

The Lesson of Things: Halina Grynberg and the Post-Shoah Jewish Literature in Brazil

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**The Lesson of Things:
Halina Grynberg and the Post-Shoah Jewish Literature in Brazil**

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Translated by Mateus Gomes

Abstract

The poem “As coisas têm alma” by Maria José de Queiroz (1934-2023), and the book *Lição de Coisas* by Carlos Drummond de Andrade (1902-1987), illuminate the reading of *Mameloshn: memória em carne viva* (2004) and *O padeiro polonês* (2015) by Halina Grynberg. The eleven-year time that separates the two novels does not make their reading more palatable. On the contrary, the doubling of the number 1 (one) points symbolically to the double condition of the narratives. In both, “the memory in the flesh” translates to “the violence of being a survivor,” as stated by Nilton Bonder (2004). The Holocaust, he adds, generates cruelty, exile from one’s homeland and, mainly, exile from human territory, humans’ most primitive language. In this sense, the things or items referenced, cited or listed bring into play objects and things that are part of a ruined world that is mobilized through memory by writers and narrators.

Keywords: Shoah, Memory, Brazilian Literature, Things, Objects, Halina Grynberg, Jewish literature in Brazil

In her online article “Apartment discovered untouched after 72 years reveals true gems in Paris,” Joana Gontijo shows photographs and describes it vividly: When German troops invaded Paris in 1939, many people closed their homes and fled searching for safety far from occupied France. Some families never managed to recover their houses or their belongings from the city ruins. But in 2010, one of those persons’ granddaughter had that chance. Seventy-one years had gone, and Madam De Florian’s family found out that, for all that time, she had been paying taxes and keeping her apartment in Paris closed, even though she never returned to it. She was twenty-three years old when she needed to flee, leaving all behind. After her death, an auditor prepared an inventory with all that was found in the apartment which had stayed closed and inhabited for all that time.

Once reopened, they found out that the apartment had metaphorically become a time capsule. Amidst the dust and spiderwebs, the objects seemed to be in suspension, the shelves held real treasures from the early 1920s. The kitchen was still equipped with silverware, glasses, and other utensils. Artworks had been removed from the walls, as if the proprietary had been preparing to take them away but ended up having no time for that. A carefully crafted dressing table held toilet objects, make-up packages, perfume flasks. Over at a corner, two dolls were found, a Mickey Mouse and a Porky Pig, revealing the presence of the Walt Disney universe at that time. One painting catches the eye: the

portrait of the apartment owner, who was a successful actress in Paris, in an elegant pink dress. There were also found love letters carefully wrapped in multicolored ribbons. (Gontijo 2014)

Madam De Florian's apartment history illustrates, in a unique way, France's private lifestyle at the time of World War II. Also, the poem "Things have a soul" ("*As coisas têm alma*" in Brazilian Portuguese) by Maria José de Queiroz depicts this setting:

Things have a soul.
Truly.
However, it is necessary to unveil their secret:
bring it to light, to the sun, to the stars,
wake it up by the strength of a shriek,
or by the hardness of the impious diamond,
bring it to life, to the murmur, to the rhythm,
to the homeland of pain, of the lightning and the reflex (Queiroz 1982,
17-18).¹

Things speak and, there, where silence has its mouth, mystery manifests itself, the lyrical voice sings in frank dialogue with the book "*Lição de coisas*" (Lesson of things) by Carlos Drummond de Andrade (2012), they illuminate this reading of a series of female writers who, in the offhand of a not always generous criticism, amidst vagueness, make fulgurate a trace, a trail, a detail.

"*Mameloshn: memória em carne viva*" (2004) ("In Raw Flesh") and "*O padeiro polonês*" (2015) ("The Polish Baker") by Halina Grynberg, are paradigmatic items for that literature. The eleven-year time that separates both novels does not make their reading more palatable. On the contrary, the duplication of the number one symbolically points to the condition of double or twin in the narratives. In both, "memory in raw flesh" translates to "the violence of being a survivor," as observed by Nilton Bonder in the afterword of the first novel (Bonder 2004, 101-106). Also, in that text, he declares that "all of us are a result of the most diverse violence produced in the past. The Holocaust produces cruelty, homeland exile and, mainly, exile from the human land, our most primitive language." (Bonder 2004, 101)

Besides, Bonder warns the reader to the fact that Grynberg "follows the grammar of dreams and nightmares," hence "in the middle of so much darkness and bewilderment, amidst so much loss and so much inevitability, soft surviving adjectives lurk from the rubble." (Bonder 2004, 103) However, this proposed reading both Grynberg's novels

under the light of nouns, that is, under the light of the things referred to, cited, or listed. More than adjectives – which are close to and qualify as nouns – they place on the scene words that name beings, objects, qualities, actions, and feelings.² This way, objects acquire, in their silence, an ever-increasing relevance and manifest romance as a cosmologic fact modelled after the biblical Genesis, as Umberto Eco (1932-2016) proposed (1985, 20). In this sense, things, or nouns – that show up in lists and enumerations – are part of an underlying world furnished by the author and her narrators. (Eco 1985, 21-27)

It is also Eco who claims that, in Western culture history, there are rosters of saints, list of soldiers, enumerations of grotesque creatures, inventories of plants and catalogues of treasures. (Eco 2010) To these lists it is possible to add the lists created by writers who make lost things, or things which remained from that big catastrophe, their motto for writing. (Nascimento 2017, 151-163)

Both novels by Halina Grynberg – *Mameloshn* and *O padeiro polonês* – are, however, peculiarly inscribed in the Brazilian literature. Márcio Seligmann-Silva states that such production is “extremely marginal” and that, for a series of reasons, survivors who “ended up landing in Brazil didn’t find” here “a warm audience to their testimonies.” (Seligmann-Silva 2007, 1) Thus, for the critic a “bleak panorama” is composed, despite the relevance of such texts having been considered. (Seligmann-Silva 2007, 10)

Before Seligmann-Silva, Regina Igel deals with the theme *Jewish immigrants/Brazilian writers* with a pioneering approach (Igel 1997). In the section named “Memories of the Holocaust” (*Memórias do Holocausto* in Brazilian Portuguese), she divides that construction in a) pedagogical – characterized by the didactic content, with autobiographic substance and what she considers as a “minimum imaginative elaboration;” b) hybrid – marked by the combination of styles, that is, one showing pedagogical traits intertwined with descriptions of war experiences, either real or imagined; and, last, c) fictional, i.e., texts which narrative voice is one omniscient, analytical or interpreter of character reactions, re-creating, through the imagination, historical events in dramas and conflicts based on the Shoah. (Igel 1997, 211-247)

According to Igel, her proposal aims at locating those texts within “the memorial body of Brazilian literature.” (Igel 1997, 211) “To be object of a modest analytical device” (211)

would then be a recent cutout. Moreover, the first authors who produced texts with autobiographical content “from the time they arrived in this country to the moment they opened the doors of their memories” took around thirty years to write and publish material about their memories. (Igel 1997, 211)

The cast and the analysis of these and other authors who have mixed facts and fiction, besides those who admittedly wrote fictional texts about the Shoah, begin with an introduction on other warlike themes in Brazilian literature. (Igel 1997, 212-214) Igel highlights that, despite these topics have a modest register in fiction in Brazil, they conformed narratives exploiting epic colonial and imperial time episodes, as well as biographies of other relevant names in the Armed Forces and war barrack experiences. Since 1970, a new generation of Jewish historians has diligently dedicated themselves to the studies on World War II, such as Egon Wolff (1910-1991) and Frieda Wolff (1911-2008) and, later, Roney Cytrynowicz. Besides them, with a paradigmatic work by its “didactic intent,” Igel highlights the work of Henry Nekrycz, more known by the pseudonym of Ben Abraham (1924-2015). His publications, “...e o mundo silenciou” of 1972; “*Holocausto*” of 1976; and “*Segunda Guerra Mundial: síntese*” of 1985, reveal the cutout over time.³

Following Igel’s approach, which goes back to the 1990s, two Jewish writers stand out for dealing with World War II in their works. Firstly, in a precursor way, Jacó Guinsburg (1921-2018) with the short story “*O retrato*”, published in 1946, and Boris Schnaiderman (1917-2016) with the novel considered autobiographic “*Guerra na surdina*” of 1964. Then, the theme occurs in texts by other writers, like in the novel “*A Guerra no Bom Fim*” by Moacyr Scliar, of 1972.

Using Regina Igel’s book as a preliminary study parameter, Seligmann-Silva suggests, in the article “*Literatura da Shoah no Brasil*”, to classify as “primary testimony” texts that show experiences lived ‘first-hand’, i.e., memorial texts by survivors; and as “secondary testimony” those texts which were produced by those who did not live the catastrophe in the flesh but make it their literary theme. (Seligmann-Silva 2007, 5) From the first group, the critic refers to the work of, among others, Giselda Leirner and Halina Grynberg, who published after Igel’s research. He concludes that “despite the lack of a dialogue between this production with a traditionally more privileged line of national literature” works like

those of Schnaiderman and Nichthauser, or Grynberg and Leirner, suffice to “offer proof of the thematic relevance and the quality of its treatment.” (Seligmann-Silva 2007, 6)

Furthermore, he estimates that the books shown may be seen as

a type of concentrated summary of a huge production, given many of its modalities which are aesthetic and determined by the relation of chronological proximity or distance of the event, and by belonging to the generation of survivors or their descendants, are represented here. (Seligmann-Silva 2007, 10)

Berta Waldman, in two fundamental articles – “*Entre a lembrança e o esquecimento: a Shoá na literatura brasileira*” (Waldman 2015) and “*Uma história concisa do Holocausto na literatura brasileira*” (Waldman 2019) – brings to the forefront other examples on how Brazilian literature configured the atrocities perpetrated during WWII.

In those texts, the Shoah “is an instrument for the construction of metaphors, metonymies, comparisons, hyperboles, litotes, with the purpose of dealing with other situations besides the Holocaust itself.” (Waldman 2019, 7)

Based on Waldman’s analyses, it is possible to notice more than extermination stories of Jews in World War II. These writers, both Jews and non-Jews, have brought a more attentive, sensitive, and delicate look upon the daily lives of characters marked by catastrophes, either in first or second degree.

In this sense, the approach in this article departs from the perceptive eye of those scholars, but in contrast with more panoramic approaches, along with Waldman, proposes a more intimate and personal reading of the texts, considering above all the value of detail as a relevant trail.⁴ In addition to making the void explicit, the lack and the gap repeatedly pointed out in the lists and enumerations, the things that have a soul, that emerge from the shadows – as seen in Grynberg’s novel – are the common thread of the analyzes made here.

Not used to monumentality, in Brazil having the Shoah as their theme, the writers select the small, tiny details to build their narratives. Readers are not facing the void of a blank page then, but they are in dictionary terms among fragments, ruins, and ashes, as suggested by Carlos Drummond de Andrade. Such things, just like dictionary entries, in their minimal completeness, seem to bring from far, or not that far in history “between being and the things,” voices that cannot be muffled.⁵

Viviana Bosi, in the afterword of “*Lição de coisas*” (Lesson of Things) by Drummond,⁶ states that this book contains an investigative tone of memory. In the scholar’s opinion:

what could be taken by a simple dictionary catalogue seems to synthesize the deep memory of a culture, a place, a long period in time. Further ahead, another obsession breaks out from the beginning to the end of the book – the question about the relationship among the expression of the subject, words and things: “The name is much more than a name: the beyond-the-thing, /the thing free from the thing, walking about.” (Bosi 2012, 103)

This reading thus goes against the judgement of the critic, which insists on treating Shoah literature as if it were muteness or futility. Bosi’s reflection forms a basis to rethink with an attentive eye on the little things, on the almost translucent lists present in Grynberg’s novels, for example. There, things anxious to leave their “time capsule” make themselves heard, just like the items in Madame De Florian’s apartment, or like the works in a dictionary state, as in Drummond’s verses, come to life in the readers’ memories.⁷

Beatriz Sarlo, in “*Tempo passado,*” makes a reference to memory culture and subjective shift, called by Primo Levi “raw materials,” which make “great theoretical gestures,” and brings testimony to the scene. (Sarlo 2007, 23-24) This way, the study of things potentializes the contemplation that causes some frontiers to be crossed including some epistemological frontiers regarding the Shoah. Then, in the face of catastrophe, trauma, and losses, comes up the resource of certain theoretical optimism to rethink the “art of memory”, perhaps in contrast to a “duty of memory.” (Sarlo 2007, 24) In that regard, the writing of things brings a “poetics of the lists” to the discourse, as a strategy and narrative potentiality. (Rebello 2017)

Lists of things lost, recovered or partially preserved, as an inventory or a collection of silences, as shown in both novels by Grynberg, which lyrically tear apart the narrator and every character inscribed there. Both narratives conform as a kind of shrine, in which those remnants are preserved and exhibited. (Nascimento 2017, 151-163) Both novels, then, open up as a kind of legacy where the mystery of the lives hidden there is manifested bluntly.

The term “shrine” appears in several stretches in both narratives and provide the tone of the writing. As one may know, the term refers to a small box or chest where objects belonging to a saint or have been touched by him/her, as well as body parts (teeth, bones, strands of hair) are objects of great affective value. Unlike the registry of ashes and improbable waste that percolate the delusions of the mother, an Extermination Camp

survivor, the narrator in *Mameloshn* assesses that “the dust from cremated people danced in the darkness until they landed” upon her. “Just like Ash Wednesday in me, always” she states. (Grynberg 2004, 9)

Things, which can be wrongfully taken as items in a catalogue or as a simple listing, such as the letter Aleph or the enumeration present in the poem “The Things,” by Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986), displaying a space for remembrance, an area for intertext and significations, vestiges of a culture, a place, a period, a life, or a compliment from the shadows.⁸

In this perspective, each thing conforms, as a phantasmagoria of what was lost or the little things which remained preserved. In the novel *Mameloshn*, the narrator asserts:

[...] Madureira was extremely hot every month of the year and I remained alone on the anonymous, precarious bed. Each thing inhabited the homelessness. And can I barely remember wardrobes or shelves which would be in the double-room, any piece of furniture mixing clothes and identities, the absences more than the clothes, and people who were there but who remained being better defined than me or my sparse belongings. (Grynberg 2004, 12-13)

From her sparse memories of the bedroom, she then goes, in first person, to the description of the body she inhabits. This, however, is not referred to with density and consistency. The narrator says,

I touch the calligraphy of the time evoking it, an unexpected shake in the marks on my arm’s skin, the light roughness of the freckles, there is a fold in the flesh of soft muscles, the white pigments are an epigraphy of her absence. (Grynberg 2004, 17)

The writing of time translates, in the daughter’s fragmented body, the mother’s body and memory. Skin, arm, muscles appear as *disjecta membra*, i.e., scattered fragments. Likewise, the marks on the skin, the roughness of the freckles, and even the fold in the flesh of soft muscles, make one see, as pigments, the writing on the body and the body in the writing.

Calligraphy is the art, practice or technique of writing by free hand, according to readability rules and conventions (size, shape, proportion and placement of graphic signs), or according to aesthetic patterns of elegance and harmony. In the context of the novel, that art or technique can only come together to the epigraphy, i.e., an attempt to decipher, date and interpret the motherly writings on the skin. It is, however, in that skin, presented as a marked page, that the narrator’s written body sometimes gets lost,

sometimes meets the mother's which, since the beginning of the narrative is at the cusp of delusion and death.

Both words "calligraphy" and "epigraphy," bring to the table an illusion or autobiographical staging (Miranda 2009) where body parts – skin, freckles, arm – are fragments of a love discourse, as it would have been said by Roland Barthes (1981), impossible to be presented as a whole, even if oddly sewn together. As a survivors' daughter, the narrator reveals through her writing her own body as a shrine, an envelopment, which would become a "support for a palimpsest, a distinguished document of the lineage devastated in the Holocaust." (Grynberg 2004, 21)

In the sequel, the narrator reflects on a vaccination against whooping cough, which she suffered in childhood in Paris, before her family would embark to Brazil,

Stuffed with antibodies, I went on in the remains of the epidemic, grabbing the naked doll that helped me sleep. Sucking the single strand of hair embellishing the top of her head was all I needed to get filled with encouragement. I could get reborn from there. All I needed as evidence: there would be a world where dolls would have hair, clothes and shoes. And I would have a name to call. (Grynberg 2004, 39)

The doll with a single strand of hair is evidence and a hope. The narrator's rebirth through writing seems, in this moment, even in the face of the ruin of toy, or the text as a ruin, because coming to Brazil would somehow mean being able to dream of a world "where dolls would have hair, clothes and shoes". If, on the one hand, a child is the doll's mother, as it often happens in the child play, on the other hand, the girl sucks on the strand of hair, as if the doll were the mother's breast. Beyond that, ambiguously, the narrator may, anonymous as she is, have a name to call or, by extension, be called or named, thus rescuing, through the doll's lifeless body, her own name devastated by war, disease, and disaffection.

That way, in *Mameloshn*, the narrator stages her mother tongue and, by extension, the mother, the memory and her family relations as a continuously open wound; but in "*O padeiro polonês*," she uncovers and takes off her shadows, in an attempt to a relentless reckoning with the abject figure of her father, using it as intertext in the same way it appears in the "Letter to His Father" by Franz Kafka. (Kafka 1997)

As if it were the central page between the two halves of a single book, the two novels mirror each other. In the first novel, the narrator builds her mother's image, and her

circumstance as a wife abandoned by the husband, in delusions about the time spent as a prisoner in the Camps, marked by senility and by disease. In the second novel, the figure of the father dominates; the one whose representation crumbles any justification to the actions criticized by his daughter. In the daughter's speech, a sublime grudge, full of lyricism and melancholy, caustically destroys any idealized memory.

According to the daughter's narration, the father's rhetoric was the art in Patisserie, i.e., the gift of deceiving those who got close to him. That way, she states

He crafted an epic poem, carelessly conjugating ancestral Yiddish with uncultured Polish: phrasing, abrupt, hypnotic rhythm, a mythological aura enmeshing details, adulterating his war years' misadventures. He'd look like a prophet bent under the weight of the revelation dragging the steps of his passion for a Europe divided between Nazism and Communism. (Grynberg 2015, 21)

By this mutilated speech, the narrator plants seeds, here and there, doubting her father's good nature.⁹ This way, she relies on the complicity of a reader who cannot notice that that "rhetoric" also exposes her own discourse.

After all, the first-person narrative exhibits, more than it covers, the narrator who may not deserve the reader's full trust. Her father's "ruses and tricks" may mirror her strategies to seduce the ones who follow her stories. If the father's "poorly contained mask" and "whimsical confusion" challenges an "uninhibited fiddle-faddle trickery, redundantly excessive and filled with endless sequencies of metaphors, exhausting the audience's attention as to cover up divergent versions of the 'truths' disseminated," (Grynberg 2015, p. 22) the performance the narrator uses is also noteworthy.

Very well-crafted, the shy, personal narrative of the daughter is inserted in a much wider story:

Most of the Nazi genocide survivors would rather not remember. They spared themselves, and their children and grandchildren, one'd mumble. Bewitched, I grasped books, books and more books, in frenetic research on the Shoah. I'd read other people's memoirs. Any author, any text, since it allowed me going a step further beyond my father's secrets, moving on throughout the desert of meaninglessness, far beyond the abyss of forgetfulness, and further across the dead ends where our history seemed to be buried. (Grynberg 2015, 24)

Not remembering is not an option for this narrator. Thus, the text is a form of a lament, accusations, and lack of empathy towards the surviving father. The keyword in that stretch is "bewitched," because it points out a frenetic search to bring some sense to the father's silence. The reading scene in "books, books and more books" puts "other

people's memories" in the spotlight, memories sewn to life itself, in a vertigo of invisible books referenced by that repetition. (Piglia 1991, 60-66)

The labyrinthine spaces are backlit in that text, and listed as the desert of meaninglessness, the abyss of forgetfulness, the dead ends and, in the spotlight, the narrator's Freudian slip, "our history." The daughter's body-text, then, doubles the walled bodies of her parents. In the mother's and the father's fictional bodies, the daughter invents and reinvents herself, also fictionally, with the purpose of being able to bear "the exile and the perplexity" of the homeland, pain, and lighting, but also of the reflex, quicksand territories of fiction.

If as Ricardo Piglia (1941-2017) proposed, memory is the impersonal tradition, made out of citations, in which every language is spoken (Piglia 1991, 60), then in Halina Grynberg's novels and in the post-Shoah literature in Brazil, memory is something intimate and personal, where silence flows and the tiny mystery of living is manifested. Texts, in that sense, open up as a time capsule, just like Madame De Florian's apartment or like Queiroz's poem. The micro-stories therefore compose history in and through language, not only the children in their parents', but also the parents in their children's, just like a network, or lace, using one's own and other's memories, memories with human parts, memories from books.

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Notes

¹ “As coisas têm alma./ Deveras./ É preciso no entanto desvelar-lhes o segredo:/ expô-lo à luz, ao sol, às estrelas,/ despertá-lo com a força do grito,/ ou com a dureza do diamante ímpio,/ trazê-lo à vida, ao rumor, ao ritmo,/ à pátria da dor, do relâmpago e do reflexo” (Queiroz 1982, p. 17-18).

² It is worth mentioning Georges Perec (1936-1982): “And there was the washing powder, the clothes that dry, the clothes that are ironed. Gas, electricity, the telephone. The children. The clothes and the underwear. The mustard. The packaged soups, the canned soups. Hair: how to wash it, how to dye it, how to keep it, how to make it shiny. The students, the nails, cough syrups, typewriters, fertilizers, tractors, amusement, the gifts, haberdashery, white electronic goods, politics, the highways, alcoholic drinks, mineral water types, cheese and pickles, the lamps and curtains, insurance, gardening. Nothing human escaped him” (Perec 2012, p. 27).

³ Ben Abraham’s work has over fifteen titles dedicated to the Shoah theme. Besides that, Igel quotes other writers (Igel 1997, p. 211-247).

⁴ For other authors, check the *Dicionário de Escritores Judeus no Brasil* (Dictionary of Jewish Writers in Brazil) at the website of *Núcleo de Estudos Judaicos da UFMG* (Center for Jewish Studies at UFMG), which has around two hundred authors referenced in entries. Available at: http://www.letras.ufmg.br/padrao_cms/index.php?web=nej&lang=1&page=1824&menu=1094&tipo=. Accessed on: Oct. 20th, 2020.

⁵ See the poem: “*Entre o ser e as coisas*”, by Carlos Drummond de Andrade. (Andrade 2012, p. 203).

⁶ Drummond 2012, p. 12.

⁷ Drummond 2012, p. 19.

⁸ (N. of T.: Besides the enigmatic Hebrew letter, which brings the notion of infinite to the table (Borges, 1998. p. 686-698), see, also, the poem “The Things:” “The walking cane, the coins, the keychain,/ A docile lock, the late / Notes which won't read the few days / I have left, the suits of cards and the board./ A book, and in its pages, the drought / Violet, monument of an afternoon / Undoubtedly unforgettable and already forgotten,/ O red western mirror where it burns / An illusory dawn./ O! many things,/ Limes, thresholds, atlas, drinking cups, carnations,/ They work as tacit slaves,/ Blind and strangely confidential!/ They'll last far beyond our forgetfulness;/ And will never know we were gone in a moment” (Borges 2000, p. 395)].

⁹ See some verses of the poem “Daddy”, by Sylvia Plath: “*Eu tive de matar você, papai./ Você morreu antes que eu pudesse –/ Peso de mármore, saco repleto de Deus,/ Estátua medonha com um dedão gris/ Do tamanho de uma foca de Frisco*”. (Plath 2006, p. 165-199). [N. of T.: “Daddy, I have had to kill you./ You died before I had time –/ Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,/ Ghastly statue with one gray toe/ Big as a Frisco seal’].