
MEMORY DEGREE ZERO: NOTES ON JOSÉ
CARDOSO PIRES' *DE PROFUNDIS, VALSA LENTA*¹

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IN 1995 the Portuguese writer, José Cardoso Pires, suffered a cerebrovascular accident, or stroke, which damaged the left-hemisphere frontal lobe, affecting his capacity to understand and use language (speaking, writing and reading), as well as his capacity to recall information. 'Estrangement' is the word that might best describe the experience. In the first moments of the stroke, he was addressing his wife with the question, "como te chamas?" ('What is your name?'), followed by a complete loss of memory and aphasia (loss of speech). *De Profundis, Valsa Lenta (Slow Waltz)*, by José Cardoso Pires (1997), is the dramatic testimony of his remarkable recovery from, in his own words, "morte branca" 'white death.'

Most patients suffer debilitating lesions in the areas affected by a stroke, and it is known that complete recovery from this kind of brain accident is a rare occurrence. What kind of expectations, then, might one reasonably bring to such a text, a memoir that recounts a period of no memory? How does one read an empty mind?

From the beginning, *De Profundis* is framed as a journey into, and out of, a place, suggesting almost an impossibility of narrating an existence without reference to a time sequence. Similarly, it suggests the impossibility of existing apart from a consciousness of time.

The book has two important paratexts: a preface letter from the neurologist to the author, José Cardoso Pires, and a postface by the author. Both texts are a testament of the events, and a confirmation that the

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period of aphasia and memory loss, as well as the recovery experienced by Cardoso Pires, will continue to remain an enigma: What is an empty mind? How does one perceive an empty mind, and can one read it? What is there to know in a mind that has no memory, nor a language to express itself? How do we interpret José Cardoso Pires attempts to read his own empty mind, having established from the start the impossibility to gain access to it? He departs from no privileged position, except as a subject of the loss of subjectivity:

[. . .] foi naquele lugar e naquele instante que eu, frente a frente com a minha imagem no espelho mas já desligado dela, me transferi para um Outro sem nome e sem memória e por consequência incapaz da menor relação passado-presente, de imagem-objecto [. . .] (24)

[. . .] it was right there and then that I, facing my image in the mirror but already disconnected from it, transferred myself to an Other without name, without memory, and therefore incapable of the slightest relation of past-present, image-object [. . .]²

Can personality doubling be a response to evidence of the loss of identity? This is the very description of a disembodiment, by no means an unknown mental experience. The narrating of 'I' into an 'Other' creates an observer and an observed, an agent and an object. It enables narrative. It implies a co-existence of a protagonist as narrator and the same protagonist also as character (referred to as 'he'). The reenactment of the 'mirror stage' and the epiphanic moment of perceiving the 'Other' in the mirror unveils a similar radical break in the personality of the 'I'. The difficulty, however, resides in the observer ('I') being able to exercise his Theory of Mind in a being ('Other') who shows no signs whatsoever of "embodied transparencies."³ The 'Other' is not physically capable of emoting.

There seems to have been moments in Cardoso Pires' experience where both 'I' and 'the Other' co-existed but generally, for the 'Other' to be present, the 'I' had to step back (*qua* Mr. Hyde and Dr. Jekyll). In other words, when aphasia and memory loss were at their peek, the 'I' could not be found. To narrate this phenomenon, José Cardoso Pires needed to gather information from other people: doctors, nurses, family and friends. It was mainly their testimony after the fact that allowed for

² Author's translation.

³ Lisa Zunshine, "Fictions of Transparency: How to Make us Think That We Know What Other People Think." Keynote Speaker, Theory of Mind and Literature Conference, Purdue University Nov 1-4, 2007.

reconstitution of the events to take place. As the 'I' attempts to read the unreadable mind of the 'Other', he does not show to have any more insight into that mind than anyone else had, or did not have. As an insatiable reader captive to the narrative of his reconstitution of self, his only choice to satisfy his urge to know is to metaphorize; to create narrative clusters of meaning that stand both as an illustration of the unknown and simultaneously are the real thing, the event, the experience.

The metaphor "white death" might appear as an ironic trick of destiny, since Cardoso Pires, who published his first book of short-stories in 1949, had always longed for a kind of writing that would be "substantive" rather than "adjective", devoid of those markers that render a text "literary" (i.e., the presence of a certain type of narrator and a choice for certain verbal tenses). He longed for a "white writing", one that would be liberated from the strictures of language (society, morals, ideology), a transparent writing that would not call attention to itself, but would rather allow characters and events to come alive before our eyes. Such was a desire shared by many writers and intellectuals throughout the 20th century, notably surrounding the events of the Second World War. This neutral technique of narration is the style that characterizes the writing of Hemingway and Camus, and was theorized by Roland Barthes in 1953 as the "degree zero of writing". Nonetheless, such a liberated style, in all its transparency, neutrality, instrumentality, and innocence, is doomed to fail in its emancipatory agenda (Barthes 218). It is yet another prisoner of formalism in the sense that it is enclosed in a certain type of sentence, in a particular technique. Fredric Jameson would later harmonize with Barthes and cite Hemingway as a perfect example of an aesthetic act that is itself ideological: "It is a mistake to think, for instance, that the books of Hemingway deal essentially with such things as courage, love, and death; in reality, their deepest subject is simply the writing of a certain type of sentence, the practice of a determinate style." (Jameson 409).

I am establishing here an analogy between the idea of a degree zero of writing and the idea of a degree zero of memory as it was experienced and conveyed by José Cardoso Pires in *De Profundis*. Just like there is no such thing as a degree zero of writing if it does not mean absence of writing, a degree zero of memory equates with nothingness, absence of consciousness. Memory of the absence of memory is something already, and is open to narrative.

In both 'white writing' and 'white death', white is the unmarked term, the neutral, an index for absence and void. It is a totalizing metaphor that encompasses a temporal and a spacial experience. Cardoso Pires refers to the absence of memory as a temporal suspension, as "tempo cego", "nulo", "passivo" ('blind time,' 'void,' 'passive') (53). Memory is an enigma that signifies both the stuff that fills the container, and also the container itself. A container ('I', consciousness) devoid of memory loses its unique inalienable materiality, as well as its metaphysicality:

Sem memória esvai-se o presente que simultaneamente já é passado morto. Perde-se a vida anterior. E a interior, bem entendido, porque sem referências do passado morrem os afectos e os laços sentimentais. E a noção do tempo que relaciona as imagens do passado e que lhe dá a luz e o tom que as datam e as tornam significantes, também isso. Verdade, também isso se perde porque a memória, aprendi por mim, é indispensável para que o tempo não só possa ser medido como sentido. (25)

Without memory the present, that is simultaneously already a dead past, vanishes. Anterior life is lost; interior life as well, for sure, because without references from the past, affections and sentimental ties pass on; the notion of time that connects images from the past and gives it the light and the tone that dates them and makes them significant, that too. True, that too is lost because memory, I learned on my own, is essential in order for time to be not only measured but as well felt.

Feeling time and affections, and having sentimental ties is a challenge for a consciousness that has no memory. But there is no anguish either. Seeing a friend crying by his hospital bed, the 'Other' is incapable of empathizing with that person. Anguish is possible only where there is memory.⁴

This "white" narrative of memory covers the period of time Cardoso Pires spent at the hospital, indeed an experience as white as hospital walls and as clean as a hospital environment can be; a place that threatens mobility. Not only does the illness already relegate the patient to a place of anonymity, marginalization and mortality, the "space itself is constructed specifically to inhibit movement, to hold the patient in place until such time as he or she is summoned into motion." (Tanner 52, describing the medical waiting room). But the hospital, as the place where the full experience of "white death" takes shape for Cardoso Pires is simultaneously perceived as a space of possibility, since it is also

⁴ Antonio Damasio defines empathy as a simulated body state: "The feelings we experience come courtesy of body-sensing regions" (2003, 111).

where the author eventually regains his language and memory. Walking those white halls was not unlike Michel de Certeau's "rhetoric of walking in the city", whereby the action of walking "affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc, the trajectories it speaks" (99).⁵ "Pedestrian speech acts" are for de Certeau what makes 'space' occur from the stability of 'place': "Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities" (117).

Beginning with the title, *De Profundis* is necessarily a construct of spacial metaphors that refer to the 'Other' as an experience of "território satélite sem vida" 'lifeless satellite territory,' "ilha dos naufragos" 'island of the stranded' (57), "galeria sem história" 'gallery without history' (40) or "geografia sonâmbula" 'somniaulant geography' (52). It is thought that Cardoso Pires's mobility inside of the hospital played an important role in his recovery. Descriptions vary between "passear de alma ausente" 'a strolling with an absent soul' (32) and "animal a planar dentro de uma redoma de vidro" 'animal gliding inside a glass shell' (40) but as he walks around in the hospital and receives different input (voices, people, colors, sounds), suspicion and resistance arise in moments of "pedestrian speech acts":

Por cima duma porta não sei onde havia um letreiro que me obrigava a um soletrar intrigado: ВАННОЗ. Aquilo parecia-me uma grafia ciríllica. Alfabeto eslavo? (44)

Above a door somewhere there was a sign that forced me to an intriguing spelling: ВАННОЗ. That looked like Cyrillic graphs. Slavic alphabet?

Having lost the capacity to understand written and spoken language, and to articulate words and sentences, language appears as a set of arbitrary symbols: "cachimbo" (pipe) designates house slippers. "Simosos" happens to be an arbitrary word created as a catch-all for eyeglasses, walker, etc. Since language has lost stable referentiality, objects and actions become something 'out there', a mere form as in ВАННОЗ (bathrooms).

Assim, ao ver o meu Outro eu a pentear-se com uma escova de dentes num quarto de hospital (conforme me contaram depois) pergunto-me quantas vezes lhe aconteceu aquilo e logo de instante vejo uma enfermeira a aparecer-lhe por trás e a trocar-lhe a escova pelo

⁵ Cardoso Pires' last book from 1997 is significantly titled *Lisboa, Livro de Bordo: Vozes, Olhares, Memorações*, a narrative of walking in Lisbon.

pena, sem um comentário, sem uma palavra sequer, pura e simplesmente na prática de quem executa uma rotina. E ele a obedecer-lhe sem a menor resistência, ele como que a cumprir a parte que lhe compete nessa rotina. (25)

Seeing my Other I combing his hair with a toothbrush in the hospital room (as I was later told) I ask myself how many times that had happened to him and immediately I see a nurse appearing from behind him, exchanging the toothbrush with the brush, without comment, not one word, simply as someone performing a routine. And him obeying her without the slightest resistance; him fulfilling his part in that routine.

We witness, here, the narrator's surprise at the 'Other's' obeisance without questioning the authority or legitimacy of the nurse's corrective actions. However, his rather automated performance during aphasia is evidence that we do think outside the boundaries of natural language and possess a "richer language of thought" that has been called by Steven Pinker "mentalese" (in contrast to "Portuguese") (Palmer 95).

José Cardoso Pires' doubling from within mirrors the speculative gaze of his observers and their insatiable curiosity about what was going on in his mind. Through his narrative, he creates for us what Alan Palmer calls the "continuing-consciousness frame", connecting the 'I' and the 'Other'; a sort of 'whole' that allows him and his observers to perceive a temporal continuity where a gap once existed. The 'I' stands for the permanent self and the 'Other' for the changing self.⁶

This metaphor of the *Slow Waltz* suggests not only a dance of life and death, but also a dance between him and himself in his mind, and between him and the "outside world". Memory formation becomes a collective endeavor between family, friends, and doctors and nurses that provide stories about the evolution of his clinical condition. Memory, in this case, does not preexist narrative. On the contrary, narrative enables memory. 'Empty' or 'inscrutable' minds are not unreadable minds if one engages in reading them. By the end of *De Profundis* I am no longer a captive of the unreadable mind, my perplexity has vanished and I rejoice with the author's re-union to himself.

De Profundis, now with a slight nuance, seems to take another turn downward into contemporary debates among neuropsychologists, philoso-

⁶ Damasio refers to the two selves (permanent and changing) as "core" and "autobiographical", being the latter the record of "the lived past and anticipated future". According to this differentiation, Cardoso Pires's brain accident must be a state experienced by the autobiographical self. Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body, Emotion and the Making of Consciousness*. London: Heinemann, 2000. Quoted in Palmer 109.

phers of language, and linguists, on the centrality of language to thought. By not providing the reader with data from neurological analysis of the activities of his brain during the period of aphasia, Cardoso Pires appears to join the pro-language perspective and assert the centrality of language, and of consciousness. Professional bias, one may say. However, there are many references throughout his narrative to brain activity that was somehow alien to conscious motivation or explanation. Those references are an indication of non-conscious activity of the brain and they truly comprise the core meaning that surfaces in this narrative, which is that both Cardoso Pires' experience, and our grasp of the complexity of the human mind, continue to evolve as a fascinating mystery.

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