

The Collective Memory in *El Evangelio Según Marcos* of J. L. Borges

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Abstract

The cultural memory has become a focus in studies of sociology, anthropology, history, among the other disciplines. It also endows new perspective on the criticism of literature. The concept of collective memory, developed by the French sociology Maurice Halbwachs at the first of the twenty century, constitutes the fundamental notion in the investigation about the cultural memory. There exists a collective memory and social frameworks for the memory. The collective memory is the instruments used to reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society.

Jorge Luis Borges is publicly recognized as one of the most important writers of the Spanish-language literature. One of the characteristics of the Borge’s short stories is the constant and abundant references to other texts. In this paper, we pick the short story “*El Evangelio Según Marcos* (The Gospel According to Mark)” as a case to analyze the cultural collective memory in the text and it’s meanings.

Key words: M. Halbwachs; Collective memory; J. L. Borges; *El Evangelio Según Marcos*; Gaucho

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1. THE COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF M. HALBWACHS AS A METHOD OF LITERARY STUDIES

The cultural memory has become a focus in studies of sociology, anthropology, history, among the other disciplines. It also endows new perspective on the criticism of literature. When we discuss about the cultural memory, tacitly we have the precondition that the cultural memory is rather related to a community than to an isolated individual. So, the collectivity may be the immanent quality of the cultural memory.

The concept of collective memory, developed by the French sociology Maurice Halbwachs at the first of the twenty century, constitutes the fundamental notion in the investigation about the cultural memory. The main points of Halbwachs are these:

Firstly, Halbwachs defines the “memory” distinguishing it from the “impression”. He appoints that the impression varies from individual to individual and from type to type, completely aside from the social influence. However, the memory depends on the social environments. “It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (Halbwachs, 1992, p.38). We recall the past mostly spurred by the others, and our recollections depend on all those of our fellows. For explaining this, Halbwachs puts the case of dreams as the contrary of the memory: the dreams are not real and complete memory because they are composed by chaotic, mutilated and alien fragments. When one dreams, he is removed from the society. It is impossible that one can relive the past by dreams, detached from the system of social representation. On the contrary, in order to remember, one must be capable of reasoning and comparing and of feeling in contact with a human society that guarantee the integrity of our memory (Ibid., p.41).

In this sense, there exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory, “it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection” (Ibid., p.38). But the social frameworks of memory do not mean a sum o a simple combination of individual recollections of many members of the group. “The collective frameworks of memory are not constructed after the fact by the combination of individual recollections; nor are they empty forms where recollections coming from elsewhere would insert themselves” (Ibid., p.40). The collective frameworks depend on conventions, and one of the most important is the verbal convention. Halbwachs affirms that “(...) verbal conventions constitute what is at the same time the most elementary and the most stable framework of the collective memory”. Nevertheless, he also emphasizes that “this framework is however rather slack, since it fails to encompass all memories that are even slightly complex and since it retains only isolated details and discontinuous elements of our representation” (Ibid., p.45).

The collective frameworks of memory depend on the conventions of the present society, and this conduces to the third main point of Halbwachs: That is, the past is not preserved but reconstructed on the basis of the present. The collective memory is precisely the instruments used to reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society. We are reshaping the past always under the influence of the present social milieu (Ibid., p.47).

As a consequence of the collectivity, memories occur in the form of system. That is, although one may have a memory unlike that of anyone else, given the variety of temperaments and life circumstance, “(...) individual memory is nevertheless a part or an aspect of group memory” (Ibid., p.53). Halbwachs states:

One cannot in fact think about the events of one’s past without discoursing upon them. But, to discourse upon something means to connect within a single system of ideas our opinions as well as those of our circle. (Ibid.)

As a result, the individual memory only can be understood when it is located within the thought of the corresponding group, such like family, the religious group, the social classes and other communities. On the other hand, the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in individual memories.

In our opinion, the literary text is highly concerned with the collective memory of a society. Those texts such like the *Holy Bible* or the classical literature may serve as examples, because they form an important part of the memory of the western culture, being recalled in numerous occasions, sometimes literally quoted, or otherwise to be alluded implicitly. The theory of Halbwachs gives us a new perspective in the interpretation

of a literary text, focusing on the traces of the collective memory that contains a text, in order to decipher the meaning of those inserted fragments.

Jorge Luis Borges is publicly recognized as one of the most important writers of the Spanish-language literature. In many occasions, Borges declared that all the books are one book, or all the stories are one story. In an interview he also said that:

No estoy seguro de que yo exista, en realidad. Soy todos los autores que he leído, toda la gente que he conocido, todas las mujeres que he amado. Todas las ciudades que he visitado, todos mis antepasados.... (Fermosel, 1981)

All these statements could be understood as a manifestation of the collective memory: nothing could be an isolated entity but the accumulation of all that precedes it. This concept of collective heritage has been widely represented by Borges in his literary works. One of the characteristics of the Borge’s short stories is the constant and abundant reference to other texts. In this paper, we pick the short story *El Evangelio Según Marcos* (*The Gospel According to Mark*, translated by Norrnan Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with the author) as a case to analyze the cultural collective memory in the text and its meanings.

2. FOUR TYPES OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN *EL EVANGELIO SEGÚN MARCOS*

The short story *El Evangelio Según Marcos* is firstly published in the collection of short stories entitled “*El informe de Brodie*” in 1970. The story is about the crucifixion of a young man named Baltasar Espinosa. Espinosa, with an unlimited kindness and a capacity of public speaking, studies medicine in Buenos Aires city. At 33 years old he is invited to the farm to spend the summer months by his cousin Daniel, where Espinosa knows the family of the foreman, the “Gutre”. Espinosa finds several books of different themes in the house, such like folkloric novels and poems in Spanish, a *Holy Bible* in English, etc. Hemmed in by a diluvion, Espinosa begins to entertain himself and the foreman’s family, reading novels. At first, the Gutres are not interested absolutely, but with the recitation (and translation from English to Spanish at the same time) of the *Gospel According to Mark* of the *New Testament*, the whole family begins to pay a special attention. By the handwritten record in the blank pages at the end of the *Holy Bible*, Espinosa gets know that the foreman’s family is native of Inverness, and their surname actually is “Guthrie”. The Guthries abandoned Scotland to emigrate to Argentina at the first of the 19th century as peon. After several generations, they have forgotten English, neither they have dominated completely

Spanish, language that “gave them trouble” at the time Espinosa knows them. Thereby the chronicle of the family history is interrupted at the eighties of the 19th century. The recitation pronounced by Espinosa awakes the religious fanaticism of the Guthries, who begin to venerate Espinosa, taking Espinosa as Christ, and finally they decide to crucifer him on a Friday.

Evidently, this short story is a recollection of the *Gospel According to Mark* of the *New Testament*, just like the title has indicated. But before the analysis of the religious memory, we’d like to appoint that the story also contains mainly other three types of collective memories: the memory of the family, the memory of the diaspora, and the memory of the history. These four types of the collective memory will be traced in the following part of this paper.

2.1 The Memory of the Family

In the story the foreman’s family is very special, beginning with their facial features: “Eran altos, fuertes, huesudos, de pelo que tiraba a rojizo y de caras aindiadas” (Borges, 1980, p.425). Their reddish hairs that indicate the Anglo-Saxon origin are not harmonious with their faces of Indian features. Behind these strange features, there is peripeteia of emigration and miscegenation of a Scottish family:

(Espinosa) Explorando la casa, siempre cercada por las aguas, dio con una Biblia en inglés. En las páginas finales los Guthrie —tal era su nombre genuino— habían dejado escrita su historia. Eran oriundos de Inverness, habían arribado a este continente, sin duda como peones, a principios del siglo diecinueve, y se habían cruzado con indios. (Ibid., p.427)

The Guthries have tried to keep the record of their lineage annotating the history of the family in the last pages of the *Bible*. However, just like Halbwachs emphasized that, as a framework of collective memory, the verbal convention is very slack. The language itself is a memory which easily can be corrupted and dwindled. In this story, the Scottish family, after three or four generations of emigration and miscegenation with the Indians, has forgotten their mother language; living in an isolated farm without any alphabetization and education, they neither learned Spanish. Thereby, the Guthries have lost the speaking and become aphasics in a metaphoric sense, gravely limited in the capacity of remembering, just like Halbwachs indicates (Halbwachs, 1992, pp.43-44). As a consequence of this metaphoric aphasia, they are incapable to tell the family’s history, and in this way, the collective memory of the family is interrupted:

La crónica cesaba hacia mil ochocientos setenta y tantos; ya no sabían escribir. Al cabo de unas pocas generaciones habían olvidado el inglés; el castellano, cuando Espinosa los conoció, les daba trabajo. (Borges, 1980, p.427)

They even have forgotten their real surname, which could be the most important signal of the family history. The corrupted form of the surname—from “Guthrie” to

the Spanish-liked “Gutre”—reinforces this extinction of the collective memory of the family.

2.2 The Memory of the Diaspora

The alphabetic condition of the foreman’s family conduces to the collapsing of the verbal convention in this small community. As a consequence, they are incapable of verbal expression: “Casi no hablaban”, “El diálogo resultaba difícil; los Gutes, que sabían tantas cosas en materia de campo, no sabían explicarlas” (Borges, 1980, p.426). This metaphoric aphasia not only makes them lose the speaking and the possibility to keep the family’s history, but also makes them incapable to recognize the past. The Guthries are unable to read the family chronicle, so they are unconscious of their Scottish origin, the emigration and the racial miscegenation with the Indian people of their ancestors. They have no verbal convention, and therefore, nor memory, just like Borges appoints in the short story:

Espinosa recordó que su padre solía decir que casi todos los casos de longevidad que se dan en el campo son casos de mala memoria o de un concepto vago de las fechas. Los gauchos suelen ignorar por igual el año en que nacieron y el nombre de quien los engendró. (Ibid.)

They can’t narrate the family’s story, neither they are able to form concepts such

like “past” or “history”. The Guthries have lost the notion of the time, which is fundamental to form the concept of memory. So, they are living only in the present and have no interest in knowing any cultural tradition or racial identity, typical components of the collective memory about the past.

Verbal convention is the most important framework of collective memory, and this convention normally is represented physically by manuscripts and books. In the story, Espinosa finds some books in the house:

En toda la casa no había otros libros que una serie de la revista *La Chacra*, un manual de veterinaria, un ejemplar de *lujo del Tabaré*, una *Historia del Shorthorn* en la Argentina, unos cuantos relatos eróticos o policiales y una novela reciente: *Don Segundo Sombra*. (Ibid.)

These books are medium through which the Argentine history can be reconstructed. The epic *Tabaré* is the sign of the racial miscegenation with the Indian people in the plain of De la Plata River; the farm journal “*La Chacra*”, the handbook of the veterinary medicine and the book of the Shorthorn’s history in Argentine serve as the memory of the history of the cattle industry; and finally, “*Don Segundo Sombra*”, novel published in 1926 by the Argentine writer Ricardo Güiraldes, is a literary work that continues and reminds the “gauchesca” (word comes from “gaucho” which means “cattle drover” in Spanish) tradition in the national literature. The deluxe edition of the Uruguayan epic poem *Tabaré*, which narrates the tragic love between the Indian cacique Tabaré and the Spanish women Blanca, can’t awake the minimal

interest of the Guthries, just because they ignore the family's history and they are free of the notions such like "tradition". The Guthries have no memory about the family's history, neither they pay attention to the memory of the diaspora and the miscegenation.

2.3 The Memory of the History

The reference to the novel *Don Segundo Sombra* lead us to the third type of memory referred in the Borges's short story, that is, the memory of the Argentine's history.

It is impossible to elucidate the whole Argentine history in this paragraph, and we will mainly focus on that part related to the cattle drovers. *Don Segundo Sombra* tells a story about the life of the cattle drovers in Argentine. This work continues the national tradition of "gauchesca" literature, this is, a group of poems and novels that describe the romanticized life of the "gaucho", the cattle drover in Argentine, Paraguay and Uruguay. The first poems of this theme appeared at the thirties of the 19th century. After the political independence, some literates continued the tradition, writing poems imitating the voice of the gaucho. In 1872, the publication of the poem *Martín Fierro* constituted the climax of this type of works. In some sense, in the 19th and the first of the 20th century, the gauchesca literature has been used to reconstruct and reshaping the collective memory of Argentine history; many times people try to reconstruct the national history basing on these literary texts, and the division between the literary fiction and the historical facts is blurred. Borges himself has tried to demystify the image of gaucho and the gauchesca tradition in several essays¹.

The works of the "gauchesca" literature often has the "pampa", the Argentine plain around the De la Plata River as background, to narrate the dramatic life of the "gaucho", normally intercalating conflicts between the Indians and the "gauchos". The assault perpetrated by the Indians to the white people, named "malón" in Spanish language of Argentine, Uruguay and Paraguay, is the most stereotyped plot in the "gauchesca" tradition. In these plots, Indians run to the white people's village in horse, kill men, and kidnap women and children. In the literary stories, those assaults used to occur in the southern boundaries, historically named "frontera" in Spanish, that divided the white people's villages, located in the northern plain, and the wide southern zone controlled by Indians. The background of *El Evangelio Según Marcos* is exactly set in Junín and the Salado River, boundaries of constant interchanges and fluid of the population (Mayo, 2000; Gómez Romero, 2005; Duncan Baretta & Markoff, 1978). Here, the toponyms not only define a geographic space, but also recall the stories between the white people and the Indians in the collective memory of the Argentine history.

¹ See "La poesía gauchesca", "Paul Groussac", "El escritor argentino y la tradición", all in *Discusión*, collection of essays published in 1932.

As an educated and cultured young man, Espinosa is familiar and interested with this collective memory, so one night he asked the Guthries if people remembered the Indians raids—el malón—in the 19th century:

Una noche, Espinosa les preguntó si la gente guardaba algún recuerdo de los malones, cuando la comandancia estaba en Junín. Le dijeron que sí, pero lo mismo hubieran contestado a una pregunta sobre la ejecución de Carlos Primero. (Borges, 1980, p.426)

The Guthries say yes, but they would have given the same answer to the question about the beheading of Charles I. The indifference of the foreman's family, who do have experienced the racial cross, may due to their incapability of verbal expression, but also can be understood as disagreements to the stereotyped reconstruction of the history about the Indians like salvages.

The legendary image of the "gaucho" also is deconstructed by the foreman when, to make the after-dinner time enjoyable, Espinosa recites the fragments of *Don Segundo Sombra*. The doing of the hero of the novel can't whet the interest of the foreman, who had been cattle drover also. The tough and dangerous work described in the novel is light for the foreman and even constitutes good chance to know the far flung places:

Espinosa, para distraer de algún modo la sobremesa inevitable, leyó un par de capítulos a los Gutres, que eran analfabetos. Desgraciadamente, el capataz había sido tropero y no le podían importar las andanzas de otro. Dijo que ese trabajo era liviano, que llevaban siempre un carguero con todo lo que se precisa y que, de no haber sido tropero, no habría llegado nunca hasta la Laguna de Gómez, hasta el Bragado y hasta los campos de los Nuñez, en Chacabuco. (Ibid.)

The comments of the foreman are contrary to the literary myth of gauchos, tough guys who stand the misfortune with stoicism and only vent the sorrow playing guitar and singing. In some sense, the gauchesca literature has been always used to reconstruct and reshaping the collective memory of Argentine. In many occasions, the gaucho is described as the hero of the Independence Movement and the symbol of the national identity. *Don Segundo Sombra* may be the last example of this exaltation of the myth of the gauchos in Argentine literature. But the image of the Guthrie has dismantled the mythological figure of gauchos, and the collective memory that they convey.

2.4 The Religious Memory

Now we discuss about the religious memory referred in *Evangelio según Marcos*. First of all, in the beginning of the story, one can find many coincidences in Espinosa and the figure of Christ. Just like Christ, Espinosa is thirty three years old when these events took place. He has an unlimited kindness and a capacity of public speaking, and the most prominent may be his spirit transcends the common concept of "nation":

Abundaba, por espíritu de aquiescencia, en opiniones o hábitos discutibles: El país le importaba menos que el riesgo de que en otras partes creyeran que usamos plumas; veneraba a Francia pero menospreciaba a los franceses; tenía en poco a los americanos, pero aprobaba el hecho de que hubiera rascacielos en Buenos Aires. (Ibid., p.424)

When Halbwach studies the origin of the Christianity, he stresses that:

We can say that in its articles of belief, its dogmas, and its rites, Christianity is in effect above all the expression of a moral revolution which was a historical event, the triumph of a religion with spiritual content over a formalistic cult, and, at the same time, of a universalist religion with no reference to races and nations over a narrowly nationalist religion. (Halbwachs, 1992, p.86)

Not only there are similarities in personality between Espinosa and Christ, but also, at the same time that the actions develop parallel with the stories in the *Bible* (the rain flooded the ranch and the house is hemmed in by water, just like the biblical Flood), even Espinosa begins to take the physical similarity with the popular image of Jesus: he had grown a beard, and began dallying in front of the mirror to study his new face. Espinosa becomes every time more and more like Jesus Christ. Therefore, the lecture of the *Gospel* is no more an incidental action but the repetition of the preaching. When Espinosa cures the pet lamb of the daughter of the foreman, the gratitude that this treatment awakened in them took Espinosa aback:

Una corderita que la muchacha mimaba y adornaba con una cintita celeste se lastimó con un alambrado de púa. Para parar la sangre, querían ponerle una telaraña; Espinosa la curó con unas pastillas. La gratitud que esa curación despertó no dejó de asombrarlo. (Borges, 1980, p.427)

The Guthries, having receiving with attention the preaching of the *Gospel*, consider the treatment of the lamb as the miracle made by the son of the God. As we analyzed before, the Guthries have lost the verbal convention as frameworks of memory, and their notion of the past must be blurred. They are incapable to conceive that all what is happening just can be a recollection or coincidence with the episode of the Gospel. Instead of this, they confuse the memory with the present. Precisely the agelessness is a relevant quality of the Christianity, just like Halbwachs appoints:

The Christian religion —entirely oriented toward the past as is the case with all religion—can still present itself as a permanent institution, that it claims to be positioned outside of time. (Halbwachs, 1992, p.88)

The Christian truths can be both historical and eternal (Ibid.). Facing with a changing world, the Christian religion maintains itself immutable by the rituals—the celebration of the commemoration of the life of Jesus:

The Christian year is centered around the Paschal period, which is devoted to reproducing through the very order of its ceremonies and the contents of its sermons and prayers the various phases of the Passion. (Ibid.)

But the Guthres, lacked of the notion of the past, think that they are not recalling the life of the Jesus but living it, taking Espinosa as Jesus Christ and confusing the dogma with the reality. The result is that they put in practice the Passion of Jesus Christ, adopting the extreme form of the commemoration:

Los tres lo habían seguido. Hincados en el piso de piedra le pidieron la bendición. Después lo maldijeron, lo escupieron y lo empujaron hasta el fondo. La muchacha lloraba. Cuando abrieron la puerta, vio el firmamento. Un pájaro gritó; pensó: Es un jilguero. El galpón estaba sin techo; habían arrancado las vigas para construir la Cruz. (Borges, 1980, p.429)

CONCLUSION

The constant and abundant references to other texts constitute one of the most relevant characteristics of the works of Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. In this paper, we pick the short story *El evangelio según Marcos* as a case to analyze the cultural collective memory in the text and its meanings, relying on the theory of Maurice Halbwachs.

In *El Evangelio Según Marcos* four types of collective memory can be found: The memory of the family, the memory of the diaspora, the memory of the history, and finally, the religious memory of Christianity. The protagonists of the story do not manifest interest with neither the memory of the Scottish origin of the family, nor the memory of cattle drover, the “gaucho”. Only the religious memory of Christianity can awake their faith. By this identification with a spirit that transcends the races and the nations, Borges has tried to reshape the Argentine history and cultural identity with the cultural eclecticism and cosmopolitanism, as he always proclaims in his texts.

It is also important to appoint that those different levels of identification of the collective memory probably coincides with the feeling of the readers. That is, a reader no familiar with the Argentine history and the national literature of Argentine o Uruguay, may difficultly seize the recollection about the collective memory of the interchanges with Indians and the immigration of Europeans in the fifth of 19th century. However, the Christianity is much widely spread and popular, even for those unbelievers. The collective memory of Christian religion lets this short story can be understood and appreciated by all. In this sense, *El Evangelio Según Marcos* surpasses the *Don Segundo Sombra* o *Tabaré*, which focus on proclaiming the nationalism.

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