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Transgenerational Communication of Traumatic Experiences. Narrating the Past from a Postmemorial Position

Unresolved traumatic experiences can be transmitted in different forms from one generation to the next, as well as affect or disturb the life of the descendants. They can create problems with identity and cause generational conflicts. Psychotraumatology refers to this phenomenon as transgenerational traumatization.

The individual memory of European catastrophes of the first half of the 20th century (like the Spanish Civil War, the Holocaust, World War II or the Greek Civil War) will be soon forever lost. There is an important historical transition from communicative to cultural memory. In recent years, numerous European authors of the subsequent generations deal in their works with an unmastered or concealed traumatic past of their ancestors. The concealed or media- and narrative-based transmission of the ancestors' traumatic experiences consume the characters and force them to search for their own identities. They use a variety of methods and means to reconstruct the past, in an attempt to create greater clarity about their individual situation in the present. The narrators communicate traumatic experiences from a postmemorial position, seek to bridge the generational gaps and to conserve the communicative memory. The process of reconstruction and narration can have both a stabilizing and destabilizing effect on their identities.

Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory describes a mode of remembering that crosses generations and which is based on retrospective reconstruction. It refers explicitly to the situation of a generation which has not experienced or witnessed the traumatic events directly, but received them as second-hand knowledge. In a broader sense, postmemory reflects the after-images and after-effects of collective catastrophes.

The postmemory concept has been criticized, for instance for its overdetermination, but nevertheless it offers a descriptive category and an analytical tool to analyze texts that communicate traumatic experiences in a transgenerational context. Several literary scholars have accepted its analytical advantages and have applied it in a modified form to postmemorial narratives.

In this article, I will first outline some psychoanalytical and psychological aspects concerning the transgenerational transmission of trauma and its influence on literary studies. Nicolas Abraham's theory of the phantom, which emphasizes on

psychic consequences of silence and the untold, is of particular interest. Secondly, I will present Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, discussing its reception and modification by different literary scholars. Finally, I will exemplify the postmemorial discourse by analysing three novels (of the Spanish, German and Greek literature) published during the first decade of the twenty-first century, which deal with traumatic events of the first half of the twentieth century. I will discuss the specific narrative tools and strategies which are characteristic of transgenerational and postmemorial writing. I will focus on the narrative instances of the discourse, on the temporal ordering of the texts, on the incorporation of different factual material in the novels and I will outline the effects of the postmemory process on the psychic life of the protagonists.

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