

**"In the face of what disappears: what does not disappear".
The presence of absence in the memory in *Antígona González***


**"Frente a lo que desaparece: lo que no desaparece".
La presencia de la ausencia en el recuerdo en *Antígona González***

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Abstract:

This article addresses the role of individual memory in the construction of collective memory in literature that deals with issues of violence such as the disappearance of people in Mexico. From this perspective, we analyze the memory in *Antígona González* (2012) by Sara Uribe, as a rescue of the presence of the absent. In this work, the role of the archive is relevant, since through testimony she rescues memories of the indirect victims of violence to represent diverse life experiences that give a political and social dimension to this problem. To interpret the use of memory for the configuration of collective memory in this work, we resort to theoretical notions on these aspects, as proposed by Paul Ricœur (2003) and Astrid Erll (2012). In addition, we rescued ideas from Josefina Ludmer (2009, 2021) about the link between literature and reality for the production of the present.

Keywords: Remembrance. Presence. Absence. Collective memory. Testimony.

Resumen:

En este artículo se aborda el papel del recuerdo individual en la construcción de la memoria colectiva en la literatura que trata temas de violencia tales como la desaparición de personas en México. Desde esta perspectiva, analizamos el recuerdo en *Antígona González* (2012) de Sara Uribe, como rescate de la presencia de los ausentes. En esta obra, el papel del archivo es relevante, pues por medio del testimonio rescata recuerdos de las víctimas indirectas de la violencia para representar diversas experiencias de vida que dan una dimensión política y social de esta problemática. Para interpretar el uso del recuerdo para la configuración de la memoria colectiva en esta obra, recurrimos a nociones teóricas sobre estos aspectos, según lo propuesto por Paul Ricœur (2003) y

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Astrid Erll (2012). Además, rescatamos ideas de Josefina Ludmer (2009, 2021) acerca de la vinculación de la literatura con la realidad para la producción del presente.

Palabras clave: Recuerdo. Presencia. Ausencia. Memoria colectiva. Testimonio.

When we remember, we make a mental representation of an image of the past. We recall it from a time when that memory no longer is. However, with this image, the memory becomes present. The non-being of what is absent, what we recognize as missing, we make present in the memory, both on a temporal and spatial level. This is how Paul Ricœur puts it in *La memoria, la historia, el olvido* (2003), in which he traces various theories that question aspects related to individual and collective memory, lack and forgiveness. These ideas lead us to observe Latin American texts that work with memory in contexts of State violence, where non-forgetting becomes relevant under notions of history and justice. In this context, remembering becomes an act of resistance that does not yield to official narratives, but allows for a critical interpretation of the facts based on one's own knowledge. In these situations, absences tend to refer to victims of violence who are murdered or disappeared. The case of missing persons has been worked on in the literature, oriented to the problem of the impossibility of achieving justice that allows forgiveness. They are, then, mourning that cannot lead to a happy oblivion, according to Ricœur.

Sara Uribe addresses in *Antígona González* (2012) the duality between the absence and the presence of missing persons. From this theme, memory acquires a political, historical and ethical charge, which guides the interpretation of the past from a context in which the lack cannot be compensated. To this end, remembrance becomes a strategy that makes it possible to make present what is absent in a time in which forgiveness cannot be achieved in the face of unacceptable situations. Under this hypothesis, this paper aims to analyze in *Antígona González* the memory of missing persons and the political implications that prevent achieving a happy oblivion in Ricœur's terms. To do so, we will take the fragment in which Antigone remembers the visits to the river she made with her brother Thaddeus when they were children. This memory is confronted with a present in which Thaddeus is no longer there, and from this perspective, certain elements that are recalled are re-signified. What do the clothes, the river, the gaze mean when they are no longer there?

Antígona González is a rewriting of the myth of *Antigone*, by Sophocles, contextualized in the conflict of the disappearance of people in Mexico. The protagonist, Antigone, fulfills the mythical archetype, as she has the mission of recovering the body of her brother to bury him. In Sophocles' myth, Antigone rebels against Creon, king of Thebes, to request that she be allowed to bury her brother Polynices, who was denied because he was considered a traitor. The literary tradition of the Antigone archetype has recovered the denunciation as a characteristic of this character. Many of these are set in contexts of State violence that imply a double transgression on bodies, such as the military dictatorship in *Antígona furiosa* (1986) by Griselda Gambaro, survivors of political assassinations in *Antígona tribunal de mujeres* (2014) by Carlos Eduardo Satizábal or the indigenous extermination in *Antígona Vélez* (1981) by Leopoldo Marechal. In all of these, there are faults that fall into the unjustifiable or unacceptable, which according to Ricoeur implies that there is no culprit, no punishment, no reparation of the damage and also implies an intention and, to a certain extent, the involvement of state institutions. Sara Uribe recovers fragments of these works in *Antígona González*, together with archival texts and testimonies that build a collective memory made up of the sum of individual memories of victims of violence.

Several studies on *Antígona González* highlight the use of the archive as textual materiality for the conformation of a collective memory. This is how Laura Alicino observes it in "We are voice, memory, body. La construcción colectiva de la memoria sobre la violencia en México en el proyecto digital *Nuestra aparente redención* (NAR) (2022) where she highlights the use of digital media for the representation of testimony, and with it the memory. To this end, she focuses on the use of "Instructions for counting the dead" from the portal *Menos días aquí*, with which Sara Uribe juxtaposes the document with the poetic word. In this regard, Alicino mentions: "[t]his practice contributes to create the connective structure of our cultural memory, which in turn is based on the individual memories that reconstruct it" (2021, p. 20). On the other hand, María Ema Llorente in "Identidad y memoria en la literatura mexicana actual. Estrategias de escritura contra la desaparición" (2022) focuses on the use of testimonies as a strategy to rescue the human meaning of the victims from memory. Like Alicino, Llorente highlights a juxtaposition that occurs with the real or fictionalized memory that recalls the lives of the disappeared, as opposed to official or journalistic discourses in which they are treated as bodies. Elisa Cabrera García and Miguel Alirangues López also studied memory in this work in "Duelo y memoria de los cuerpos ausentes en *Antígona*

González" (2019), where they take Josefina Ludmer's notion of postautonomy to explain the relationship of the text with memory. The authors quote Ludmer to define postautonomy as "a movement that puts something else in literature, that makes of [or with] literature something else: testimony, denunciation, memory, chronicle, journalism, autobiography, history, philosophy, anthropology" (2021). Thus, through diverse textual materials, reality is linked to literature with the intention of transforming it, of producing the present.

Previous studies on *Antigona González* present relevant notions on remembrance as a literary strategy to construct memory, rescue the humanity of the absent and have an impact on the fabrication of the present. With this background, let us look at remembrance from its relation to the absent and forgiveness. To do so, let us look at what happens with Thaddeus' memory, focusing on Antigone's dream about her visit to the river:

Other nights I dream of you as a child, in the river, next to the juniper trees. I dream that murmur of the water on the stones. That humidity under the trees.

Mom used to take us often in the summer, she said it was the only way she could calm us down on the hottest days. A tuna salad, a loaf of bread, a thermos of lemon water, a couple of towels and her knitting, that was all we needed.

Upon arrival, the first thing you did was tear off your shirt, pants and shoes. Once near the water it was impossible to tame you: you ran to the tallest tree, climbed up its branches and you were thrown without further ado into the pools.

You taught yourself to swim, you were never afraid. Not even after that time you fell badly and cut your forehead open. The blood dripped mixed with the water down your face as you were scolded. You didn't seem to care. I remember your blank stare. You stood there with your fists clenched, not complaining about mom cleaning your wound, but at the same time you were somewhere else.

I like to dream about that river, you know? I like it because I know that we will never return to its waters (pp. 40-43).

This memory, which is first presented as a dream, contrasts with the nightmares narrated earlier in the play, in which Antigone saw Thaddeus lost and tired looking for her. Likewise, it opposes the journalistic accounts in which missing persons are treated as bodies, corpses. This opposition presents in exchange an image of life. In this memory, Tadeo is not alone, nor lost, he finds himself with others.

The contraposition in which this image is situated has much to do with the temporality from which it is remembered. It is a present in which Tadeo is already absent and remembering him implies creating an image of him as what is missing. The time in which he is remembered also determines the perspective from which the events are reinterpreted. In this regard, Ricœur says: "if memory is an image in this sense, it carries a positional dimension that relates it, from this point of view, to perception" (p. 72). This implies that Antigone's memory is hers alone, even though Thaddeus is part of it. It is she who remembers him from what she saw and makes him present in the text with that image. Thus, although Thaddeus is absent from the beginning of the play, Antigone makes him present with her memory. This is linked more to the present reality than to the past, of which it is only a representation that is constructed from her imagination. Through this image she contrasts her bare feet and bare chest in the river with the other image of what might be happening to her. We can see this opposition in the dream that precedes it: "There are nights when I dream you skinnier than ever. I can see your ribs. You're shirtless and barefoot. I can see your dark circles under your eyes and your tiredness of days" (Uribe, 2012, p. 39). While in the first dream there is anxiety, in the memory there is not even fear. However, in the moment in which it is remembered, that fear is present, and the blood, the pool and the lost look acquire other meanings that refer us to violence.

From the implications of the present in which the remembrance takes place, we can observe an evolution of the memory, in which this happy moment of childhood approaches with signs to the context of violence from which it is remembered. Antigone begins by narrating the murmur of the water and describing natural elements such as the sabinos or the stones. This first image generates a clash with the present from which she speaks, which is ruled by violence. In contrast to this, it is a peaceful image, which allows us to contrast the murmur of the water with the murmurs with which the missing persons are spoken of and which are frequently mentioned in the work, in fragments such as: "What is it that they

murmur? Why do they whisper everything in a low voice?" (p.16) or "A body made of murmurs" (p. 73). The memory thus presents itself as a kind of oasis in the midst of violence. Next, this dream looks to the mother as caregiver and provider of all they need. Under the wing of childhood they are safe. Reinforcing this idea of oasis, Antigone says: "only in this way did she manage to soothe us on the hottest days" (p. 41). The river, then, both in the past and in the memory, is a place of calm, of peace, both for Antigone and Thaddeus. Subsequently, the moment in which Thaddeus leaves his clothes behind and fearlessly throws himself into the well is narrated. Although she describes him as indomitable, this fragment introduces a change in the environment, to develop the following scene where we can intuit the context of violence that re-signifies the memory. Although Antigone says that even in the fall she was not afraid, we see a linking of the image presented with Thaddeus' disappearance. He is no longer an agile and indomitable child, now his gaze is lost and his fists are clenched. All this refers us more to an absent Thaddeus in the present from which he is remembered. This is reinforced at the end of this fragment: "at the same time you were elsewhere" (p. 42), which speaks to us of this limbo between the presence and absence of the missing persons and, in turn, of memory.

Recovering the presence of missing persons is an issue widely addressed in *Antígona González*. This aspect is found in the very structure of the work, which uses the archive as textual material, with which testimony and memory make it possible to bring to the text the lives of those who disappeared. In this present, from which the testimonies speak, the absence of their loved ones is linked to the past. This presence against absence is also raised in the text: "In front of what disappears: what does not disappear" (p. 45), says Antigone about her dream. Thus a narrative structure is formulated that develops in the following pages, in which newspaper articles about bodies found are contrasted with memories that refer to the lives of the missing persons. There is an insistence on not forgetting that those bodies are people, that they are not just a number, but that the link with the past proclaims an awareness of their life. In the face of absence there is remembrance. This, then, becomes a strategy to return to what once was. This is how Antigone presents it when she says: "I like to dream that river, you know? I like it because I know that we will never return to its waters" (p. 43). Thus, through memory, Antigone is able to recover remnants of what she knows she no longer is. Not to forget is to keep present that which is missing. In other words, Antigone presents forgetting as the conclusion of disappearance: "That is why I think of you every day,

because sometimes I think that if I forget you, a single day will be enough for you to vanish" (p. 39). As long as there is no forgetting, presence is possible, or in Ricœur's words: "memory guarantees the temporal continuity of the person" (p. 129). However, this author exposes that, due to the interpretation of memories from the individual and temporal perspective, it is not possible to link them to an idea of truth, nor to keep them reliably. Forgetting exists in relation to memory, and vice versa, we build memory from what we do not forget. What is forgotten generates gaps that are filled with imagination and that reconfigure the interpretation of memory.

Tadeo's memory is not the only one that appears in the play; there are multiple memories of other missing persons introduced through testimony. Although fictionalized testimonies are presented, Sara Uribe takes others from the archive to introduce them as memories that help to construct the personification of Tadeo or as other people's memories that contribute to the creation of a collective memory. Ultimately, a testimony is the narration of memory and, as such, it is linked to the subjectivity of the perspective with which the past is narrated and the present in which it is narrated. In this regard, Tamara Kamenszain points out that "testimony is a proof of the present and not a realistic record of what happened" (*La boca del testimonio*, 2007). In a historical sense, the subjectivity of individual testimony may cast doubt on the veracity of the memory. However, the sum of individual memories, that is, of testimonies, generates collective memory that adopts objectivity not in the sense of the veracity of the facts, but of the cultural interpretations of these. In this sense, Astrid Erll emphasizes: "Individual and collective memory has never been a mirror of the past, but a highly informative indication of the needs and interests of those who remember in the present" (p. 10). Thus, memory provides us with information about the present in relation to the past, with which we can understand a transformation that has taken place in reality. Faced with the sum of testimonies, memory, as a component of collective memory, shows us the processes by which lack is understood and its comprehension is conceived from a relationship with temporality. "If we move towards the dimension of the semiotics of culture, we must look at these texts as if they were artificial retinas that transform into images the context that the text contains and refracts, restoring an idea of memory as a trace and as a trace" (Alicino, p. 14).

Astrid Erll in *Collective Memory and Cultures of Memory* lists a series of reasons that have led to a boom in memory studies. Among the causes she mentions are historical processes of transformation such as the Cold War or the Holocaust, where the denial of the facts led to the narration of life experiences as a political act with ethical implications. In addition, he mentions that the evolution of technology transformed the media and its operation. The storage and reproduction capacity of the media began to be employed for the manipulation of history (2012). Collective memory is a response to these phenomena as a collective need to recount experiences. In the problem of the disappearance of people in Mexico we see the impact of these two factors. On the one hand, it is a conflict that implies historical transformations in reference to the way in which violence operates. In view of this, it is relevant to rescue the testimony of the multiplicity of victims it produces, in order to understand the different mechanisms by which the rights of the population are violated. Likewise, the testimony opposes the official or journalistic discourses, where the consequences are recorded in terms of numbers or deaths, instead of lives disrupted.

While the testimony linked to memory is subjective because of the perspective and temporal implications in which it is recalled, collective memory provides a more objective vision in terms of cultural interpretation of the facts. As Astrid Erll points out, collective memory is the result of individual phenomena of memory that are related. In these, various types of texts are introduced that, as traces of the past, shape a cultural perspective of the past. Individual phenomena of memory include autobiographies, testimonies, archives, history and, of course, literary texts. Under these indications, we can understand *Antígona González* as a container of collective memory, since she collects what happens with the disappearance of people from journalistic, testimonial, critical and literary texts. Because of this textual configuration, it can be understood as a postautonomous work, according to Ludmer's conception. As such, it is linked to reality no longer in the sense of representation, but as a producer of the present. In this regard, Ludmer mentions that postautonomous literatures:

They fabricate the present with everyday reality and that is one of their policies. Everyday reality is not the referential and plausible historical reality of realist thought and its political and social history [the reality separated from fiction], but a reality produced and constructed by the media, technologies and sciences (2009, p. 42).

Thus, bringing the memory of victims from different perspectives also allows us to understand the problem at a social and cultural level. Uribe's work is thus a sum of interpretations of the past that gives us a broad conception of the present.

That the disappearance of people is linked to memory is not gratuitous. This presence of the absent in memory has much to do with the problem of the lack of a person, a limbo in which they find themselves in which it is impossible to say whether they are alive or dead. For the most part, in Mexico those who search for a person assume them to be dead, but in the absence of a body, it is impossible to reject the possibility that they are alive. As a consequence, there is a mourning that cannot come to an end. Although in *Antígona González*, in the end she finds Tadeo's body inside a grave, this is not the case of thousands of investigation files that cannot be closed for lack of evidence or a guilty party. Ricœur mentions that the juridical notions of inculcation determine the unacceptable as that which implies a will "to deliver the other to the helplessness of abandonment" (p. 603), and which generates an impediment to reach forgiveness due to an impotence to coincide with dignity. To achieve forgiveness, the institutions of the State are key pieces, because when there is a law that allows the inculcation, it can lead to a punishment or the distribution of the fault or justice in order to be able to go through the mourning. We see this problem in the dialogues of Antigone to Thaddeus: "Do you see why I have to find your body, Thaddeus? Only then will I be able to give your children a grave where they can go to see you. That's all I'm waiting for now, a body, a tomb. That haven" (p. 56). This question is addressed in the tradition of Antigones who demand as a right to be able to bury their loved ones in order to be able to go through the mourning. At that point, the only thing that is sought is to rescue the dignity of people.

Just as it is not gratuitous that the various versions of Antigone link memory with mourning, neither is it gratuitous that they are politically charged in their rebellion against the State. Most of them deal with problems in which State institutions are involved and which, therefore, present difficulties in assigning culprits. In order to gain access to justice, it is necessary to resort to legal processes that allow for reparation of the fault. From a legal perspective, it is then necessary to be able to designate a guilty party, since forgiveness is situated at a political level in which not obtaining a punishment or reparation would

mean impunity, injustice. At this level of the unacceptable is the forced disappearance, which according to the *Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance* (1992) of the UN General Assembly is

[that persons are arrested, detained or transferred against their will, or otherwise deprived of their liberty by government agents of any branch or level, by organized groups or by private persons acting on behalf of, or with the direct or indirect support, authorization or acquiescence of the Government, and who then refuse to disclose the fate or whereabouts of such persons or to acknowledge that they are deprived of their liberty, thereby removing them from the protection of the law (p. 1).

However, the disappearance of people in Mexico has its own complications, for while there are cases in which the state is involved, it is largely produced by drug trafficking. Although the State may be involved in the disappearance generated by drug trafficking, the incrimination of the State is often hindered, to such an extent that historical cases such as Ayotzinapa have not been concluded even 10 years after they took place. Some of the reasons for this are irregularities in the process, lack of budget and attention to specialized teams and even, in a countless number of cases, the absence of a body to serve as evidence. Consequently, the fault produced by these disappearances is not amended, so the victims' relatives cannot access justice or forgiveness.

The involvement of the State in the disappearance of persons implies that forgiveness, as a conclusion of mourning, acquires political dimensions in the face of which it is not enough to address the issue from legal perspectives. In this sense, it becomes indispensable not to forget that cases of disappearance imply the absence of a person with a life, nor that people disappear every day, nor the links of State institutions in these cases. Thus, works such as *Antígona González* build a collective memory of this mourning with the search that it may come to an end. Within this mourning there is a struggle not to forget that is directly linked to the absence implicit in the disappearance. "All of us here will disappear if no one looks for us, if no one names us" (p. 95), Antigone mentions at the end of the play. It is only through memory that Thaddeus remains present, but also Antigone and all of us. In addition, from collective

memory the problem becomes present from the social and political spheres. Not forgetting implies recognizing the socio-historical dimensions and keeping the search for justice latent. Literature, then, also has a political role in the construction of collective memory and, although, like memory, it is more linked to the imagination than to reality, it has a direct link with the present of which it is a sign and allows us to produce an interpretation of the past.

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