

Testimonial objects, private-public spaces and the inheritance of stories as mechanisms for recovering memory in *Chilean Electric*.


Los objetos testimoniales, los espacios privados-públicos y la herencia de las historias como mecanismos para recuperar la memoria en *Chilean Electric*.

DOI: 10.32870/revistaargos.v13.n31.e0181

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Received: 02/06/2025

Review: 26/08/2025

Approval: 08/11/2025

Abstract:

This paper analyses the novel *Chilean Electric*, written by Nona Fernández, with the aim of observing the *mnemonic mechanisms* used by the author to recover memory in its historical context, which are: testimonial objects, private-public spaces and the inheritance of stories. This work draws on concepts from Paul Ricoeur's *Memory, History, and Forgetting*, such as *evocation*, *search*, *recollection*, and *reminding*, as well as from Beatriz Sarlo's *Past Time: Culture of Memory and Subjective Turn. A discussion*, with the term *subjective turn*. The result of this work is that the author problematises the consequences of damaged memory and narrative gaps, and recovers the *mnemonic mechanisms* with which it can be saved from oblivion.

Keywords: Search. Evocation. Subjective turn. Testimonial objects.

Resumen:

En este trabajo se analiza la novela *Chilean Electric*, escrita por Nona Fernández, con el propósito de observar los *mecanismos mnemónicos* que utiliza la autora para recuperar la memoria en su contexto histórico, los cuales son: los objetos testimoniales, los espacios privados-públicos y la herencia de las historias. Para la elaboración de este trabajo se toman conceptos recogidos tanto de Paul Ricoeur en *La memoria, la historia y el olvido*, como lo son *evocación*, *búsqueda*, *rememoración* y *reminding*; así como de Beatriz Sarlo en *Tiempo pasado. Cultura de la memoria y giro subjetivo. Una discusión*, con el término *giro subjetivo*. De este trabajo se tiene como resultado que la autora problematiza las consecuencias de una memoria dañada, los vacíos narrativos, y recupera los *mecanismos mnemónicos* con los que esta se puede salvar del olvido.

Palabras clave: Búsqueda. Evocación. Giro subjetivo. Objetos testimoniales.

There were no shadows left, they had all been swallowed up by the light
Nona Fernández

Much of contemporary Spanish American literature revolves around the dictatorships of the 20th century. Against this backdrop, writers have devoted themselves to revisiting themes such as identity, memory and forgetting in an attempt to understand what happened during those years, or at least that is what they appear to be doing. In the particular case of the Chilean dictatorship, according to Gutiérrez in the UNAM Gazette, to refer to the coup d'état in Chile and the Pinochet dictatorship "is to speak of persecution, raids, arbitrary detentions, torture and murder" (2023), as well as exile.

This regime was based on authoritarianism – imposing characteristics of military education such as following orders and submission – with the aim of maintaining social and political control over citizens (Canal Encuentro, 2017, 5m16s). According to Isaza Laverde (2021) in his work "Chile: mechanisms of censorship and dictatorship," "a totalitarian system was implemented on artistic and cultural production, and these measures incubated a feeling of fear and terror in the population with the aim of promoting increasingly strict measures of self-censorship" (p.29). Cultural and artistic expressions were oppressed to the point of creating a void. This led to the suppression of any expression of free thought and, consequently, the eradication of narratives that support the record of subsequent years; the eradication of part of history itself.

Monsálvez (2011), in his article "The military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet as history of the present: historiography, dictatorship, transition, social demand and crisis of representativeness", states that it is necessary to understand this movement and the process of democratic transition in order to comprehend Chilean "history of the present" (p. 187), that is, to construct the present "through the interpretation and questioning of the past, which entails the construction of perceptions, judgements, analyses, etc." (Monsálvez, 2011, p. 176). Therefore, we can speak of a before and after in this history that encapsulates a series of interrogative gaps, necessary for the configuration of identity. In this situation, the search is a word that takes precedence and the key word is memory.

Ricoeur, in *Memory, History and Forgetting*, explains this very concept of memory through several binomials. One of these is evocation-search, where the latter refers to remembrance: a process in which one searches for a memory or memories that one does not want to forget. On this point,

Ricoeur (2003) points out in the same work that forgetting in the formation of memory is not so much a discomfort as a mechanism (pp. 46-48). In reality, forgetting is a strategy for recovering memory, without which one would not know that something has been forgotten (p. 41).

In this sense, *Chilean Electric*, written by Nona Fernández, articulates a series of mnemonic mechanisms with the purpose of recovering memory – fighting against this forgetting – which are: testimonial objects, private-public spaces and the inheritance of stories. However, it is necessary to define the concept of memory in greater depth.

In *Memory and Reminiscence* (2003), Ricoeur distinguishes between memory and imagination. He states that 'memory, reduced to recollection, operates by following the traces of the imagination' (pp. 21-22), that is, to remember two bodies that affected one, it is enough to evoke the images that help to evoke the other (Ricoeur, 2003, p. 21). With this, he explains *mneme* and *anamnesis*, two concepts that consist of "memory as something that appears, something passive in short, to the point of characterising its arrival in the mind as an affection –*pathos*–[;] and (...), memory as the object of a search commonly called recollection, remembrance" (p. 20). Memory, then, is an active search for the past, a voluntary operation of the mind.

In addition, Ricoeur (2003) proposes that it is essential to distinguish between the intentions of both. On the side of imagination, its purposes are related to fantastic, fictional, unreal or potentially possible aspects; on the side of memory, its purposes are found in past reality, those things remembered, the 'remembered' (p. 22). Consequently, the difference between the image of the absent as unreal and the image of the absent as past is the active nature of its search and knowing it to be real, as already mentioned. To do this, it is essential to decipher what is remembered. If what is found is recognised as real, it is memory. Memory takes place as the act of recollection, a continuity of what is remembered, the aspects that belong to the past and that constitute memories that are related to each other and form a story: personal or collective memory (Ricoeur, 2003). Therefore, it takes the form of constant recollection.

With this point in mind, *Chilean Electric* is a novel that plays with these elements: the dichotomy of imagination and memory, evocation-search, light and darkness. The novel begins with the memory of electric light in Chile and the memory of the grandmother, but this is questioned due to the difference in time, resulting in a fragmented and unreal story. From this account, a series of stories unfold that are linked through a space, a person or an evocation. These memories struggle to find themselves outside of darkness, to fight against oblivion, and to understand the events that preceded

them—at least in their superficial appearance. To achieve this, the narrator uses mnemonic devices that make this recollection possible and reacts to the self-defence system, as a symptom of an illness, which represents oblivion.

Firstly, testimonial objects. Throughout the novel, certain objects are presented that operate as testimonies insofar as they preserve the story of a past self. Among them are the photograph, the monthly electricity bill, and the typewriter. According to Ricoeur (2003), photos, postcards, receipts, and mementos are signs that indicate, remind, and effect remembrance (p. 60). Therefore, the narrator not only describes the photograph of a stick horse, but also recalls the actions and images that surround it in great detail, despite her doubts:

I have a pair of braids hanging down my shoulders and my brow is furrowed because the sun is probably shining on my face. Behind me, I can see more stick horses and more photographers like the one who is pressing the shutter at that moment. Although the photo is in black and white, I know that the wooden bench in the distance is green. After the photo, we will sit there and eat cotton candy or a candied apple. (Fernández, 2015, p. 47)

Actions that had previously been forgotten are recalled through an image as if it were a film reel. Likewise, these hesitations, cotton candy or an apple – 'this or that' – represent attempts to fill in the gaps in memory with specific details.

However, part of the work is devoted to monthly electricity bills, which mention that on the back of these bills are the faces of those who disappeared during those years. The normalisation of disappearances during the dictatorship is reflected in the everyday nature of the receipts, in a struggle between forgetting and remembering: stories of a past that haunt a fragmented present. It is a wound that, in order to heal, requires recognition. Thus, the bills serve to remember those women who marched for their relatives, and the relatives themselves, who are still searching, a reminder of the injustices: "the price of electricity in Chile" (Fernández, 2015, p. 77) and a cure for collective amnesia. A tangible object allows for the positioning of a memory that manifests itself through a space, the Plaza de Armas – an aspect that will be discussed later.

The typewriter is the central object of the novel, as it holds the memories of the protagonist's grandmother: 'The most precious heirloom from my grandmother's trade is her typewriter. A large black Remington with worn keys, where the H is missing and the A and C no longer exist, because my grandmother's fingers erased them completely' (Fernández, 2015, p. 38). This machine is presented as

the grandmother's working tool since she was fourteen years old, with which she has a close relationship, so much so that this element is linked to her bodily memory, which can be somewhere between the reflective and the mundane – such as tying her shoes – or that which becomes a necessity for the story (Ricoeur, 2003, p. 62). An example of the former is when the news reports Cloro's imprisonment and she, "as a good civil servant [,] filed a new ministerial report" (Fernández, 2015, p. 54) typing with her right hand on her shirt. This object constitutes a link, a container of memories for both the grandmother and the granddaughter: an object that records two generations.

Secondly, there are private-public spaces. On the private side, there is the grandmother's room, where the narrator used to go to take refuge as a child: "I would slip between her stiff sheets, which smelled of mothballs and¹, and in the darkness she would tell me a story to help me sleep. They were always stories about her life" (Fernández, 2015, p. 23). In this way, the grandmother's room was associated not only with the space of refuge, but also with the stories of her life that would later become her legacy – a subject that will be discussed later.

On the other hand, the space most often referred to is the Plaza de Armas in Santiago. Several events that take place in this location are recounted: the peaceful demonstration against the crimes of the dictatorship – where a child loses his left eye – the women's march for their disappeared relatives – culminating in candles in the square – the funeral of Salvador Allende and the arrival of electric light. Most of these memories deal with events of repression or their consequences, with the square as the key location. The short circuits – as she calls them – are made up of stories that belong to the narrator but which, in order to be understood, require the memories of others and a political background. These memories form part of the narrator's personal memory which, by serving as testimonies to the years of repression in Chile, shape the national memory. Consequently, the square is configured as a space of collective memory.

Furthermore, Ricoeur states that "memorable encounters offer themselves to our recollection, not so much because of their unrepeatable uniqueness, but because of their typical similarity, even their emblematic character" (2003, p. 43). In the peaceful demonstration that takes place in Cortocircuito Nº 2, a kind of analogy or parallelism is drawn in time, representing events of repression through remembrance, with the square as an emblematic setting:

Before we did so, someone shouted, a woman I think, warning that a child was bleeding in the square, that the police had beaten him, that he needed help. (...) He was in the centre of the

¹ Aromas also function as *reminders*, as they are linked to places, objects, or people themselves.

square, in the same place where more than four hundred years ago there had been a gallows for public executions. Instead of the gallows, there was now a student lying on the ground in a pool of blood. (Fernández, 2015, pp. 49-50)

The time difference between one period and another is considerable, but the comparison is possible through the recollection that emerges from the private sphere and moves into the public sphere. This is why memories are reconstructed according to the memorable place in which they unfold, circulating around the space where they took place. In these stories, they originate in the Plaza de Armas.

This is also related to the disappearance of the family in Cortocurcuito No. 3, ninety-three years after the electric light ceremony and seven months after the photograph on the stick horse (Fernandez, 2015, p. 52). The forced detention of the family, an event that takes place in private when people go to their home to take the family away, leads to the women's demonstration in the Plaza de Armas:

Years later, Doña Ana Gonzáles, his wife, recounted that when her husband, daughter-in-law and children had just been arrested, someone slipped a piece of paper under her door [...]. She never knew who left it there, but Doña Ana followed the suggestion to go to Plaza de Armas 444 with the scant information she had about what had happened to her family. There she met other women who were in the same situation. (Fernandez, 2015, p. 55)

These stories do not belong to the narrator, so to speak, but she recounts them as memories of the past that form a narrative that gives meaning to the gaps in her memory. Therefore, the circulation of stories is relevant because they form the pieces of a memory that is completed to be eventually narrated and disseminated.

Thirdly, the inheritance of stories. The unfolding of stories is related to memory in the sense that they constitute it. Three issues are highlighted here: false memories, the ownership of stories, and their hereditary nature. The first factor concerns the arrival of electric light in Santiago, specifically in the square.

The plot begins with the narration of the grandmother's story, evoking the lighting as a sinister spectacle. However, the narrator realises that this arrival did not happen to her grandmother, but long before she existed: "The lighting ceremony took place in 1883, [...] exactly twenty-five years before she, the blonde girl, the woman without a navel, my grandmother, the protagonist of the narrated scene, was born" (Fernández, 2015, p. 30). The main question raised by this story is its verisimilitude. The

question here is not whether she experienced it or not, but why this fragment forms part of her memory.

To answer this, we must turn to the ownership of stories and their hereditary nature. The diverse accounts presented here circulate among themselves. The section entitled Cortocircuitos recounts the stories surrounding the Plaza de Armas, as mentioned above: it begins by narrating events in which he was not present or did not take part and ends with an episode he witnessed, such as the kidnapping of the family and the women's candlelight vigil in protest at their disappearance. To be able to complete the meaning of a memory requires more information, other narratives, and for her to take them as her own. The events surrounding the Plaza de Armas belong to her insofar as she needs them to complete the meaning. This is the case with her grandmother's stories.

The figure of the grandmother is very important because she represents heredity, because of her relationship with the narrator: "From those years of recording, I inherited several stories" (Fernández, 2015, p. 32). In reality, the hereditary nature of her grandmother's "false memory" lies in its constitution:

The last emblematic memory I have of the Plaza de Armas is not mine. It is one that does not exist, one invented and instilled by my grandmother. The supposed ceremony, of the supposed arrival of electric light, supposedly installed by my great-grandfather. (Fernández, 2015, p. 69)

If the grandmother had not been born to experience it, they must have told her about it so that it could become part of her memory. Consequently, the narrator ultimately accepts it, inherits it, and expresses it as follows: "a distant self who once, for some reason I do not know, told me about the origin of the light in my city's Plaza de Armas" (Fernández, 2015, p. 81). Through this recognition, she understands what the message left to her by her grandmother with the inherited stories would be, which will be discussed below.

Prior to this, the narrator raises the question of the veracity of memories and their relationship to the stories that circulate:

I could tell some stories and then pass them on to my grandchildren in my dark room. I would encrypt some hidden message in them, an enigma to be deciphered, like the one that remained circulating in that scene from the ceremony of light that my grandmother told me about. (Fernández, 2015, p. 45)

So, as mentioned, there is a "hidden message" surrounding this memory that will be passed on—a kind of oral tradition to shape private and national history.

Sarlo, in the chapter 'El tiempo pasado' (Past Time) in *Tiempo pasado. Cultura de la memoria y giro subjetivo. Una discusión* (Past Time. Culture of Memory and Subjective Turn, 2006), explains that in the 1970s and 1980s, what is called the subjective turn emerged, which places the focus on testimony, whereby "oral history and testimony have restored confidence to that first person who narrates their life (private, public, emotional, political), in order to preserve the memory or to repair a damaged identity" (p. 22). In this way, the arrival of electric light in Chile represents an excuse for approaching the political and social issues of that time: material light—light bulbs—illuminated the shadows while also blinding (Fernández, 2015, p. 20). "The stories of our grandparents illuminate the past, and our gaze projects them into the present and the future [...] what we read in that enclosed story is a cry for help, the need for rescue [...]" (Fernández, 2015, p. 69). The cry for help signifies the desire to be rescued from oblivion and from the shadows – the silence – that inhabit Chile after Pinochet's dictatorship.

In this regard, Sarlo mentions that "it is more important to understand than to remember, although in order to understand it is also necessary to remember" (2015, p. 26). The act of thinking above memory that Sontag emphasises, quoted by this author, is inevitably recovered in memory. The narrator lists the events that have surrounded her and shaped her: "I think about 'the social question', I think about the social problem, I think about social difference, I think about the social movement" (Fernández, 2015, p. 84). In the end, all that remains for her is to record it with her typewriter, so that it exists and remains outside the margins of oblivion: "Perhaps that is the hidden message left by my grandmother, the task that circulates in that scene she invented for me: to illuminate the fearsome darkness with the written word" (Fernández, 2015, p. 86). Although she positions it again as a false memory, she continues to accept it for reasons greater than herself: to preserve the memory of a wounded past.

Thus, the relationship between the typewriter and the Plaza de Armas, linked by the grandmother, aims to recover the voices of those who suffered under the dictatorship, those who disappeared and are not found in the memories of Chilean history. To understand what happened at that time, it is necessary to remember, as Sarlo says, but contrary to her, the emphasis here is on the need to repair a wounded identity, where the state went from being a single reliable source to

censoring and repressing civilians. Thus, the subjective shift is the replica: to constitute a source that recovers reliable testimonies of catastrophic events. The search for past memories, the real and recognisable.

In short, Fernández articulates mechanisms for recovering memory in a construction of the testimonial self under the sphere of electric light, which becomes problematic in different ways as the plot develops – literally in its capitalisation, metaphorically in the concealment of information and as a representation of the consequences of the political and social situation. Thus, the testimonial objects are configured as switches to recover subsequent memories in a central space—the Plaza de Armas—both on a personal and collective level; united by stories and, above all, their hereditary nature, which constitutes a person's identity, as in the example of the grandmother. Nona Fernández problematises the consequences of a damaged memory, the narrative gaps, and recovers the mnemonic mechanisms with which it can be saved from oblivion.

Finally, with regard to this work, there is an analogy with Alejandro Zambra's novel *Formas de volver a casa* (Ways of Returning Home), where belonging and the circulation of stories form mechanisms for reconstructing the past, but the memory around which it revolves is that of the earthquake. Here it is configured through mnemonic discourse (remembrance): the intercalation of the characters' stories and their constant repetition when told, some of them—the stories—reach the point of being questioned and fall into these same "false memories" which, without further ado, end up belonging to the protagonist to form his memory. Therefore, we invite you to conduct this type of research on the memory of this parallel work.

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