

Archives and Memories of Pedro Nava

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...one of the things that has most impressed me before today, and which has acted as a Proustian madeleine for me, is a watch chain that my father gave me when I was a small boy. My father would take me out, and sometimes dressed in an identical fashion to him. And so he gave me a watch and a chain, which were obviously cheap. But I hadn't seen that watch chain for ages, and I had completely forgotten about it, until one day mother showed it to me. She said, "This watch chain was yours." Then I remembered all these facts entirely. This watch chain held me captive, and linked me to the past in such a way that I would never have imagined.

Pedro Nava ("Entrevista" 107-08)

Pedro Nava (1903-1984) began to write his *Memórias* in 1968, after he had retired from the medical profession, in which he had practiced for over thirty years. His literary experience, begun in the 1920s in the city of Belo Horizonte, included the company of those young writers who were about to play their part in the São Paulo modernist movement. Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Abgar Renault, Emílio Moura, among others, became nationally known poets, in contrast with Nava, who only published *Baú de Ossos*, the first volume of his *Memórias*, in 1972. His later efforts at literature would fulfill an agreement made earlier with colleagues of his generation, because with the exception of a few poems published in the *Revista* in 1925, Nava did not write very regularly. Of his few poetic manifestations, "Mestre Aurélio entre as Rosas" and "O Defunto," reedited by Manuel Bandeira in his *Antologia dos Poetas Bissextos*, in 1946, may be cited as outstanding.

This “getting even” with the past made Nava the most important name in the genre of memoir writing in Brazilian modernist literature. This resulted from three factors, all of which were related to diligent efforts on his part. The first is his encyclopedic knowledge, the second, his painstaking passion for details, and the third, his effort to reconstruct the histories of his family, of his own educational and professional training, and of the intellectual generation to which he belonged. Carlos Drummond de Andrade (*Boitempo, Menino Antigo*) and Murilo Mendes (*A Idade do Serrote*) had already produced works belonging to the memoir genre, evoking childhood reminiscences and thoughts regarding the patriarchal landowning structure of the society of Minas Gerais, but neither of them attempted to create a narrative of the epic, monumental dimensions in the manner of Nava’s works.

Six volumes were published within a period of just over ten years (1972-1983), covering thirty years of Nava’s life, apart from thirty-six unpublished pages of *Cera das Almas*, the book that continued the series. *Bau de Ossos* (1972), *Balão Cativo* (1973), *Chão de Ferro* (1976), *Beira-Mar* (1978), *Galo das Trevas* (1981) and *O Círio Perfeito* (1983) constitute the author’s memoir oeuvre. The texts are somewhere between fiction and documentary, a reinvention of the facts as experienced by both the writer and his generation.

The impact caused by publication of the first volume of *Memórias* provided a re-reading of the Brazilian literary canon, as late as the 1970s. The renewal of the Brazilian memoir tradition represented for the critics the need to reflect on concepts that had been suppressed by the literary avant-garde, such as tradition, memory, writing about oneself and autobiography. The publication of Nava’s work unveiled a new panorama for Brazilian letters, in which history and fiction, the old and the new were blended, in an effort to extend the concept of memoir genre and to enrich the literary text. A boom in autobiographical writing was soon to take place in contemporary literature, especially with the political liberalization following the military regime, together with the return of former exiles to Brazil. This record of experiences during the period of military dictatorship initiated another form of storytelling.

Nava’s memoir text, which included his participation in the 1920 modernist movement, was presented in a different form from the autobiographical accounts of the generation of exiles who returned to the Brazil at the end of the 1970s, such as, for example, that of Fernando

Gabeira. Nava's writing included a narrative of his life from childhood to the beginning of maturity; this is one of the reasons it is considered all-encompassing, in the sense that it fulfilled a narrative project in a highly detailed and grandiose way, combining various stages of the writer's private and public life. The same is not true of the texts written by exiles, because their basic tenet was either to deny or ignore the individual's familial past or his genealogy; theirs was a type of writing that aimed at canonizing neither the individual nor a particular social class. Nava's *Memórias* not only revitalized a literary genre that had been disregarded and undervalued, but also provided an historical, political and cultural reference for Brazilian reality in those first decades of the twentieth century. A further result is that literary critics were forced to revise methodologies and theories by creating space for approaches that were more interdisciplinary and cultural, because they felt the need to enlarge the concept of "literariness," as well as to review the place of the writer in the act of writing, whether fictional, memoir-oriented, or essayist.

Nava made use of a substantial number of metaphors in elaborating the vast material stocked in his memory. As well as being useful for understanding his creative process, these metaphors have been explored by those critics who have focused specifically on Nava's work. Images multiply and reinforce each other as a result of the writer's continuously revealed need to resort to metalanguage and to theorizing while writing. His writing is "Frankensteinian" in nature, elaborated like a puzzle, a kaleidoscope, a palimpsest and a *bricolage*, in which fragments and pieces of text, memories and objects kept in a dusty trunk are collated. Thus, literary critics appropriated these images and elaborated concepts related to Nava's writing process, namely, "a memory mobile" and "a tree-like construction" (Davi Arrigucci Jr.); "sponge-like memory" (Antônio Sérgio Bueno), "Frankenstein-type writing" (Celina Fontenele Garcia), "skeleton memory of many vertebrae" (Joaquim Alves de Aguiar), "a trunkful of madeleines" (Maria do Carmo Savietto), and so forth.

Reading Nava's *Memórias* entails going through various levels of textual analysis, as the memoir-document is an artistic object, a source of knowledge and a cultural fact. The continuous act of dealing with the manuscripts left by the writer is linked to a time in motion, to a direct intervention in the present, as well as to an enunciation that is both intermittent and continuous at various stages during the reading process.

The reader establishes contact with the text, but also develops an awareness of wherein the text results from a biographical act that culminates eventually culminate in a vast cultural panorama.

Among of the most significant sources for the study of Nava's work are Pedro Nava's personal files, housed in the "Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa." The interlacing between the files, the writing and the memoirs can be in the profusion of photos, postcards and drawings seem used to construct various phases in the elaboration of his text. A surgical dissection of this material involved eliminating substantial amounts of data. An assessment based just the book version itself made it difficult to evaluate the full dimension of what took place before the writing of the definitive text. Inspecting of the files revealed that the preceding work resembles the technique of *bricolage*, which, in this case, collates information and the life experiences of the somewhat fragmented subject of the discourse.

Nava's creative process appears in three phases. First, there are cards and loose sheets of paper filled with the writer's own research, including drawings, photos, newspaper clippings, together with information sent to him by his friends. At a second stage, there is an organization of the "dolls" ("bonecos"), a concept to which I will return below, around which the chapters and their future development are outlined. At a third stage, both the corpse and the "doll" gain life and a voice by means of the typewritten text, almost ready to be sent to the publishers, despite the fact that a blank page among the originals may later include corrections added during revision.

The relationship between the medical and the literary series is materialized by means of the image of the "doll," which acquires a number of meanings in Nava's work, ranging from its original form shown on the drafts to its metaphorical unfoldings. The mark of the physician is observable in the material used in the draft work of *Memórias*, written on either paper or cards stamped with the address of Doctor Pedro Nava. This mark is both the writer's reverse and his mirror, the complementary face of the memoir writer. In this web of textual intercrossings, the "doll," the second stage in the writing process, may refer either to the image of the graphic project of a book or to the idea of a corpse, already dissected and prepared for study. As an outline and simulacrum, the "doll" does not have the status of a finished product, but reveals a constant process of elaboration. This text incorporates the image of a corpse-text, to be manipulated, reworked and collated by his creator. The acts of cutting, sewing, dissecting, and forming the internal

configuration of the human body during anatomy lessons associate memoir writing with the practice of the student-doctor and his doll-corpses, or rather the doctor and the monster, the writer and his creature, in a type of Frankensteinian writing.

This latter technique in Pedro Nava's memoir writing may be observed in two scenes from *Beira-Mar*, which especially emphasize the difference between archives and memory. The scenes also focus on the circumstances in which memory may be regarded as a static, fossilized procedure. In the first of these scenes, the maternal grandfather decides to get rid of the things that he has been hoarding by throwing out the documents related to Nava's maternal family. The future guardian of the family's histories collects the papers and the photos of the Halfelds, ties the material in bundles and organizes what was left out. He thus becomes the legitimate proprietor of an heirloom, and thanks to this, writes part of *Bau de Ossos*, specifically that part related to his maternal genealogy.

The second scene concerns the sale of the gold watch inherited from his paternal grandfather, which has no value as an object of memory because it has no functional role. The watch displayed the family initials PSN, referring to Pedro da Silva Nava. The young Nava discards it, however, because he regards it as a dead object, the symbol of a time separated from memory, time as fetish:

During the day, I had sold an old watch, which had belonged to my paternal grandfather, at the *Joalheria Diamantina*, a watch bought in Switzerland, the glass covered by a precious layer of gold, a double lock also made of gold. The two lids displayed the same initials, PSN, beautifully engraved. It was a wind-up watch, but the key was missing and the watch had thus become a useless object. (*Beira-Mar* 128)

Nava keeps the texts and the documents in the memory trunk. He strips the broken family watch of any meaning as a parasitical memory, or as a corpse that is unable to be touched and brought back to life. He detaches and links his name to the object, which he then sells as a meaningless inheritance, one that has no value as an archival document, because it is a dead document. However, this position differs from that of another object, the doctor's ring that had belonged to his father, received as a deserved gift and as a symbol of professional continuity and conquered inheritance. The watch chain received

as a gift from his father later becomes a real Proustian “madeleine,” due to its magical power to light up and reactivate the memory of the interpreter of the family histories.

Archive memory, nostalgia and a passion for one’s origins, or, in Derrida’s words “*mal d’archive*” (142)—these are the principles that guide the endless excavation work of textual genealogy. Being ill, being possessed by the “*mal d’archive*” is to consider this work as a specter and a corpse, a phantom that allows for the continuous dialogue of death and life. It is thus the duty of memoir writing to fulfill the role of both a supplement to, and simulacrum of, this dialogue.

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