society – but the philosopher is not denying survivors the possibility to witness as the arousal of an unspoken content of collective memory. He takes side against both monopolist capitalism and collective socialism, criticizing the decline of human relationships, the individual life reduced to pure fiction, to the mere field of consumption. Reification brings humans to alienation, and alienation brings to dehumanization.

In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno wants to break down this dialectical short-circuit trying to set free the dialectic from its affirmative nature, stating that – in response to Wittgenstein's axiom – the subject of philosophy's discourse should be exactly the “unspeakable”. That is also the parenthesis I would like to open.

The aim of this brief essay is to focus on the period of time that goes from the second part of the nineteenth century till nowadays, moving forward from Adorno's assumptions, extending the field to postcolonial literature, or – I prefer to specify – to those narratives which have flourished and continue to flourish in war and post-war realities, historical fractures, traumatic collective episodes.

## II.

Firstly, it is necessary to introduce a fundamental subject. It is impossible, in fact, to talk about the twentieth century's historical violence without mentioning the concept of trauma. Trauma is a concept that emerges within modernity as an effect of the rise, in the nineteenth century, of the technological and statistical society that can generate, multiply and quantify the ‘shocks’ of modern life. Here again, a product of alienation: the first traumatized subject is the injured worker. The industrial accident becomes a

constant variable in the life of modern man; a variable which is domesticated with social insurance. The political tangibility of the shock and symptoms of the industrial accident start to redefine the identity paradigm of modern man's life, but the first mass phenomenon of traumatic experience is undoubtedly the First World War. In fact, it is with WWI that a psychological aspect, until then only associated to hysterical women, was added to the consideration of trauma, beforehand thought of as mere physical pain. For the first time, trauma was identified and diagnosed in terms of a sudden laceration of the protective shield of the ego due to a fearful and unforeseen experience to which the person was not prepared. The excess of energy released from the violent emotion is behind the repression of the event: not being integrated in conscience, there are no words to recall it. Then, it is registered in the unconscious, in a traumatic memory dimension parallel to the ordinary one (Freud 1920).

If the soldier suffering from shell-shock is the first iconic figure of the survivor, it is with the Holocaust, however, that contemporary trauma theories are historically defined. This historical event has a privileged role in Trauma Studies, because it contributes in a determinant way to a view of trauma as an aporia of representation that continues today to be of particular importance. There are two important issues the reflection upon the Holocaust has brought to light: one is the importance of testimony and the other is the wider question of the effective representativeness of the traumatic experience. Hannah Arendt's 1961 work *Heichmann in Jerusalem. A report on the banality of evil* contains the reportage of Adolf Eichmann's trial, during which a survivor, Yahiel Dinoor, is called to give evidence against the ex-SS colonel. Dinoor, who became a writer under the pseudonym K-Zetnik, collapsed during the evocation of his personal experience after the court interrupted him. He spent several weeks in hospital, recovering from coma, and became the symbol of the incommunicability of human deportation and the example of the man traumatized by the encounter with a past of violence he cannot bear nor revise.

### III.

It's far from my intentions to take an aesthetic drift. What I want to consider reflect upon is the vastness of mass traumatic phenomena that have occurred in our recent past and the non-stop flourishing literature that comes out from historical wounds of many countries and peoples.

After the fall of the Empires many countries started a path of readjustment that led them through civil wars and often to totalitarianism.

If we mention postcolonial India, we cannot neglect the huge mass deportation that took place in 1947 during the Partition. In the riots which preceded the partition in the Punjab region, between 200,000 and 500,000 people were killed in the genocide between the religions. The UNHCR estimates 14 million Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims

were displaced during the partition; it was the largest mass migration in human history (Brass 2009, 71–101).

It is almost mandatory, at this point, to make a comparison with the way in which postcolonial writers elaborate the question of trauma through the use of language. Trauma always has to do with violence, and in this case with colonial violence (which is, anyway, a form of historical and political violence). The phantom of colonial violence is a *topos* in postcolonial writings, and it generates various forms of creative expression, such as, for example, magic realism, which has its maximum exponent in Salman Rushdie. What I personally also found in my research upon Arundhati Roy's use of language in *The God of Small Things* (Osti 2014) is a rich layer of intertextual material, disseminated through the text. These intertextual references, if revealed, show us a map of signification which brings to light the very nature of autobiographical and historical trauma.

From the analysis of literary texts we assume that trauma is very often transmitted transgenerationally, like a discontinuity point in a family narrative, or a phantom, indeed, an unburied memory. Though, as Yahiel Dinoor's story reminds us, that unspeakable point *is* already the discourse. Using structural analysis – dismantling the text, inquiring into it, reassembling it – we are able to find more about those unspeakable entities which populate trauma narratives. The narrative exists and there is a discourse inside it, be it hidden in an enigmatic form or plot. I will not put postcolonial literature under the aegis of postmodernism; I want to suggest, instead, that trauma narratives should be drawn together in a common field. In this field, authors like Edmond Jabès, Amelia Rosselli, Tahar Djaout, but also palestinian writers or Syrian refugees' narratives could be approached with a multidisciplinary method. In this historical period, after a long and climaxed craving for realism and a spectatorial position toward crimes perpetrated in the world, refugees are coming to our cities to say that the other *really* exists. It will be suitable to learn how to *really* cope with it.

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