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On the Heart of Totalitarian Violence

[Marisa Siguan, *La memoria de la violencia. Sobre Primo Levi, Imre Kertész, Jean Améry, Ruth Klüger, Jorge Semprún, Varlam Shalámov, Max Aub y Herta Müller* (“The Memory of Violence: On Primo Levi, Imre Kertész, Jean Améry, Ruth Klüger, Jorge Semprún, Varlam Shalamov, Max Aub and Herta Müller”), Icaria editorial, Barcelona 2022]

At first glance, Marisa Siguan’s book, *La memoria de la violencia* (“The Memory of Violence”), suggests that we are faced with a didactic and at the same time chronological journey through the literature that emerged from the experience of the concentration and extermination camps and, more generally, from totalitarian violence. It goes from Primo Levi, the first to write and publish about what he experienced, since his *If This Is a Man* came out in 1947, to Herta Müller, the German-language author born in Romania in 1953, who knew the Nicolae Ceaușescu dictatorship and the practices of his State Security Department. Each of the chapters is introduced with an illuminating portrait of the author: Primo Levi, Imre Kertész, Jean Améry, Ruth Klüger, Jorge Semprún, Varlam Shalamov, Max Aub and Herta Müller (all of them narrators, prose writers). The presence of Semprún and Aub establishes a necessary link with Spain. The geographical scope is also broad, ranging from the Iberian Peninsula to the Siberia of the Gulag. And Siguan also reminds us that although Primo Levi published *If This Is a Man* only two years after the end of the war, this is not the case for Kertész, Semprún or Améry, who took years and sometimes decades to write and publish their works on the traumatic experiences of Auschwitz or Buchenwald.

As the book progresses, the reader realizes that what he or she is touching on are the core points of the literary elaboration of the experience of totalitarian violence. And it is not by chance that Siguan introduces her authors with succinct biographical information since what characterizes them is precisely the fact that they base their literary writings on their own experience. She also reminds us that Müller, for instance, states that “her model has always been authors in whose work biography was visible and decisive” (p. 161). And since works are the fruit

of the lived experience, memory plays a central role. Both the involuntary memory that brings back the reality of what happened (e.g., Siguan cites the passages from Semp-rún's *La montagne blanche* ["The White Mountain"] about smoke which "floats over the peaceful plain of Freneuse" (p. 100) and which is a "trigger of involuntary memory that always refers to the memory of the concentration camp" (p. 100)), and also the creative memory to which Kertész resorts "to re-create his past" (p. 35) in *Fatelessness*, or the memory that is established as an ethical precept, as an obligation to remember the vanquished, as it is presented in Aub's work.

At the same time, Siguan notes, "all the authors discussed in this volume raise the difficulty or, indeed, the impossibility of narrating their experience, while at the same time manifesting the imperative need to do so" (p. 180) and "refuse to remain in silence" (p. 180). It is in this tension that literature moves around "that which happened,"¹ as Paul Celan puts it in his Bremen speech. And this also entails the need to "find an adequate language to capture what has been lived," (p. 180) a language in which the traces of the impossibility of speaking about what happened are visible. As Kertész points out, the classical tonality has been lost, and a new one must be found.

Then there is the role of literature itself, which is essential in *La memoria de la violencia* and permeates each page. Already at the outset, when the author refers to the work of Levi, a link is generated with the literary tradition, with its own inscription in the flow of literature. She mentions that Levi compared himself to the figure of the old sailor in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem, to the shipwrecked sailor obsessed with telling the story of his shipwreck "even though no one wants to hear it" (p. 24). And he also reminds us of literature as an instrument of survival in the camps by alluding to the famous scene in *If This Is a Man* in which the narrator quotes Dante's *Divine Comedy*, more specifically the canto of Ulysses, referring "to the awareness of the dignity of the human being in the face of adverse circumstances, in a situation of extreme humiliation" (p. 31). For Klüger, too, who had spent time in Theresienstadt and other camps, literature also provided her with a foothold, "the possibility of escape into the interior" (p. 91). By contrast, however, is mentioned the experience of Améry, who noted the failure of the intellectual personalities in the concentration and extermination camps. Améry writes that he remembered there some famous lines from Friedrich Hölderlin's poem *Half of Life*, but the lines told him nothing, they bore no relation to the reality he was living in. Améry wanted literature to sustain him, but literature failed to do it. And he warned, moreover, that the German literary tradition "had become the undisputed and indisputable property of the enemy" (p. 59). There is a deep rift between literature as a grip and literature as useless in the midst of the experience of totalitarian violence. There is also a rift between

¹ P. Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. J. Felstiner, W.W. Norton & Company, New York-London 2001, p. 395.

the acceptance of literary tradition and a questioning of that same tradition as implicated in what became the reality of violence. Kertész, Siguan points out, records the “failure of the pre-Auschwitz culture” (p. 33) and unmasks as false the victory of civilized, dialogic humanity over barbaric power as presented, for example, in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Iphigenia in Tauris*.

Literature permeates the pages of *La memoria de la violencia*, as well as those of the writers discussed in the book – those of Levi, those of Kertész, those of Shalamov, and those of Semprún. Also, those of Améry, in the end everything is literature. Just think of his titles! *Beyond Guilt and Atonement*, with a clear reference to Friedrich Nietzsche and Fyodor Dostoevsky, or *Unmeisterliche Wanderjahre* [“Years of Unmastered Wanderings”], alluding to Goethe. For him, literary figures are suddenly more real than real people. And that is also the case e.g., for Aub, as Siguan points out. Towards the end of her book, we read these words of Shalamov, the author of the *Kolyma Stories*, who had something to say on the subject: “I am deeply convinced that art is the immortality of life. That which art has not dealt with will die sooner rather than later.” (p. 191)

Marisa Siguan has written a scholarly, highly instructive and necessary book, which denotes a sensitive knowledge of the subject.