

# LITERATURE AND HISTORICAL CATASTROPHES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, A NEW FOCUS IN COMPARATIVE STUDY<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** || The article reflects on the relevance of studies about literature and twentieth century historical catastrophes for Comparative Literature, particularly in regard to testimonial literature of concentration camps and exile. The article explores antecedents in disciplines such as Literature and History and Literature of Exile. It also proposes to approach testimonial literature from two comparative perspectives that enrich the analysis of texts: interdisciplinarity and transversality.

**Keywords** || Comparative Literature | History | Historical Catastrophes | Concentration Camps | Exile | Testimony.

## 0. Introduction

Several years ago, comparative studies began to study the links between literature and historical catastrophes, including political, social and cultural catastrophes, which occurred throughout the twentieth century in various socio-cultural circumstances.<sup>2</sup> A possible field of study which is being considered in this relation is testimonial literature, a type of writing that relates to the experiences of witnesses living during military conflicts, totalitarian regimes and dictatorships of the twentieth century, such as the two World Wars, the National Socialist regime in Germany, the Civil War and subsequent Franco dictatorship in Spain, Stalinism in Russia, and the military dictatorships of the 60s and 70s in the South Cone and in other countries of Latin America, to name but some examples. The accounts that make up this literature tell of the repressive systems instilled by State powers, which operated through different forms of imprisonment and exclusion, like exile and concentration camps. This also included so-called 'internment camps', 'secret detention camps' or 'extermination camps', according to the political and historical circumstances in which they were established. All these situations affected the constitutional rights and the integrity of the people, who were used as the subject of the literature and who gave rise to testimonial literature.

This article supports the proposal that the study on testimonial literature of concentration camps, written during or after the exile of the authors, belongs to the themes inherent to Comparative Literature. Bearing in mind the individual characteristics of these texts, they can be studied in a transversal and interdisciplinary way, a perspective used in a comparative study method. This method enriches the interpretation of these texts. In the same way, given that the literature on exile currently constitutes an important area of investigation in the comparative field, this testimonial literature, which recounts the past of the witness-author in the concentration camp, could be considered like a sub-system of this bigger whole.

### 1. The twentieth century, a century of historical catastrophes: the testimonial literature of concentration camps

The twentieth century was the period of the biggest historical, political and social catastrophes, which devastated a large part of the society in many places around the world. The Western world faced two world wars and different civil wars, as well as dictatorships and totalitarian governments in Europe, Latin America, Asia and Africa. The consequences of these catastrophes resulted in a series

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#### NOTES

1 | This article arose from a research project entitled "Exilio, campos de concentración y testimonio: aportes comparatistas para el estudio de la narrativa testimonial concentracionaria" en España y Argentina (siglo XX)", supported by Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas de Argentina (CONICET, Argentina), starting May 2012.

2 | Although a study which tackles the theme of literature and historical catastrophes should extend to warlike conflicts and concentration camp situations in recent years, this article is limited to totalitarian systems and dictatorships that continued in different contexts throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

of events that profoundly damaged the integrity of people as regards their constitutional rights. In other words, the consequences resulted in exiles, migrations, repressions, tortures, and genocides.

The culminating point of the century was the years of the German Third Reich, when the Nazi extermination took place. This was a systematic and industrial assassination, the magnitude of which changed the course of humanity. Zygmunt Bauman explained that the Holocaust confirmed the failure of the project of modernity, an era that stood for certain progress of a civilized society driven by the State. Progress meant the complete intelligibility, availability and manipulation of people, in such a way that all that was known and familiar had to be left excluded. According to Bauman:

en cuanto el proceso civilizador completase su labor, no quedarían rincones oscuros, agujeros negros de ignorancia, áreas grises de ambivalencia ni guaridas inmundas en las que pudiera refugiarse la incertidumbre más salvaje. De hecho, el Estado moderno tenía como objetivo gestionar los asuntos humanos mediante la exclusión de todo aquello que resultara imposible de administrar y que, por lo tanto, fuera indeseable. (Bauman, 2010: 22)

The determination of the Nazi's for dominance and for the segregation of all that was alien or different to them, and therefore undesirable, fuelled the development of nationalist movements in the twentieth century. The most extreme nationalist political movement implemented was Adolf Hitler's under the German State during the Second World War. Given that their objective was the systematic elimination of an entire community, it has been defined by Bauman as a 'categorical assassination' without precedent, that is, the physical annihilation of men, women and children because they simply belonged (in reality or by attribution) to a category of people deemed despicable and for this reason, were sentenced to death (2010: 22). This category not only included Jews, but also all those who were destined to be exterminated: gypsies, homosexuals, the handicapped, and political prisoners, among others.

During German National Socialism and other dictatorial governments in Europe and Latin America, there was a recurrent presence of a phenomenon which linked all these catastrophes. This was the 'concentration camp', a place where subjects were imprisoned and deprived of their constitutional rights. The concentration camp came into existence when the 'state of exception', created for periods of emergency or extraordinary situations, became the norm. As Giorgio Agamben explains, it is "una porción de territorio que se sitúa por fuera del orden jurídico normal, pero que no por eso es simplemente un espacio exterior"; rather it is included in the legal regulations by means of its own exclusion. Agamben concludes by stating that "lo que de esta forma queda incorporado sobre todo en el orden jurídico

es el estado de excepción” (2010:39). Because of this characteristic, the concentration camp did not start out as a prison system or from ordinary legal laws; rather, it originated from Martial Law. In *Si esto es un hombre*, Primo Levi recounts an anecdote which clarifies this definition:

Y precisamente: empujado por la sed le he echado la vista encima a un gran carámbano que había por fuera de una ventana al alcance de la mano. Abrí la ventana, arranqué el carámbano, pero inmediatamente se ha acercado un tipo alto y gordo que estaba dando vueltas afuera y me lo ha arrancado brutalmente.

- Warum?- le pregunté en mi pobre alemán

- Hier ist kein warum (aquí no hay ningún porqué)- me contestó, echándome dentro de un empujón.

La explicación es sencilla, aunque revuelva el estómago: en este lugar está prohibido todo, no por ninguna razón oculta sino porque el campo se ha creado para ese propósito. (Levi, 2005: 50)

As Primo Levi illustrates, the arbitrariness and the suspension of the ordinary logic of coexistence are the constituent elements of the concentration camp. The Argentinean testimonial narrative about secret detention centers during the last military dictatorship (1976-1983) also described the concentration space with these characteristics. *Desaparecido. Memorias de un cautivero* (2011), by Mario Villani and Fernando Reati, establishes the differences between a legal prison and a concentration camp:

En las cárceles legales por lo general hay una clara demarcación entre el territorio de los presos y el espacio de los guardias: estos raramente entran en los pabellones donde viven aquellos. En los campos clandestinos, esas fronteras no existen [...] En la vida diaria de los campos los guardias se comportan con los prisioneros como si fueran insectos a los que pueden aplastar, pero también pueden, de a ratos, tratar a los que someten a trabajo esclavo como si fueran compañeros: juegan con ellos al truco, les cuentan cosas de su vida, cantan y tocan la guitarra con ellos. (Villani, 2011: 49)

Another situation that restricts certain civil rights is the forced exit from a country of some section of its society, that is, exile, due to the ideological and political confrontation between the citizen and the hegemonic power. If the exit does not happen, people remains in a vulnerable position and face possible reprisals that limit their freedom, and on occasions, threaten their lives. This is affirmed by Javier Sánchez Zapatero, who differentiates exile from other situations of removal from ones native country:

[El exiliado] no sólo está obligado a vivir lejos de su país, sino que además no puede volver mientras persistan las causas que provocaron su marcha. La imposición, directa o indirecta, de la partida y la imposibilidad del retorno se convierten así en las características que diferencian el exilio de cualquier otro proceso migratorio. (2008: 437)<sup>3</sup>

## NOTES

3 | Francisco Caudet has analysed the condition of the exiled person and concluded that “caracteriza al refugiado la falta real, insalvable –es la condena que le toca arrostrar–, de libertad para vivir en su tierra, siendo ésta una diferencia que se considera cualitativa (...) respecto al emigrante tradicional” (2005: 281).

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Exile reveals a conflict between the persons' bond of belonging to their country and their ideological stance, which is contrary or divergent to that of the institutional political power. Before the imbalance of power, people see themselves forcibly expelled from the confines of their country and forced to begin life again in another one. This instance of incorporation in a new place creates endless conflicts that come from the feeling of territorial dislocation. The effects of this dislocation have repercussions in all their areas of life and their future.

Both the concentration camp and exile constitute experiences that change the normality of the subjects' life and threaten their moral and human integrity. This is due to the fact that these subjects or 'witnesses' have been torn from their place of belonging and confined in another place in which they do not want to establish a bond. To be stripped of their point of reference damages their own identity. For these subjects, writing usually becomes a form of resistance, a means of escape and a possible way to explain the traumatic experience.

Both situations, the time in the concentration camp and the time in exile, usually combined, create a type of writing that narrates the personal experiences of the witnesses, and places the survivors in the centre of the story. This type of writing is called 'testimonial literature' and is made up of heterogeneous genres, works and authors. Broadly speaking, the body of this type of literature is composed of texts with various degrees of fictionality. This spans from what you could call zero degree of writing, which tends to contain the most referencing, to total fictional elaboration or the esthetical realisation of the experience, in which the author filters some autobiographical points. In the field of the literature on the Shoah, the work of Primo Levi, *Si esto es un hombre* (1947) is an example of zero degree writing; while Imre Kertész's novel *Sin destino* (2002) is an example of the second type. Other examples of this diversity can be seen in all the testimonies on French concentration camps, which have the most reported works, such as *Los perdedores: memorias de un exiliado español* (1973), by Vicente Fillol, or *Manuscrito cuervo* (1951), by Max Aub, in which the author uses many literary sources and aesthetic devices to narrate the experience of a concentration camp. In this way, this literature is conveyed in various genres and subgenres: short stories, novels, poetry, theatrical works, essays, etc., written by men and women of different ages and from different locations and social backgrounds.

The continual presence of autobiographical features in these narratives allows testimonial literature to be included in the genres that form part of the so-called 'literature of the self'. However, as regards Hispanic studies on autobiography, the concept of

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'testimony' still is not included in the repertoires of autobiographical genres. José Romera Castillo has divided them in the following way: autobiographies relating to fiction, autobiographical poems, autobiographical novels (interviews and conversations with authors), autobiographical essays, travels books, chronicles, reports, memoirs, personal evocations, daguerreotypes, pictures, etc. (1993: 11). Anna Caballé alludes to autobiography, self-portrait, memoirs, intimate diaries, and letters (1995: 40). In *Como la vida misma. Repertorio de modalidades para la escritura autobiográfica* (2004), Francisco Puertas Moya limits the study to autobiographies, memoirs, diaries and daily journals, letters, confessions, and other lesser-known modalities (self-portraits, travel books, obituaries, conferences, etc.). This observation is interesting when trying to gauge in which area the majority of these discourses have transcended the most—for example in legal and historical areas—and for which reasons, something that exceeds the scope of this study.

Testimonial literature has several particular characteristics worth mentioning. Firstly, its objective is to recount a significant and particular experience of subjects who have suffered a traumatic rupture in their personal life and which has therefore caused a change the patterns of reference on which they based their identity. From this, as Pollak and Heinrich explain, “los testimonios deben ser considerados como verdaderos instrumentos de reconstrucción de la identidad, y no solo como relatos factuales, limitados a una función informativa” (1986: 4). This restorative function of writing is revealed in many testimonial works, like in the case of *Una sola muerte numerosa* (1996), by Nora Strejilevich, survivor of the Argentinean concentration camps, in which the author states: “Perdimos una versión de nosotros mismos y nos reescribimos para sobrevivir” (2007: 150). The reflexive use of the verb “reescribir” [to rewrite] alludes precisely to the regenerative capacity of the writing, in the way that it deals with the trauma of memories and captures the experience on paper. It can also open the reaffirmation of landmarks in their personal story.

Secondly, testimonial literature places the character of the witness-survivor in the centre of interest, and the storyline is organised around the personal experience of the subject. Because of this, one of the main problems of the analysis of this corpus is the construction of the narrator and the discursive strategies used in this literary representation. In spite of the strength with which the first person narrator takes control of the discourse, arbitrary movements into the third person are frequent. These movements into third person seek to make a more distant and less subjective account of the vivid events. An example of these narrative movements is seen in various Spanish testimonies about the experience of concentration camps in France, such as the text by Vicente Fillol mentioned previously, *Los perdedores*, or in *El peso de la derrota* (1974), by Antonio Sánchez

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Bravo and Antonio Tellado Vázquez. These peculiarities signal a notable difference between the testimony and other autobiographical genres, given that, unlike the properly named autobiography or the diary, the testimony recounts an exceptional experience which has marked a clear before and after in the life of the witness.

Thirdly, this literature acquires a significant value in the social processes of constructing memory, due to the fact that, even though the accounts usually allude to a private and individual experience, they are interconnected with the experiences of a collective group or community that has seen itself damaged, imprisoned or excluded, and who is represented in the text. The testimonies, therefore, fulfil a pedagogical function in the way that they warn society not to repeat the events, and they become tools at the service of memory. In the case of testimonial literature of concentration camps, it is about “recordar a los que ya no están, a los que perecieron en los campos, y hacer recordar a los demás” (Sánchez Zapatero, 2010: 96). Enzo Traverso deepens this potential of the testimony and interprets it as a way of direct social intervention used to achieve social justice:

testimoniar no sólo significa cumplir una necesaria función pedagógica con las generaciones nacidas tras la Segunda Guerra Mundial sino, más en general, cumplir una útil labor de «moralización de la historia», pues la memoria de la ofensa es una condición esencial para restablecer la justicia. (2001: 192)

It is impossible to forget Primo Levi when considering the value of such writing as it constituted the moral essence of his work and his mission as a survivor. In the appendix of *Si esto es un hombre*, he reflects on the reasons why he did not die at Auschwitz:

El hecho de haber sobrevivido y de haber vuelto indemne se debe en mi opinión a que tuve suerte [...] Quizás también me haya ayudado mi interés, que nunca flaqueó, por el ánimo humano y la voluntad no sólo de sobrevivir (común a todos), sino de sobrevivir con el fin preciso de relatar las cosas a las que habíamos asistido y que habíamos soportado. (2005: 245)

## **2. Testimonial literature on concentration camps written during or after exile in the comparative sphere**

### **2.1 Antecedents in the area of Comparative Studies: Literature, history and the literature on exile**

Comparative Literature considers its object of study, the literature of the world, in connection with the socio-historical events in which it occurred and circulated. It has therefore been interested, since its beginnings, with studying literature in relation with other areas of knowledge and human development. One of these areas is history,



as some of the principal theorists of the discipline have noted. In 1961, Henry Remak noted that:

Comparative Literature is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts (e.g. painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, history, the social sciences, religion, etc., on the other. In brief, it is the comparison of one literature with another or others, and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression. (1971: 1)

The interdisciplinary nature of Comparative Literature, reflected in this definition, was established as one of its methodological trademarks. This interdisciplinary nature was made visible in several of the proposed definitions, amongst them, that of Pichois and Rousseau, who described it as “el arte metódico, mediante la indagación de lazos de analogía, de parentesco y de influencia, de acercar la literatura a otros dominios de la expresión o del conocimiento” (1969: 198). Years later, in the prologue of *Teoría y praxis de la literatura comparada* (1984), Schmeling made reference to the expansive nature of comparison itself, and highlighted its intrinsic interdisciplinary value:

el hecho de que su material empírico se encuentra repartido entre diversas literaturas nacionales y artes y ámbitos científicos, que está familiarizada con campos de trabajo muy diferentes y que, por encima de ello y en cuanto es una «área», tiene que aclarar sus relaciones con otras disciplinas afines. (1984: 5)

History is one of the areas of human knowledge with which literature has a close bond. Contacts, frictions and dialogues between the domains of history and literature are greatly valued in the comparative approach. In the 1980s, Daniel-Henri Pageaux alerted the academic community to the necessity of carrying out certain methodological renovations. Structuralism and New Criticism had imposed a type of analysis which concentrated principally on the text, or, as Pageaux explains “une attention immodérée au texte, et plus encore à la ‘clôture’ du texte a trop longtemps estompé ou mis sous le boisseau l’union féconde de la production textuelle et de la dimension historique ou culturelle” (1986: 66). To restate their proposal, but also to confirm that the study of the relationship between literature and history in the comparative sphere continued, they went on to cite a series of themes which had been tackled in the comparative sphere.

La volonté d’ouvrir la littérature comparée à l’interdisciplinarité, la réhabilitation d’une perspective historique, voire historienne en littérature; la liaison possible entre l’esthétique et la perspective historique; l’esthétique de la réception comme relance historique, sociale de l’étude littéraire... (1986: 67)

Nowadays, Comparative Literature has not exhausted the approaches

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connecting literature and history. In 2007, Emmanuel Bouju portrayed the situation of these studies and offered an alternative to the different domains of investigation that connect both areas of human knowledge. Restating the words of his predecessors, the author defends the idea that current investigation must show its capacity to think and to practise a close union between the textual analysis and the questionings of intellectual cultural, political and social history. In this way, he notes that comparatism depends on the work of other disciplines that complement it. He mentions historiographical, social, and anthropological sciences, but also philosophy, linguistics, cognitive and social psychology and psychoanalysis. (Boulu, 2007: 166-167)

Another antecedent of Comparative Literature which allows to incorporate the relationship between literature and historical catastrophes in its repertoire of relevant themes is the discipline's legitimation of studies on exile literature. In 1973, Egon Schwarz, an Austrian exile in different Latin American countries, noticed the popularity that literature on German exile had acquired in these years. Faced with this evidence, he wondered about the specificity of the literature on exile. On this point, he explained that it is necessary "dejar valer solo como literatura de exilio aquellos obras que conscientemente explican sus motivos, condiciones y consecuencias del exilio o que inconscientemente reflejan estos fenómenos de un modo significativo" (1973:158). This consideration highlights the significant value of the traumatic experience suffered by the subject, not only because of the effects its produced in the life of people torn from their place of belonging, but also because the subject and his or her work has been transformed by this life in a foreign place.

Schwarz's definition appeals to the comparative discipline to identify and value the literature on exile, given that it focuses on interpreting the significant gaps emerge from the contact between two cultures. From the Hispanic academic sphere, Javier Sánchez Zapatero also proposes the use of a comparatist view to reflect on the literature on exile. Otherwise, he warns,

los tradicionales marcos epistemológicos sincrónicos y nacionales se antojan insuficientes para llevar a cabo el estudio de una literatura de alcance multiseccular e intercultural cuyas características se repiten de forma recurrente en la obra de autores tan dispares y tan distantes en el tiempo [...]. (2008: 451-452)

## **2.2 The current state of research on literature and historical catastrophes**

In his panoramic of the connections between literature and history, Emmanuel Boulu acknowledges some recent doctoral dissertations

that have been useful in shaping this field of investigation. Amongst these, he mentions works on concentration camps, Hiroshima, and the war in the former Yugoslavia. These themes represent the most contemporary trends in comparative investigation and, Bouju adds, they have a particular capacity to tackle the most sensitive issues in the field, as they are set in the confluence of the aforementioned camps, the disciplines and the related theories. (2007: 171)<sup>4</sup>

The theme of a relationship between literature and historical, political, social and cultural catastrophes in the twentieth century constitute one of the current lines of investigation in Comparative Literature. From the French academic sphere, Catherine Coquio has commented on the recent interest for this theme and advised that one of the options is the comparative study of works derived from different events, be it the violence of war, colonialisations, totalitarian regimes or genocides, which are aesthetically comparable (Coquio, 2007: 174). From the Hispanic sphere, Javier Sánchez Zapatero has studied the body of testimonial literature that emerged in Europe from the totalitarian regimes of the 1930s and 1940s. His comparative perspective is seen in the description of these regimes. He explains that “es ésta una literatura que nace de una experiencia concreta, pero que se une con un marco intercultural determinado por la universidad del fenómeno concentracionario” (2010: 31). This international perspective is also seen by Claudia Nickel, who explains the following: “[la] literatura ‘concentracionaria’ no se restringe a ser un fenómeno nacional, o sea, no pertenece exclusivamente a una literatura nacional, un concepto que es, a mi entender, demasiado restrictivo para captar y comprender la complejidad de esta literatura”. (2010: 68)

Several renowned academic publications had begun to incorporate these perspectives, like for example the journal *Arcadia*, a global source of reference for comparative studies, which devoted its 2010 issue to the theme of the representation of cultural traumas in theatre and cinema. In the introduction, the editors Frederik Le Roy, Christel Stapaert and Sofie Verdoot highlighted this theme in relation to the Holocaust and 9/11, among others, and stated their desire to focus on how cultural traumas are experienced in theatre and cinema (Le Roy, Stalpaert and Verdoot, 2010: 255). These academic gestures reflect the current preoccupation of comparative studies for testimonial literature. This has become a source of interesting themes as well as problems for the intellectual comparative community.

The study of testimonial literature on concentration camps also constitutes a contribution to reflections on literature on exile, a rapidly expanding area in the comparative domain.<sup>5</sup> These authors who have wanted to narrate their experiences in the concentration camps have frequently been involved in a situation of exile, which brought

## NOTES

4 | Amongst the themes noted by Boulu, “la question du politique, à travers le sort accordé à l’événement historique comme fracture, bouleversement ou catastrophe politiques...” and “la question de la mémoire –dont la place et les usages apparaissent non seulement comme de nature éminemment politique, mais aussi comme le lieu principal de la rivalité entre historiographie et littérature” (2007: 171).

5 | In Argentinean comparative studies, the Centre for Comparative Literature at Universidad Nacional de Cuyo sticks out for its bibliographical resources on literature on exile. An example is the special issue on this subject in the *Boletín de Literatura Comparada* of 1986-1987, which highlights its importance for comparative literature. Nicolás Dornheim explains that “la literatura del exilio constituye uno de los surcos más antiguos –si bien a menudo no reconocido y por lo demás usufructuado por las literaturas nacionales– de la literatura comparada” (1986-1987: 8) This issue contains various results on research carried out by Lila Bujaldón de Esteves, Nicolás Dornheim, Elena Duplancic de Elgueta, Emilia de Zuleta y Blanca Arancibia, among others, who have researched Argentina in literature on exile, multiple exiles that include German, Spanish and other less studied origins like Croatia. Starting in 2010, the Centre for Comparative Literature offers a Postgraduate Course on ‘Encuentros con la Literatura Comparada’. The Centre promotes debates on traditional themes in the discipline and discussions on the most current problems.

about a change for them, a rupture in their lives and a dislocation in the cultural norms that formed their identity. Because the testimonies have been written during or after these experiences, many of the problems that affect the literature on exile—the adaptation to a new space, exile as a place of production, the crisis of the ‘personal’ and the ‘foreign’, the temporal rupture between normal life and life in the new space, among others<sup>6</sup>—are manifested in texts on concentration camps.

### 3. Transversality and interdisciplinarity in concentration camp testimonial literature

According to the antecedents noted above, and taking into account the current state of research on literature and historical catastrophes in the twentieth century, one question prevails: Why is Comparative Literature interested in the study of testimonial literature on concentration camps? The answer points directly to the object of the comparative study, which aims to cross geographical, linguistic, cultural, and methodological borders. The discipline has become subject to the criteria of transversality and interdisciplinarity. Testimonial literature of concentration camps fulfils both these criteria on different level.

Firstly, this literature recounts experiences on concentration camp and exile that took place in various socio-cultural contexts throughout the twentieth century. The transversality of the object of study therefore can be considered on a geographical, historical and political level. In Europe, the end of the Spanish Civil War in 1939 confined thousands of civilians and soldiers to the so-called ‘internment camps’, which were opened to imprison them. These camps were located mainly in the south of France, in small towns like Argelès-Sur-Mer, Saint Cyprien and Barcarès. Shortly after, during the Second World War, the German National Socialist movement imposed a policy of concentration and extermination camps, which ended the lives of whole communities whose names echo in the minds of all humanity: Dachau, Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen, Auschwitz, Mauthausen etc. Stalinism in Russia also put into place a system of forced labour camps, the Gulag, which operated from the 1930s to the 1950s. Many people saw the last days of their lives in these labour camps. In South America, the military dictators who appeared in the 1970s in countries like Chile, Uruguay and Argentina, organized secret detention centres, also known as ‘concentration camps’ by witnesses. In these camps people were tortured and killed along with some thousands of men and women. Many survivors of all these traumatic experiences had decided to put their experiences on paper, creating complex and heterogeneous testimonial literature, written in

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#### NOTES

6 | Claudio Guillén has referred to this characteristic of literature on exile, which manifests that “el destierro conduce a ese destiempo –vocablo que ha empleado con acierto no un ensayista hispánico sino el escritor polaco Józef Wittlin– a ese *décalage* o desfase en los ritmos históricos de desenvolvimiento que habrá significado, para muchos, el peor de los castigos: la expulsión del presente; y por lo tanto del futuro- lingüístico, cultural, político- del país de origen” (Guillén, 1995: 141).

various languages and by different authors of many nationalities and geographical origins.

Although the Nazi extermination is considered a single historical event without precedent,<sup>7</sup> comparatist Andreas Huyssen has analysed it in relation to other temporally close political systems and describes it as a paradox in order to disassociate it from isolation and consecration:

Es precisamente el surgimiento del Holocausto como un *tropos* universal lo que permite que la memoria del Holocausto se aboque a situaciones específicamente locales, lejanas en términos históricos y diferentes en términos políticos respecto del acontecimiento original. En el movimiento trasnacional de los discursos, el Holocausto pierde su calidad de índice del acontecimiento histórico específico y comienza a funcionar como una metáfora de otras historias traumáticas y de su memoria. (2002: 17-18)

According to Huyssen, the groups of testimonies from concentration camps have similarities and differences that are appealing to Comparative Literature. The testimonies will also have as one of their objectives the abstraction of general categories of analysis, without avoiding particular characteristics from each area or historical, political, social and cultural circumstance in which these texts are made or circulate. Catherine Coquío also takes this position and is of the opinion that, although it would be inappropriate to compare historical events, it is possible and productive to work comparatively on poetic problems such as the limits of representation of testimonies and their literalness, which can be approached in a transversal way. (2007: 174)

As previously mentioned, concentration camps have acquired different names according to the place and the moment in which they happened: internment camps, extermination camps, secret detention centres... Claudia Nickel sums them up in her investigations from a comparative perspective and defends the international character of the camps:

Todos los tipos de campos comparten rasgos comunes. Su función principal es la exclusión de un grupo de personas, el cual es definido como «anormal» o «peligroso». Es un grupo que perturba la «normalidad» de una sociedad y por eso se crean zonas que cumplen la función de agrupar a los excluidos. (2010: 67)

However, in order to tackle a comparative study, it is necessary to bear in mind that each one of the expressions that defines the distinctive types of camps has a particular history. The expression 'concentration camp' is the most complex and for this reason, deserves special attention. Annette Wieviorka has traced its genealogy from its appearance, in 1901,<sup>8</sup> during the Boer Wars (1880 to 1902), to the camps opened and run by Hitler during the Second World War. Faced with the diversity of circumstances and events that the

## NOTES

7 | Primo Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz, supports this idea. In *Los hundidos y los salvados*, he notes that "(...) el sistema de campos de concentración nazi continúa siendo un unicum, en cuanto a magnitud y calidad. En ningún otro lugar o tiempo se ha asistido a un fenómeno tan imprevisto y tan complejo: nunca han sido extinguidas tantas vidas humanas en tan poco tiempo ni con una combinación tan lúcida de ingenio tecnológico, fanatismo y crueldad" (2005: 484).

8 | Javier Sánchez Zapatero notes that the first concentration camps appeared in colonial Cuba in 1885 and were opened by the Spaniards to "reconcentrar" [reconcentrate] country peasants in isolated areas and expropriate their lands, thus quieting down pro-independence groups who were rising up against the Crown. He highlights that the expression 'reconcentration' was replaced by 'concentration' by the English during the Boer Wars. (2010: 53)

phrase designated during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the author warns about its dangers:

L'expression «camp de concentration» est trop erratique pour permettre d'appréhender des phénomènes différents. La volonté de faire cadrer dans une définition préconçue des événements de nature différente, obéissant à des logiques différentes, risque d'interdire au bout du compte leur intelligence. (Wieviorka, 1997: 12)

The historical reality of South Africa at the beginning of the century differs notably from the circumstances of the late 1930s that caused the opening of the Nazi camps. Even though they formed part of the same system of elimination of a specific sector of society, the first generation of camps set up by Hitler (Dachau, Buchenwald, Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen, etc.) and the second (Auschwitz, Chelmno, Sobibor, Treblinka, etc.) also had different characteristics, especially as the later were meant to directly implement the Final Solution project, which was put in place in 1941 with the aim of exterminating the Jewish population. It is therefore a permanent danger to generalize the use of this concept, since the expression is associated directly with the Nazi deportation, with the risk of forgetting, as Wieviorka warns, that each historical experience has different causes and a particular logic. Nevertheless, an extended use of the concept 'concentration camp' goes beyond the sphere of German National Socialism and into other distinct linguistic and cultural areas.<sup>9</sup> Its use has been generalized to define other different historical realities, associated to these camps because of their use in totalitarian policies that reduced the civil and human rights of its victims. In any case, the adoption of a term entails a political positioning that the analyst must consider.

Secondly, it has been noted that Comparative Literature proposes an interdisciplinary perspective to the analysis of literary text. The testimonial literature on concentration camps has particular characteristics that require the analyst to adopt an interdisciplinary perspective; therefore, its transversality occurs also at a methodological level. In addition to theory, history and literary criticism, contributions from other areas of knowledge, such as history, philosophy and psychoanalysis, amongst others, strengthens and complements the philological study.

In the field of history, historiographical disciplines working with oral sources have been increasingly relevant, starting in the 1970s and to the present. These approaches have increasingly used testimonies as a key tool to access historical knowledge. In Spain, a landmark of research of Oral History of the Spanish Civil War was Ronald Fraser's study, entitled *Recuérdalo tú y recuérdalo a otros. Historia de la Guerra civil española*, firstly published in 1979, four years after the death

## NOTES

9 | The term 'concentration camp' reappears, for example, in Argentinean testimonial literature written by the survivors of secret detention centres. An example is *The little school. Tales of disappearance and survival in Argentina* by Alice Partnoy. In the cover of this book, Bobbie Ann Mason writes "Alicia Partnoy is a survivor of one of the 'little schools', the concentration camps for the 30,000 'disappeared in Argentina'" (Partnoy, 1986). In a 1997 article on testimonial narratives about imprisonment, Fernando Reati states, "Sólo así se explica la compleja estructura creada en Argentina, compuesta por campos de concentración y centros de tortura oficiales pero clandestinos..." (1997: 213).

of the dictator Francisco Franco. Containing hundreds of interviews conducted in Spain between 1973 and 1975, the volume proposes to consider the matter in a subjective way, that is, “la experiencia de las personas que participaron en los hechos”, underpinned with a historical positivist methodology. That is why oral history may be considered as “un intento de revelar el ambiente intangible de los acontecimientos, de descubrir el punto de vista y las motivaciones de los participantes” (Fraser, 2007: 17), able to complement and fill in the gaps left by traditional positivist approaches, which focus on written documents as sources of historical knowledge. Taking as a point of reference the 1962 trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, Annette Wieviorka has interpreted this growing role of witnesses as a process of democratization of the actors in the story (Wieviorka, 1998: 128). Wieviorka created a new concept of historiography based on the individuality and subjectivity of the actors involved in the events, and the internal focalization of the historical event. Comparative Literature shares with these perspectives the idea that the subject is placed at the centre of the scene. Therefore, creating a narrator and the strategies used for representation are two key problems in the analysis of testimonial literature of concentration camps.

Philosophy has also brought several concepts that could be interesting and useful to the comparative study. In the case of this particular literature, the theoretical developments on the ‘testimony’ are interesting, amongst which we find Jacques Derrida’s concept of a ‘forked structure’. For the philosopher, the testimonial is a utterance that

ne se contente pas de raconter, de rapporter, d’informer, de décrire, de constater –ce qu’il fait aussi–, il *fait* à l’instant ce qu’il *dit*, il ne se réduit pas essentiellement à un rapport, à une relation narrative ou descriptive, *c’est un acte... c’est d’abord un acte présent.* (1998: 44)

Testimonial discourse transcends simple information and description gathering to acquire a pragmatic value. It acts as an element of direct social intervention. Another particular aspect of the testimony is its singularity and relation with truth. This has been studied by philosopher Gianni Vattimo, who has explained that the testimony “evoca el *pathos* con el que el existencialismo ha considerado, a partir de Kierkegaard, la irrepetible existencia de lo singular, su peculiar e individualísima relación con la verdad, relación con la cual la persona está totalmente, y solo ella en el fondo, comprometida” (1999: 43). From this dissociation of the concept of ‘testimony’ from that of ‘truth’ stems the possibility of shedding the concept of proof, and, through literary analysis, it allows to study the ways of representation and symbolic elaboration of experience.

Psychoanalysis has developed studies on testimonial that are vital for

literary analysis. This theory observes that the testimonial discourse is reflected in conflicts that connect language and trauma. Writing becomes a necessary means of overcoming the trauma caused by the vivid experience, that is, a painful and distressing experience that is nonetheless repressed by the subject and cannot be related to his or her life. The word testimonial therefore acquires a therapeutic value in the way that it helps to heal trauma. As Lacapra explains, language contributes to the start of the process of returning to the past and describing the trauma. It can also “dar cabida a otros procesos vinculados con el juicio, con una responsabilidad limitada y un agenciamiento ético al menos” (2005: 108)

Thirdly, we should consider transversality at the level of *literary genre*, since testimonial literature of concentration camps acquires different discursive forms and is seen in various degrees of fictionality or aesthetic writing of the experience. If we take the case of Spanish testimonial writing on French concentration camps written by republican authors from 1939, it is possible to notice different types of works: poetry, like for example *Diario de Djelfa* (1944), by Max Aub; lyrical prose, *St Cyprien, plage...* (1942), by Manuel Andújar; novels, as in the case of *Destins* (1947), by Joan Cid i Mulet; short stories, amongst which the writings of Max Aub stand out, like “Manuscrito cuervo” (1949-1950) and those included in *Cuentos ciertos* (1955) and *No son cuentos* (1944); finally, theatrical works, such as *Morir por cerrar los ojos* (1944), again by Max Aub. All these texts are based in the autobiographical experience of the authors in the French camps and the exile in Mexico.

In addition, a large number of reports have been published that are dominated frequently by testimonies and memoirs that narrate in the first person the vivid experiences of the witnesses in French camps. They were not written with the intention of being literary works and have remained on the periphery of critical studies. Examples are works such as: *Argeles-Sur-Mer* (1940), by Jaime Espinar; *Alambradas: mis nueve meses por los campos de concentración de Francia* (1941), by Manuel Garcia Gerpe; *Entre alambradas* (1987), by Eulalio Ferrer; *Campo de concentración* (1939) (2003), by Lluís Ferran de Pol, among others. These authors published primarily in exile in Latin America. This wrongly named “literatura menor”,<sup>10</sup> which started to be published in the 1940s and has continued to develop in Spain and other countries arose very interesting questions that made people reflect on the strategies used to represent experience.

According to the diversity of discursive forms and levels of fiction in the works, a comparative study that questions the theme of literary genre will allow for deeper analysis on the number and heterogeneous ways of representation and contribute to the theoretical reflection on *testimony* and *testimonial function*. In the same way, this

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## NOTES

10 | In one of the first volumes on literature on republican exile, Sanz Villanueva explained: “No son pocos los libros narrativos del exilio que se muestran al crítico como expresión ocasional, no artística, de vivencias dramáticas. Con ellos hay que contar en una historia de este tema, pero su significación es escasa desde un punto de vista literario. Por el contrario, de la muy extensa nómina, aún incompleta, de narradores transterrados sólo unos cuantos, de un número previsiblemente muy superior, han superado ese carácter de escritores ocasionales y fortuitos” (1977: 182).



perspective will broaden the way we think on how exile influences writing in general, and on texts on concentration camp experiences, in particular. In short, to approach the problem of genre can raise questions about how each form represents the concentration camp experience.

Lastly, another particular feature that indicates testimonial literature of concentration camps belongs to the category of themes of comparative interest is seen at the *level of the plot*. In spite of the diversity of types and authors, as well as the various degrees of fictionality, works that come together under the description of testimonial literature of concentration camps focus on the past in a concentration camp. This past signified a rupture in the personal history of the subject-author. In tune with literature on exile, these works highlight the dislocation, or 'de-location', and the decentralisations suffered by a subject. These subjects, for reasons outside their will, have seen flung into a situation of exile and concentration camp. Both of these situations raise the question of the feeling of belonging for the subject in the new place and territorial identity. They create the inside/outside pairing, which brings into play traditional themes of Comparative Literature, like the representation of the other (the companion, the security guard, the subject that is outside of the camp) or the interrelation between man and place.

#### 4. Final remarks

From the outset, Comparative Literature has shown itself to be a dynamic area of investigation and discussion that has allowed the constant updating and revision of traditional themes, as well as the addition of new problems related to emerging historical, social and cultural systems. The focus of studies on literature and historical catastrophes has come from a constant preoccupation of the discipline to tackle the relationship between literature and history, which has also been made visible in the incorporation of other themes throughout this time, such as literature on exile and migrations.

Just like the aims of the study, testimonial literature on concentration camps written since or after the period of exile, deserves a comparative study. It requires a transversal and interdisciplinary centred approach on various levels: geographical, historical and political, methodological, generic, and argumentative. The comparative approach therefore allows for the identification and reflection on the common characteristics and tendencies between the diversity of the considered texts. The aim of this approach is to encourage new interpretations on the particularities and the specific value of each text that were not considered in the methodological framework of national literatures.

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