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SHADOWS OF THE PAST IN SEBALD’S FICTION: LITERATURE AND TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

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ABSTRACT: The shadows of the past are represented as postmemory in the literary works of Sebald, German author born in 1944. Through his long prose fiction writings, the author reveals how the “second generation” received memories of traumatic events experienced during the Second World War. Taking Sebald’s works as an example, this paper has the purpose of indicating possible interactions between literature and transitional justice, with the understanding of this term as a means to transform a society which has passed from a dictatorial regime to a Democratic State of Law. The methodology employed was qualitative, and the study focused on the analysis of the books published by Sebald between 1988 and 2001, establishing a theoretical framework based on Marianne Hirsch’s ideas on postmemory. As a result, it becomes clear that Sebald’s fiction restores a repressed past which must come to light for the reconstruction of reality, so that both the children of the persecuted survivors and of the human rights violators can deal with the experiences of a traumatic past. In conclusion, literature which focuses on postmemory presents itself as a key hermeneutic element in the search for understanding in the process of transitional justice.

KEYWORDS: postmemory; human rights; fiction; transitional justice.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The connection between a traumatizing event, the subsequent shock and the reaction of the surviving people has been the focus of historiography, literature and psychology research fields alike before. In this paper, our intention is to analyze the perspective of Winfried Georg Sebald, a non-Jewish German, born in 1944, and how he sees this condition of survivor in relation to the Second World War. More specifically, our object of analysis are the fictional works made by Sebald from 1988, when he published the (practically self-biographical) poem *Nach der Natur*, up to the publication of *Austerlitz* in 2001, when he prematurely died. This research has the purpose of indicting the possibility of interconnecting literature and transitional justice, which is understood here as a means to transform whichever society that has been through a regime with human rights violations and shifted to a Democratic Rule of Law. The methodology used here was qualitative, and the research focused on the analysis of Sebald's works published between 1988 and 2001 – four long prose fiction works, and one prose poetry work –, based on the theory of Marianne Hirsch on postmemory.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first one brings the connection between memory and human rights, from the distinction between collective memory and individual memory. In this context, the paper brings the analysis of the concept named “postmemory”, created by the professor of Compared Literature Marianne Hirsch, from Columbia University, in order to indicate the social feeling from a traumatizing time, passed from the surviving generations to their descendants. The second part of the article is about the fictional representation of postmemory in the works of Sebald, which show a second-generation view of past events, from a close coexistence with survivors. The research investigates the ethical dimension of Sebald's narratives about the Shoah during the Second World War and its further consequences.

The third part of this paper discusses the contribution of Sebald for transition justice, since his literary narrative is about a society that needs to deal with the traumas of a past filled with disrespect for human rights,

with aims at consolidating democracy. Considering that reading fiction generates empathy, this paper seeks connections between the literary prose and the ability of one to see themselves in the other, which could be the starting point of a strong and generalized reflective process, of fundamental importance for transitional justice.

2 TRAUMATIC MEMORIES OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

According to Le Goff (1990, p. 425, translated), “memory has the property of capturing and preserving certain pieces of information [...] with which man can update past impressions, or impressions he perceives as past”. Certain aspects of the study of memory evoke traces and problems of historical and social memory, in an intervention process of traces’ ordering, and the re-reading of these traces. Memory is not simply the recalling of events, it is also a connection to past experiences to the present time, and it generates identity. Thus, memory may be analyzed through two different scopes: individually or collectively. Individual memory is the one we create and cultivate individually, and is the result of information and lived experiences recollection. As for collective memory, it is a shared experience between generations on certain facts, people, meanings, and feelings of certain groups.

From this dualistic classification of memory types, there are, equally, two distinct dimensions for the right of memory: the right of a collective memory and the right of an individual memory – both of which bring consequences in the public sphere and the State. The right to a collective memory contributes to democratic development insofar as it grants access to essential information of all sorts. The right to individual memory, on the other hand, preserves the memory of each person (and their singular identity-building process, for instance), and is also related to the compensation of suffered damages. Collective memories are built by social groups, resulting from the sum of several individual memories that determine what is to be remembered and where these memories should be preserved.

What defines something as having a memorial trait is the process of transmitting the memory of experiences that may have been lived directly

or not by a certain subject, because what matters is the value of the facts for him or her. Hence, the concept of “postmemory” emerges, created by the professor of Comparative Literature, Marianne Hirsch, from Columbia University. Postmemory designates the transmission of the feeling from a traumatic time, passed from the surviving generation to their descendant generations. In this case, the following generation to the one which suffered trauma is called “the second generation” (Hirsch, 2008, p. 105), those who inherit first-hand the memoirs of the first generation, but who had not actually lived these events – thus having a very close but mediated coexistence with these events. Based on the analysis of reports of human rights violations by Jewish survivors and their families in the post-World War II era, Hirsch points out how accounts of witnesses, memoirs, photographs and several other sources could allow the transmission of experiences and memories to the “second generation”, those who still immediately suffer the consequences of the traumatic events, despite never having experienced them personally.

The Argentinian literary critic Beatriz Sarlo (2012) counter-arguments, to some extent, the concept of postmemory. She understands it is based on the intrinsic division between remembering past events (which is the case of the immediate generation, who went through the events), and “recalling” (Hirsch, 2008, p. 106) these facts by mediated means (reports, images, and other sources from the survivors). This “recalling” process supposedly generates a substitutive aspect of the events and those who had actually gone through them, which, for Sarlo, is a generalization of any past event. In this sense, any access to the past is necessarily guided by a vicariousness of a historical fact through memoir, narration, or witness, based, therefore, on inherently subjective historical vestiges; similarly, any testimony is thus marked by the fragmented and subjective character of memory. So, every past experience is supposedly fragmented and vicarious, which makes the concept of postmemory a redundancy, since it deals with whatever type of study about the past – except, perhaps, to the study of the “first generation after the events” (Sarlo, 2012, p. 157, translated).

However, defining the concept of post-memory only based on the vicarious relationship between later generations and the traumatic events themselves can be considered a somewhat limiting perspective. Hirsch's idea, conceived on the basis of an interdisciplinary approach to memory transmission, deals not only with the vicarious relationship of later generations with historical events themselves through inherited memories, but with the search for a closer understanding of the diverse effects that a trauma generates for posterity. Her idea becomes especially relevant when the memories involve traumas resulting from political regimes that had disrespecting human dignity as a whole. In these cases, the State has the duty to adopt reparative public policies to minimize the traumatic effects on the second generation, carrying out investigations, punishing offenders, and compensating the victims.

It is undeniable that those born immediately after a traumatic event do intensely experience the consequences of that historic moment. Nevertheless, when dealing with events as traumatic as the Second World War (Marianne Hirsch's historical scope), one could hardly claim that the trauma ends in the first generation after the events. The relation between postmemory and the past occurs, therefore, in this double subjectivity when addressing traumatic historical events: not only from the historical sources themselves, with their intrinsic subjectivity in their attempt to convey personal experiences, but also the subjectivity of the person themselves, of the very historical agents that contemplate their traumatic pasts. That is why postmemory itself is seen "rather, as a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience" (Hirsch, 2008, p. 106), indirectly made, inherent consequence of a plethora of individual experiences of a traumatic original event that must be atoned, and avoided to happen again in the future.

If we then consider the "first generation" as that of the survivors, those whose experiences of a traumatic event will determine the access of the future generations to that moment, the "second generation", as called by Hirsch, therefore, suffers intensely from the consequences of

the traumatic event, without having had the concrete experience. However, these people are marked by the guilt of not having lived that moment – of seeing the terrible consequences of a conflict close to them (without initially having a complete understanding of the damage extent), and of feeling the impact of those facts, either through interaction with previous generations, or through access to the means of information transmission. Nonetheless, they are inevitably tied to the impossibility of interference, attached to the insuperable historical gap that separates them from that past moment. This is the case, for example, of the German author Winfried Georg Sebald (1944-2001).

3 POSTMEMORY IN THE WORK OF SEBALD

Born right after the Second World War, Sebald did not really live the conflict itself, but suffered its effects first-hand, due to all the people around him – in his family and in German society as a whole. He was not present when the events took place – that is, he was “second generation”, in Hirsch’s concept – so Sebald did not have immediate access to those events. He depended on testimonies that helped him signify his own experiences and access the events, undeniably mediated by those surrounding him. Author of four long fiction prose books and a prose poetry piece, published between 1988 and 2001, Sebald mixes reality and fiction together to narrate the stories of those who experienced traumatic events that permanently marked their lives – as well as Sebald himself was marked by the recent history of Germany (and his own father, a soldier in the German Nazi army) in World War II.

One of the main elements in the construction of Sebald’s long fiction works is the constant presence, in all of his writings, of the Narrator – a never named subject, who has undeniable traces of approximation to the author’s biography, in a co-extensiveness between the figure of the Narrator and Sebald himself. This creates a noise between the real and the fictional aspects, which causes a certain unease in Sebald’s works; a

discomfort that brings with it the impossibility of the direct representation of reality, especially with regard to traumatic themes.

Shoah and the forced emigrations caused by the Second World War are recurrent matters in his writings, but Sebald does not directly address them, and the latent state of shock caused by the experienced horrors becomes evident through the writing style and its several formal resources. An essential aspect for this analysis is to understand the point of view from which the author writes: always later, after the occurrence of the events, in a search that the Narrator undertakes with the purpose of unveiling the past and finding himself, almost like a puzzle game, gradually put together for the understanding of his own self and of the world he lives in. Not having lived those moments of suffering for everyone in his country and family ends up becoming a gap of experience for the members of a second generation, such as Sebald, despite the “memories” they become aware of:

But theirs is a displaced knowledge - at the centre there is a «hole» (Fresco, 1984; Cohen, 1985). That is because the enormity and horror of massive destruction establish the facts as primary and constrain precisely those imaginative processes that must be used if they are to know (Laub and Auerhahn, 1994, p. 72).

Therefore, although the second generation has unique access to events, due to daily coexisting with the survivors, at the same time this knowledge, these “memories” transmitted are not necessarily genuine, that is, typical of the individuals of the second generation, but inherited experiences, “recalled” ones (Hirsch, 2008, p. 106). With that, this knowledge is supposedly “displaced”, as stated by Dori Laub and Nanette Auerhahn, who have worked on the concept of trauma (mainly regarding the post-war generation) for many years.

This displacement works as a key point in the development of guilt due to having been absent, not having been present, not having experienced something. Sebald, as pointed out by literary critic Ruth Franklin, manifests this experience gap “as painfully as most people experience the experience of trauma itself” (Franklin, 2011, p. 132,

translated). In his writings, melancholy stands out, a feeling of uncomfortable and disturbing emptiness (*Unheimlich*), of a search for meaning amid these gaps in everyday experiences and inherited memories:

I've grown up feeling that there is some sort of emptiness somewhere that needs to be filled by accounts from witnesses one can trust. [...] I would never have encountered these witnesses if I hadn't left my native country at the age of twenty, because the people who could tell you the truth, or something at least approximating the truth, did not exist in that country any longer. (Sebald, 2011a, p. 85)

This unease, *Unheimlich*, the strangeness that defines the relationship between Sebald and his family, is analogous to the strangeness that the author felt in relation to the German past itself, and that we can define as an intrinsic feeling of guilt – even if he himself, as an individual, had been unable to be present at the time of those events. All that could be done, thus, was to search in vestiges, such as accounts of witnesses and photographs, a recollection of this uneasy and latent past, in order to bring it to the present, change its meaning, in attempt to bring meaning to this emptiness, this gap of experience that is postmemory.

In his personal life, family albums had a very important role for Sebald in this recollection of the past. In an interview to Carole Angier in 1996, Sebald mentions that there were photographs of his father in the family albums, as a member of the German army in the Polish campaign just before the conflict broke out (Sebald, 2011a, p.66). These photographs initially portray a relaxed atmosphere among the soldiers, but after a while they start to portray devastated Polish villages. These photos, which seemed normal to him as a child, took on a terrible and inapprehensible meaning as an adult, due to the necessary but painful process of becoming aware of and understanding those experiences.

This process of reframing acquired memories is a fundamental starting point for the children of traumatic events survivors, in order to account for the traumatic past experienced. However, the children of the persecuted survivors and the children of the perpetrating survivors have completely different experiences. Sebald, the son of a *Wehrmacht* soldier,

inadvertently found himself connected to the other side of the story, still having to deal with the consequences of that. Even the few memories that he still had from that time, from his childhood, had to go through a painful process of understanding, an awareness of what those past actions really meant.

Second generation members are subject, therefore, to the accounts of the survivors' experience through stories of their own experiences, images, and, often, the significant presence of absence, of silencing about the matter. Both in his fictional works and in several interviews, Sebald points out how the silence imposed on those events during the War made latent the existence of something, an uncomfortable and undeniable, although unknown, truth, about which the survivors never said a word.

Not talking about that moment created an atmosphere characterized by Sebald as a "conspiracy of silence" (Sebald, 2011a, p. 47), strongly felt by him on a daily basis, during his childhood and youth. It was largely the anguish resulting from this silencing that led him to emigrate to England shortly after his graduation in 1965, only occasionally returning to visit family members. This generated a permanent feeling of non-belonging, wherever he went to.

This feeling of non-belonging appears at different moments in his works, incorporated both in the narratives themselves and in the descriptions of different characters. For example, in *Austerlitz* (2001), considered to be his masterpiece, Sebald addresses the issue of *Kindertransport* and of the evacuation of Jewish children from Czechoslovakia before the mass deportation to Nazi concentration camps. An uneasy feeling of non-belonging is present at all times, both by the Narrator and by the main character, Austerlitz, who discovers that he was one of the children evacuated during the War, and thus sets out in search of his identity and traces of his family's history. Both Austerlitz and the Narrator are constantly immersed in experiences built from inherited memories from those original traumatic moments.

As in his previous works, Sebald opts for the lateral, indirect approach to some sensitive issues, such as Nazi persecutions. According to

the author, given our constant contemporary coexistence with shock, we are not able to effectively understand certain pieces of information if directly approached (Sebald, 2011a, p. 80) – thus, he privileges the indirect narrative of these issues, giving space to accounted memories and individual experiences. The German author is very careful, however, when choosing this narrative perspective; as he himself points out in many interviews, there is an inescapable ethical dimension that should be respected, especially given the nature of the topics he deals with (Schwartz, 2011, p. 19).

This ethical aspect of Sebald's narratives is of core importance for the author, who said in different interviews he saw as fundamental to take care when dealing with traumatic experiences (regarding society and each of the individuals), especially because he often addressed the issue of Shoah during World War II and its aftermath – as a non-Jewish German. In this sense, the stylistic resource of self-fiction, mixing inextricably the real and the fictional aspects, assumes an ethical role in the attempt to create an effect of reality (Barthes, 1972). Thus, he avoids to create the illusion of a direct representation of reality in literature, at the same time as he denies an opposition between reality and fiction.

At the center of this internal conflict, are the origins of Sebald himself – in the case of *Austerlitz*, the Narrator himself, a subject that, as pointed out, has both fictional and real characteristics. This perspective is clear at the beginning of the narrative, when the Narrator visits the Belgian fortress of Breendonk, which had served as a Nazi forced labor camp during World War II, and was later turned into a museum. Inside the fortress, the Narrator is faced with both the prisoners' workplace and confinement site, and with a soldier canteen – and, to his despair, he can relate to the latter, but not with the former:

On the contrary, however, of this constant toil that was repeated day after day, year after year in Breendonk [...], what I could, yes, perfectly imagine when I entered the fortress and looked right through the glass of a door, the so-called canteen of SS officers [...], were the parents and devoted children of Vilsbiburg and Fuhlsbüttel, from the Black Forest and the Münster region, as they met there after the service to play cards or write letters to their loved ones at home, after all I

had lived among them until my twenties (Sebald, 2008, p. 27, translated).

Here, the conflict generated by his incapacity of identifying with the victims despite his effort is visible. Due to his former experiences, he can only relate to those who committed the crimes, which generates a great deal of unsettling – due to the daily unease felt by the Narrator and Sebald himself. That is, unease not only because he is a “receptacle of a historical legacy” (Hoffman, 2004, p. x, translated) whose undesirable burden (in the case of the children of the perpetrators, a burden enhanced by an extra distorted moral weight) had been inescapably inherited, but also for feeling accountable for this un-lived past, as James Wood defines, in the introduction to *Austerlitz*: “[...] guilt for the idea that the dead are at our mercy, that we can choose to remember or forget them” (Wood, 2011, p. x, translated).

Hence, in his fictional works, Sebald seems to undertake a search against forgetfulness, showing stories and memories of those who experienced traumatic events and permanently marked their lives – as Sebald himself had been marked by the history of his country (and of his own father) in the Second World War. So, when transforming into fiction his own or his acquaintances’ experiences, he tries to find an entrance to account for his own experiences – such as having grown up in the midst of this postmemory moment, in the midst of a defeated and broken Germany, surrounded by an impenetrable silence about the recent German past – in addition to the survivors’ traumatic experience itself.

Nonetheless, these experiences are undeniably passed on to subsequent generations though indirect means, mediated by the imagination and projection of those who did not come to live such events. Therefore, when dealing with the experiences of individuals that were born after a traumatic event – which dominates their lives (Long, 2007, p. 162) –, Sebald attempts to find a repressed past, to bring it to the surface of reality and reframe it from there. Postmemory thus presents itself as a hermeneutic key in the search for an apprehension of meaning in a

trauma *working-through* process (LaCapra, 2009), supported by the literary analysis of fiction as an open methodological approach.

4 TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

As he works on the reframing of traumatic memories, Sebald's fictional representation of postmemory is a strong example of how literature interacts with the concept of transitional justice. Thus, according to Fayga Bedê and Raphaella de Sousa (2018, p. 526), the writing process itself is a way of redemption, of deliverance, insofar as the driving emotion of those who write is the possibility of finding something or someone. Sebald's writing style mirrors this motion towards the other person who suffered trauma, which supports the whole process of transition from authoritarian regimes to democratic models. A known social-political phenomenon, widely studied from the 80's and 90's, transactional justice was implemented in the reconstruction of the democratic identities of countries in Europe, America, and Africa. Hence, according to the UN Security Council:

transitional justice is the set of approaches, mechanisms (judicial and non-judicial ones), and strategies adopted by each country to face the past forms of mass violence, to assign responsibilities, to demand the effectiveness of the right to memory and truth and to strengthen institutions with democratic values (and non-repetition of atrocities) (2005, p. 4, translated).

Transitional justice is a process with specificities depending on the time, place and culture involved, so it does not have an absolute or restrictive definition. The idea of transitional justice must be understood as inherent in the transformation of a given society that goes through a political shift, from an exception regime to the Democratic Rule of Law. In this context, literature has a lot to collaborate, since it has the possibility of "saying everything", implying an intrinsic commitment to democracy, as Fernando Ribeiro (2019, p. 471) recalls. By refusing to accept a single truth, art will always be opposed to authoritarian regimes – as Riberio (2019, p. 471) asserts, when explaining the polyphonic character that defines literature, an institution that gives voice to many subjectivities.

In the transition to democracy, transitional justice involves some basic obligations on the part of the State, which were listed by Inês Virgínia Prado Soares (2014, p.147). They include: the adoption of reasonable measures to prevent violations of human rights; the provision of mechanisms and instruments that allow the elucidation of violence situations; the creation of a legal apparatus to enable crime accountability; the guarantee of compensation for the victims, by means of actions aimed at material and symbolic amends. In the face of such arguments, it is clear that transitional justice seeks atonement through the investigation and full disclosure of events and violations of human rights. The idea is closely related to the right to the truth, which is a way of avoiding what Sebald called the “conspiracy of silence” (Sebald, 2011a, p. 47), the source of a permanent feeling of non-belonging.

Conceived as a response to serious violations, the right to the truth grants access to information of public interest on historical facts. From a collective point of view, this right enables the engagement with the development of democratic systems, while from a private point of view, it allows a form of compensation to victims and their families.

It becomes evident that the right to truth is not limited to simply having access to information, it includes the ethical responsibility of society in (re)building the opinion on historical facts among people. Thus, by using self-fiction as a resource, Sebald combines the real and the fictional realms, in collaboration to this ethical responsibility, by seeking an effect of reality. In addition, the empathy caused by literature is a way to see oneself in the role of the other person, since the act of remembering through fiction is associated with a strong reflexive charge. A literary work helps the moral conscience in examining the truth of the facts and events that in no way could be the object of restriction.

The ways of avowing the right to memory are not those of rational truth evidence, but the unveiling of facts by witness accounts and information gathered through countless other mechanisms, as pointed out by Lafer (2009, p. 182). The Updated Set of Principles for The Protection and Promotion of Human Rights through Action to Combat

Impunity, by the United Nations, defined the right to memory (to know) as follows

Every people has the inalienable right to know the truth about past events concerning the perpetration of heinous crimes and about the circumstances and reasons that led, through massive or systematic violations, to the perpetration of those crimes. Full and effective exercise of the right to the truth provides a vital safeguard against the recurrence of violations (2005).

This outline made by the UN reveals the valorization of justice and social dignity, aiming for the structuring of a democratic State. In addition to giving voice to those who suffered during a regime of exception, transitional justice also seeks historical responsibility for human rights violations that must be faced head-on by the whole of society. In Sebald's work, this responsibility produces a certain unease, on the one hand, because it is a receptacle of an undesirable historical legacy for the children of the offenders, and on the other hand, because it exposes the feeling of being accountable to this distant, not-lived experience. Dealing with historical truth involves collective memory, which is the experience shared between generations about facts, people, senses and emotions of a certain group. It is not only a recollection provided, but also the connection of past events with the present, building identity. Sebald's literary fiction and works alike can help the development of new perspectives for the very construction of reality.

The right to memory, which acknowledges a wide spectrum nowadays, stems mainly from "international humanitarian laws that protect the rights of parents to know the fate of their children who had disappeared in armed conflicts" (Sampaio apud Lemos, 2014, p. 209, translated). Within the scope of the UN, the right to memory is associated with the right to the truth, and it can be seen as a duty of remembering, exercised in the face of the State:

A people's knowledge of the history of its oppression is part of its heritage and, as such, must be ensured by appropriate measures in fulfilment of the State's duty to preserve archives and other evidence concerning violations of human rights and humanitarian law and to facilitate knowledge of those violations. Such measures

shall be aimed at preserving the collective memory from extinction and, in particular, at guarding against the development of revisionist and negationist arguments (2005).

These arguments of denial are a threat to the construction of democracy, because the past is a condition to the present, and if history is distorted, the present becomes out of control. Literature like the one by Sebald has the power to avoid that risk, as it reframes reality through the recalling of a repressed past that must come forth. The author uses postmemory in his attempt to find meaning while working-through traumatic past experiences. With that, Sebald demonstrates that fiction is an instrument of utmost importance when it comes to transitional justice, as it keeps memories alive in order to facilitate democratic transition.

5 CONCLUSION

This paper explored the possibilities of interaction between literature and transitional justice, the latter understood as a means for the transformation of a given society after shifting from a regime of exception to the Democratic Rule of Law. Potentialities for political change have been identified in literary writing, since literature leads to the understanding of the other people who suffer, with an attitude of openness, of fundamental importance to transitional justice. More specifically, this research focused on the narrative of postmemory present in Sebald's writings, which are concerned with demonstrating the structure of indirect and constructed transmission of traumatic experiences.

Initially, the article pointed out the interconnection between memory and human rights, and the concept of postmemory was introduced. Traumatic events inevitably generate a temporal nuance, in which past and present overlap, as the survivors' experiences remain latent in their daily lives. However, the scope of the trauma itself does not end with the survivors themselves, because the effects of deeply traumatic experiences are inevitably passed on to later generations. These new generations, in turn, build their own relationships with those events and

with the environment in which they find themselves immersed, and, therefore, in postmemory there are democratic potentials for the reorganization of political life.

The second part of the text discussed the fictional representation of postmemory in Sebald's written production. It constitutes an important historical-literary exponent, insofar as it is between the fictional realm and the historiographical witness record. Without giving up the interpretive freedom that fictionality provides to the narration, Sebald's writing style is intrinsically associated with reality, so that the past constantly appears in the present in his temporality representation. Sebald's long prose stories should not be read only as a historiographical interpretation of events, even though his writings do unveil the historical past of certain traumatic events. It can be said, therefore, that Sebald's prose adds a human, individual dimension that goes beyond a historiographical reading, which is fundamental to the rebuilding of society on more democratic terms. This characteristic of Sebald's style can be seen as a successful example of interaction between literature and transitional justice.

The third part of the paper discussed the possibility of a dialogue between Sebald's literature and transitional justice, necessary for the transformation of societies that need to deal with a past of disrespect for human rights, in order to consolidate themselves as democratic societies. Based on the observation that the Sebald focuses on postmemory, the section indicated lines of connection between literary fiction and transitional justice that go through the uneasy emotion of revisiting the trauma, but that generate a strong reflexive charge, a fundamental element to the shift of a political regime. Literature presents to scholars of the past one more element to compose the narrative web of witness accounts, since fiction can be a tool to address a traumatic past, enabling a crucial look to try to understand the effects of traumatic experiences on individuals and societies.

The use of fictionalized accounts allows an approximation to inaccessible aspects of history, since literature is a unique access key to

the conscious and unconscious effects of trauma. By exposing to the reader the conditions of the second-generation characters who deal with their not-lived past experiences, only accessed through narratives, Sebald's literary representation enables traumatic events to be resized by new generations who assume the responsibility of projecting a better future in society. As Sebald's prose focuses on the second generation's unexperienced memories, it unveils the mental process of constructing discourses about serious human rights violations, which is an essential requirement for transitional justice. As a result of the research, it was noticed that Sebald's fiction rescues the shadows of an un-lived and repressed past, similarly to what is done by transitional justice in societies that had experienced authoritarian regimes. Thus, the conclusion is that literature focused on postmemory – which is the case of Sebald's writings – is a hermeneutic key in the search for the development of new social meanings in the process of transitional justice.

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