

MEMORY, OBLIVION, AND NOSTALGIA IN TREZZA AZZOPARDI'S *THE HIDING PLACE*

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Abstract - Shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize 2000, Trezza Azzopardi's debut novel *The Hiding Place* is the devastatingly harsh but also deeply moving story of Frankie Gauci, his wife Mary, and their six daughters as seen through the eyes of Dolores, the youngest sister who slowly unravels the tragic secrets that haunt her past. Set in a Maltese immigrant community in Tiger Bay, Wales, and peopled with deeply flawed characters, *The Hiding Place* traces Dolores's journey through the seductive yet often terrifying labyrinth of memory, a labyrinth governed by its own primitive sense of familial law and order. Lyrical in one breath and stinging realistic in the next, Azzopardi calls on her impressive mastery of language to weave an intensely self-reflexive story of guilt and innocence, absence and presence, fragmentation and plenitude and, above all, oblivion and memory. This paper focuses precisely on Azzopardi's treatment of memory as an instrument of reclamation and retrieval in the search for selfhood. Though memory is elusive and untrustworthy because of its polymorphic nature, at the same time it is endowed with a redemptive power capable of transforming the outside into the inside, denial into acceptance, and obscurity into revelation.

Introduction

Trezza Azzopardi's *The Hiding Place* is the story of Frankie Gauci, a Maltese immigrant who moves to Wales, his wife Mary, and their six daughters, as filtered through the eyes and memory of Dolores, the youngest sister who slowly unravels the tragic secrets that haunt her past. Through Dolores's recollections, the reader learns of her father's physically abusive behaviour, his obsession with gambling, her mother's adulterous relationships as well as her eventual loss of sanity, the disappearance of her older sister Marina, the pyromania of one of her other sisters which resulted in the loss of Dolores's left hand in a fire, and the family's final disintegration.

Going down memory lane

Propelled by the desire to search for an overriding design governing life, Dolores delves into her past in a journey which enables her to bring shape and order to the emotionally and sequentially erratic operations of memory: 'I go back, and try to piece together how it was. I think there must be a design.' (Azzopardi: 2001: 33) Through deeply suggestive first-person and present-tense scenes, Dolores attempts to tie past and present and to reconstitute a fragmented selfhood out of memory. However, the recollections of her childhood are disjointed, and their elusive and

ever-changing shapes are situated in time and place from the perspective of the present, that is to say, from a 'here and now' which is outside and distinct from the 'there and then' of a remote past:

That was a time before I was four. The house is still there, and now I am here, standing at the window of the bedroom we shared...

I'm standing at my window and I'm the last. All the rest have gone. All the sisters have gone. I'm waiting for them to stage their comeback. (Azzopardi 2001: 6)

The haunting scenes of the opening pages firmly establish the dialectic of time and space as one of the underlying hierarchies that shape the entire novel. The stage is set for the unfolding of an intensely self-reflexive process through which the narrating voice first fathoms and then transforms a defective past marred by rupture and loss into an integral present: '*I want to know about scattering a family like grains of rice: about Marina, my father, Fran, about what it means to burn.*' (Azzopardi 2001: 258)

Piecing together 'how it was' and trying to understand 'what it means to burn' involves a laborious process which evokes in Dolores remembrances of her own self as a baby:

This is my bedroom, and Luca's, and Fran's, and my mother's. The four of us sleep here, and at the back of the house live Celesta and Rose...They have pinned a notice on the bedroom door which I can't read but which I know says, KEEP OUT. THIS MEANS YOU! I think it means me...

I slept in the chest, when I was newborn. My mother told me how she wrapped me in a shawl at night and hid me from my father. (Azzopardi 2001: 4-5)

Unmistakably and irrevocably, Dolores's earliest recollections place her on the outside and relegate her to a hiding place. Only after the scattered grains of rice have been meticulously picked up one by one and put together can Dolores leave her hiding place to which she has been confined: '*And this time I drink with them, and it feels warm, the whisky and the moment and being on the inside.*' (Azzopardi 2001: 279) The restorative power of memory metamorphoses rejection into acceptance, the outside into the inside, as well as physical disfigurement into a unified whole.

The limits of memory

Though memory brings past and present together in an identity-forming experience, at the same time it does not necessarily correspond to historical actuality. And yet, despite its untrustworthiness, memory is Dolores's most valuable instrument in her quest for selfhood: '*And my memory which cannot be trusted and which is all I have clings to me like mud.*' (Azzopardi 2001: 231) As she reminds Louis, her nephew,

who is as eager as she is to retrieve the fragments making up their family's past, her memory is that of a five-year-old and, as such, '*it's a child's bubble of street names and people's names. Not the real thing.*' (Azzopardi 2001: 256) Rather than merely retrieving or reclaiming the past, memory continuously reconfigures and reinvents prior events in an endless recycling of their meaning: '*as with all truth, there is another version.*' (Azzopardi 2001: 75) The polymorphic nature of memory is such that even one of the very first childhood stories Dolores was exposed to invariably had an endless variety of versions. '*My mother would tell me this story, every time differently*' (Azzopardi 2001: 77)

Truth is elusive and multifaceted, and Dolores's relentless search for a design in her past adds several overlays to the narrative while raising a series of highly intriguing questions. How can one reconcile contradictory versions of the same story to get to the truth? Is it possible to distinguish memory from sheer fantasy? Since memory is a present-oriented and highly subjective experience, do recollections coincide with what really took place in a remote past? Are Dolores's recollections of herself as a newborn baby a fabrication of her imagination? To what extent are her memories influenced by what her older sisters told her about her past? In other words, how can memories filtered through Dolores's own perception as well as that of her other family members reflect the truth? And is the 'truth' of one sister reconcilable with that of another? In short, how reliable an instrument is Dolores's memory in her quest for selfhood and meaning?

The obstacles working against the truthfulness of Dolores's memory are several: sheer forgetfulness, multiple versions of the same event, hindsight, the inability of reasoned inquiry to comprehend the explosive intrusion of an unexpected remembered detail and, very importantly, the wilful decision to forget the past. Whereas Dolores relentlessly retrieves the tenuous links with her past in her struggle against fragmentation, oblivion, and loss of identity, Celesta, her sister, tries to 'disremember' by vehemently refusing to help her sister piece together the missing pieces of her past. As Dolores gets closer to the truth and challenges even more strongly Celesta's repressive attitude toward resurfacing memories, the tension between the two sisters becomes particularly riveting:

Celesta won't let me pass through the door until she's said her piece.

I've told you, Dolores, I won't have it. You think you can dig up whatever you like and just swan off again – but we've got to live here...

I'm serious, she finally says. I Don't Do Memory Lane. Okay?

(Azzopardi 2001: 266)

Memory and the 'Nostos': too little or too much nostalgia?

Why exactly is Celesta unable to weave her past into a history with which she can live? Why does she refuse to do 'Memory Lane?' The answer to these questions has to do with nostalgia or, more precisely, with the lack of it on the one hand, and with

the shaping hierarchies of inside and outside on the other. Since Celesta, unlike Dolores, never leaves the hometown where she grew up, she does not experience 'nostalgia,' that achy pain (or the *algia*) that makes one want to return home (*nostos*). In short, Celesta cannot desire what she has never lost. Nor can she ache for a home she has never left. Memory, for Celesta, is an agent of disorder which engulfs and subsumes the present. For the sister who never steps out of her hometown, the 'inside' will irrevocably remain an 'inside' without any possibility of ever perceiving it as an 'outside.' Unlike Dolores, who is intent on 'listing' memories from the past and '*putting things together*' (Azzopardi 2001: 267), Celesta lives past and present as an indivisible unity with no defining moments marking off one from the other. As the disjointed fragments of the past gradually start falling into place, Dolores begins to understand her sister's fear:

There was a bitterness...which told me everything: about Celesta, living here all this time, the rumours never quite going away, but changing, altering imperceptibly over the years. A small fire is an inferno, a burnt hand is a horror story, and a falling-out between old friends is murder. No wonder she didn't want to talk about the past. My own recollections seemed drab by comparison. (Azzopardi 2001: 245)

Too much past has terrifying implications for Celesta, whose childhood memories constitute a powerful reminder that she is entrapped inside a harrowing past from which she is incapable of breaking away. Because Celesta has never been allowed to experience forgetfulness, she is unable to recuperate her past and eventually integrate it into her present through a process of re-elaboration. Conversely, Dolores has understood the subtle mechanism of memory and oblivion, a mechanism which 'puts in order' what is forgotten, discarded, or repressed and then links it to the present. Indeed, Dolores's identity of the self rests entirely on memory, on her ability to recognize the past as past - a past which is absent but which can be transformed into presence, a past which can be woven into the present to form a coherent pattern.

Nostalgia, or in certain instances the lack of it, as in Celesta's case, is therefore a determining factor in the shaping of the characters' perceptions of the past. Interestingly enough, Azzopardi aptly invokes nostalgia to paradoxically convey feelings of tenderness in the portrayal of Frankie Gauci, the physically abusive, superstitious, and gambling father who pawns off one of his daughters to partially pay off his debts. In a poignant scene, the reader feels drawn to Frankie, or perhaps more specifically to Frankie's sentiments, which make him yearn for his 'Nana' and '*her grief at finding him gone,*' as well as his '*papa.*' (Azzopardi 2001: 44) The cold weather of Tiger Bay penetrates his being and makes him crave for the warmth of his homeland:

This cold is a slow ache; it makes your skin sore, it makes you want to crouch double. And it's been with him right from the start – it crept up as the Callisto docked in Tiger Bay, and snuck like a thief into his bones...The snow on the road outside is terrifying. He has never seen such a thing before; he thinks the sky has fallen. Frankie hasn't been able to muster the courage to walk into the city. His chest hurts. (Azzopardi 2001: 39)

Dolores, who so far has been endowed with the powerful first-person narrating voice, now seems to take on the third-person perspective of the omniscient narrator as she recounts the story of her parents, Frankie and Mary. As both first-person and a seemingly third-person narrator, the position from which Dolores recounts her memories as well as those of the other characters becomes intriguingly ambivalent. Tempted by the power of propelling the story through first-person narration as well as the need to be observed, nurtured, and, above all, taken out of her hiding place, Dolores thus shifts between asserting herself as the character who organizes her sisters' comeback on the one hand, and exiling herself to the margins on the other.

Memory and the reconstruction of the self

As the allure of nostalgia becomes more powerful and the interplay between past and present gathers momentum, the ambivalence deriving from the fusion of perspectives and perceptions is heightened. Toward the end of the novel, when Dolores sees her self being ripped apart while she is actually in the very act of reconstituting her identity, the structure of first-person narration makes physical description particularly problematic. During this dizzying process of self-cancellation and self-reconstitution, the narrating voice belongs to both the subject and the object of the story, the on-looker as well as the looked-at, the observer and also the observed: *'I am severed in two: here in the kitchen, and there at the end of the garden, watching.'* (Azzopardi 2001: 271)

Nowhere is Dolores's narrative more informed by the paradox of effacement and reconstitution than in her depiction of the physical fragmentation of the self. It is only when Dolores finds a picture of herself as an infant before she lost her hand in the fire that she can become a unified whole under her own mesmerized gaze. As Dolores discards her disfigurement and loss, the confrontation with her body and her identity reaches a climactic moment of painful triumph. The body which had come into being through scarring, exclusion, and deformity is finally transfigured as Dolores regresses to the very first stages of cognitive and affective development, when even her name and identity were undefined and still in the making:

The baby next to her is crying. It holds both fists in the air like a prizefighter. It takes me a moment to realize that the baby is me. I study the photograph closely. I put it so near to my eyes that the tiny left hand becomes a blur of off-white, no more than

grains on a surface. On the back of the photograph, my mother's nervy script says, Luca, age 2, with Dolores, 3 wks.

I am crossed out and re-spelt, as if she hadn't got used to this latest child.

It's me, I say to Rose.

Aye, she grins, All of you.

The ghost pain flexes. I've never seen my hand before. (Azzopardi 2001: 248-249)

As Dolores recovers images of herself before she was burnt in the fire, her hand becomes the repository of ultimate meaning and unity in the narrative. Its temporary retrieval with its lost five fingers becomes the powerful signifier of a reattachment with the five sisters from whom she had been severed. As an instrument of reclamation and retrieval, memory thus acts as a substitute, a surrogate, indeed a strategy of compensation, capable of transforming loss into plenitude, and absence into presence.

Conclusion

The Hiding Place is a harsh yet profoundly lyrical work peopled with tragic and deeply flawed characters. Intensely self-reflexive and allegorical, this multi-layered novel sets forth an intricate set of issues: the perception of memory as an intruder that must nonetheless be welcomed; the unreliability of memory with its polymorphic 'history' or 'histories;' the dynamics of remembrance and oblivion; the dialectical relationship between effacement and reconstitution in the search for selfhood; the disconcerting interchangeability of the shaping hierarchies of 'inside' and 'outside' which often seem to be specular inversions of each other; the paradox of nostalgia with its capacity to draw us to characters toward whom we would not like to be drawn; and finally, perceptions of disfigurement. Azzopardi's *The Hiding Place* expresses this knotted up intricacy with extraordinary clarity. Such a combination of clarity and intricacy heightens the contrast between a style that is made up of linear, limpid, and highly condensed sentences and a reality that is multifarious, undeniably complex, but never negated or simplified, despite the medium through which it is filtered. It is this unique combination that makes *The Hiding Place* a truly remarkable novel which displays Azzopardi's wonderful mastery of the art of writing.

GLORIA LAURI-LUCENTE was awarded a B.A. in Italian Literature and History from the University of Malta. She obtained a 'laurea' in Lettere from the University of Siena and a Ph.D in Comparative Literature from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Dr Lauri-Lucente taught English Language and Literature at the Universities of Lecce, Pisa and Firenze. She also taught English Literature, Italian Literature, and Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor as well as Eastern Michigan University. She has published articles in *Allegoria*,

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Reference

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