

**Therapeutic Narrations: Recounting Fascist Psychological Violence in  
Alberto Asor Rosa's *L'Alba di un Mondo Nuovo* and Esther Tusquets'  
*Habíamos ganado la guerra***

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The aim of this study is to ascertain whether writing autobiographical literature may represent an effective therapy to a specific type of violence, namely the subtle psychological violence caused by the imposition of Fascist ideology in Italy and Spain.

This article will focus on two works, *L'Alba di un Mondo Nuovo* (2005) by the Italian author Alberto Asor Rosa and *Habíamos ganado la guerra* (2007) by the Spanish author Esther Tusquets, which do not deal with what one would expect to find in works about violence and suffering experienced in fascist times in Italy and Spain, namely high-impact descriptions of atrocities and physical violence. On the contrary, they present a low level of physical violence. However, they do provide an accurate account of the psychological violence caused by the imposition of fascist habits and attitudes, which necessarily implied identity erosion and repression.

Both works recount the authors' lives from their early childhood to adolescence, in the case of Asor Rosa, and the first years of university for Tusquets. The authors narrate their negative experiences of Italian and Spanish Fascism from different social perspectives. Asor Rosa belonged to the Italian working class and therefore experienced at first hand not only the social and cultural repression Fascism imposed but also the consequences of the Second World War (famine, poverty, fear and desperation). Tusquets, on the other hand, belonged to the Catalan bourgeoisie, did not personally experience the Spanish Civil War and only lived from 'outside' the social and cultural repression of Francoist regime and the famine which millions of Spaniards suffered. Although the Catalan author, as she clearly confirms, always led a comfortable existence, she also acknowledges her lack of love from her family and freedom, due to the social policies Fascism promoted in Spain. Both autobiographical works present the evolution of the narrators' characters and their awareness of their suffering caused by Fascist psychological violence.

Fascism, both in Spain and Italy, relied enormously on psychological conditioning. The two regimes divided their societies into fixed categories to which people had to adhere; they each created a vertical social system into which everyone had to be integrated. Not being part

of the fascist system would be tantamount to belonging to an inferior race and the total erasure of individuality and freedom that this inevitably implied would cause suffering. Psychological violence therefore should be interpreted as that manifestation of violence which undermined the intimate realm of individuals.

This study is situated within the current trends in Spain and Italy towards an attempt to readdress a difficult chapter in their histories, the Fascist regimes, and all their painful implications. It will discuss an aspect that has always been considered too subjective and has been rarely analysed but that represents an essential step towards a more comprehensive depiction of violence and suffering in fascist times in both countries. It will begin by considering the phenomenon of subjectivity in narration in terms of, first, the issue of a community's reluctance to accept a literary perspective that is both intimate and subjective of the suffering caused by, particularly psychological, violence and, secondly, the importance, notwithstanding this resistance, of narrating subjectively first-hand experiences of such violence and the suffering it caused. From there it will move on to draw examples from the two works under review to illustrate the importance of such subjective narration, before concluding with some observations on the therapeutic role such narration can acquire for both the writer and the wider community receiving his or her message.

## 1. Subjectivity in Narration

### 1.1 Physical and psychological violence

In the works being analysed in this article, violence and suffering are strictly connected. Violence may manifest itself in different ways: physical, psychological and verbal; it can be deliberate and unintended, explicit and implicit, and again, inflicted by individuals and/or circumstances. When violence is inflicted by certain individuals on others, it is more likely that the victim recognises the causes from which the distress consequently originated. When, however, circumstances exert violence on individuals, victims are confused as they are unable both to identify the cause of their distress and find a solution or at least a palliative. After this preliminary consideration, an important question is how violence can be inflicted by circumstances. Individuals may be deprived of something and humiliated not directly by other individuals but by a conjunction of historical events. An interesting critical view on this is provided by Rosa (1995) who, referring to Elsa Morante's *La Storia* (1974), maintains:

[L]a catastrofe [...] non deriva dai fatti bellici, è insediata nella normalità del tempo di pace; gli agenti del male non sono figure storiche, ma gli istinti ferali che sempre ci abitano, pronti a insorgere per corrompere ogni possibile relazione umana. [...] (224)

*[Catastrophe does not spring from the events of war, it is entrenched in the normality of peacetime; the agents of evil are not the people who have shaped history but the feral instincts that always dwell within us, ready to manifest themselves suddenly in order to corrupt any human relationship possible.]*

This critical position sheds a light upon an important consideration, namely, our existences are constantly under the threat of evil that we, humans, feed unconsciously. Violence therefore may not only be carried out by individuals but also by events as the negative forces (at the base of violence) are somehow spread in our environment and are part of our personal realm. In these terms, violence does not have to be necessarily inflicted by specific individuals.

Another important difference to note concerning the definition of the concept of violence is the one between physical violence and psychological violence. Physical violence is that type of violence that takes place in the physical realm; examples of this can be: rape, beating, torture and murder. Psychological violence, on the other hand, is less evident to identify and concerns the intimate realm. Wilkinson (2005) observes that:

While the attention of a person 'in' suffering is captivated by pain, the felt reality of this experience cannot be openly shared with other people. The 'unsharability' of suffering may well be one of its most essential attributes, it may be precisely as a result of suffering being locked in the realms of personal experience that it succeeds in causing us so much distress and harm. (2005: 16)

Wilkinson clarifies the different ways in which suffering is manifested and establishes that psychological suffering affects individuals in their private sphere, deprives them of their identity and represses their freedom. Although psychological violence is difficult to acknowledge, it is the worst manifestation of violence that individuals may undergo as it totally upsets the psyche. From the authors' perspective, a literary approach to the psychological violence they have experienced necessitates a candid disclosure of their inmost selves to their audiences and this inevitably entails a more immediate style based on images able to enlighten the readers (even those who are culturally and socially 'distant' from what is narrated) about their distress. This will be evident during the examination of the psychological nature of suffering in the two cases studies.

### 1.2. Subjective narration: difficulties for the reader

The reasons why a reader finds it difficult to be attracted to an autobiographical work can be various: they can be personal, if the plot narrated is perhaps too distant from their own experiences; they can be cultural, if a reader is ignorant of certain events and in many cases may fail to understand the level of gravity of what is told; they can even be subjective, if the reader does not agree with the personal position of the author. Discussing Primo Levi's

success in the United States, Fiano (2007: 92) mentions that the late public interest in his work was due to the fact that people were still not prepared to receive Levi's shocking message.<sup>1</sup> Fiano, when describing the cultural scenario of universities in the United States in the 1970s, recalls Weil's words and notes that there were no academic courses on Holocaust Literature during this period.<sup>2</sup> The only account of the Holocaust available was the diary of a fifteen-year-old Dutch girl, who, despite her affecting narrative, did not entirely express the atrocity of the concentration camps (92). Fiano's discussion reveals the reasons why the American public found it difficult to accept Levi's work when it first appeared. It is important therefore to point out how this can represent a quite widespread difficulty. The American readers in this case felt the events narrated by Levi to be too distant from their daily lives.

When Levi's works appeared in the United States, the first albeit superficial information about Nazi atrocities was indeed starting to circulate but it was still too early for the public to comprehend what had really happened. There were no detailed data about it and it was something that had not yet entered people's lives. It is exactly for this reason that a work such as *Il Sistema Periodico* (1975) that is centred on the Jewish issue was the first work to reach the wider public. The issues presented in this work are relatively 'soft' in comparison with the following books that directly approach the atrocities of the Holocaust. Fiano's discussion sheds a light on how public expectations play an essential role in deciding whether to accept a work or not and his reference to Primo Levi, whose *oeuvre* is objectively recognised as essential testimony, renders his argument even more persuasive. This clarification may enlighten our discussion about testimonial and autobiography by offering a view of the possible scenarios authors may find in their audience and possibly how these can influence the authors' stylistic and thematic choices.

### 1.3. Importance of subjectivity in narration

Autobiographical works acquire an important value not only for those who write them but for the entire society they address. Carrier (2005), who refers to Nora's *Les Lieux de mémoire* (1984) in order to specify his discussion about the Holocaust monuments and national memory, defines the term 'sites of memory' carefully; sites of memory, he maintains, are significant entities that are symbolic of the memory heritage of a specific society (187). These entities may be physical or non-physical and are a sort of medium between memory and the

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<sup>1</sup> I am referring here to Primo Levi as he represents one of the pillars of testimonial literature.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Weil is Levi's editor.

individual or a society. It would not be rash to categorise testimonial works as proper *lieux de mémoire*.

Asor Rosa claims that memory inevitably implies an important advantage, namely, ‘Se sei in grado di ricordare, vuol dire che sei vivo’ (16) [*If you are able to remember, it means that you are alive*]. This idea obviously does not only concern the single individual but may also be extended to a collective level; in fact, he goes on to argue that:

Dentro la nostra memoria pulsa una molteplice vita, di cui sono beneficiari innumerevoli soggetti. Con me, nel mio ricordo, vivono uomini e donne, molti dei quali non sono più fisicamente presenti, che continuano a parlare, ad agire e persino a cambiare nell'estrema varietà delle loro metamorfosi mentali. (17)

[*Within our memory throbs a complex life whose beneficiaries are countless subjects. There are living with me, within my memory, men and women, many of whom are no longer physically present, who continue to speak, do things and even alter in the extreme variety of their mental metamorphosis.*]

Asor Rosa reminds us of the multiple layers of memory when he suggests that our memory is a receptacle of both what we have been and the entire reality connected to our past. Memory refers not only to our own existence but also to all other people who have participated in and are connected to it. This idea emphasises the concept that individual memory may also be projected into a collective reality, transforming itself in collective memory. If remembering is, therefore, important for the individual in order to feel ‘alive’, so is it for the community to which that individual belongs:

Nella memoria c'è la radice di ogni mito: anche di quello piccolo, piccolo, modesto, per chiunque altro insignificante, ma per se stessi decisivo, in cui consiste per ognuno di noi esserci stati, aver preso significato e consistenza nel tempo, essersi immaginati che eravamo una cosa piuttosto che un'altra e, da un certo momento in poi, aver pensato che quella cosa che eravamo stati era la cosa migliore che avremmo potuto essere [...]. (23)

[*There is, within memory, the root of each myth: even the smallest, the smallest and most humble one, of no significance to anyone else but essential to one's own self, which consists of one's own having been there, having acquired meaning and substance in time, supposing that we were one particular thing rather than another and, from a certain moment on, having thought that, whatever we had been, it was the best that we ever could have been [...]*]

Within memory, there is the essence of not only each individual but also the community of which that individual forms part. Through memory, not only individuals but also communities acquire a new awareness of their past, mature and realise their roles. Remembering, therefore, is an essential process at both an individual and collective level since it allows us to reinvigorate both our individual identity and the society to which we belong.

This premise theorises an essential aspect of the discussion of this article, namely the importance and urgency of recounting as something physiological for individuals (authors) who experienced violence. Such urgency is clearly tangible in Tusquets' and Asor Rosa's

autobiographical works and, therefore, a reflection on the importance of recounting events is required.

## 2. Psychological violence and intimate suffering

Writing a book can illuminate certain realities, communicate a specific message with different intensities and even change the world.<sup>3</sup> Elsa Morante says through the words of Davide Segre (otherwise known as Carlos Vivaldi), one of her characters in *La Storia (History: a Novel)* (1974), that: ‘Writing a book [...] may change the existence of all mankind’ (461).<sup>4</sup> It is important, at this stage of the discussion, to analyse in more detail what the message is that the authors in question want to communicate to their public in order to establish later their purpose.

It is understandable and logical that Asor Rosa, only son of a poor worker’s family living in precarious conditions, should have written a collection of his memories: he was an ‘observer’ in the sense that Thomas explains when discussing Sobejano’s division of authors into the *observadores* [observers], *militantes* [militants] and *intérpretes* [interpreters] (Thomas 1990: 31); he maintains, quoting Sobejano, that:

[L]os novelistas “observadores” se distinguen por imprimir a sus relatos un sesgo cronístico y anecdótico, propio de quienes, durante un tiempo históricamente importante se apresuran a registrar las experiencias personales para informar la posteridad (Sobejano 1970: 45).

[Novelists who are ‘observers’ can be recognised by the way their narratives have a stamp of the chronicle and the anecdotal, a characteristic peculiar to authors intent on bringing to posterity as quickly as possible their record of the historic times in which they are living.]

When we remember that Fascism in both countries used violent repressive methods, we can appreciate that it is natural, therefore, for authors to write about their personal experiences in order to attempt to free their minds of those anxieties about freedom restriction (fascist censorship) which persecuted them and also to make the entire society aware of what they have been through. Applying this to Asor Rosa’s narration, it is clear that it originates as a necessary act in order to start a new life, a new world’s dawn indeed. Writing memories becomes a liberating act.

As for Tusquets, it is slightly harder to justify her critical and autobiographical work. As already mentioned, the Spanish writer was a member of the Catalan bourgeoisie and, in contrast to Asor Rosa, had a comfortable life. However, like the Italian author, she suffered a psychological pressure that can be defined as psychological violence.

<sup>3</sup> According to the author’s abilities.

<sup>4</sup> He is generally known as Carlo Vivaldi, a name assumed to hide his real identity because he is a Jewish anarchist.

## 2.1 Fear, first memories and images

In Asor Rosa's work it is possible to acknowledge the presence of images acting as very first memories, which disclose feelings of fear and terror that may be easily linked to psychological violence imposed by the circumstances:

Il corridoio si allungava fino alla porta massiccia, da cui entravano improvvisamente, quando si spalancava, le luci e i suoni della scala: verso il fondo, vicino alla porta, quando era chiusa, c'era una zona d'oscurità, in cui non osavo addentrarmi, e dove i muri, invece di correre paralleli l'uno all'altro, sembravano restringersi e far corpo tra loro. (29)

*[The corridor stretched as far as the massive door, through which, when it was opened, sounds came all of a sudden from the stairs. Towards the back and near to the door was a dark area into which I dared not go, an area where the walls, instead of being parallel with each other, seemed to be closing in on themselves.]*

The protagonist revealing his first visual memories unveils a sensation of fear. He experiences one of the commonest childhood fears, that of the dark and the unknown, a fear that is encapsulated in the image of the long and dark corridor from which sounds on the stairs are perceptible and which symbolises the protagonist's insecurity about reality that, due to his tender age, produces fears. However, there is no mention of any particular event experienced by the young protagonist that can make us think about a shock or violence suffered linked to this image.

As for Tusquets, she recounts a similar fear; she was afraid of her dark house.<sup>5</sup> She narrates: 'En aquel pasillo oscuro y larguísimo, donde acechaban mis miedos infantiles [*In that long, dark corridor, where my childhood fears used to lie in wait for me*]' (25) or also: 'La casa oscura, la casa de la soledad, la casa del abandono [...] [*The dark house, the house of solitude, the house of desolation [...]*]' (31). Even in the case of the Spanish author, we come across the image of a dark and unfamiliar environment which paradoxically is the author's home.

According to Oesterreich (2003): 'Several factors contribute to a child developing fears by age 2. Children between the ages of 2 and 6 have experienced real fear or pain from being lost, injured, or bitten. ([1])'. It is obvious that this is not the case so far as Asor Rosa and Tusquets are concerned, as, according to them, they never received any mistreatment from adults. However, Oesterreich raises a very important point with her article, namely, the assimilation by children of all the anxieties, worries, fears, dangers, repressions and negativity in general present in the environment they live in. She goes on to observe that: 'children also are aware of dangers that they hear about or see on TV. It's hard to know what is real and

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<sup>5</sup> She always described it this way despite the fact that it was not dark at all.

what is not. ([1])'. Referring this theoretical foundation to the historical frame in which Asor Rosa's and Tusquets' works are set, it is possible to demonstrate that the general climate of repression, poverty and fear during the fascist regimes in Spain and Italy and during the Civil War and the Second World War doubtlessly contributed to the development of fears within children and the pressure applied to them may be interpreted as psychological violence. Tusquets admits that she was aware that 'existían cartillas de racionamiento [*there were ration books*]' (25) and that other people were in desperate conditions. She also remembers: 'Fui una niña angustiada por multitud de miedos [*I was a child wracked by a myriad fears*]' (52). Similarly Asor Rosa writes: 'Ci furono poi molti altri risvegli dolorosi o preoccupanti [*There were many other awakenings that were distressing and worrying*]' (53). On the one hand, these statements clearly refer to the protagonists' anxieties and fears for suffering; on the other, they clearly allude to the climate of pressure in which they were living. These events and this subtle psychological violence may obviously influence the child's psyche even if the subject did not live such experiences at first hand. This can be justified by the destabilisation of the idea of home as a safe and peaceful place that both authors do. The house becomes a place to fear, a place permeated by sadness and an obscure, pressuring force.

Children associate their fears with particular things or situations that might also be completely unrelated to the causative element. The fear of a long and obscure corridor that becomes narrower, for instance, refers only formally to that specific part of the house; it principally refers to something that the child might have associated with it and communicates the fear of the unknown and oppression that the individual might feel in his familiar environment. Children might not have experienced oppressive situations at first hand. However, as Oesterreich points out, they can well perceive it in the environment in which they live. In Asor Rosa's case, for instance, the origin of his oppression comprises various factors, among them his parents' continual arguments caused by their economic restrictions or the persistent climate of terror imposed by the Fascist regime and its censorship. Tusquets, on the other hand, admits that, during her childhood, she always questioned the strict differences between social categories. This may highlight the protagonist's difficulty in living in a comfortable environment while somewhere else there were people starving and living in very precarious conditions. Violence and suffering therefore may not be experienced at first hand by children but their effects may be acquired unconsciously and can manifest themselves in the form of fears and anxieties. These examples are a good illustration of indirect violence suffered by the authors/protagonists, who, even though they do not suffer at first hand or have



only a filtered perception of the violence imposed by the situations (the Second World War and the post-Civil War period), experience psychic trauma.

## 2.2 Psychological violence

Violence, however, manifests itself only indirectly when individuals are not strictly related to its source; in our specific cases, the subtle psychological violence caused by Fascist impositions is experienced indirectly only when the protagonists are children and therefore, still not totally integrated into the Fascist system. When, however, the child's links with the causative element are apparent, psychological violence is direct in that it manifests itself explicitly. The type of violence that Tusquets and Asor Rosa came to experience was obviously not physical but involved total repression of identity by a mass 'homologation' (the imposition of Orwellian mass-mindset and Huxleyean mass-culture)<sup>6</sup> which implied absolutely no possibility of opposing the national order; in these respects, Benadusi (2005) states that: '[il Fascismo fece] una vasta opera di omologazione di comportamenti, abitudini e stili di vita [[*Fascism instigated*] a vast programme aimed at the 'homologation' of behaviour, habits and lifestyles]' (13).

Asor Rosa explains how, under Fascism, Italian schools aimed at preparing their pupils for serving the Fascist cause. Along with ordinary classes, demonstrations were organised to exalt the regime and to promote a sense of nationalistic admiration towards *il Duce* and the state. He remembers: 'Qualche settimana dopo l'inizio della scuola fu organizzata la cerimonia del nostro primo giuramento al Duce [*A few weeks after we had started school, the ceremony in which we pledged our loyalty to the Duce for the first time was organised*]' (40). Similar manifestations were the routine in Fascist schools. Benadusi observes:

Nell'ottica nazionalista i giovani dovevano essere pronti alla guerra, un'eventualità cui l'Italia si doveva preparare [...] Era dunque necessario allenare e rigenerare gli Italiani dal punto di vista della mente, ma anche del fisico, per sviluppare quelle qualità di forza e coraggio necessarie per vincere e dominare, secondo il vecchio adagio *mens sana in corpore sano*. (17)

[*From the Nationalist point of view, the young had to be ready for war, a possibility for which Italy had to prepare [...] It was therefore necessary to train and regenerate Italians not only mentally but also physically, so that they would develop the strength and courage necessary to win and dominate, following the old adage mens sana in corpore sano*]

In order to achieve such an aim, young boys needed to be trained physically and mentally; they had to be strong and represent the ideal citizen of the Fascist revolution, who was able to draw on tradition but was also able to use it for the glorious future of the nation. However, as Asor Rosa recalls:

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<sup>6</sup> *Un mondo nuovo* is the title of the Italian translation of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

Le esercitazioni del sabato pomeriggio erano pesanti e noiosissime. Trascinavo svogliatamente i piedi nella polvere e sentivo le mie ambizioni guerriere disfarsi a poco a poco. Una volta un caposquadra, un ragazzo di quattordici-quindici anni, mi tirò un pugno in testa perché non rispettavvo l'allineamento. [...] (43).

*[Saturday afternoon training sessions were tedious and boring. I would drag my feet listlessly in the dust and feel my warrior ambitions little by little melt away. Once a team captain, a lad of fourteen or fifteen, punched me in the head because I did not comply with his line-up [...].]*

The Italian author expresses in these lines his total disinterest in attending the physical training sessions organised by his school; having established here his disenchantment, he later relates how, when an explanation was demanded for his absences at the training session, which little by little became more frequent, he would offer some banal excuse. Furthermore the protagonist highlights an important matter, namely, the abuses that weaker and younger boys used to suffer at the hands of older ones. Once again, this highlights the fascist idea of virility being something with which boys were inculcated from a tender age in environments such as schools and after-school associations, and through books. Boys needed to learn early on how to fight and defend themselves. These sorts of ideas were therefore normal and even very welcome at that time since they instigated violence and this represented the full realisation of the fascist male. It is not difficult to deduce that this mentality represented a manifestation of psychological violence and did not put at ease those who did not believe in it.<sup>7</sup> Asor Rosa, who clearly was not the typical virile man Fascism tried to promote, expresses in his work his frustration *vis à vis* the mistreatments from his colleagues and highlights the distress at being unable to react, especially in the presence of his father. Later on he will decide not to attend the gymnastic sessions any more, thus earning his father's approval and avoiding his own distress and humiliation:

Un bel giorno, sommando insieme le mie insoddisfazioni e le sue attese, quando ero già di fronte, in divisa, al cancello del recinto Gil, gli comunicai senza tanti complimenti che non avevo voglia di andare all'esercitazione del sabato [...] (44)

*[One day, when I was already in uniform at the gate to the Gil training ground, I would tell him straight that, taking together my dissatisfaction and his expectations, I wanted to quit the Saturday training sessions.]*

Here it is possible to identify through the protagonist's acknowledgement of suffering, humiliation and dissatisfaction a manifestation of psychological violence not only towards the protagonist but also towards other members of society who had to comply with these rituals and obligations. The author states that his main interests were walking with his father or reading, in other words exactly the opposite of what fascism proclaimed. He also narrates that after making his oath to Fascism (compulsory for each pupil going to a state school), he was

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<sup>7</sup> It is pertinent to highlight that in this case physical violence is also involved.

for a long time tormented by ethical problems, which highlights once more the effects of the psychological violence on individuals:

Di fatto giurai, sputando fuori le parole con tutta l'aria che avevo nei polmoni. Per quanto possa apparire strano, a lungo poi, fino all'adolescenza, fui tormentato dal problema morale se, avendo comunque giurato, benché del tutto indipendentemente dalla mia volontà, non sarebbe stato più giusto mantener fede all'impegno preso, e mi rammaricavo con me stesso di non essermi limitato a spalancare la bocca, come alcuni dei mie compagni accanto a me misteriosamente avevano fatto. (42)

*[I indeed gave my oath, spitting out the words with all the air I had in my lungs. What could seem strange, however, is that for a long time after, right up to my adolescence, I was tormented by the moral problem whether or not I was still obliged to keep the oath that I had given, having regard to the fact that I had actually given it, albeit this was an act completely independent of my own volition, and I would reproach myself for not having limited myself to just opening my mouth, in the way that some my schoolmates near me had mysteriously done.]*

The author expresses on this occasion the discomfort and distress caused by imposed values. Here it is possible for the first time in *L'Alba di un Mondo Nuovo* to detect an explicit reference to not only the psychological violence suffered but also its effects, namely identity, internal conflicts and consequent distress. These effects, however, could not be explicit. The author recounts:

[A]nche se sentivo piegarmi le ginocchia, reprimevo un analogo turbamento, fedele al severo comando materno: "Non farti vedere", che più o meno voleva dire: nascondi il più accuratamente possibile i tuoi sentimenti, soprattutto se di genere lamentevole e querimonioso, non è bello "farsi vedere" per quel che si è e tanto meno per quel che si prova, bisogna stringere i denti e mostrare un volto tranquillo e sorridente, anche se si è angosciati nella peggior maniera. (38)

*[Even if I felt my knees sagging, I would suppress the analogous anxiety, following my mother's strict command: "Don't draw attention to yourself", which meant: take care to hide your feelings, especially if they are full of self-pity; it is not good to 'draw attention' to what you are and even less to what you are feeling; you must grit your teeth and show a calm, smiling face, even if you are suffering the most dreadful anxiety.]*

In this description, Asor Rosa conveys the way in which he was forced to repress his feelings, which inevitably increased his suffering further. This may be interpreted as a demonstration of violence within violence, as the protagonist is even denied the right to find solace.

Tusquets, as well, narrates the weight that the Spanish Fascist society imposed on her and, similarly to the Italian author, communicates her discontent. She explains:

[L]as niñas íbamos a clase de danza (clásica, claro) [...] Los chicos, incluso los más negados para el estudio, cursaban todos bachillerato, no estaba prevista otra posibilidad. Las chicas hacíamos, casi todas "enseñanza del hogar". Ni siquiera unos padres como los míos se plantearon la posibilidad de que yo, aunque pareciera dotada para el estudio [...] pudiera ir a la universidad. (107)

*[Girls would go to dancing classes (ballet, naturally) [...] Boys, including the most hopeless academically, continued their education in the 'Bachillerato'; they had no other option. Nearly all the girls took 'enseñanza del hogar'. My parents like others did not even address*

*themselves to the possibility that I could go to university, even though I seemed to be academically inclined.]*<sup>8</sup>

This passage clearly depicts the author's irritation at fascist tradition and its absurdity which manifested itself in expressions such as the one that Tusquets' parents often used to say: 'Qué pena que la chica sea la lista y el chico el guapo [*What a pity that it's the girl who is clever and the boy good-looking*]' (107). Women were only expected to aspire to become perfect wives and mothers; they had to be good-looking in order to find a respectable husband and such a mentality was not only inculcated at school but something rooted in society as the attitude of Tusquets' parents attests. Women could not occupy significant positions within society at any level, since this would have altered the fascist social order. This, for the Spanish author, represented a serious threat to her identity, in that she always felt it to be totally different from the one imposed on her. Tusquets perceived the Fascist 'homologation' as a real manifestation of psychological violence towards her and towards those individuals involved in such mass repression of identity. However, Tusquets explains later on in her work that, despite the opposition of her family and the entire system, she did not intend to limit her possibilities and refused to force herself and her expectations to do something that she did not want to only because tradition imposed it, as many other girls did.

El verano anterior había decidido que quería dejar los cursos de 'enseñanza del hogar' y hacer el bachillerato. El motivo que entonces aduje, y en el que creí durante un tiempo, era descabellado: hacerme luego enfermera para ayudar a papá. Para justificar estudiar lo mismo que los chicos necesitaba – ante mí misma, no ante mis padres, que sabían que me mareaba sólo con ver una gota de sangre y que me ponía enferma el olor de un hospital – elegir de antemano una de las profesiones reservadas a las mujeres. (187)

*[I had decided, the previous summer, that I wanted to drop 'enseñanza del hogar' and continue my education in the 'Bachillerato'. The reason that I put forward, and in which I believed for a time, was preposterous: to become a nurse and help Father. Justifying my desire to study the same as boys — to myself, not to my parents who knew that the sight of just a drop of blood would make me feel faint and that the smell of a hospital would make me feel sick — needed me first to choose one of the professions restricted to women.]*

This passage is very important if we consider the whole context of the discussion about tradition, since it shows the protagonist's fear and insecurity in admitting her decision and therefore the intensity of psychological violence imposed by fascist tradition. Like Asor Rosa, Tusquets highlights the great influence fascist tradition had on people to the extent that it completely changed their perception of freedom, consequently causing discomfort and

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<sup>8</sup> The 'Bachillerato' is an additional two years of secondary education after the completion of compulsory education to prepare the student for university. 'Enseñanza de hogar', which could be translated, roughly, as 'Home Craft', was a practical not an academic course of 'study', which cannot be equated with the modern 'Home Economics', comprising as it did topics such as cleaning, cooking, child care, sewing etc. The term was used by and is associated with the Francoist dictatorship.

diffidence. Tusquets' explanation appears hesitant when she tells how she tried to justify her decision to pursue a course of academic study by ascribing to it a reason that would have been acceptable to society. The most significant point of this explanation, however, is when she states that she needed to convince herself of the fact that she wanted to study simply for her own benefit and not because she wanted to become a nurse (typical work for a fascist woman). This demonstrates how the author was also, in a way, pressured by tradition and its subtle psychological violence and was consequently a victim of anxiety and distress. It is possible to confirm this through the words of the author herself when she says: 'Y precisamente aquel verano, después del éxito en los exámenes, [...] me sentía más feliz que nunca [*And that very summer, after my success in the final examinations, [...] I felt happier than ever before*]' (188). The sense of happiness that is conveyed to the reader by this statement can be interpreted as an indication that all anxiety and distress about her decision had momentarily vanished.

The psychological violence that stemmed from the oppression of fascist tradition is also perpetrated by Tusquets' mother in the dissatisfaction and estrangement she displays when confronted by her daughter's decision:

[M]i madre levantaba una ceja: ¿por qué demonios esa hija suya tenía que hacerlo todo del modo más raro? Muy fácil la respuesta, mamá porque tú no me matriculaste a los diez años en bachillerato, ni me preguntaste siquiera lo que yo quería, convencida de que para escribir o para traducir, que era lo que decidiste sería - por elección propia, claro, no porque tú lo impusieras - mi profesión [...] un título de bachiller no iba a servirme para nada. (188)

[*My mother raised her eyebrows: why on earth did that daughter of hers have to do everything differently? The answer is easy, Mother: because for ten years you did not send me to the grammar school and never even asked me what I wanted to do; convinced as you were that in order to write or translate, these being what you decided my profession would be — freely chosen, of course, not because you said so — a Baccalaureate would be of no use to me.*]

This subtle violence thus perpetrated represented a cause of suffering for the Spanish author, who comments: 'Es difícil sentirse orgulloso de uno mismo cuando eres consciente de que no te pareces a la hija que tu madre hubiera querido tener [*It is difficult to feel the slightest bit proud of yourself, when you're aware that you don't look like the daughter your mother wanted*]' (217). This statement clearly alludes to the author's distress, the effects of which still persist and which is due to a continuous psychological violence suffered during the years of her youth.

Both Asor Rosa and Tusquets demonstrate that the psychological violence suffered by the imposition on them of fascist ideology and tradition inevitably involved total cancellation of their own identities and freedom and that this, in turn, caused them distress. The two works

analysed highlight an implied violence that is more subtle and therefore difficult to understand as it does not present itself in physical terms but only within the protagonists' own inner realm. In these respects, Wilkinson (2005) observes:

While being able to recognize and respond to the outward signs of a person's distress, we can never actually enter into the realms of their personal experience of suffering. The very fact that suffering is such a deeply personal experience may well be part of the explanation for why it remains so difficult for commentators to agree on a definition of what 'it' is (2005, 16).

Wilkinson's theoretical position clearly highlights the difficulty in grasping that suffering also takes place within the psychological realm. This may refer back to the point discussed earlier about the difficulty of readers' fully understanding the purpose and the meaning of testimonial literature and autobiography and may justify it further. The narration of personal events, however, may contribute towards the process of healing from suffering.

### **3. Recounting psychological violence: a therapy to overcome its effects**

Sturrock (1993) maintains that '[a] life storied is a life made meaningful' (20); what he does not define, however, is for whom such life stories should be meaningful. Testimonial and autobiographical works document certain events, providing readers with a critical vision of them. The audience therefore does not read descriptions composed immediately after the conclusion of the events but a relatively mediated and reflected version of them that inevitably involves criticism.<sup>9</sup> The purpose of narrating events in the first person therefore, considering the work as a product to be approached by an audience, is precisely the divulging and documenting of certain events and the authors' critical views about them. This, however, leads perhaps to a more important assumption, namely that the real essence of testimonial literature and autobiography is the meditation on and rationalisation of their existences by authors. Such an aspect, which has often been disregarded, is not immediately apparent, because as the importance of this type of literature is usually identified in its documentary and testimonial value, the authors generally focus their approach on the receiver of their message. This aspect represents in reality an essential element that is able to enrich the concept of autobiography and testimonial literature and allows shifting the attention from the audience, the receiver of the literary product, to the author, the producer. Recounting their personal experiences constitutes a therapy for the individuals suffering from them; by looking back at their lives and trying to make sense of past events, they gradually acquire a new awareness about these experiences which is not only able to filter out their painful aspects but also

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<sup>9</sup> This can be substantiated by observing the number of value judgements present in the two autobiographical works being discussed.

contextualise them within the present and future existence of the narrator. What our authors recount changes from mere chronological facts (as they appear at the beginning of the works) to ones belonging to the heritage of a specific person and they are able to radically and deeply modify him or her.

The violence presented at the beginning of these two autobiographical works is therefore transfigured into an obligatory path which authors have to walk in order to gain their new awareness. The autobiographical-therapeutic process provides the author with new certainties about their lives. Asor Rosa's and Tusquets' works conclude with the acknowledgment of a new truth: in the case of Tusquets, her real social identity that moves away from her familiar one; in the case of Asor Rosa, the regained peace, freedom and normality. Recounting the past through literature is essential to reviving our individual existences and to making us feel alive. Asor Rosa offers a fascinating theoretical perspective in the introductory essay to *L'Alba di un Mondo Nuovo*:

La memoria rappresenta un filtro affettuoso del passato. Atroce è la realtà. Raramente lo è la memoria. Lo stesso Primo Levi, Principe dei ricordi, non può fare in modo che la sua narrazione di avvenimenti atroci sia atroce come quegli avvenimenti; anzi, accenna al fatto decisivo che per distaccarsi dall'atrocità bisogna ricordare (se non erro, parla precisamente di "liberazione interiore", [...]). (2002: 15)

*[Memory acts as an affectionate filter for the past. Reality is terrible. Memory rarely is. That Prince of memories, Primo Levi himself, when narrating events that were terrible, cannot make the narration as terrible as those events were; on the contrary, he points out as a deciding factor, that it is essential to distance oneself from atrocity in order to remember (if I am not mistaken, I think he actually talks about "interior liberation", [...])]*

The past is an important element in human life and it should serve the present and the future by enlightening them. Tusquets and Asor Rosa neither ignore their past nor relegate it to a mere literary exercise; they confer on it an active role, the repository of not just their experiences but above all the essence of their existences. The past inexorably shapes personalities and characters and this is evident in our authors' works. The fact that both Tusquets and Asor Rosa decide to write autobiographical works relatively late in their lives and in recent years, may reveal further the active role of the past, which is not a finite reality but an on-going one that keeps on communicating with, showing and teaching the person who lived it a specific lesson. Memory helps, in other words, to render meaningful the protagonist's existence.

Memory, moreover, represents an important tool with which to moderate the effects on our present and future of a painful past suffered. The distance between past and present, identified with those experiences in the midst of these two opposite realities that contribute to

the individual's own maturity, is integrated into memory and allows mitigation of the perception of past atrocities. Asor Rosa acknowledges in his biographical work the importance of the past but also recognises its essential projection onto the present and asserts that memory constitutes the only way to come to total knowledge (2002: 6). His idea of total knowledge refers to that knowledge that covers not only the past and the present but also the distance between these two separated dimensions and this is precisely what memory does in order to preserve our existences from oblivion. Asor Rosa justifies this idea by delineating a progressive process according to which we cannot think of the past without taking into account the lapse of time between the moment in which a specific event is concluded and the one in which we are recalling (2002: 6).

Similarly Tusquets adopts a term which has the same value: 'final stage'. The Spanish author recognises the distance between past and present and the gap between them. Her conception of final stage consists of the moment in which one acquires the awareness of existence, taking into consideration past, present and the period between them.

These two ideas that both authors employ in their works delineate the positive consequence of narrating their existences, that is, a new beginning, freed from anxiety and distress originated by fascist psychological violence. The autobiographical process these two authors undertake is, therefore, a personal one that allows them not to erase their pain but to learn to live with it as forming part of their personality. Once the autobiographical process has rendered an individual's existence meaningful in their eyes, they can track down their experiences, contextualise them, evaluate to what extent they contributed to their personal and psychological development and finally acquire solace from them. This maturation process is evident in Asor Rosa and Tusquets, as they start their narration with unclear, opaque and confused pictures of reality (typical of children) and move away gradually to more conscious and meditated ones that will allow them to achieve 'total knowledge' in the 'final stage' of their autobiographical-therapeutic process.

In these terms recounting personal events can be considered a therapeutic process that offers its benefits to the writers. Testimonial literature and autobiography therefore acquire a double value, namely to liberate individuals from anxiety and distress through a long and gradual awareness process and to shed a light on the intimate representations of violence (in this case psychological) inflicted by fascism. Narrating personal experiences can be interpreted as a survival instinct. If, as Asor Rosa affirms, it is essential to remember in order to feel alive, it is understandable why recounting personal experiences is so important for



those who have been victims of physical and psychological violence. Violence implies ideas of repression, deprivation and abuses and is fed by a destructive drive. Violence aims at repressing individuals, ideas and even memory. Victims of violence, therefore, need to remember rather than abandoning themselves to oblivion and leaving violence to complete its destruction. Recounting and remembering offer us the possibility to start again, to live without distress and to enrich our identities with a new awareness of our past.

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