

# ENCUENTROS



## *The Female Memory in Narrative*

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Lecture by

**Nélida Piñon**

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## THE FEMALE MEMORY IN NARRATIVE

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*Nélida Piñon*

I take great pleasure in serving literature with the memory and body of a woman. Under the watchful eye of time, I seek the female memory among countless others. The fabric used to weave this memory has existed since the world's beginnings.

Without raising its voice—indeed, almost without speech—the female memory has encompassed reality. With its mystique of muted emotions, it has enriched human language.

The female memory took umbrage at a Biblical God who condemned woman as abettor and accomplice. At Troy, it sensed that Ulysses' homecoming would take place only following great adversity and adventure. Under the alias of love, it shared Julius Caesar's tent, seducing him to shed his mantle of power and delight in his evanescent mortality.

This ancient memory wept with Cassandra, scorned by Apollo, her prophecies unheeded. Cassandra resigned herself to entering the palace at Mycenae, after she was given as a spoil of war to

Agamemnon. Yet she knew they would both be murdered by the vengeful Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus.

As an intimate of the gods and oracles of mythical Greece, the female memory recorded the events of an old world on the brink of chaos, and defied it again and again. At the gates of the Delphic oracle, it wondered how to obey the inscription on the temple door—"Know Thyself"—when women were forbidden to voice dissent in public. There lived Python, whom Apollo, in his fervor to speak with mankind, had entrusted with revealing the future. Her voice, a woman's voice, carried his messages to the mortal world. In her desire to compete with Apollo, did she alter his words, uttering others in place of what he had spoken?

In ancient Hellenic legends, the female memory intermingled with the paradoxical Artemis, who was teacher, savage, and hunter all at once. In the seclusion of her inaccessible refuge, Artemis educated young girls who were entrusted to

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her. Years later, she returned them to the gynaeceum; fully domesticated, they would disavow rebellion and insubordination. At Artemis' command, the girls cropped their hair on their wedding night. This act of submission made them ugly and contemptible in the eyes of their husbands, who on that night would sport full heads of hair as a symbol of their power and beauty.

The female memory trod on sacred ground and embraced the discourse of the Hellenic gods. Dressed in white, it led the procession of the Eleusinian mysteries, until one day it was expelled from all religious ceremonies. Then it wandered crestfallen throughout the land, as a nomad accompanying humankind in its discoveries of the Earth. In its most intimate realm, the home, each day it drew on keen curiosity to glean scraps of history.

Exiled from society, the female memory gradually developed into a well-spring of narrative plots, a bastion of metaphor and oral tradition. The more it was confined to the boundaries of private life, the more use it made of symbolic subterfuges. Denied an active role in the vast complexities of daily life, women evolved into a species that could be identified only through poetic exegesis.

In the familiar speech of the home, women were characterized as abusers of allusion, insinuation, suggestion, and half-truths, unable to engage in direct discourse. They were accused of being evasive and cunning, always ready to misrepresent the truth. The ancient Greeks associated cunning (*metis*) with the female. Yet, given their political position, women depended on such cunning to cope with male dominance.

In those days, few women could read

or write in order to preserve their knowledge. They had not learned the ways of the *aoidos*, the Homeric poet-singer, who kept Homer's narrative alive in rich detail. Likewise, the Inca in far-away America created a special caste of memorizers, the Amauta, charged with preserving the history of the Inca empire through memory.

Illiterate, banned from writing and access to culture in general, women had to invent what they did not know or what had reached them only in half measure. What secret joy they must have taken in embellishing the stories they heard at home, but had not been allowed to take part in. Through this productive yet frustrating exercise, they slowly wove the basic structure of their inner memory. Gradually they incorporated their own versions of daily family life into their individual and collective psyches, a modest, intimate daily life transcending the social role that male society had assigned them.

The genesis of memory begins at the dawn of time, when human affliction and uncertainty fashioned legends and myths as a means of coping with the dense mystery that shrouded the world and all it contained. This mythological framework engendered Mnemosyne, a goddess of the Greek Pantheon who could grant mortals infallible memory. Although a deity, Mnemosyne was also a woman, and her memory was thus linked to the female universe. She ensured that the female gender, deprived of so many other rights, would fully enjoy the privileges inherent in memory, despite the social exile to which it had been relegated.

Mnemosyne embodies a time when human imagination was first establishing itself. Her brother Chronos taught her

about the benefits bestowed and the disasters wrought by the imperceptible passing of time in the lives of mortals. Mnemosyne could record and remember human events, and her responsibilities included keeping track of births, deaths, and the changing of the seasons. Most importantly, she oversaw the passage from one stage of life to the next, serving as an antechamber where one awaited the signs of death.

Guided by these instructions, Mnemosyne traveled through the interstices of time and history. She gave birth to nine daughters, the Muses, whose primary virtue was to inspire artistic expression. Mnemosyne taught her grandson Orpheus the art of poetry, of using care-free words that shimmer resplendently when dressed with diaphanous trappings, thus becoming poetic embellishments of human undertakings.

Together with Orpheus, Mnemosyne turned invention into the art of transcending horizons. She intertwined memory with fantasy in such a way as to make artistic misrepresentation convincing. She inspired the epic recounting of human adventures, which led ultimately to the deductive, poetic version of a daily life that underscored human chaos, the logic of the possible, and the farce of heroism and the absurd. So, although we are captives of this disorderly world, we can always look to the ever-present lifeline of narrative.

However, as myths died out and new symbols emerged, Mnemosyne sank into ancestral memory and became lost in the shadows of history. She took women with her, plunging their memory into secrecy, as if women's ancestral memory could be erased by simply confining them to the

home. Though it appeared passive, somewhere deep within, the female memory mocked the successive civilizations that arose and dare to dispense with her valuable contributions.

In literature, although women are often characters conceived by male authors, the female memory is firmly implanted in the essence of written texts. Narrators and poets have always depended on women's narrative assiduity, subsidiary contributions, and descriptive perseverance to examine the distaff soul and translate its literary mystery accordingly.

This explains the presence of the female memory in books that women did not write, though memory's usurpation by male narrators denied women a poetic register for their existence. As interpreters of the collective memory, men still needed to draw on the rich tapestry of plots, lovers' dialogues, and deathbed confessions that only women—as mourners, lovers, and mothers—could provide. They needed the treasures buried in women's hearts, hearts that shared in the world's joys, sorrows, and all the other emotions that make up the spectrum of human feeling. They knew that women carry within them a wellspring of life, without which a work of art cannot be written. No doubt a female memory helped Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes and Camões. This entitle women to lay claim, before the civilized world, to coauthorship of their works? Could one say that the female memory is the other voice of their writings?

Contemporary memory is calling on women to break their silence and turn away from their historical fate. Now, when women read a text, they draw on their own psyche, as formed by their

unique background. They must reconcile their biography with the geography of their bodies. A woman writer is challenged to create an autonomous, vital language from a fictional vision. Simultaneously, she must adapt to another language, one that is taken from the male universe.

In writing I try to create a text that harmoniously reflects the intimacy of my heart and my multifaceted thinking as a woman. I am a writer of narrative, who proudly recognizes her filial relationship with a language that thinks, remains silent, and describes; and with an imagination that has created an additional world linked to our inherited reality. This language needs to have its own semantics—my own system of representations—without neglecting the archaeology of memory with its archaic veneer.

We inherit traits from far-flung civilizations, and so I seek to understand even what is distant from my own origins. By various subterfuges, I feel myself in touch with over five thousand years of history, in the simple search for knowledge that I enjoy just from existing and from narrating.

When engaging in narration, I undertake a voyage to the center of my Self. Where the map for this center lies, I do not know, or who guides me that I arrive with my imagination intact. It is a lonely pilgrimage, but it allows my memory and imagination to run free, and perhaps even to mingle with Mnemosyne. As the holder of a body and a memory, I submerge myself in the adventure of creating. In that spirit I wrote *The Republic of Dreams* in 1982, and created Eulália, who represents a special view of memory.

Eulália came from Galicia in northwestern Spain, home of a minority cul-

ture that stood up to the oppression of the Spanish empire, which had outlawed the Galician language and imposed Spanish as the language of daily life. In this small fiefdom where memory was venerated, legends, language, and identity were preserved throughout centuries of adversity.

Around the year 1923, Eulália married Madruga, an ambitious immigrant who first went to Brazil at age 13 and later took her there. With the novel's opening sentence, "Eulália started to die on Tuesday," the narrative action is set off in an evocative stream prompted by memory, which spawns each successive character, history takes shape. By deciding to die in the month of February 1980, Eulália symbolically launches the cycle of memories within the book. The narrative agenda is thus built around a memory that permeates the book from beginning to end, through which the Brazil of her imagination is narrated.

This task is divided up among the other characters and ultimately leads each to imagine a different country. Perhaps they feel a moral obligation to invent a collective, all-inclusive, amorphous, multifaceted country, molded in the image of each individual's fancy. The cast of whimsical characters builds a hypothetical country for the sake of art, an art that expands its resources by taking inventory of its existential stock of memory. Invention and memory overlap in this novel and yield an esthetic agreement fused to the inexorable vagaries of time.

As this process unfolds, Eulália, raised since birth to serve the ethical, civic, religious, and family memory, revolves more or less symmetrically around this evocative epicenter. At the core of her reper-

toire is the legacy of her father Dom Miguel, whom Eulália had to leave behind in Galicia.

Dom Miguel was a petty nobleman from the countryside who revered the Galician elite; he instilled in his daughter the notion of dignity being linked to the preservation of local myths and legends. In the Galician imagination, the supernatural is benevolent to human interests, as represented, for example, by the symbolic figure of witches, who, in that virtually feudal region, are called *meigas*, or little darlings.

Eulália disembarked in the New World laden with myths and family photographs packed in her suitcase; these stayed with her always. She immediately set about the task of returning to thoughts of God, with whom since childhood she had an unwavering and passionate relationship. From the perspective of the past, Eulália suspects that her God does not follow the rules of human memory, which is fragmented, chaotic, and unfaithful, and can serve good as well as evil. She is convinced that the human essence, a mixture of dreams and bitter reality, is not fundamental to God. His work does not follow the laws of narrative, for while men, in their struggle for survival, construct stories that legitimize their existence, God, in glaring disrespect for the laws governing narration, carefully plans the future of His characters in advance.

As the memory of God progressively envelops the universe with His knowledge, Eulália's rejection of men's resources becomes keener. In a rare moment of confidence with her granddaughter Breta, who will become the family writer, Eulália tells Breta that only God knows how to narrate. She believes that

the narrative substance produced by men is doomed to failure.

If God were interested more in human events and less in the moral salvation of mankind, how could men, whose memory waivers in the face of lies and forgetfulness, venture to perform an act that imitates God, constantly demonstrating that they are incapable of reproducing God's thought and imagination? And if these same men are unable to record honestly their personal history—in all its conflictive, unharmonious, heterogeneous, ambiguous, and cruel aspects—in art and in life, why bother preserving it at all?

This inherent contradiction recurs throughout the narrative. Thus, Madruga transfers his Galician heritage to his granddaughter Breta in the form of stories, using eloquent turns of phrase to dramatize daily life. But Eulália, on her deathbed, simply divides up her few personal belongings among Odete the maid and her children.

To Odete she leaves the bracelet Madruga had given her back in Vigo on their wedding night, as a symbol of the deep, heartfelt relationship that had grown between the two women during the past forty years. The bracelet touches a secret place in Odete's heart. Eulália had experienced a strange symbiosis with Odete, to the point where Eulália had taken on Odete's accent and Odete had acquired her employer's Galician accent.

As yet another facet of this story about memory, Eulália had invented a system of boxes for herself and her children. Upon the birth of each child, her husband gave her a memory box, which she kept in the closet. As years passed, Madruga never asked what the boxes are for. He never tried to open them or find out what is

inside them. He also kept his distance from Eulália who, over the decades that followed, randomly and arbitrarily placed items in the boxes.

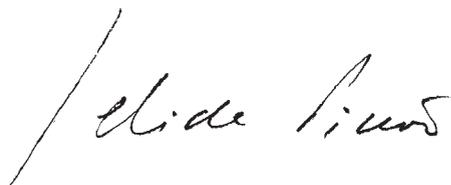
As the provider of her children's memory, she decided what objects should go into the boxes. She penetrated her children's memories, filtering them through a version of their lives that reflected how she saw them. She would give them a note, a flower, or a portrait, gradually invading their psyches. True, Madruga would leave a fortune to his children, but the boxes would be their heritage. Memory is the only legacy that gives life to the spirit. What more did the children need than the religion of memory?

On that Tuesday, convinced she was near death, Eulália dressed in silk and solemnly performed all the appropriate rituals. Death is another ten days in coming, however, allowing time for the novel to delve into Eulália's true dimension, the dimension of memory. When the final moment arrives, she summons her children. They are frightened by the specter of the boxes, but Eulália is relieved to transfer the fate of the boxes to them. She will no longer have to manage their lives.

After the wake, Eulália's box is opened and produces a surprising discovery, a single sheet of blank paper. Such modesty seems intended to criticize those who brazenly record the impudence of mankind. Eulália preached forgetting, skepticism about human spoils, and the infinite inability of humans to narrate. Her faith came from Ecclesiastes, those embittered pages that invite men to obliterate their own history as a means of suppressing vanity, since the very act of remembering bespeaks an arrogance that

competes with God. As the guardian of Eulália's memory, He had placed His invisible signature on the blank sheet.

Eulália's legacy is a debate about the female memory, which is present in all human undertakings. Silent for so long, now it rises to challenge art, to shed light on new mysteries and give life to reality. This memory, present in the female psyche for millennia, is a treasure that is eager to be revisited and revealed at last.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Nelida Piñon". The signature is written in dark ink on a light background. The first letter 'N' is large and stylized, with a long vertical stroke extending downwards. The rest of the name is written in a fluid, connected cursive style.

**Nélida Piñon** (Rio de Janeiro, 1936) graduated from Rio's Pontifícia Universidade Católica with a degree in Philosophy. As a member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, she was the first woman to serve as its president from 1996-97. In 1970, she inaugurated the first Chair of Creative Writing at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and, since 1990, she has held the Dr. Henry King Stanford Chair in the Humanities at the University of Miami, previously held by Nobel Prize Laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer.

In 1995 she became the first Portuguese-speaking author and first woman to receive the Juan Rulfo Literature Award in Mexico. She also served as a judge on the committees that awarded the Casa de las Américas Prize (1982, Cuba), the Premio Latinoamericano de Novela (1987, Nicaragua), the Neustadt International Prize for Literature (1988, USA), and the Prix Guimaraes Rosa of France. She holds honorary doctorates from Rutgers University, University of Santiago de Compostela, University of Poitiers, and Atlantic University of Florida. She has received decorations from six nations including the Gabriela Mistral Medallion from Chile, and the Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres from France.

Her novels and short stories have been translated and read in more than twenty nations, and include *Fundador* (1969, Walmap Prize); *A casa da paixão* (1972, Mario de Andrade Prize); and *A república dos sonhos* (1984, APCA Prize, Pen Club Award) that was translated to *Republic of Dreams* by Helen Lane in 1989. She is a visiting writer at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, Columbia University in New York, New York, and Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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**Inter-American Development Bank**

IDB CULTURAL CENTER

1300 New York Avenue, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20577

U.S.A.

Tel: (202) 623-3774

Fax: (202) 623-3192

[IDBCC@iadb.org](mailto:IDBCC@iadb.org)