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Between Longing and Rejection: Antonio Lobo Antunes and Chaim Potok

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ABSTRACT

The aftermath of major historical events often offers the opportunity to come to terms with one's own idea of belonging to a social, religious, ideological, or political group. This paper analyses Antonio Lobo Antunes's outstanding novel *Os Cus de Judas* (*The Land at the End of the World*, 1979) and Chaim Potok's short narrative *The Trope Teacher* (2001) in order to demonstrate how the narration of a traumatic experience, such as taking part in a war becomes an expedient to deal artistically with the past, and at the same time, to reassess one's own group identity. In both works, the protagonists' reappraisal of their sense of belonging leads them to accept the impossibility of getting rid of the burden of the past and to refuse to be included in any given definition of "identity."

KEYWORDS: war, inner exile, disillusion, rejection, identity

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"Without stories there is nothing. Stories are the world's memory. The past is erased without stories" (Potok, *Old Men* 924). In Chaim Potok's novella *The War Doctor* (the second movement of the "triptych" *Old Men at Midnight* published in 2001), Ilana Davita Chandal replies with these words to the protagonist, Leon Shertov, who has just affirmed that he would never write down *his* stories, because no one "needs stories of . . . another Jew" (Potok, *Old Men* 922-23). As Potok's readers know, Ilana Chandal—the first female narrator in the author's novels—is herself a writer of short stories and has a talent for collecting stories from other people, or, to say it better, for "forcing" stories out of them. Eventually, she will obtain a story from Shertov and, significantly, it will be a war story. Potok's novella testifies to the close relationship between war and narration. In fact, together with "action" conducted against "the Other," "readiness to act," and the mingling of major historical events with everyday actions and experiences, narration represents one of the main constituents of the meaning of war (Montanari 7-8). Interestingly, this anthropological connection between war and narration emerges clearly when the phenomenon of war is analysed from the point of view of semiotics: narration and the different ways in which war is represented also become forms in which war enunciates itself (Montanari 10) and shapes a particular socio-cultural context. Narrating war is, thus, necessary, both as a way of preserving the memory of the past for future generations—which is one of the main aims of "telling stories" in general—and as a form of inner relief. In both cases, it may turn into an appalling experience, entailing unpredictable psychological implications for the narrator. Much more so if the narrator is a veteran, who is often obliged to revive traumatic memories:[1] looking back to his/her own involvement in a conflict, the narrator is sometimes forced to dig up a part of his/her own past which he/she has willingly buried in his/her psyche. At times, reviving the past may lead to the recognition of one's own responsibility towards other people, while offering, at the same time, the opportunity to come to terms with one's own idea of belonging to a social, religious, ideological, or political group. The reappraisal of what it means to "belong" may eventually entail the refusal to be included in any given definition of "identity." This paper analyses how the narration of such a traumatic

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[1] For a lucid account of the relationship between history and memory and of the role of the past in enabling both individual understanding and the way personal narratives relate to social discourse, see Hunt, in particular 96-126.

experience as taking part in a war becomes an expedient to deal artistically with the past—referring both to the private and the public spheres—and, at the same time, to reassess one's own group identity. I will focus on Antonio Lobo Antunes's outstanding novel *Os Cus de Judas* (*The Land at the End of the World* [*South of Nowhere*], 1979) and Chaim Potok's short narrative *The Trope Teacher*, the third novella collected in *Old Men at Midnight*.

Though the two works differ in narrative structure, theme, and the time span they look back to (i.e. the Portuguese colonial war in Angola in the 1960s-1970s and World War II, respectively), the depiction of the protagonists' recollection of their experience as soldiers reveals some points of contact which open to a comparative analysis. Lobo Antunes's assertion on the mnemonic nature of fiction provides an effective point of departure for our discussion: "tú no inventas nada, la imaginación es la manera como arreglas tu memoria" (qtd. in Cammaert 2011, 269) ("you don't invent anything, imagination is the way you arrange your memory" [Cammaert, "You" 287]). This "mnemonic paradox," as Felipe Cammaert defines it, implies the undermining of the "literary distinction between facts and fiction" in a text, insofar as imagination does not determine the fictional quality of a work of art, but is "associated to the individual perception of past time" (269). As a consequence, invention—from which normally fiction originates—is possible only "in terms of remembering past actions" (269). In the case of Lobo Antunes's *Os Cus de Judas*, the experience the narrator-protagonist recalls is modelled on the novelist's own—i.e. his twenty-eight months as a surgeon in the Portuguese camp in Angola—thus creating an effective mixture of imagined action and the re-evocation of the writer's own real past. The same declaration of poetics may be applied to Potok's novella: in 1999, asked about the presence of autobiographical elements in his fiction, Potok answered: "I think most serious writers, certainly in the modern period, use their own lives or the lives of people close to them or lives they have heard about as the raw material for their creativity" (Chavkin 147). As for Lobo Antunes, for Potok fiction stems from a fruitful mixture of imagination and memory, albeit with some significant changes, which render the mnemonic paradox still more paradoxical by playing on a double level of memory. Though Potok did not take part in the events of World War II which constitute the background of his novella, he served as a volunteer army chaplain during the war in Korea in the 1950s (Kremer 37). That experience, together with his visit to Hiroshima, proved crucial as he started to

reconsider his position regarding both Jewish religion and culture: “I went into that world one individual and came out another individual altogether—not so much changed outwardly in the sense of observance, but profoundly changed inwardly so that everything I saw had altered radically” (Kremer 37). In *The Trope Teacher*, Potok’s memories of the events which triggered the process leading to the definition of his “adult sense of self” (Devir 94) in Korea overlap with the atavistic memory of the Jewish people, perhaps mediated by stories of the Holocaust heard from the people he knew. This allows the author to instil in his fictional protagonist, Benjamin Walter, his own constant questioning of what it means to belong to a cultural and religious group.

Along with a common ideological framework about the nature of fiction in general, other analogies can be detected in the overall narrative structure of both Lobo Antunes’s novel and Potok’s novella. In both works, night provides the setting for the narration: *Os Cus de Judas* is set in one long night, while in *The Trope Teacher* the main event is narrated in the course of several night-time conversations. Both Lobo Antunes’s anonymous protagonist and Potok’s Benjamin Walter narrate their stories to a woman: an unnamed girl whom the narrator has approached in a bar and whom he eventually takes home with him in *Os Cus de Judas*, and Ilana Davita Chandal, Benjamin Walter’s neighbour, for whom he has mixed feelings of attraction, curiosity, and trust in *The Trope Teacher*. Interestingly, the women are constantly addressed in the course of the narration, their presence is always perceived; however, the reader only gets glimpses of their reactions from the narrators’ words, sometimes having the impression that a real dialogue may be going on (Moutinho 80). This results in the use of a technique which blends the “modernist” interior monologue (which points to a common source of inspiration in James Joyce)[2] with the Victorian “dramatic” monologue, through which Antunes’s persona expresses his psychological—almost physical—need to break the silence by directly addressing the listener,[3] and Benjamin Walter’s attempts to recover the “cords

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[2] For Joyce’s influence on Potok’s work, see Potok 1987, 1-10, and Kremer 31-45. For a comparison of Lobo Antunes’s use of a sort of Joycean “polyphony,” see Mendes *passim.* See also Farnoux 165-94, for a clear-cut analysis of the interior monologue on a comparative perspective including Joyce and Lobo Antunes.

[3] Interestingly, the narrator’s longing for attention is expressed in terms which recall his experience of the war: “Listen. Look at me and listen, I so need you to listen, to listen with the same anxious attention which we used to listen to the calls on the radio from the company under fire, the voice from the communication officer calling, begging, in the helpless tones of a shipwreck victim . . .” (Lobo Antunes 72).

of connection" of a painful part of his own past that he is voluntarily resisting. On the one hand, then, we are in the presence of a narrator who is unable to arrest the flow of his thoughts and words and who is looking for an audience that, by listening to his memories, could save him from mental and social alienation. On the other, we find a man whose memory—which has gained him the respect of the Academy—seems to fail him, and whose inability to control his personal past and the words to express it generates an analogous feeling of overwhelming alienation.[4] Thus, the constant rumination on the sense of "dispossession" and "exile" that emerges from Lobo Antunes's persona's story patently reflects his need to affirm his social identity; similarly, Benjamin Walter's progressive unfolding of what he has tried to repress and reject all his life expresses a deep craving for belonging.

Severely shaken in their core beliefs—in a way that will utterly change them—by what they personally experience on the front as grown men, Lobo Antunes's persona and Benjamin Walter begin to figure a connection between the idea of belonging to a social group and the war when very young. This connection entails a significant confrontation with their families' past, with their own ancestry, and with the success of long-gone ancestors or close relatives in warlike feats. Fighting in a war, then, acquires the value of an imperative rite of passage which will make a man out of a boy who is physically "unfit," and thus "unworthy" to be part of a tribe. Lobo Antunes's persona is subject to his aunts' harsh judgement about his physical appearance, his thinness and his prominent clavicles being contemptuously regarded as a stigma for the family, especially when compared to the pictures of the "irate generals—who had died before [he] was born after waging glorious battle over backgammon and billiards" (Lobo Antunes 25-26). Significantly, the boy's opinion about his ancestors reveals a sort of de-sacralisation of his family's

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[4] Benjamin Walter teaches History at Columbia University and is famous among his colleagues for his memory and for his ability to find connections among facts; for this reason, the very moment he tries to write his own memoirs he perceives the inability to fill the gaps of his past as particularly overwhelming. It is not surprising that for this man—who is accustomed to delving into anything that concerns the two world conflicts—the war appears as a metaphor for his struggle with/against memory: "Much to his wonder and disquiet, when he'd begun the task of remembering his early years he discovered that his zone of deep memory was, as he put it to himself, well-fortified and resistant to frontal assault. Only reluctantly did it begin to yield to determined probing, surrendering now and then a tiny territory of uncertain value . . . . He barely recognized those fragments from his past, was unable to locate what he single-mindedly sought and uncovered in his scholarly tunnelings: the linking trails of cause and effect; the cords of connection, as he labeled them, that invariably led him to a unified chronicle" (Potok, *Old Men* 1928-40).

history, which reflects both a larger de-sacralisation of Portuguese collective history and an open questioning of warfare dynamics aiming at showing the individual's physical and ideological removal from the world he knows (Cammaert, *L'écriture* 241). However, he finally agrees, though reluctantly, to undergo the trial leading to social acceptance; his family then reunites to eagerly witness the metamorphosis of the boy into a man:

> And so when I embarked for Angola, on board a ship packed with soldiers, in order finally to become a man, the tribe, grateful to the Government for making such a metamorphosis possible at no expense to them, turned up in force on the quayside, putting up, in a moment of patriotic fervor, with being elbowed by an excited and anonymous crowd, very similar to the one in the picture showing the guillotine, gathered there as impotent witnesses to their own deaths. (Lobo Antunes 27)

The tribe of Lobo Antunes's persona expects him to always keep in mind the images of those belligerent generals who fought to bring glory both to the country and the family, and, at the same time, to emulate them. That is, he is implicitly asked to negate his own identity as an individual in order to find his place on his family's "wall of fame."

While on the ship that will take him to Africa, during his long conversations with one of the military priests, the narrator already perceives the absurdity of what he is about to live. This feeling (which significantly somatised "in the physical guise of some unlocatable affliction"—Lobo Antunes 36) intensifies when he arrives in Luanda and sees the squalor of the slums and the misery of the children, and when he finally gets to the front, where he recognizes death as something "real." And death hides round every corner: in the ambushes, in the mutilated bodies, in the eyes of the young soldiers clinging to their rifles as they would do to a symbolical life preserver, in the utmost desperation of the lieutenant who asks the persona to "come up with a little disease that would get [him] out of [there] because [he's] sick to the back teeth of [that] goddam war" (91-93), in his own miraculous escape. Encountering death under different guises contributes to make a man of him, just as his family had predicted:

> . . . and I, rigid with rage, imagined how pleased my family would be if they could see, all of them together and wearing broad-brimmed hats like in Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson*, the competent, responsible doctor they had always wanted me to be, patching up with needle and thread the heroic defenders of the empire, who paraded their incomprehension and horror along jungle paths . . . . (61)

However, is it really so? Has he really become the man his family wanted him to be? Has he really become one of the "tribe" ? There, "in that asshole of the world," wearing a uniform that gives him "the equivocal appearance of a disillusioned chameleon" (60-61), the narrator begins to ponder over his freshly-gained identity and to indulge in the mounting rage towards his role which makes him more and more sympathetic both with fellow soldiers and with the African civilians. Indeed, the image of the "disillusioned chameleon" acquires a clear metaphorical value, insofar as it defines the narrator's inner self more than his physical appearance. His uniform is the necessary means to camouflage, to adapt to the surrounding environment in order to preserve his life; however, that uniform is not enough to make him conform to the ideological stance of the group he is in and of the country he is serving. Hence, his disillusion, the creeping, painful awareness of being "displaced," of not belonging anywhere. Of course, the narrator does not belong to Angola, a place where he feels banished and which he rejects:

> I hate your streets that go nowhere, your tame Atlantic that smells of detergent, the sweat of your armpits, the strident bad taste of your luxury hotels. I don't belong to you nor you to me, everything about you repels me, I refuse to accept that this is my country, I, a man of so many mingled bloods, with grandparents from all over, Swiss, German, Brazilian, Italian, my country is thirty thousand square miles wide with its center in Benfica in my parents' black bed, my country is where Marshal Saldanha points his finger and the Tagus flows obediently in that direction, it's my aunts' pianos and the specter of Chopin floating in the afternoon on the air rarefied by the breath of visitors, my country, as Ruy Belo wrote, is what the sea rejects. (93-94)

Significantly, he opposes not only Africa, his real country, but also his lineage and his identity as a Portuguese, which is a "composite" identity itself—thus, one which marks the narrator's natural "in-betweenness," while making discussions on issues of "identity," in general, even more complicated at the same time. And yet, his rational and emotional rejection of Africa and his stubborn self-assertion do not confirm his sense of belonging; in fact, instead of proving his loyalty to Portugal's political and social values, the war exposes both the narrator's own frailty as a human being and the faultiness of that very system he is called to preserve (Moutinho 78). It is clear, then, that the narrator's displacement only marginally involves his actual belonging (or not belonging) to a place. The ideas of "place" and "identity" are shaken "primarily because historical and social circumstances lead the community and individuals within it to physical and psychological displacement, as well as to the existential and epistemological uncertainty of being" (Seixo 20).

Symptomatically, this emerges when he returns home on leave to meet his baby daughter. At Lisbon airport, the customs officer's reaction to the narrator's attempt at being amusing immediately opposes the soldiers to those people who have had no direct experience of war:

> "You guys come back from Angola thinking you're really big men, but this isn't the jungle here, soldier." And his voice articulating the words very carefully, as if he had learned his Portuguese from a record, suddenly brought to mind my old Portuguese teacher at school. . . . "If we were in the jungle, I'd shoot you in the balls." (Lobo Antunes 98)

The narrator is forcefully inserted in an opposition "you" vs. "us" which clarifies his rejection on part of the community he is supposed to belong to and which should acclaim him as a hero. Much to the officer's surprise—who probably expects a mild apology from his interlocutor—the narrator's reply sounds like a declaration of war, through which he defies the system by recognizing his status of "inner exile," a foreigner in his own country, a man who, in the eyes of society, has decided to take a stand with the "wrong" side. This is ultimately attested by the failure to recognize Lisbon as "home":

> [As] I stared into the deserted, wilting gloom that was gradually fading in an improbable dawn, I thought, So this is Lisbon, and I

> felt the same incredulous disappointment as when I had visited the house in Nelas many years later, and had found, instead of vast, echoing halls filled by the epic breath of childhood, only small, banal rooms. Sitting on the back seat of the taxi, with the sound of the ticking meter pulsing like suppressed sobs in my throat, I was trying desperately to recognize my city through those windows covered in pimples of water that slid down the glass. . . . My grandiose memory of a glittering capital city full of movement and mystery straight out of John Dos Passos, which I had been fervently nurturing for a whole year in the sands of Angola, shrank back in shame before those suburban houses in which low-ranking clerks lay snoring amid cheap silver trays and crocheted table linen. . . . "What a shithole this country is," I declared to the driver, who responded with a distrustful sideways glance in the rearview mirror that reduced his face to two small, hostile eyes, to which the glass gave a sharp, protuberant, metallic glint. (99-101)

The narrator's sense of belonging is completely disrupted: the city he is looking at does not coincide with the image he had of it, with the memories he had cherished in order to preserve his mental health while being confined in the land at the end of the world. Interestingly, Luanda and Lisbon seem to merge in the harsh judgment the narrator formulates on his hometown: the "asshole" of the world is itself displaced north, as a powerful symbol of the protagonist's "uncertainty of being." Back to Lisbon, at the moment the narration takes place, Lobo Antunes's persona is paradoxically afraid of "returning" to Portugal, as if he had never left Angola, and to Africa he wishes to return to die, an Africa "of the mind" and of the heart, purged of any memories of the war, where he will rise again to a new life (Saldanha Alvarez 57-59).

Potok's Benjamin Walter experiences a similar rejection on part of society as an adult: while the Academy accepts and acclaims him as the "Professor of war," he encounters the fierce opposition of the younger generation, for whom he stands as the representative of "antiquated gunboat diplomacy," and, as such, "[regressive], imperialist, colonialist, favoring oil interests and decadent regimes" (Potok, *Old Men* 2046-53). Though this hostility shakes neither his self-awareness nor his self-reliance, Benjamin Walter's weariness in front of his audience on the occasion of his public speeches signals a mounting feeling

of discomfort that will be clearly expressed the moment he begins to delve into the recesses of his past, the very moment the "trope teacher" emerges unexpectedly from his memory. Like Lobo Antunes's persona, Benjamin Walter undertakes a "rite of passage" leading to social acceptance. For him, the rite coincides with his *bar mitzvah*, that makes him officially part of the Jewish community of New York, but that also marks the beginning of his questioning the ideas of identity and belonging. Isaac Zapiski, the "trope teacher" (an old family friend, who had fought with Benjamin Walter's father in World War I and who is chosen to train the boy), plays a crucial role in the protagonist's quest for identity. Not only does the man instill in the boy that interest in military history which will make him famous as an adult: though unwillingly, he also helps him confront his family's history—which is also a relevant part of the history of the Jewish people—and with his father's involvement in the war.

Young Benjamin Walter's epiphany—and the Joycean term perfectly fits into the situation—in Zapiski's sitting room touches on a taboo part of his family's past and opens a window on his future at the same time. Admiring the old man's huge personal library, filled with volumes in Yiddish and English about the Great War, the boy gives vent to his curiosity:

> "Why do you have so many books about war in your apartment?" . . . His face twitched with annoyance. No doubt he'd expected a question about grammar and trope.
>
> "Because I was in the war, and I am trying to understand it."
>
> "What did you do in the war?"
>
> "I was a soldier like your father."
>
> I have no recollection why I put the next question to Mr. Zapiski. . . . In any event, abruptly, for no clear reason, I heard myself ask Mr. Zapiski, "Whose side were you on?"
>
> My query startled him. His pale features turned crimson. He did not answer for a moment. Then he asked, in a tremulous tone, "Why do you ask me that question?"
>
> The word he used for "why" was "warum," which is both German and Yiddish. He pronounced it "varoom."
>
> I told him I was just curious.

> He said, after another silence, "Your father and I fought in the army of Emperor Franz Josef of Austria, on the side of Germany, against England, France, Russia, Italy, and America."
>
> On the side of Germany! They had fought on the side of the enemy! Was that something to worry about? It had never occurred to me that my father had fought against the United States. How had he and Mr. Zapiski managed to get into America if they had once fought against it? Perhaps they had been asked and had lied. What if American government should ever find out? Would Mr. Zapiski and my father be sent back to Europe? (Potok, *Old Men* 2564-81)

The trope teacher's explanation for his interest in history books—i.e., to make sense of the war and, perhaps, of his involvement in it—represents an essential lesson for the boy, who will make a profession of his childhood curiosity, driven by the same impulse to understand History and, maybe, to understand the meaning of war. More relevant to this context, however, are Zapiski's startling question and young Benjamin Walter's reaction to the revelation. Using "warum," which fuses Yiddish and German, Zapiski literally expresses the opposition "you" vs. "us" which will become fundamental in defining the boy's sense of belonging. Like Potok himself before going to Korea (Cusick 133), young Benjamin Walter has always had a clear mind map of what he is and who he is both as a Jew and as an American. This means that he has always measured his own and his relatives' identity in terms of belonging to a place—the United States—and in a cultural group—the Jewish one; no wonder, then, that he is overwhelmed by the news.

In representing a boy trying to make sense of an old man's point of view, *The Trope Teacher* illustrates that "core-to-core cultural confrontation" between ideas residing at the heart of Judaism and the central elements of the Western world which characterizes Potok's major works and which typically occurs when individuals try "to come to terms with two universes of discourse that they love passionately" (Potok, "Culture" 1-3).[5] However, in the novella the conflict between the Jewish religious and cultural values and secular society is rendered more ambiguous as it seems to transcend the geographical limits of the United States and to touch the whole world. At the same time, the

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[5] See also Abramson 1.

generational clash which naturally follows the cultural confrontation as Potok intends it, and which constitutes one of the main themes in his *oeuvre*, here acquires somber nuances. *The Trope Teacher* does not depict the painful, face-to-face opposition of the young protagonist to his parents' orthodox values that forms the core of the "*Asher Lev* novels," nor does it illustrate the father-son ideological and verbal antagonism that characterizes *The Chosen* or *The Promise*. In the novella, any opposition remains unexpressed on a verbal level: the protagonist is filled with doubts he does not dare to express or that his education compels him to repress, in a progressive erosion of the feeling of trust which ties him to his family and which significantly results in his own physical distress. Like Danny Saunders, Reuven Malter and Asher Lev in Potok's renowned novels—and even more like Lobo Antunes's narrator—young Benjamin Walter begins to perceive that he is no longer part of the "us" that, until then, had provided him with solace and comfort because this "us" is itself an ambiguous entity including both American Judaism and the European Judaism of America's enemies. Thus, his father, the one who sided with the enemy and who—in the boy's imagination—had probably lied about his involvement in the war, putting at risk the whole family, becomes himself *the* enemy and, as such, someone to reject. The boy's constant terror at being repatriated may explain Benjamin Walter's unwillingness to talk about his parents as an adult and his dismissal of them as "unremarkable people." This also accounts for the fact that, though he acknowledges his father's war as his own—that is, he recognizes the role of World War I in creating his conscience as an American—he refuses to connect it with his own personal history (Potok, *Old Men* 2696-705, 2361-67).

Significantly, Zapiski gives the ultimate validation to the opposition "you" vs. "us" when he explains his reasons for going back to Europe on the eve of the second world conflict: "This America of *yours*," he sadly reveals to the boy who has just declared that he does not like war and he does not like history anymore, "is not a country that values history. Where I was raised, history was the heart and marrow of a person. I am returning to the inside of myself that the war forced me to leave behind" (Potok, *Old Men* 2781-82; my emphasis). It is for *his* America, i.e. for the only "us" that stands clear and unambiguous to the boy's mind, that Benjamin Walter enlists in the army against his parents' will in order to fight *his* war and to confirm his belonging to a social group. Still, World War II would become pivotal in unsettling his identitarian certainties

once and for all. Potok's awkwardness in dealing artistically with the Holocaust[6] is reflected in Benjamin Walter's narration of his experience on the front, which is aesthetically rendered as a sort of descent to the underworld. In 1944, on the Ardennes, Benjamin Walter perceives the trope teacher's presence next to him, guiding him through the forest and warning him of danger. Significantly, there he physically sees the trope teacher for the last time, dead, rotting in a trench in an abandoned concentration camp; it is here, too, that he finally comes to terms with his split, composite identity. The American soldiers are welcomed by a group of "murmuring phantoms" (Potok, *Old Men* 3112) who speak a language only Benjamin Walter can understand; thus, he acts as a translator between the prisoners and his lieutenant, much to the surprise of both ("The lieutenant asked them, 'Where are the guards?' They did not understand him. I translated his question into Yiddish. They stared at me, stunned. A soldier with a weapon, in an American uniform, speaking Yiddish!") (Potok, *Old Men* 3115-17). Significantly, he maintains his function of intercultural mediator even when the Americans finally find the German soldiers, still using Yiddish as a means of communication:

> "You fucking bastards," the sergeant said. "Where are the others?"
>
> "Where are the others?" I said to them in Yiddish.
>
> One of them, a corporal, stiffened and looked at me. . . .
>
> One of the guards, a tall heavy-shouldered man with a jutting lower jaw and a pockmarked face, suddenly said, "What kind of German do you speak?"
>
> "New York German."
>
> "That's not German."
>
> "Warum? Is that okay German?"
>
> "You are not speaking German." . . .

[6] As Potok states in his *Wanderings*, the Holocaust stands as an all-pervasive influence in Jewish people's perception of contemporary history, as if they were haunted by "a sense of constant struggle with frightening echoes of the past" (Potok, *Wanderings* 515). Though this general assumption may account for his own early interest in the Holocaust as a narrative subject, he admits in an interview his lack of confidence in handling it: as his Benjamin, Potok feels unable to find the proper "cords of connection," the "threads" to grab in order to "weave [the Holocaust] into some sort of aesthetics" (Potok, *Old Men* 3314-18). Could you double check the kindle version of this book does have some three thousand pages!? It's very peculiar! If the page ref is incorrect, please also correct all the page references of this book throughout the paper. NUMBERS REFER TO "POSITIONS" NOT TO PAGES IN A KINDLE EBOOK. THEY ARE ALL CORRECT. IF IT IS ALLOWED, YOU CAN ADD "POS." BEFORE THE NUMBERS.

> "Go fuck yourself, you piece of shit," I said to the guard. "Is that good enough German for you?"
>
> He muttered something, his fingers twitching.
>
> "I am one of those you were killing!" I suddenly shouted.
>
> He stiffened. His face grew red. A Jew shouting at him! He reached for the empty holster.
>
> Absently, as if in a dream, I heard scurrying sounds and shouts. . . .
>
> I did not have to raise my weapon but simply pointed it at him.
>
> I fired twice. Both bullets hit him in the chest. The second must have struck bone; he was lifted about six inches off his feet and thrown against the wall behind him and fell dead. On the wall were blood and bone from the exit wounds. . . .
>
> "Was that good German?" (Potok, *Old Men* 3112-42)

A strange American, who speaks a strange kind of German; one who dares both disobey the orders of his sergeant as an American soldier, and spurns the "authority" of the German "pure" race as a Jew. Interestingly, though the survivors in the camp do not recognize him immediately as one of their own despite his language—as if his real inner self proceeded out of his uniform—Benjamin Walter recognizes himself as part of them in an instinctive outburst of rage and hatred. Using *warum*, the very Yiddish-German word with which his path towards adulthood began, he proclaims himself not an American Jew, but a "European" one, part of the very community the trope teacher belonged to.

"I am returning to the inside of myself that the war forced me to leave behind": the words of the trope teacher reveal the core of both protagonists' tragedy. If the war "enunciates" itself through their narratives, it does so only to express its role in defining the identity of Lobo Antunes's persona and of Benjamin Walter, and to affirm their detachment from the social context whose values it has contributed to strengthen. The war has changed them by frustrating their childish expectations of integration, thus transforming them into the men they are. The famous "Professor of war" finally acknowledges himself for what he is: an old man whose search for social success is only a mask to conceal his terror of being haunted by the ghosts of his past. On his part, Lobo Antunes's protagonist perceives his dreadful rootlessness and his metamorphosis into a

middle-aged "exiled ostrich," floating "between two continents, both of which spurn [him]," always "searching for an empty space in which [he] might drop anchor" (Lobo Antunes 201). More significantly narrating the war has exposed their inability to cope with memory: theirs is a tragedy of memory indeed, not because memory really fails them but because it defies any attempt—either conscious or unconscious—to resist. Thus, the impossibility of ridding their mind from the burden of the past proves crucial in the path leading to their inner selves' construction insofar as it compels them to return to the "inside" of themselves, to the real place of belonging, which is defined by a liminal condition they cannot but accept in the end.

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