Memories of the Future Past

Temporality – that is the notion of a past, a present and a future – which we normally perceive in a linear manner - is key when we are talking about both memory and modernity.

Memory is what we in the present carry with us from the past – as individual AND collective memories. The latter, especially, are crucial for our identity, or identities – be they, national, ethnic, religious, intellectual, political or whatever.

Modernity, on the other hand, is tightly tied to the present – the contemporary – and with a view to the future rather than the past. Yet, Modernity is also a historical era, which – whatever starting-point you may choose, happens to coincide with the expansion of European power and domination all over the globe – and, more importantly, the diffusion of Capitalism (with Socialism as its – temporary – counterpart).

Modernity in that sense has become aware of its historicity – that was the meaning of post-modernity – a notion from the 1980s that now seems strangely obsolete. Now, in the ongoing worldwide transition, and the restructuring of the global economic and political power relations, there is also a rising self-awareness in the traditional West of its own particularity – although 'Western' and 'Modern' are still largely seen as synonymous categories – and assumed to be Universal.

Now, if Memory is looking back and Modernity is facing the future, Memories of Modernity may seem like a contradiction in terms. Remembering the present is of course, at a basic level, what we do all the time.
A diary – or a blog – may simply be a way of documenting the quotidian for future remembrance. Reporting is a more elaborate way of making sense of the present continuous.

But what about Memories of the Future? Some might regard prophesies as examples of that, but then we are entering the domains of mysticism – or fiction - and leaving rational science behind.

Yet – that may be precisely what we need to do to better understand our contemporary predicament. The ability to do so is, in my view, the great asset of art and, especially, literature. I’ll give you a few examples ...

PP2

I came upon the intriguing notion of ‘the future past’ in the reading of a novel by the Argentinean writer Juan José Saer. The novel, Glosa (Gloss), from 1986. was written from Saer’s voluntary exile in Paris, but it takes place in an imaginary space of the country and province of his birth.

Gloss, as a literary genre, is an interpretation or explanation of an obscure or unintelligible text, and Glosa is one of Saer’s most complex and evasive works. The narrative frame is a conversation between two reunited friends during a walk along San Martín street in the city of Santa Fe on an early October morning in 1961.

One of the two friends has recently returned from a journey to Europe and his fresh memories are popping up as they walk, as one of many different time layers that interfere with the narrative present (the one hour it takes to walk the 21 blocks). The most intriguing – and disturbing – temporality is this curious future past, 18 years ahead in which one of the protagonists will remember this walk and know that his friend the year before, in 1978, had killed himself after being ambushed by the police.
This other layer of their future fate adds a resonance of nightmarish horror to the walk through the empty streets. And there is one specific detail that stands out as a condensation of this horror: the capsule of venom (cyanide), which the militants were provided with by their organizations as “death insurance” in case they were captured.

In *Glosa*, in the future past of Leto’s years of militancy, the sordid capsule of venom becomes – in literary critic Beatriz Sarlo’s words PP3 a talisman that represents the all-or-nothing of a struggle and gives the violent action a sort of negative metaphysical shine: an assured Nothing

This novel was published three years after Argentina’s return to parliamentary democracy, at a moment when the country seemed eager to close the book on the horrors of the immediate past. But although the novel had little public impact, it stands, as a chillingly exact depiction of the social solitude of the militant, with an existential depth that a retrospective testimony is hardly able to transmit.

Another Argentinean example of creative distortion of past and future is Carlos Gamerro’s novel *Las Islas* (The Islands) from 1998. PP4 It is one of the very few novels that deal with the taboo subject of the disastrous war against Great Britain over Malvinas (The Falklands) in 1982. Gamerro is one of the writers I interview in my book *Fiction and Truth in Transition* – He was born in ’62 – the year class of the “boys of the war” – the conscripts who were sent to fight the well-equipped professional British troops in the Antarctic winter on the barren islands in the South Atlantic. He was supposed to be one of the boys, and he writes his novel as if he were one of the veterans – as if that actually had been his fate, a parallel fictional life.
And the truth is, that he could not have written the novel about the war and its aftermath if he had been there. (That is one of my main conclusions, that *literary fiction works the void of experience.*) I’ll come back to that.

The decisive contribution of literature in the Argentinean transition, and the principal challenge for Argentinean writers is, in my view, the dismantling of the still-pervasive national mythology. The particular case of Malvinas condensates the complex of complicity, revealing the ambiguous, yet intimate relationship between the dictatorship and civil society.

(On 30 March 1982, one of the major popular manifestations against the military government was held at Plaza de Mayo. Three days later, on 2 April, after the surprise disembarking on the islands, there were as huge manifestations, and with largely the same people, expressing their support for the Malvinas campaign. Even the guerrillas, who had barely survived the total defeat in the dirty war, immediately buried the hatchet and whole-heartedly joined sides with the former enemy in this “anti-imperialist” endeavour.)

This is difficult to understand, even for Argentineans themselves. And it is somehow the *National Shame* – and the reason why this really is a sensitive subject. (By the way, the conflict may surface again any moment, since British Petroleum now is drilling for oil in the sea outside the Falklands.)

Gamerro’s novel is set in 1992 – ten years after the war – but in a slightly distorted Buenos Aires, resembling the near-future cityscapes of cyber punk. It is a novel about the war, but also a *tragicomic hyperbole* of the grand illusion of the neoliberal 1990s.

I will not go in to the intricate plot and its innumerable bifurcations. But let me just give you a hint of the style:
When the main protagonist, hacker Felipe Félix, is commissioned to design a computer game on Malvinas, he finds, to his surprise, that the battle of the South Atlantic is not included in the existing computer games’ catalogues on real and hypothetical modern wars. To simulate the British-Argentinean confrontation, he therefore has to put together an eclectic concoction of past and present conflicts. He picks World War I, with its trenches and bayonets, for the combat on land, adjusting the armament by putting World War II and Six Day War weapons in the hands of the Argentineans, and Gulf War weapons at the disposal of the British.

For geographical setting he decides on Russia in 1944, but finds the corresponding soldiers too well clad to be Argentinean.

Looking for the best match in the latter respect, he finally, after thorough research and consideration, settles for the Iraqis of Desert Storm. It turns out to be a real hit; even their features resemble those of the Argentineans, not least after the lightning defeat:

somewhat confused, dirty, worn-out, uncertain of what they were doing there and relieved that they had been defeated so fast.

Saddam Hussein’s surprise occupation of Kuwait, with its similar disastrous outcome, indeed makes for an intriguing comparison. It is even more fascinating that it is suggested by an Argentinean.

Las islas is an exceptional novel; a satirical tour de force; exuberant, hallucinatory, mercilessly self-ironic. But is more than slapstick comedy. At another level it is just as much an elegy over the recent and recurrent tragedy, resonant with clarified anger and sorrow, and Gamerro’s great accomplishment is, in my view, the consistent dialectic between these two narrative registers.
I stated earlier that literature, as opposed to journalism, testimonies and other forms of witness reports, works the void of experience. Now, what does that really mean?

In my interview with Gamerro, he says that “fiction to me is a life un-lived”, and I quote here an excerpt from that interview.  

When someone asks me if my fiction is autobiographical, I say, yes, it’s a negative autobiography. It’s what could have happened to me but didn’t. Yes, I should have gone to the Malvinas. So it’s as though my life divided itself into a real life and a ghostly life that somehow accompanies me. When I interviewed the ex-combatants, my fear was, “how could I write about a war I didn’t fight?” Did I have the right? It was almost a moral issue, not only a question of information. (…)  

There’s a famous phrase by Walter Benjamin: “The soldiers came back mute from the battlefield”. However, when I talked to them, they were not mute; they were laconic. They were not capable of talking because each word was so charged with meaning and experience that they didn’t see the need to elaborate. They said, “yes, yes, it was cold”, or “yes, the trenches were wet”, or “yes, the explosions were terrible”.  

So I realized that fiction also restores something that the testimony doesn’t necessarily have. The testimony is tied to a shared experience that already took place, whereas fiction has to create that reality. I somehow needed to use many words to give that world an identity – words the soldiers considered unnecessary because for them that world was already real. I think I discovered, then, that fiction could clearly be on par with the testimonies.

This truth revealed by Las Islas equally refutes the two grand narratives by which the story of Malvinas is still being told in Argentina.

- the victorious discourse of the military campaign, which was embraced by practically all Argentines
- and the following victimization discourse of the transition, in which the vanguard of the young nation sent out to defy the decaying British empire was turned into sacrificed martyrs – victims, not so much of the superior British troops as of their own deceitful officers.
I dare state that it is only literature that breaks and deconstructs this binary structure.

So, although Literature has historically played an important role as witness-bearer, especially when other forms of documentation have been missing, today, when we have immediate access to almost all dramatic events in the world, there is perhaps less incitement for literature to assume that role.

It can seldom compete with Journalism anyway, in terms of immediate impact or communication power. In terms of imaginative power, however, literary fantasy is and remains unsurpassed.

That could have been my concluding remark. But I’ll give you one final example, to bring us back to the notion of the future past. The example is my own writing.

PP8 (The Triangle)

This has become my trademark. What this simple figure illustrates is what I regard as the three main writing practices and their interrelations.

I would even state that all forms of creative writing happen in the dynamic tension between these three poles. (Think of them, not as a triangle, or a pyramid, but as the three poles of a triangular field of force.)

There is a crucial difference between the literary practice and the other two. While everything in the world can, metaphorically speaking, be turned into literature, everything cannot claim to be journalism or science. A novel can incorporate the other genres in a totalizing effort that the others could only dream of. (Gamerro’s novel a good example of that.)
(The flip side of this cannibalistic capacity is a correspondent vulnerability to the influence of these other practices with their more formatted language and sturdier genre conventions.) The literary freedom can indeed also serve as an excuse for not doing proper research on a subject. You can always hide behind this shield of fiction...

The area of this triangular field where I have as yet the least experience is the academic corner. When I embarked on my research project on fiction and truth in South Africa and Argentina – which ended up as a dissertation in Social Anthropology – I had practically no previous experience of academic research, and therefore, perhaps, an exaggerated respect for what it would entail.

So, why, you may ask, did I choose an academic format - academic in the sense that it abides to the academic standards, to be accepted as a dissertation – although that was never a requirement, since my project was one of artistic research. Why didn’t I simply write a novel – or some hybrid form of fiction and fact, which has been so fashionable lately, all over the world.

Wouldn’t that have been the most congenial form for an investigation of “what fiction can tell us about the world, that journalism and science cannot”, which was my simple and vast research Q.

Perhaps – but then it would also have been easily dismissed by Academia as “non-verifiable”, that is, as fiction.

It would not have given me any academic credits. And I doubt that it would have given me more literary credits. And it is very unlikely that I would have found a publisher if it hadn’t been properly sealed with the approval of an examining committee...
And that is of course also the great merit of the academic form. The *rigor* that it imposes on you as a writer.

And I actually don’t believe that the practices *should* be fused. I am of course very much in favour of *hybrid forms* and *genre transgressions*, but I believe that every such attempt still has to be anchored in one of the three corners of the triangle (there is nothing in the middle). So my decision, as a non-academic on the outset, was to adapt to the academic form and push its limits from within. The resulting text has elements of reportage and memoir, but it is definitely to be classified as *non-fiction*.

However.

After spending five years doing this arduous academic research, it was really a relief to go back to writing fiction. My latest novel, *Santiago*, was published in 2007, as the second part in a planned Argentina trilogy (that is why all my previous examples were from Argentina). The first novel came out in 2000, and the third, which I have just completed, will hopefully be out this year. (They are all in Swedish, so no need to give you the titles, but the last one is called *Misiones*.) I’ve had that title in the back of my head ever since I wrote *Santiago*, or even earlier, and I’d probably written it a long time ago if the Fiction and Truth project had not come in-between.

But then, it would certainly have become a quite different novel. Why?

The more thorough research into the ethnographic material that I was beginning to explore in *Santiago* has given my writing a more solid historical ground. And, more importantly, the subsequent greater confidence in my own authority, if you like, has given me the ability and motivation to invent more freely.
One of my South African interviewees, Ivan Vladislavic, suggested that there is not enough invention in literature and called for more writers who would simply make things up. (He was primarily thinking of South African literature of the transition, but I think it can be applied to Literature in general – and I think that is a good point.

For example, Misiones (which means Missions) is a province in NE Argentina with a fairly large and largely unknown community of Swedish immigrants, who arrived in the late 19th and early 20th century. I have been there, very briefly, but I have all the time planned to go there and do some proper research for my novel. But in the end I decided to write the novel first, completely based on imagination and not making use of any of the ”real” history.

Moreover I decided to set my novel in a near future – 2018/19. If you didn’t know, a low-scale world war will then be going on, with its epicentre in Central Asia... All intercontinental air traffic will be cancelled, Europe is on the verge of complete dissolution, millions of migrants are once again going – by boat - from the old world to the new, and from North to South, with Argentina and Australia as main recipients –and emerging new economic and political powers, joining the others in what someone wittily has named ABRICA.

It has been truly funny to write completely without inhibitions– not knowing where imagination would take me.

But – and this will be my concluding remark – this literary fantasy is a just as serious interrogation of the present past as the academic dissertation. They are indeed very different approaches, but they have mutually informed each other – and they have more in common than I would ever have assumed.

In fact, in retrospect, I can even see these two big projects – the dissertation and the trilogy – as two sides of one larger interrogation of what you may call Global Modernity.