IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER: IDENTITY AND FAMILY MEMORY IN ANDRÉS RIVERA AND MAURICIO ROSENCOF

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_Speak, Memory_
Vladimir Nabokov

_Burrowing into the past always involves the most enriching risks_
Ana Lydia Vega, _True Romances [Pasión de historia]_

Cicero and Quintillian tell the anecdote of the Greek bard Simonides from Cos (6th century B.C.E.). Shortly after Simonides sang his poems at a party, the roof of the party hall collapsed and all the guests perished. The bodies were so damaged that it was impossible to identify them, but Simonides remembered perfectly where every guest was seated and could name every one, thus rescuing their identity.

This episode constitutes for Western tradition something akin to a primary scene between memory and identity. It is not a coincidence that the hero in this story was an artist: the Muses were indeed the daughters of Mnemosine, the goddess of memory.

The immediate visual memory helped Simonides save the victims of the collapsed roof from anonymity, and yet another type of memory, oral tradition, preserved this anecdote for centuries. A third type of memory, the documentary one, is found in the texts themselves, in which Cicero and later Quintillian documented the event. And there is a fourth type of memory which occurs any time this story is quoted and repeated (such as in the present paper). When an event is documented in writing, it may be restored even if it remains latent for centuries, while oral memory is fragile and demands an uninterrupted series of receptors and transmitters.

In _The Poetics of Memory_, Thomas Wägenbaur brings about the correlation of memory data and its retrieval through the act of remembering through the word play of ‘storage’ and ‘story’, given that recollection always takes the shape of a narration and thus the process
of remembering becomes akin to a literary endeavor. The narration/recollection encompasses several superseded levels, because, according to Wägenbaur, memory—the only human function that can act upon itself—works according to the model of a ‘non trivial machine’: it not only registers the event but the registering itself and the occasions when it was actualized: “A non-trivial machine … has a variant input-output relation, because it is determined by its own previous operations. There is a constant feedback of its own output as its input” (Wägenbaur, 1998: 5).

In *Memory in Literature*, Suzanne Nalbantian also establishes a tripartite circuit of memory, constituted by “encoding, storage and retrieval” (Nalbantian, 2003: 7). Nalbantian points out that in the encoding an event, object, landscape, etc. is registered along with the manner the subject experienced it, thus the stored material is subjective and hierarchized. The retrieval can start at the individual psyche or be motivated by external objects. It may be voluntary (conscious and deliberative) or involuntary (unconscious and automatic). Its trigger may be emotional, somatic-sensory, associative, random, induced, etc.

In this paper, I will analyze the novels of two contemporary Argentine and Uruguayan Jewish authors in which recovering the family memory within the historical context constitutes the means of re-shaping personal identity. These novel narrate (1) the recovering and/or the construction of the father figure through a narrative fiction founded in personal or family memory; (2) the re-shaping of the self by means of its insertion in this memory chain, which is being (re)discovered as necessary in the

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1 Both Wägenbaur and Nalbantian show how authors have intuitively applied those same notions from the very beginning of literature. A further quotation taken from Amos Oz: “Memory deludes me. I have just remembered something I completely forgot after it happened. I remembered it again when I was sixteen, and then I forgot it again. And this morning I remembered not the event itself but the previous recollection, which itself was more than forty years ago, as though an old moon was reflected in a windowpane from which it was reflected in a lake, from where memory draws, not the reflection itself, which no longer exists, but only its whitened bones” (Oz, 2005: 90–91).

2 Regarding the codification process (or the lack of it) and its recovery, this quotation (of so many possible) from Marcel Proust: “Memory, instead of a duplicated sample always present before us, of the different facts in our life, is actually a nothingness from which for a few instants a similitude allows us to extract dead recollections; but there are also a thousand little facts that have not fallen in that virtuality of memory and they will always remain out of our control” (1980: 130). Henri Atlan finds in Jewish ritual memory a ‘seminal metaphor’ in which memory storage represents a feminine principle and retrieval becomes a masculine activation: in Hebrew, the same root is found in *zekher* (remembrance) and *zakhar* (male). See Atlan, 1986; 1992: 19.