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“Did not/Am not”: The Remains of Memory in Gabriel Josipovici’s Works

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Introduction

This paper aims to examine the ways in which the British contemporary writer Gabriel Josipovici raises question relating to memory, reminiscence, and commemoration in his short stories, novels, and literary criticism. Born in France, in 1940, after settling in England, Josipovici has been writing in English and has so far published numerous novels as well as critical essays, theatre plays and short story collections. Many of Josipovici’s texts deal with memory issues, and the specificity of narrative in Josipovici seems to have something to do with the very process of remembrance.

I wish to demonstrate that Josipovici’s works focus on memories of traumatic events which show us something about the way in which memories arise and are apprehended. Josipovici stages characters grappling with their reminiscences. In other words, by making use of narrative indeterminacy or repetition, Josipovici not only tells us stories of remembrance, but he also shows us constructs and patterns that underlie remembrance.

I shall focus on the notion of impossible or aporetic acts of reminiscence by first looking at Josipovici’s recent novel *After* (2009), concentrating on the way in which reminiscence becomes part and parcel of this novel’s poetics, whereby memory appears not only as a theme or a symbol, but also as a narrative strategy. Second, I will focus on the particular form of reminiscence – the question of traumatic memory as it appears in some of Josipovici’s novels and especially in his short stories published in the collection *In the Fertile Land* (1987).

Impossible Reminiscences

Josipovici depicts characters trying to come to terms with their identity as a matter of remembrance, that is to say the question of the subject emerging as a remembering self. One of the questions is how can the individual safely affirm *I am what I am because I remember myself becoming myself*. Such interrogation of reminiscence takes on ontological values, as is the case in *After* that symbolically refers to reminiscence, since the title immediately touches on that which has turned into memory, a present envisaged from a posterior viewpoint, as an aftermath or subsequence.

In *After*, two characters – Alan and Claude – meet after 15 years of separation and come to talk about their past. The text is written in dialogues and minimalist narrative fragments.

While the narrative is limited to introductory verbs, the novel proceeds through conversations, of which it seems possible to distinguish three types: (a) mundane social interactions, exchanged during parties; (b) artistic or intellectual conversations, dealing with literature and the arts; (c) and a middle section based on reminiscence proper between Alan and Claude.

A gap is at once sensible: the woman character, Claude, calls Alan “Alain,” which reinforces the alienating time lapse between the past and the present, that is, memory, precisely. This hiatus is explored as a means of highlighting the alteration of self-memory in relation to otherness. This obvious discrepancy derives from the fact that one’s memory of oneself does not chime at all with the way in which one conceives of oneself at given moment. Nor does it correspond to an individual’s remembered representation of the self, or others’ representations of an individual. Memorial representation provides only a biased, often idealized or disparaged vision of self and otherness, necessarily altered by time. Hence, Alan is astonished at what Claude can tell him about his former identity:

–Oh, Alain, she says. Only you would ever say a thing like that.

–Really.

–Really. (Josipovici, *After*, 2009: 42)

The first aspect of reminiscence based on memory discrepancies between subjects gives us a sense of altered or falsified individual memory, where forgetfulness prevails: “You’re right she says. Don’t you remember? I was always like that.” (Josipovici, *After*, 2009: 47).

The second aspect of memory that comes to the fore is the fact that reminiscence is staged against the backdrop of the everyday¹. This is ordinary remembrance, springing out of nowhere and appearing within the context of everyday life and the ordinary fixed, habitual, mundane activities of the English learned middle-classes. Within the ordinary, memory is closely linked to habituation, and, to an extent, to forgetfulness². However, it also becomes involuntary recalling that surprises the individual by its irrational, sudden appearance within the habitual course of events, thus subverting the ordinary itself. To a degree, the arrival of Claude in Alan’s life may be interpreted, itself, as a symbol of memory overwhelming the individual and undermining the subject’s attachment to ordinariness – Claude, then, seems to be an embodiment of involuntary autobiographical memory assailing the subject, as though she stood for Proust’s *madeleine*.

¹ In relation to this, one may recall Georges Perec’s idea of the *infra-ordinary* (Perec, 1989: 9-13).

² Interesting tension arises from the correlation between remembrance and the natural tendency to forget the ordinary, defined, precisely, by its *a-memorable* nature.

The third aspect of reminiscence here is related to nagging, persistent memory, not only involuntary but above all undesirable remembrance. Alan is literally chased, pursued by his past: “There’s a woman pursuing me, Alan says. I knew her ages ago in the States. She’s over here now with her family. She says she’s come to find me.” (Josipovici, *After*, 2009: 69). The figure of the woman acquires a new symbolical value: not only is Claude an incarnation of involuntary memory, but she is also to be interpreted symbolically as representing memory as persistence or obsession. Claude keeps asking questions, digging into their common memories, nagging at Alan:

- Tell me what happened, she says. [...] Tell me, Alain, she says. [...] Tell me, Alain, she says again. [...]
- It was a long time ago, Claude, he says.
- You thought I’d vanished forever?
- Yes, he says. (Josipovici, *After*, 2009: 85)

Such obstinacy constitutes a recurrent theme in the novel which is predicated on the lack of certainty as to the past. Memories catch up with the subject, as though forgetting backfired on the individual. Memory is what occurred, but what occurred can only be retrieved through remembrance, and remembrance is necessarily flawed by spaces of indeterminacy. Shunning his own memories, Alan, cannot help being entrapped in the net of illogicalities and absurdities of memory – the prospect of remembering and being unsure as to what one remembers precisely and fearing that one’s memory is not to be taken for granted, as is shown in a dialogue between Alan and Mike:

- You must have an idea. Did you have an affair?
- I don’t know. [...]
- What are you going to do? he asks.
- I don’t know, Alan says.
- Forget her, Mike says.
- That’s what I’ve done till now. But now she’s come to England to do something to me and I’m frightened. (Josipovici, *After*, 2009: 69-71)

A series of questions can be raised: why are the characters shown to remember whereas they do not even know what can be recalled? Is fear merely due to the unknown? What symbols convey a vision of remembrance in the novel? And, finally, what narrative patterns stand for structures of reminiscence?

There exists an element of dread relating to the act of remembrance, partly due to the nature of the remembered story that revolves around a traumatic event, probably a car crash. Hence, reluctant recalling has something to do with the inability to come to terms with trauma. However, remembering also brings back former relationship patterns, so that the act

of remembrance itself – as it is depicted through dialogue and argument – is a form of re-enactment or revival of past relationships. Indeed, the characters have a row over their memories; they disagree and blame one another for the cause of the accident. Consequently, such shared retrieving of the past is unsettling both as a form of work on trauma and as a revival of bygone togetherness.

Furthermore, the structure of the reminiscence takes on specific repetitive and variational patterns. In fact, the middle section of the novel – overtly tackling the theme of remembrance – is founded on multiple re-telling of the same event. From chapter IX to chapter XIII, the two protagonists get together and try to recover their past. Each chapter is a dialogue and each gives us a vision of the event from the point of view of one of the characters and, thus, a new, slightly altered version, like in the passage below, taken from chapter XI, whose version is told by Alan and that contrasts with Chapter XII, told by Claude (my emphasis):

chapter XI

The story told by Alan

We were going to the sea [...]. We had eaten our picnic [...]. You were driving. It was your car and you were driving. [...] We were approaching the sea [...]. I gave you directions [...]. You turned off the road onto a sandy path. You drove down it, getting ever closer to the sea. [...] I told you to slow down. [...]. Then you took a bend too fast and the wheels began to skid in the soft sand. [...] The car swung as you tried to control it and hit a stone. [...] It was very still [...]. In the distance, I could hear the sea. Close to, a bird was chirping. Otherwise it was silent. I called you [...]. You seemed to be asleep at the wheel. [...] I got out of the car [...]. It wasn't easy. The door was jammed and I had to push to get it open. I wanted to be sick. But I couldn't. It wouldn't come. My stomach was churning but nothing came out. Only a bit of bile. I walked. The sea appeared over the dunes. I walked down to the sea. I sat. [...] Eventually I came back. **I thought I had mistaken the place because there was no car.** I turned back to the sea. I looked round at the dunes. [...] I sat on a stone and looked at the sea. [...] I came back [...] **I thought I had mistaken the place because there was no car.** I turned back to the sea. I looked round at the dunes. *Then I saw the tyre marks. [...] You were asleep [...]. I didn't want to wake you. I walked down to the sea. When I came back you had gone [...] driven off. [...] I waited for someone to come by and give me a lift.* (Josipovici, *After*: 2009, 92-96)

chapter XII

The story told by Claude

We took the car to the sea [...]. My car. But you were driving. [...] I asked you to slow down [...]. But you paid no attention. [...] We came in sight of the sea and then it disappeared again [...]. You were driving along the sandy tracks [...]. I asked you to slow down but because we had quarrelled you wouldn't. [...] You went round a bend [...] and the wheels began to skid. Then the car hit a bank and started to climb. I remember [...] I must have hit my head on something, though, because I remember nothing else. [...] I was lying in the sand. [...] It was dark. [...] I began to feel cold. [...] I thought I was dead. [...] I opened my eyes [...] It was dark. *And then I heard the sea.* I began to remember what had happened. [...] I rolled over. I sat up. *Everywhere the silence. Except for the sound of the sea,* on the other side of the dunes. [...] I looked round [...] I waited, trying to see in the dark. Trying to hear. I was afraid of what I would hear. [...] Blood [...] dripping. Or you moaning. Or, worst of all, nothing. [...] **I got up and looked round.** I could see the sea, now I was standing. A grey mass beyond the dunes. **I began to move** [...] But there was nothing. [...] **I walked round [...]. I thought: he has gone [...]. He has taken the car and gone. He has taken the car and left me there to die.** [...] I began to walk away from the sea. [...] I walked in circles first [...]. **I came back to the place and the car had gone. You had gone.** [...] I went back through the long grasses, the dunes. *And then I saw the car. I got in and sat at the wheel. I waited. My head was hurting. The bleeding had stopped but everything was hurting.* [...] **You drove away and left me there. I sat in the dark and waited [...]. I waited.** (Josipovici, *After*, 2009: 97-101)

Such version-narrative may be described as follows: (a) the passages in italics are more or less coinciding versions of the same story; (b) the underlined passages are details or additions that are specific within one version but do not seem to have any particular relevance as variations or alterations; (c) the passages in bold are the truly diverging versions of the same story.

The nature of the interaction between the characters is telltale as well. The dialogue contributes to the specificity of the narrative, representing remembrance through the telling together of a story, by means of questions and fragments of memories. Memory is shown to occur through a mutual re-telling of a story by taking turns and re-enacting. Claude acts as a goad to memory, thanks to her constant asking questions about the past, acting as a nagging voice from the past. But the facts are steeped in doubt and oblivion: “Perhaps you imagined it all, he says.” (Josipovici, *After*, 2009: 99).

It looks as though neither of the characters knew what had really happened; as though they were both contributing to a confabulation; as though reminiscence were sheer brain fiction. By reinventing the past together, they re-create their present togetherness. It seems that the past needs to be relived: “Take me there, Alain, she says.” (Josipovici, *After*, 2009: 106). It is noteworthy that the moments of reminiscence within the middle section should all begin by the same time indication – symbolic of presence rather than absence – the adverb “now”:

Chapter IX	Now, it seems, they are sitting in Valerie’s crowded patisserie in Soho. (Josipovici, <i>After</i> , 2009: 83)
Chapter XI	Now they are walking on Hampstead Heath. (Josipovici, <i>After</i> , 2009: 92)
Chapter XII	Now, it seems, they are walking through Epping Forest. (Josipovici, <i>After</i> , 2009: 97)
Chapter XIII	Now they are sitting in the Orangery once more. (Josipovici, <i>After</i> , 2009: 103)
Chapter XIV	Now there is only the sound of their voices. (Josipovici, <i>After</i> , 2009: 107)
Chapter XV	Now he cannot see her. (Josipovici, <i>After</i> , 2009: 111)
Chapter XVII	And now he is driving carefully through the streets of East London. (Josipovici, <i>After</i> , 2009: 120)

Consequently, the version narrative translates into a process of recreation of past tensions, as is evidenced by the accusatory and adversarial nature of the interaction, reminding the reader of theatrical stichomythia:

- You didn’t call, she says. In the days that followed.
- My father died, he says. I had to go back to England.
- You never called, she says.
- I sat by the sea, he says. I wanted to be sick.
- You knew I was dead, she says. You left me there knowing I was dead.
- You weren’t dead. You drove away and left me there. (Josipovici, *After*, 2009: 95)

Behind the story of the car crash, a more profound traumatic tension is to be found: the row between the characters seems to have been more violent – Claude appears to have been hit by Alan, or even sexually abused.

By this token, it is interesting to point out that the multiple versions are not necessarily all diverging. Some of them coincide and complete one another. But, the general impression conveyed through multiple narratives is that of a partly erased story, constantly replaced by new versions cancelling each other out. Claude states: “[...] I’ve been thinking. It wasn’t like that, you know. [...] There was no accident [...]” (Josipovici, *After*, 2009: 103). That gives us a sense of a living memory, ever prone to transformation, so that remembrance is shown to be an eternal recreation/re-enactment of events.

The use of multiple versions shows us something about the intimate bond between fiction as confabulation and memory as alleged truth, as though what was emphasized was a natural tendency always to transform the remembered by recreating it. The question of memory precision, trustworthiness and truthfulness, and the attempts at recovering the past is not totally out of kilter with both the psychological question of repression and the forensic question of oral testimony.

Josipovici’s novel is about the reconstruction of the self through memory, about the difficulty to recreate a flawless and reliable self-narrative. Such difficulty is echoed in the novel’s specific use of repetitive structures. The last part of the middle section, chapter XIV, turns into a fragmentary and rhythmical pattern – “time passes” is repeated twice and “a time” repeated 24 times:

A time.

–Will we go, Alain? She asks.

–Yes, he says.

A time.

–I took your clothes off, she says. Quite slowly. Do you remember?

A time.

–I was still in shock, she says. I needed to feel your body.

A time. [...] (Josipovici, *After*, 2009: 108).

Repetition – as both verbal repetition and narrative repetition – dramatizes the persistent memory and singles out the traumatic event.

Interestingly, the novel also presents us with symbolical thematizations of memory. One of them is a counter-image of Claude and Alan’s failed struggle with their past. Opposed to an imperfect and fragmentary reminiscence, *super-memory* is symbolically conveyed through the

famous figure of Ireneo Funes – the protagonist of Jorge Luis Borges’s short story, “Funes, the Memorious,” who stands for a case of prodigious memory. Funes never forgets anything and is able to reconstruct whole days. This is what medicine will call hyperthymesia or super autobiographical memory. In Borges’s text, to remember is a “ghostly verb” (Borges, 1962: 107). Josipovici alludes to that *ghostliness* of memory:

- If we didn’t forget we wouldn’t be able to function at all, Alan says. Like that character in Borges.
- So why do some people remember more than others? Claude says.
- You remember as much as you need, he says.
- But how does one define need? She asks. That’s a good question, he says. (Josipovici, *After*, 2009, 58)

In the light of the monstrous prospect of super-memory in Borges that underlines the *vital* need to forget, Josipovici’s *After* ends with an aphoristic phrase: “It doesn’t do to dwell on the past too much [...]” (Josipovici, *After*, 2009: 136).

Yet another image is given us through an intertextual reference to François Rabelais’ melting images³. Rabelais invents the idea of a battle scene, where words have been frozen and levitate somewhere until humans manage to defrost them. The vision of thaw may be interpreted as a gradual access to a lost or forgotten reality. Studying the impact of the printing press on writers, Alan is particularly keen on quoting from Rabelais:

Pantagruel and Panurge and their companions reach an island, he says, and start to hear strange sounds of battle, guns going off, the cries of wounded men, the shouts of soldiers urging each other on, the neighing of frightened horses. That sort of thing. But there’s no one about. The island seems to be deserted. They don’t know what on earth’s going on. Is this an enchanted island? Are they going crazy? Then their guide explains it all to them: A battle once took place in this very spot, in the middle of winter. It was very cold. In fact, it was freezing. The sounds of battle rose into the air and froze there. They’ve remained frozen to this day, but now it’s suddenly getting warmer and they’re starting to thaw. As a result the sounds that were frozen are once more being released into the air. Pantagruel and his men wander about the island and find a number of words and sounds, still in their frozen state, lying on the ground like large hailstones. They pick some of these up and as they start to melt in their hands the sounds of that ancient battle are released. (Josipovici, *After*, 2009: 27)

Alan draws a parallel between Rabelais’s melting images and the persistence of human presence on Earth through words. “Only the words remain,” Alan declares (Josipovici, *After*, 2009: 28). Hence, the melting images also stand for a gradually revived literary memory – memory as a ghostly presence, again, a bodiless spectral presence, ephemeral existence of the text, brought back to life thanks to a “breathing reader” (Josipovici, *After*, 2009: 28) who breathes life back into the work of art. Therefore what is at stake is literary memory above all.

³ See François Rabelais, *Quart Livre* (1998), chapter 55-56, pp.487-497.

The traumatic event

In many of his early novels and short stories – the ones published in the 1987 collection *In the Fertile Land*, for example – Josipovici stages characters in the act of endeavoring to remember trauma. Some of his texts revolve almost exclusively around acts of remembrance. Some of the key questions, as in *After*, are linked to the notion of trauma and to impossible reminiscences, either because the characters strive to remember and do not manage to, or because the structure of the narrative itself prevents memory from resulting in a clear and unambiguous shape.

In several novels, remembrance is associated with old age memories or illness, and it is often represented by means of amnesia. The recurring figure is that of an old person trying to remember but being unable to recover the past as well as that of the subject attempting to get back to an event which seems to have been traumatic but whose traumatic nature cannot be fully grasped. The reader is presented with only snippets of imprecise memory.

In *The Echo Chamber*, Peter, an old person staying in a place that seems to be a hospital, or an old people's home, is depicted through bits of conversations. Peter hears voices, experiencing a feeling of haunting memories, especially the impression of falling, as though an unidentified trauma has befallen him. But his memories are without content – something keeps nagging at him, but he is unable to say what is. The conversations are short exchanges that resemble verbal therapy:

–You were running?
–I don't know.
–Try, she said.
–Try and remember.
–It's like a jigsaw. As if I can't really rest till it's been sorted out. Each piece fitted in. (Josipovici, *The Echo Chamber*, 1980: 90)

Unlike Borges's Funes, everything slips by, "everything drains through" (Josipovici, *The Echo Chamber*, 1980: 91), and like in Rabelais's melting images, memory is a distant echo of something that cannot not be logically conveyed. Yet, memory of nothing is still an act of memory, an emptied template, evidencing that something there was, in the past, that refuses to take shape in the present, so that recovering it becomes an uncontrollable, albeit irrepressible need:

I don't know. Something happened before everything went black. [...] I have to know [...]. You see, when I began to recover I thought it would just recede and then vanish altogether. [...] But it's not like that. It won't go away. I keep thinking about it. About what it was that happened. I have to find out. [...] There are bits.

But they don't join on to any of the other bits. Like parts of different stage sets lying around in a warehouse. (Josipovici, *The Echo Chamber*, 1980: 97-103)

The painstaking process of reminiscence shows that remembering absences is a constant persistent presence of void, wrought with disconnectedness and failure: “‘Something is trying to come through,’ he said. ‘A figure is trying to disengage from the rest. It’s as if I know what it is but I push it back.’” (Josipovici, *The Echo Chamber*, 1980: 114).

Amnesia, old age, convalescence and frailty are the features that seem to be recurrently connected with remembrance in Josipovici. But, in *Everything Passes*, in *Migrations* or in the short novel, *Distances*, there is yet another aspect of memory acts – the bond of memory and the body. In *Everything Passes*, an old man keeps walking in his room; in *Migrations* an old man keeps walking in the streets, stopping, resuming his walk, falling, standing up; in *Distances*, a woman comes back to her hometown and keeps walking back and forth, without any apparent goal.

It would seem that in all these novels, two elements are brought to the foreground: (a) on the one hand, it seems that the bodily activity – the need to be on the move – is to be associated with remembrance; (b) on the other, the indeterminacy of memory seems to be both compensated by and resulting in such bodily activity as a means of overcoming some indefinite trauma.

Nothing really happens in these novels. They seem to be abstract stories, somehow like in ancient allegories – actions symbolically pointing to more than the sheer plot. The walking and all the false-starts signify time, passing, or even exile, and the body becomes the *locus* of traumatic reminiscence, as though remembrance consisted in projecting trauma onto the corporeal. In his collection of essays, *Touch*, Josipovici describes the concept of “kinetic melody,” aka *proprioception*, i.e. a phenomenon of bodily – when disrupted by an accident, one suddenly becomes aware of one’s body and has to strive to regain the memory of it, that is to say the *un*-remembered naturalness of the body⁴. In other words, the bodily memory is the ability to forget some of one’s gestures. Josipovici also speaks of the “therapy of distance” and the healing properties of pilgrimage⁵. It is no coincidence that so many characters in his works are shown to move around without specific goals. Endless movement is not only geared to the endeavour to retrieve memory, but it is, as such, a form of alleviating painful, traumatic, albeit absent and irretrievable, reminiscences. Being on the move – which takes on Jewish

⁴ Josipovici refers to Sacks and Luria and his studies on memory (Luria, 1996).

⁵ Josipovici refers to the notion of “thérapie de la distance.”

overtones in *Distances* in relation to exile⁶ – is the paradox between the necessary forgetfulness, being able to turn over a new leaf, to forget, and the necessary remembrance through gesture, for not moving would be falling into oblivion, thus losing the sense of onself:

Abraham. My ancestor. He was told to change and he changed. [...] He was told to get up and go, he says. And so he did. After him we have always been ready to get up and go. [...] When I sit here, with you, or by myself, I lose any sense of myself. I am not sure if I have already been here before or even if I am really here now. At least when I walk, she says, I know I am walking. I know something is happening. (Josipovici, *Distances*, 1987: 181-206)

In a similar way, *In a Hotel Garden*, memory becomes a need that is revealed through walking. An Englishwoman from Constantinople, Lily, decides to trace back her past by revisiting the place her grandmother had visited years before. The place is a hotel garden near Siena. Reminiscence takes on an existential value related to the character's sense of identity, so that the travel raises a simple question: "Who am I?" (Josipovici, *Hotel Garden*, 1993: 29). First, the answer seems self-evident – *I am what I can remember I am*. But then, the question of Diaspora makes the matters more complicated. Facing elusive memory, the subject states: "I'm not anything" (Josipovici, *Hotel Garden*, 1993: 40). Pilgrimage, migration and movement are part and parcel of the quest of identity building up out of reminiscence. But then, the *chronotope*⁷ of memory – the *topos* of the garden – does not allow the character to know more. She does not find out anything, and the only aim of the pilgrimage to the hotel garden is the very act of going and the very gesture of trying to remember and not the object of that memory as such.

Another example is the story of Martha, a widow, whose son goes to war. The story is called "Waiting," and memory crystallizes precisely within the ordinary act of nothingness – empty waiting – as a token of purposeless, bodily reminiscence. Martha bids her son goodbye: "Martha, a widow, kissed her son first on the forehead and then on either cheek, both eyes, the nose, the chin, the ears and the mouth. She held him for a moment, then pushed him away from her." (Josipovici, *In the Fertile Land*, 1987: 55). Then, Martha's ordinary gesture turns into a bodily *litany* that symbolizes an obsessive memory translating into a maniac gesture by which she reproduces a foregone act and symbolically brings it back to life on an everyday basis. Memory here is a form of constant resurrection – representing absence through an obsessive displaced presence:

⁶ For an interesting discussion of the theme of Jewish exile, in keeping with the notions of dispersal and separation, see Attias (2010:15-28).

⁷ I refer to Bakhtine's concept of *chronotope* as a time-space construct (Bakhtine, 1987: 235-398).

After that, each morning, before she got out of bed, and each night, before she turned over on her side—the position in which she found it easiest to sleep—she said aloud to herself: forehead, cheeks, eyes, nose chin, ears, arms, legs, hands, feet; shoulders, back, chest, stomach, arms, legs, hands, feet; shoulders, back, chest, stomach, arms, legs, hands, feet. (Josipovici, *In the Fertile Land*, 1987: 55)

The restless waiting is at one with this ordinary absence of a son within the context of obsessive, anxious “counting” and “memorizing” (Josipovici, *In the Fertile Land*, 1987: 56). The frantic repetition is suddenly interrupted when in her daily calculations Martha loses track of a ladle. The missing object disrupts her ordinary bodily memory and makes her give up counting, giving way to mad search. Then, one day she dreams of God. Clad in a white robe, her god has lost one of his arms. Memory as a projection of absence onto an object transforms into a dream-like confabulation, giving away the havoc wreaked with the individual.

The subject grappling with memory is also depicted through the prism of family weight. Here, too, the failure in coming to terms with memory is at the core of the text. In the “Death of the Word,” it is the fatherly figure—depicted as a looming presence crushing the individual—that provokes amnesia and repression. Like in Kafka, on whose writings Josipovici has commented in his critical essays⁸, the fatherly figure and its death are conceived of as a traumatic, “catastrophic” event. “Death of the Word” is typically a reminiscence narrative, structured around a simple statement: “I remember” (Josipovici, *In the Fertile Land*, 1987, 7). Facing involuntary memory of a father, the first-person narrator, struggles with the weight of memory, described as an “[...] ambiguous mixture of pleasure and terror, for is it not what we all most deeply long for and also what we fear above all else, to be annihilated by the father who begot us?” (Josipovici, *In the Fertile Land*, 1987: 8).

But then, like in “Waiting,” memory is too heavy to bear, like in “After,” reminiscence is depicted through repetition and variation, and it is wrecked by contradictions, and metafictional or even metaleptic narration: “I remember nothing. No wife. No sons. No autumn days or ruined kettles.” (Josipovici, *In the Fertile Land*, 1987: 13). Remembrance is subverted by the act of writing itself: “I see that I do after all have a father. He is the first sentence I wrote down.” (Josipovici, *In the Fertile Land*, 1987: 13). The spiral of the text that turns on itself presents the reader with a major paradox, which is memory being annihilated by writing about reminiscence: “For now it is clear to me that these so-called memories which have come to me in the wake of that initial sentence have had only one purpose: to oust my father from his pre-eminent position, to annihilate him.” (Josipovici, *In the Fertile Land*, 1987: 13). It is to the construction of the writerly self within the framework of individual

⁸ See Josipovici (*Text and Voice*, 1992:...)

ordinary trauma and memories of it that the text gives precedence: “[...] then what am I and where am I? I am only this sentence, hesitating, uncertain, with nowhere to go and nothing to say any more.” (Josipovici, *In the Fertile Land*, 1987: 13).

Similarly, another short story in the collection, “The Bitter End,” also resorts to such narrative ambiguity predicated on reminiscence. A man is depicted lying in his bed “his body under the covers” (Josipovici, *In the Fertile Land*, 1987: 114), “high up above the city” (Josipovici, *In the Fertile Land*, 1987: 103), in a closed room, whose windows cannot be opened. He is being attended to by a nurse. The eighty-five-year-old man is undoubtedly gravely ill and is probably living the last moments of his life in a hospital room. The coffin-like confinement and immobility contrast with fragmentary scenes depicting early autumn walks in a wood in company of his mother (Josipovici, *In the Fertile Land*, 1987: 103), so that the fragments might resemble reminiscence. But then, here too, memory is undermined as a fictional structure when an intrusive writer-character is shown to be imagining the story in question. This metaleptic phenomenon – that is to say a breach of narrative levels⁹ – makes remembrance all the more ambiguous, drawing parallels between old-age memory and fiction-writing. The ambivalence is reinforced by the vision of the past as a fluid, elusive entity that “trickle[s] away” (Josipovici, *In the Fertile Land*, 1987: 113), or “slips away” (Josipovici, *In the Fertile Land*, 1987: 113). The story itself appears as a slippery, fluid, spiral-like structure: “Read it one way, it’s one story. Read it another, it’s another. First it’s about him. A man dying. Then it’s about me. I cannot speak. Not openly. If I speak it will be something else. Not this. It will no longer be about the failure of the will to live, about the final refusal to speak. So it has to be about him.” (Josipovici, *In the Fertile Land*, 1987: 111).

What reminiscence and writing have in common is this striving for an elusive pattern – a presence about to emerge. This form of deconstruction further highlights the self-erasing attempts at remembrance.

The portrayal of a war victim in “Memories of a Mirrored Room in Hamburg,” published in *In the Fertile Land*, is an intermedial case of remembrance story. The text presents us with bits and pieces of dialogues between two characters. The fragments are constantly repeated. The text dwells on snaps of visions or memories. One of the main operating modes is mirroring. From the very start, fragments are shown to reflect each other, creating a visual layout: “Six times mirrored in the room: a round, glass-topped table; a vase; a single lily; a bottle; two glasses; a chair; a man in uniform without his cap, a naked woman on his knee.”

⁹ See Genette, *Métalepse*, 2004.

(Josipovici, *In the Fertile Land*, 1987: 23). The staging takes after Otto Dix's painting, *Erinnerungen an die Spiegelsäle von Brüssel* (*Memory of the Mirrored Halls of Brussels*) thus construing a form of *ekphrasis*. The intermedial dimension allows us to point to the representation of war, bearing parallels with Dix's depictions of WWI. Two themes intermingle in both Dix's painting and Josipovici's text: (a) one is related to the war and the trenches; (b) the other one to eroticism. Reminiscence is here predicated on utmost fragmentation and amputation of the subject who not only fails to verbalize its object – the trauma ("There was no, he says. I did not." [Josipovici, *In the Fertile Land*, 1987: 23]) –, but whose self-integrity is compromised as well: "Did not. Am not." (Josipovici, *In the Fertile Land*, 1987, 26). The self vanishes within its reminiscence, dispossessed of its "I," and what remains, once the object and the subject have been elided, is the mere negation of the verb shown through its multiple mirrorings: *did not/am not*.



Otto Dix, *Erinnerungen an die Spiegelsäle von Brüssel*, 1920, 124 x 80,4 cm, oil on canvas, Paris, Centre Pompidou.

Conclusion

The question of impossible memory conceived of as trauma seems all-pervasive in Josipovici's work. As a conclusion, I would like to refer to Josipovici's interrogation of memory as commemoration. Interestingly, Josipovici expressed his view on memory in his essay "Memory: Too Little/Too Much," published in *The Singer on the Shore*:

Too much and too little, the compulsive return to personal and communal traumas on the one hand, total amnesia on the other, are both examples of malfunctioning. [...] We need to recognize our own weakness,

our propensity to use the idea of the Holocaust as a form of masochism, to read books about it, to visit its sites, to attend lectures on it, at least partly as a way of testing our ability to imagine horror or even experiencing it vicariously. (Josipovici, *The Singer on the Shore*, 2006: 287)

As early as the 1980s, the author published a short story, called, “He”. The text is structured as an act of commemoration, a sort of elegy for a deceased friend. But what comes to the fore is the futility of such a commemorative piece of writing, its impossibility to do justice to the reality of death itself, becoming, instead, a form of betrayal. The piece eludes the narrator. The style refuses to conform to the subject matter and the choice of suitable narrative voice – he, I or you? – seems to be an insurmountable issue. The question, then, is that of the relationship between the commemorator and the commemorated, question of subject within the context of an act of remembrance: “But what end can there be for a memory or a lament? And what part of space can the survivors be said to occupy? Where am I?” (Josipovici, *In the Fertile Land*, 1987: 72). The paradox of memory lies in the fact that, whereas forgetting would seem as a betrayal, remembering is but noise: “For if too much silence is an error then so is too much noise [...]. Without the first step, the second was impossible, without the second the first would indeed be mere self-indulgence” (Josipovici, *In the Fertile Land*, 1987: 73). Commemoration here seems to be doomed to failure stemming from self-indulgence, self-centeredness or even voyeurism. So that the text as an act of remembrance is deconstructed by its own inadequacy – its inescapable deficiency:

The impulse of art, he now understood, is right: the impulse towards form, towards the articulation of pain and loss. But while recognizing this, we should also recognize the falsehood inherent in such articulation. To speak it, to write it, is always to get it wrong. (Josipovici, *In the Fertile Land*, 1987: 74)

And it is the deconstruction itself that remains the only alternative to inadequacy: “To grasp our inability to pay our true respects to the dead is perhaps a form of respect.” (Josipovici, *In the Fertile Land*, 1987: 74).

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