

# Memories of the Second World War in *O Reino* by Gonçalo M. Tavares

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## ABSTRACT

Set during and after the Second World War and also incorporating a description of the Holocaust, the tetralogy *O Reino* by Portuguese writer *Gonçalo M. Tavares* uses parody to deal with recognizable sets of discursive traditions, social practices and emblematic figures which make up cultural memories related to the war. Such parody forces readers to go beyond rigorous categorizations and to perceive the heterogeneity of experiences behind memorialization. It ultimately helps to rethink the conceptual basis of both individual and collective memory, namely the notions of subject, object and of society.

**Keywords:** Second World War, Tavares, cultural memory, subjectivity, parody.

## Memorias de la Segunda Guerra Mundial en *O Reino* de Gonçalo M. Tavares

## RESUMEN

Ambientada durante y después de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, y con una descripción del Holocausto, la tetralogía *O Reino* del escritor angolano-portugués *Gonçalo M. Tavares* utiliza la parodia para tratar de tradiciones discursivas, prácticas sociales y figuras emblemáticas reconocibles que constituyen las memorias culturales de la guerra. Esta parodia obliga a los lectores a ir más allá de la categorización rigurosa y a percibir la heterogeneidad de las experiencias convertidas en memoria colectiva. Finalmente, ayuda a reflexionar sobre las bases conceptuales de la memoria tanto individual como colectiva, o sea las nociones de sujeto, objeto y sociedad.

**Palabras clave:** Segunda Guerra Mundial, Tavares, memoria cultural, subjetividad, parodia.

## 1. Introduction

The legacy of the Second World war has been an international phenomenon that stands out for specific peculiarities like the unprecedented scale, the absurdity of concentration camps, the exceptional nature of the technical advances and totalita-

rianisms that have made it a model of atrocity of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with which everybody has had to deal. After the suffering and traumas experienced, national reconstruction required a reinterpretation of the recent past that could help every country to rebuild a common identity on the basis of history (Assmann 2014). European countries that came out of fascist regimes or that underwent their occupation, all developed policies of cultural memory to legitimate new starts or pre-war regimes (Lagrou 2000). Common issues of resistance, guilt, and collaboration, shaped the way in which wartime experience was memorialized and used in the various nations. These national narratives were not monolithic: different memories of persecution were rivals for public attention and showed the difference of experiences and of conflicting memories as well as the dialectics between continuity and discontinuity in relation to the past that had to be always negotiated (Assmann 2014).

In this article I examine four novels by the Angolan-Portuguese writer Gonçalo M. Tavares which dwell upon some of the key issues at stake when writers of the post-war generation attempt to construct narratives of the Second World War. *Um homem: Klaus Klump* (2003), *A máquina de Joseph Walser* (2003), *Jerusalém* (2004), *Aprender a rezar na era da técnica. Posição no mundo de Lenz Buchmann* (2007) were defined by their author as a tetralogy entitled *O Reino* (the Kingdom), clearly alluding to a political system characterized by violent and hierarchical power relationships. The other name used by the author to identify the place of the four novels within his abundant literary production is that of black books as they do describe apocalyptic scenarios and traumas associated with genocides and the Second World War.

The articles and dissertations on the tetralogy that were revised for this study have analyzed the theme of biopolitics, using the interpretive categories derived from Foucault and Agamben (Furão 2013), Tavares' philosophical stance (Sousa 2010; Sánchez Madrid 2015), and the category of the absurd (Freitas 2010). The common interpretive trend has echoed the author's insistence on the theme of evil (Mourão 2008, 2012; Mateus 2015).

As an extension of this previous critical debate on *O Reino*, what I propose here is some initial reflections on the way in which Tavares deals with the set of representations, lines of meaning and social practices which constitute the memorialization of World War II and the Holocaust. The present analysis will focus in particular on the themes linked to this memorialization and embodied by some of the male protagonists of the four novels, the resistance rebel (Klaus Klump in *Um homem: Klaus Klump*), the victim and the persecutor (Joseph Walser and Klober in *A máquina de Joseph Walser*), the PTSD psychiatrist and Holocaust historian (Theodor Busbeck in *Jerusalém*), and the post-war politician (Lenz Buchmann in *Aprender a rezar na era da técnica. Posição no mundo de Lenz Buchmann*). My hypothesis is that it is possible to trace the problematizing of cultural memory, one of the most enduring questions that has emerged in relation to those historical events, through the parodic inversion of post-war narratives with which Tavares presents characters and events.

In the following pages I draw on the concept of parody (Hutcheon 2000) as a form of intertextuality or self-reflexivity that aims at unsettling all accepted beliefs and that Tavares uses in order to signal continuity and difference between past and

present representations of post-war memories and subjectivities. The idea of a socially defined memory negotiated and shared with contemporaries and with a more official tradition orients the present study (Assmann 2014).

## 2. Preliminary remarks on the tetralogy

Called «reflection-novels» by Luís Mourão (2012), the four novels are not historical. They integrate the events of the fabula with a series of reflections on general anthropological categories like man/woman, the city/ the forest, man/nature. This atemporal vision of human existence in war is conveyed thanks to the indefinite places and times of the events, the frequent use of general epithets referring to characters, spaces and times, and of the present tense. All the novels take place in a city, the first two during a foreign invasion and the third and fourth in the aftermath of war.

However, the allusions to the Second World War are clear: the German names of the characters, a narrativization of the Holocaust in *Jerusalém*, and, in particular, what have been key issues, myths and nightmares, of the memorialization debate on World War II: resistance, guilt and collaboration.

## 3. *Um homen: Klaus Klump* (2003)

As Tavares explains in the foreword to the edition containing both *Um homen: Klaus Klump* and *A máquina de Joseph Walser* (2011), the two first novels of the tetralogy are set in the same landscape and period, a city occupied by a foreign army, and have exactly the same center. Speed is the physical quality characterizing both the first novel and its protagonist, the resistance rebel Klaus Klump. As we soon learn through Klaus' and the narrator's perspectives, the world has a blade that can save or kill, depending respectively on its lower or higher speed.

However, in the novel speed connotes the violence of the invaders, their sickening military rhythms, and military cults of virile activism, aggressive nationalism and deadly technology. The author's initial statement actually invites readers to investigate the association between speed and the rebel and to problematize monolithic views of the protagonists of Resistance myths, aggressive invaders and heroic rebels by defamiliarizing them through the use of narrative distance and perspective.

Klaus Klump is the first protagonist of the tetralogy that is classified as belonging to the lineage of the strong as opposed to the weak that acknowledge compassion, injustice and suffering. He shares with the invaders a minor or different version of their violence and power relations. Instead of raping women, he does not protect his fiancée Johana from being raped. To the killing of national enemies, he prefers crushing insects and stabbing to death an insect-like fellow citizen and prisoner. Instead of killing his fellow men, he opts for managing his hate and avoiding social bonds, a different form of courage in war that, according to the narrator, consists in disciplining anti-social emotions and god-like, violent aspirations to dominate and to be in control.

Klaus, moreover, is a rebel who contradicts the ideological use of the term Resistance when used to evaluate and praise an attitude of rebellion, courage and self-sacrifice for the sake of political rights as opposed to the collaboration with the enemy. A former writer of subversive novels against the economy and politics of the time, he ends up despising his homeland for its servility and incapacity to rescue him from prison. Klaus does not fight for the sake of national freedom nor for any form of nationalism and rebels when the invading army intrudes into his family business. Although celebrated as a heroic Resistance fighter by national propaganda in the aftermath of war, his resistance to the horrors meted out by the enemy is keeping invisible, neutral, deaf and mute, avoiding thoughts and erasing memories. Ultimately, his is a personal truce in the middle of a total warfare, both in the human and in the natural world.

Klaus' position among the strong, violent characters of the tetralogy associated with speed is then to be accounted for with his estrangement from the world. He has never been in contact with nature, since books before and weapons later have engendered indifference in him. He feels gradually estranged from any social group or bond he comes in contact with: fellow prisoners, resistance comrades, his father, and his fiancée Johana. Like most of his fellow citizens, he distances himself from shared cultural issues like music and language. He eventually ends up losing the capacity to even communicate as his words become confused and inadequate.

The climax of his estrangement from the community is the night scene in the forest where he picks up a stone, a correlative objective of himself. With the stone, Klaus shares a low level of technical competency and efficiency in killing physically weaker beings. Like the stone, Klaus thinks that he can do without others and does not address the moral dilemmas involved in his neutrality and individualism, in his saving or killing. Klaus realizes the existence of otherness only for a moment, when fever, significantly described as a collective phenomenon, undermines his control over his own body. Then, ironically, since he sees himself as an autonomous individual, he reverts to his socially determined habits: his father's economic opportunism, his fellow citizens' oblivion of the past and of the war, and their worship of the god-like perfection of bullets and tanks.

With the rebel Klaus Klump Tavares explores the question whether a specific form of neutrality can be morally acceptable in the face of horrendous crimes. The moral dilemmas remain complex and blurred for Klaus who, symbolically, cannot measure the speed of good and evil and keeps few memories of shared projects of resistance to the war. Tavares' focus is on the root causes of that neutrality, namely Klaus' idea of subjectivity, the perception of himself as an atomistic individual who deletes all forms of social interactions. What Tavares' parodic use of the labels enemy, ally, rebel urges readers to do is to go beyond them and analyze what conceptions of subject, object and society they are based on. This implies also dealing with the type of cultural memory they are sharing or negotiating in the public arena (Assmann 2014). In a nation of individuals, each with his own language, like the one where Klaus lives, most people have decided to ignore common memories and projects, just the current reality of war, in the attempt to survive.

#### 4. *A mquina de Joseph Walser* (2004)

As Tavares explains in the foreword, the protagonist of his second novel, Joseph Walser, is characterized by the physical quality of resistance. In a city oppressed by foreign invaders Walser's resistance does not mean rebellion against the enemy, but rather his peculiar way of surviving all disciplinarian power relations epitomized by war. Enclosed in an ordered, simplified microcosm of fantasy, like the population around him, Walser prefers to ignore the on-going war, to forget the relations between past and present, and to delude himself with an imaginary security and control over reality.

Much like Klaus Klump, Joseph Walser has a limited point of view on himself and his relationship with the world. Walser blindly dreams of attaining the efficiency of the machine he works with as a way towards control and ultimately truth, but this idolatry of technology is debunked both narratively and through the perspective of others. The machine has actually the power of life and death on Walser and keeps him in a state of constant fear until it finally amputates the index finger of his right hand, symbolically associated to power. Besides, what Walser perceives as his decision-making power (playing dice), his irrationally Cartesian bulwark against chaos (collecting metallic pieces), his offensive weapon against the aggressive century (his lack of love and friendship) and his moral virtue (not killing anyone) is subverted by the respectful although ironic narrator that sees his ideas as delusions. They are, in fact, a total surrender to chance, an escape from the world complexity, a defensive shield to avoid confrontation and a self-absolving refusal to engage with moral issues of good and evil and of responsibility.

A victim and a survivor of the machine, Walser plays the same role also with Klobler, his sly factory boss, a mentor and a persecutor. Klobler persuades Walser to embrace an extreme form of individualism with a speech that paradoxically appeals to his sense of friendship and patriotism. Klobler's actions and victim-blaming speeches question all shared values and beliefs only to subjugate his subordinate. Klobler in fact spies on Walser, humiliates him by seducing his wife and defaming his lover, praises his servility and sense of duty in order to coerce him into obedience, makes him complicit in the arrest of his colleague and resistance fighter Fluzt and finally compels him to play Russian roulette.

Klobler's and Walser's relationship reveals their proximity and inseparability in relation to moral assumptions that shaped the post-war nation building process: guilt and collaboration, passive acceptance of fate, taking advantage of conditions necessary for resisting, and ultimately bearing responsibility for what happened. Like in the first novel, Tavares' focus is on Walser's and Klobler's anti-social behavior which denies the relational nature of individuals. Like many of his fellow citizens, Walser ignores common traditions or recollections of peace, closed as he is in a solipsistic view of existence. He accepts Klobler's denunciation of collective history as a tool invented to erase individual recollections and to discipline individuals, never for a moment realizing his own plight as Klobler's victim nor imagining the possibility of negotiations in the construction of collective memory.

## 5. *Jerusalém* (2007)

The reconstruction of nations after 1945 proceeded from an attempt to stop the chance of a new state of emergency because it could lead back to what had been experienced and what everybody refused to live again. Tavares' third novel forces us to confront these questions by reflecting on the goals of conventional memorialization of the Holocaust which has an accepted normative side: it implies good intentions in the preservation of the victims' memory and in the prevention of similar future acts.

The protagonist of *Jerusalém*, Theodor Busbeck, a psychiatrist and a scholar of the Holocaust, mixes a guilty addiction to pornography and prostitution, and an unconventional moral perspective on mental health and the history of genocides. Both his addiction and interest are sites of excess feelings that, as the narrator points out, have a moral that does not save because it does not include shared values.

His controversial nature clearly emerges from the distancing mechanisms that Tavares uses to depict and question the protagonist. The narrator and Dr. Gomperz, the manager of the Rosenberg mental institution where Busbeck's ex-wife Mylia is hospitalized, systematically erode Busbeck's reliability, primarily his capacity for scientific research, self-assessment and ethical values.

As a doctor, he sees mental disorders as a lack of God and treats them through the control and normalization of difference. His inability for self-analysis stands out when he cannot recognize the disciplinarian nature of his medical treatments and of those of his double, Dr. Gomperz.

Similarly, Busbeck's interest in the study of the Holocaust is motivated by the delirious, god-like ambition to save mankind. The prevention of future horrors which he devises consists in fostering moral neutrality in people, an action that is utterly rejected by academia as a mix of science with religious nonsense.<sup>1</sup>

Ironically, Busbeck's monumental five-volume research on the Holocaust falls into utter oblivion right after its publication, while the memories he tried to silence find a place inside the novel. *Jerusalém* contains in fact two chapters, «Os loucos» and «Europe 02», which transcribe the recollections of the Holocaust victims and of the Rosenberg patients. Moreover, the mental patients' traumatic memories recur continuously in the novel and even shape its representational structure with a pervasive use of flashbacks. Similarly, «Europe 02» collects first-person individual testimonies of suffering, ethical dilemmas and horror in the concentration camps as if it were a new European history. Ultimately, the title chosen by Tavares, *Jerusalém*, is by itself a figure of the continuous proximity and re-enactment of the past intended as a preservation of the victims' memories. The title of the novel refers to Psalm 137 which Busbeck's ex-wife and former Rosenberg patient, Mylia, utilizes to reinforce her intention and promise never to forget the past at Rosenberg.

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<sup>1</sup> Busbeck sees the ethical issues of good and evil as the cause of genocides that can be prevented by identifying prospective victims and perpetrators and by eliminating awareness of good and evil through concrete activities.

## 6. *Aprender a rezar na era da tcnica. Posio no mundo de Lenz Buchmann (2007)*

While the previous novels thematize the rebel's and the victim's resistance to violence and the historian's post-war memorialization, the last novel *Aprender a rezar na era da tcnica. Posio no mundo de Lenz Buchmann* delves into the problem of post-war politics. Like in *Jerusalm*, the setting is again in an unnamed city in peacetime where democracy has brought so much anarchy and confusion of new proposals and voices that people long to restore the past order and security with one powerful leader and in a homeland protected by modern arms.

The protagonist Lenz Buchmann has survived the war while exercising the profession of surgeon in the hospital where Klaus Klump was hospitalized after his accident, and finally decides to become a politician for the same reasons that mobilized Theodor Busbeck to become a Holocaust historian: ambition, thirst for power, desire to save mankind and satisfy the desires of multitudes.

In a manner that closely resembles the previous novels, Tavares makes a parody of post-war political reconstruction narratives by debunking shared definitions of national identity and of Holocaust memorialization.

Buchmann's political project is firmly based on a view of people, of the world, of how they relate and what counts for them, which denies any imagined community. Conceiving his brain as an organ with the shape and function of a weapon, Buchmann has developed the aggressive capacity of facing the external world, which means positioning for battle. Both in the natural and urban space, interactions among men and between men and nature are those of the hunting world: hunters vs preys, persecutors vs victims. Buchmann's version of resistance or of reconstruction is to keep alive by attacking and preying on others, to kill in order not to be killed. Any fight for survival implying a defensive, accepting attitude is rejected as a cowardly, fatal weakness. Society is hierarchical, divided as it is among strong leaders and weak, unarmed and passive masses that share a deceitful sense of community. Politics for him means acquiring an individual, absolute power over masses by mobilizing their fear and admiration, by persuading them to desire what he desires, by feigning empathy to use them without getting emotionally involved. In this sense, the attraction he feels for homeless and crazy people comes from an appreciation of their total freedom to create their own system of moral rules that cannot be compared, nor shared as they have no peers to negotiate with.

As regards the thematization of memory in the novel, it is significant that the protagonist builds his identity on a military past. Although he has spent most of his life in peacetime, he draws on the recollections of his father, a war veteran, all the principles of conduct that shape his private and professional life and thoughts. His education, which was an initiation to military life, banned fear and trained him to exercise abusive power on beings in weaker positions, thus shaping his identity and understanding of family heritage, the medical profession, social relations and politics.

Buchmann's is an individual memory that deceitfully imposes personal principles rather than negotiating them, that favors a belligerent attitude, a monocratic regime, a recovery of family lineage that silences the passive, weak part of humankind, the victims. His recollections expose all the ideological marks and power dynamics of a

work on memory which becomes ominous when applied to Buchmann's political position of «one for many». *Aprender a rezar na era da tcnica. Posio no mundo de Lenz Buchmann* is in fact a re-enactment of the past, an extension and continuity of the reasons of warlike attitudes and genocide beyond space and time: this is the meaning of the preservation of the archive of family memory in the novel, Friedrich Buchmann's library, and of the oblivion of his weak brother Albert.

Tavares' inversion of post-war reconstruction myths is a major means of exposing the mechanisms and problems of memory politics. The tragic irony of Buchmann's final fate allows and demands from readers further interpretation and evaluation of his behavior and assumptions. Attacked by an aggressive form of brain cancer like his brother Albert, his physical and mental powers decay rapidly and the former hunter is forced to immobility, in the hands of his enemy's children. His limited point of view is undermined by a narrator that underlines the difference between what he sees and what others see. He cannot even pull the trigger with the index finger of his right hand, that hand that saves and kills, and so find a honorable death without the humiliation of compassion. Among his amnesias, the most tragic one is that he finally forgets his father's name.

## 7. Conclusions

Tavares' central problem is ultimately how we construct cultural memory through the dialectics between continuity and discontinuity in relation to the past that has to be always negotiated and which therefore implies a relational idea of the individual. All of Tavares' 'strong' protagonists have a problem with their conception of themselves: they deny otherness by distancing themselves from the external world, from the other that is in themselves, and they reject the possibility of a collective memory negotiated with others.<sup>2</sup> Klaus loses his language and social bonds, Walser hides in his non-shared study and utopia of order, Busbeck erases his patients' pasts and then grants recognition to those aspects of the victims' testimonies that reinforces his image of himself while ignoring experiences that fall outside of his bounds; Buchmann is an exemplary display of repressive memory politics: he builds a campaign as a testament of his understanding of the nation which is his father's military memories. Tavares resists giving an exclusionary ethical response on how to survive and rebuild memory and identity. What he does is propose a phenomenology of strategies of resistance and survival, highlighting their reciprocal porosity and proximity as well as their problematic nature when they are based on an atomistic view of the subject.

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<sup>2</sup> In the tetralogy few are the characters that have a project of resistance involving social bonds. In the first novel Joanna talks about the people's right to their music, language and silence. In *Jerusalem* Tavares collects the Rosenberg patients' and camp survivors' testimonies while Mylia speaks about the common memory of the Rosenberg hospital that she will never forget.



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