

NARRATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOME HEALTH-LIFE SITUATIONS IN M. BENEDETTI AND OCTAVIO PAZ'S WORKS

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“De quererte cantar sufro disnea,
bastante más allá de los pulmones...”
Silvio Rodríguez

ANTROPOLOGÍA NARRATIVA Y SITUACIONES VIDA SALUD EN LA OBRA DE MARIO BENEDETTI Y OCTAVIO PAZ

ABSTRACT

Narrative is a gender form in which characters express themselves with no other limit than the one imposed by the author himself. The purpose of the present research is the use of narrative as a means of better understanding the diverse situations faced by people within the immense framework of health and illness. It is within the boundaries of this context that the narrative and poetic work of Octavio Paz and M. Benedetti reveals its pedagogical and anthropological potential. Our present Study takes advantage of the poet's narrative material as a vehicle with which one may interpret –from holistic perspective– situations of health-illness.

Keywords: culture care, narrative anthropology, phenomenology.

RESUMEN

La narrativa constituye un género en el cual las características se expresan a sí mismas sin otro límite que el impuesto por el mismo autor. El objetivo de este trabajo radica en el uso de la narrativa como una forma de comprender las diversas situaciones que experimentan las personas dentro del amplio intervalo salud-enfermedad. Es en este contexto en el que la obra poética y narrativa de Octavio Paz y Mario Benedetti revelan su potencial pedagógico y antropológico. En este estudio se parte de la idea de rentabilizar el material poético y narrativo como instrumento de interpretación holística de situaciones vida salud

Palabras clave: antropología narrativa, cultura de los cuidados, fenomenología.

INTRODUCTION

The goal of this investigation is to make use as an instrument Octavio's and Benedetti's work to ease the comprehension, the meaning and the sense in every thing that take part in the health-illness situations. Therefore, this is an anthropological study in two senses: Octavio's and Benedetti's work as a way (writed culture) (Geertz,1989), and his literary production in itself as a source of themes, issues and contents that describes processes and happenings that take part in the interval health-illness. All this has been introduced in a process that goes from the individualized reading to the put

in common of the meanings that have been taken out in the team when the conclusions were raised. This kind of work can be only possible when the neopositivist limitations that consider the reality as something tangible and susceptible of been broken for its study are overcome. This is the reason why the hermeneutic focus has been adopted for this work in which the nature of the health-illness situations are a complex reality that must be studied in a holistic way contemplating the values and customs of every country, that have been transmitted through the generations (Siles and García Hernández, 1995). As a result, the narrations are a perfect seeking object for appreciating this sort of situations in an optimal way.

The qualitative procedures are making headway in very different scopes such as history, anthropology, ethnology, psychology, pedagogy, philosophy, etc. In this kind of procedures, they are very important the ones that use as a basic object, the oral narrative work analyse that help the interpretation: life stories; dialogs, studying with accurate technics the interaction developed during the conversation; the found of the sequence and structure during the interaction process, the semiotic analyse and the dramaturgic one. The reasons why this study has been done can be explained answering the following basic questions: Why shouldn't we use in a pedagogic way, the experiences that the others offer us through their writings? It would be very easy to expose light arguments to justify something that has sense by itself. Anyway we are going to numerate three reasons that reforce the pertinence of this work:

1) First of all, the increasing existence of a literary production (biography, essay and narrative) whose scope abound in a complex as diverse and plural way, as creative the subject of study. To show what we have exposed before, it will just be necessary to do a soft state of the question:

To what is respected to experienced situations for people involved in death processes, it exists a rising, specially significant, autobiographic production: Zorn relates with perfection in "Bajo el Signo de Caín" the changes that take part in his life after an unhealing cancer was diagnosed in him (Zorn, 1991). In the same kind of dynamic tale –in the sense that the author describes the happenings

according to their parallel evolution to their stop and the develop of the illness in his life- Gilbert's autobiographic tale could be included, who in "El protocolo compasivo" describes how his body and mind struggle and adapt to the limits imposed by an AIDS process, that the author lives with anxiety to achieve the end of his life (Gilbert, 1992). In the same way it is necessary to name the work of groups who suffer AIDS who gather together in the magazine "Cienpiés. Cartas entre nosotros" in which the experience of people who wants or needs it, are explained, or just try to make understand to the society what is happening to them (Grupo de Autoayuda "El Cienpiés": 1992). In the XIth World Conference about AIDS that took place in Vancouver in 1996 it could be shown the spread of this kind of procedures and methods that have been proved as powerful ways of communication and above all, to help to identify the meanings for the existence of the person starting from a new situation, a new mental, social and fisic state where new objectives are required.

There are other contributions that are also worth to show because of its high explanatory value: Ramon Sanpedro, from his tetraplegic point of view, wrote a book where he tried to let know his desperate situation with the hope that the society could understand why he was keeping his appliance to the Justice to let him die through the eutanasia (Sampedro, 1996). Something so common in the humankind as sorrow is object of reflection and it is conceptualized as "the hardest exam in the chain of exams that we call life" (Jünger, 1995:13); or the most amazing and happiest case, that could be shown as a speech of peace between life and the society, in which a woman who suffers the Down's syndrome tell us why she regards the world with the fluency of a woman who has left the heavy chains of complex behind (García Sicilia, 1996). The same method was used to break through the children and explain them what is a hospital, the illness, who work there and what for, with the simplicity of a short story (Chamizo, 1996). On the other hand, Sacks Oliver is trying to do his best to develop a new literature subgenre, inspired in the Clinical Phenomenology, achieving his goal in "Un Antropologo en Marte" (Sacks, 1997).



Octavio Paz in “Itinerario” and “El laberinto de la Soledad” (1994-1996) is a writer who is cosciet and worried about the social reality so he tries to change it. It is a constant the feelings that this produces to him: his loneliness and his anxiety, “I felt anxious because of the state of my soul”, “the presence of the evil among the humanity as a sensible reality, biologic, phycologic and historic”, “the evil harms me”, “the silence in front of the lies and crimes”. A constant search for answers, a “nostalgia of totality and absolute”.

In another important author such as Mario Benedetti, it is important to name another constant: in the most part of his tales the pain is not just a superfluous thing, he shows how is it possible to live with it and even control it and change it in a motive of proud or distition.

“The truth is that the asthma is the only one sickness that requires a style and even a vocation. A people who suffer of high blood pressure must give up the same liquids as another one; a people who suffers a problem in his liver must follow the same tedious advices in the meals as another one; a people who suffers of diabetes must take the same insulin as another one (...) In the other hand, a people who suffers of asthma will never lose his individuality, because the disnea (it was said by my poor laboral doctor to hide his professional ignorance about the topic) is not an illness but a symptom (...)” (Benedetti, 1995b:85-87).

2) Secondly, this kind of seek is grounded in the interactivity of the process: text-reader-writer-the living, is a fundamental issue of the hermeneutic nature such as the act of writing, such as the act of reading and even speaking, or just listing. Fraire says that reading is writing, and writing has save the life to a lot of writer or at least it has delayed their end. The interactivity is the implicit goal of the “Vida y Salud” tale awards whose slogan is very meaningful: “Writing is Living” because as Calvino says:

“(...)The Universe will manage to express by it self meanwhile someone could say: I read so he writes (Calvino, 1983: 182).

The importance of the written works exchange arrives to the other extreme where as Julia Kristeva underlines: “any text is the result of the absorption of another text” (González, 1994). Writing is living and for living the imitation mechanism is basic because is a common way of learning wherever it existes communication enough and interaction enough. Every writer in the world are in duty with with works created far away from them (intertextual debt) and with external experiences (living debt). It has been written a lot about the Quixote’s intertextual debt and about Shakespeare’s masterpiece. Hamlet’s first performance took place in 1602, many years before to a Kid’s play (1584) that was very similar. But the possible influences to this great drama go back more in the time, because several researcher relate it to a Saxo Grammaticus’ work (a Danish feature writer of XII century), and probably the theme that the play represents must have an antecesor - or several of them- that comes from an historic phase, previous to the writing invention (Valverde, 1994). Calvino expressed the intertextuality phenomenon in “Si una noche de invierno un viajero” (If in a winter night a traveler):

“(...) I stop before I could be seize by the temptation of copying every crime and punishment (...) by an instance it seems to me that I can understand what must have been the sense and the vocation for an inconceivable profession in nowadays: the copist (Calvino, 1983: 174).

But definitely, what is intertextuality? It is just a way of interaction, of communication between individuals, ways, groups, whose main goal is the

experiences exchange for winning the fear of the not lived, for easing the anxiety that goes together to the situations that imply big changes. Octavio, (1996) in “El laberinto de la soledad”, describes the Mexican people, people who suffers in silence and that needs “the fiesta for shouting, going off, making confidences, crying, getting drunk and killing”. He narrates some Mexican groups loneliness, such as the “pachucos”, who “have missed their heritage: language, religion, costumes and beliefs. They have only one body and one soul left in the open air, inert in front of all the sights”. This produces loneliness and anxiety and therefore aggressiveness, that becomes a pursuit. A pursuit that “redeemes him and finishes with his loneliness: his salvation depends on the access to that society that he pretends to deny. Loneliness and sin, communion and health, become into equivalent terms. He speaks, in several of his works, about the emigrants loneliness and sadness: “yes, this is very nice, but I can’t understand it. Here, even the birds speak English”. The Mexican’s loneliness as a deep feeling that is stated and denied in an alternative way, in the melancholy and the joy, in the silence and the shout, in the murder without sense and the religious fervor “our loneliness is an orphanity the dark consciousness of having been torn out from the Wholeness and an eager seek: a run



away and a return, an attempt for restoring what we had in common with the Creation. In Pirandello’s work it is reflected, better than in any other, the sorrow experienced by the man who cannot communicate with the others when they pretend that the existence is just lived in the most superficial part of the psychic being, in a conscient way. The characters desperately try to run away from the jail of their “self-lie” in “Seis personajes en busca de autor”. They want someone to help them to adapt their experiences in the dramatic universe where it takes part. In the same way, following this pirandelian pulsion, the readers, an infinite number of them, should try to make an effort and try to enrich their lives, comparing them with the characters’ experiences, as Benedetti’s, who always suffer to adapt themselves to new situations putting in practice the reflection in an uninterrupted way. Because in Benedetti, it can be appreciated, besides his own and not own experiences with sorrow, illness and death; influences from other works (inter-textual debts) written by other authors that probably doesn’t like optimism and that only use humor in their deepest and most clever expressions. This is the case of authors studied by Benedetti such as Faulkner and Onetti. If in Faulkner is appreciated a constant feature so determined by the destiny as the fate, this doesn’t avoid that in novels such as “El sonido y la furia” the interactivity is present in all the work which is determined by the union of interpretations that are scratched in different levels until achieve the being most ignored roots through the world explanation made by a fool. The same theme is absorbed by Benedetti in “El altillo” that is not too far away from the universe with bad premonitions that is so characteristic in Faulkner:

“(…)She didn’t feel the wall at all yet but he was still smelling the cool that was shining.

- Put your hands in your pockets again.

Caddy was coming walking, after she ran and the bag from the school was moving and dancing beside her.

- Hello Benjy –Caddy said. She opened the door of the wall, she got in and she ducked (...)

- You came to the meeting with Caddy –she said rubbing her hands together-. What’s the matter with you? What are you trying to say to

Caddy?- Caddy smelt like the trees, like when he says that we are sleeping.

- Why are you crying that way? Luster said (...) (Faulkner, 1982: 8-9)

“For running away, for escaping from something that one doesn’t know very well what it is, it is necessary to do it alone. And when I was running away (for example, when I smashed my aunt’s binoculars and I threw them away to the water close and she lost all her serenity and got angry and she shouted me dirty fool, pretty consequence of my father’s drunkenness (...)”(Benedetti, 1995b :26).

The poststr Onetti, who was almost sunk in bed in the same way like a whale docked in the last beach, is another of Benedetti’s most readed and studied authors. One his features is his capacity to keep a slow and oppressive atmosphere that is the perfect way to make you feel the essential of the cronic processes (the experience slowness is doubly painful when it takes more than the unexpected limits through the time) (Onetti, 1978: 153-158); this technique is also known by Benedetti. The characteres beaten by the society, the illness and by the sorrow go through Onetti’s work pages feeling the confortability from who is installed in his own home. “Juntacadáveres”, “El pozo”, “El astillero”, etc; but it could be “EL infierno tan temido” Onetti’s best tale in Benedetti’s words (Benedeti, 1995 a) where it can be observed more clearly the amazing and sensual feature, that the sorrow can achieve through the paradox exploitation in the self-destructive root of the human kind. In “El infierno tan temido” it is narrated a revenge history –that is motivated by Risso’s wife infidelity- in which underlies the unconscious wish of self-destruction. The main character separates of his wife when he discovers her infidelity, but what it could be understood as the end, it is just the beginning for a new complex relationship: Form the distance, Risso continues getting new evidences of his wife infidelity, what increases his contradictory feeling of love-hate:

“Risso builds his interpretation with perseverance, that abjection that he changes as a sign of love, proves something like an unconscious wish of self destruction(...) that is just and simply the suicide (...)” (Benedetti, 1995 a)

3) Finally it is important to point that cultural typographic nature –as a way- is the perfect instrument for the developpe of any sort of understanding learning where the fundamental is not memorizing information, but to catch the meanings included in a text that is used, in an anthropological point of view, as a scope where the anthropologist goes together to the author (Geertz, 1989). Such as in health, such as in illness, there are situations in which they are implied, sometimes in a difficult way to separate, physiologic and cultural patterns (Malinowski, 1984), this situations are by them selves , cultural issues susceptible of seek; above all if we leave from cultural concept large and generous, understanding it as all the behaviours of a group of people (behaviours that in any way, are the ones that influence in determined health-illness levels).

By its own nature and goals, this kind of research imply the claim of the written text, in an historic moment in which the decadence of the ways and uses of the Gutemberg’s Galaxy is loudly announced.

This is this way, because the fragmented and easy changing thought that are encoraged by the immerging and powerful silicon galaxy doesn’t help at all neither the goals, neither the methods that used in this search. In the forties, Salinas warned the North Americans about the fragmentable thought influenced by the journal corporations which is every time more worried about showing the news in a more sensational, quickly, and short way in as less space as possible (Salinas, 1981: 402-415). In the other hand, Ong thinks that reading do not only help to understand the experiences of the others, but above all, the self search and the being internal knowledge, and he states that the Calvinistes developed sooner their capacity for the self search, that later was so related with psychoanalyze universe (Ong, 1987). For other authors the audiovisual media show unspecific messages that are not able to separate the personal situations of their recipients. They are messages for everyone which doesn’t have the aim of being able to be asimilated because of their fragmented character (Postman, 1991). Even some specialists about this scope that are more pessimists, have to state the thought extremly state of damage because of the



raising of cultural system monopolized by the image:

“(…) It cannot be said that the image is more important than the idea, when the idea doesn’t exist. We are not just attending to image victory, but to the empty thought (…)” (Daniel,1994).

It is undoubtable that the written text in its traditional style (paper, book…) helps as any other media to understand the difficult situations in the health-illness interval, what constitutes the best way to find the meanings that take part in the develop of these situations where the complexe detail structure that compose the reality is checked, making more easy the interpretation of its process; interpretation that is always the reality lived by the individual explanation:

“I am, my-self, hardly thirty-nine years old, a disnea veteran. To breath with difficulty says the dictionary, but the dictionary can’t explain the details. When one first feels that difficulty, one thinks that his lastest hour has arrived, of course. After, that becomes common, it is known that after that false, last gasp; it will come the saving breath and one will stop getting anxious, one will stop scratching the sheeps (…)” (Benedetti, 1995b: 85-94).

METHODES

The work has been developed through text content analyse (Gicquel, 1982) following the orienta-

tions given by the narrative ethnology, (Geertz, 1989; Benner, 1992), experience interpretations techniques (Josselson & Liebblich 1995) and the phenomenology (Blumer, 1982; Riehl Sisca, 1992). The materials have been compound by several works from Benedetti, where we can name: “La muerte”, “El fin de la disnea”, “Datos para el viudo”, “Mis amnesia”, “Péndulo”, “Réquiem con tostada”, “El altillo”, “Musak” and others; and several books from Octavio Paz. “Itinerario”, “El laberinto de la Soledad”, “Obra Poética”, “El Peregrino de su Patria”... In concordance with the objective, mainly it has been tried to put in practice the specific learning procedures starting from a learning concept in which it is considered as an active one where the thought, the previous knowledges and the perception are applied with three goals: the phenomena-situation explanation- comprehension, to help for the specific behaviour change and finally the problem resolution (Peplau, 1996: 439). Basicaly, the used procedure consists in the meanings and experiences observation contented in tales. It has different phases:

- Individual reading in detail, of the text, through the observation of the happenings in the different situations of the narration.

- Short description of the situations observed in the reading.

- Data analyse comparing the ones with the others in groups: homogeneity-heterogenity, familiarity-novelty; content detarmination and themes included in the situations observed during the lecture.

- The conclusions creations must be made using proper techniques in the group dynamics to avoid the parataxic and overcoming the reader experencial limits thanks to the group interaction. In this phase it must be made as exactly as possible the happenings essence in every work, what imply to extract the meanings, and at the same time, to evidence of every active and experencial learning understanding.

RESULTS AND DISCUSION

One of the problems detected in the method application the influence of the parataxic interpretation that consists in the happenings interpretation in the text –the new situations- only in terms of

lived experiences by the reader. As well, the main handicap that interferes the work made in the in the conclusions phase (meanings extractions), it has been in the tendency of extracting the experience meanings in a stereotype way, must be overcome, as it has been told before, by means of the interaction of the different members of the group.

AN EXAMPLE OF METHODOLOGY APPLIED IN OCTAVIO'S AND BENEDETTI'S WORK

- It can be described shortly *Mis Amnesia*, as a tale with a circularity stood where, fatally, the repetition predominates in the same experience that always finish forgetting that girl surrounded by pigeon that she keeps asleep in the garden, waking up as an innocent after and, thanks to the lose of memory, she falls in Felix's hands, a middle-aged handsome man, smart and combed to the detail.

- If we analyse *Mis Amnesia* development, it can be appreciated a certain parallelism between the illness concept, that historically has been mistaken with the sin, and the waste of honor or the virginity, which has an important position in the deadly sins. The woman must forget the sin, the illness, to feel her-self clean and healthy and to fall in the same fiddle with a new freshness and naturality.

The smart Félix Roldán violent and sudden attack and the no less surprising and effective answer from the girl, it is in essence, the partial execution of an eternal sentence: the repetition of the same scene by the same characters.

- In the extraction of meanings phase the next conclusions were reflected: life is a cycle that is always repeating itself in the sense that we are born, we grow up and finally we die. No one can run away from any of these phases, that absolutely and fatally all the people must do, although to forget above all, the last one is tried. The illness as a life alteration is something to forget. The ill person is not isolated, the ill person does his best to forget his illness, isolate it to become free and to come back to the world of health become a healthy amnesic. To forget the illness, the sin, the dark side of everyone is a way to survive whose part of happiness is directly proportional to the lost in thought, unconciessness, and forget capability.

"The North Americans are credulous and we are believers; they love fairy tales detective stories and we love myths and legends," he wrote. "The Mexican tells lies because he delights in fantasy, or because he is desperate, or because he wants to rise above the sordid facts of his life; the North American does not tell lies, but he substitutes social truth for the real truth, which is always disagreeable."

"We get drunk in order to confess; the get drunk in order to forget," he added. "We are suspicious and they are trusting. We are sorrowful and sarcastic and they are happy and full of jokes. North Americans want to understand and we went to contemplate."

He noted that while Mexicans enjoy their wounds, North Americans enjoy their inventions. They believe in hygiene, health, work, and contentment, but perhaps they have never experienced true joy, which is an intoxication, a whirlwind. In the hubbub of a fiesta night our voices explode into brilliant lights, and life and death mingle together, while their vitality becomes a fixed smile that denies old age and death but that changes life to motionless stone" (Miguel Pérez. 1998 Hispanic Link News Service).

As a resume we can state that Octavio ("Itinerario", "Laberinto de la Soledad", "Obra Poética"...) often used the idea in his works of getting out of the loneliness, the sadness, the existential empty and the meaning of life. This search is made by silence, feelings repression, the joy in the fiestas and death. Expressions that don't allow to the Mexicans but to the whole humanity. We are alone. The loneliness, the place where the sadness comes from, started the day when we were born and removed from our mothers, the day when we fell in a strange, hostile world. We have fallen; and this fall, the fact of knowing that we have fallen makes us feel guilty. Why? Because of a crime without name: to be born. He uses the criticism as an instrument to bring to the light the absolute hypocrisy and to report the crimes "I discovered that the revolution was the criticism son and that the absence of criticism murdered the revolution". In Benedetti's work, the characters re consider their lives from the new situations and try to adapt themselves to them by creating new meanings which are

inspired in diverse facts: from the most insignificant happenings (heat, light of the sun or shape of the clouds perception in "La Muerte") to the most transcendental ones (relationship with relatives). The adaption capability is appreciated in "El fin de la disnea", where in a creative way, the physiologic disfunction becomes a distinction element, anyway, illness leads to a way of life. In "Puntero izquierdo" the soccer player uses his convalescence for reflection, what ease the search of the meaning of life, the new situation and to restructure the future. Something similar happens to the main character in "Ganas de Embromar" after a terrorist attack. The sentence that a doctor friend of him makes, in a fatal diagnosis way, is going to imply for Mario a situation in which he is going to question all of his life. In "Aquí se respira bien" the son disappointed because of the father model patterns faded away, makes him feel insecure when he needed it more, just before leaving, finishing the story in a cross of feelings where sorrow and the shame continue present.

CONCLUSIONS

As a final resume it is important to name the following conclusions :

- Thanks to the method used in this work, it has been possible to get the goal of making profit of Benedetti's and Octavio's work as a meaning seeds bag in the health-illness situations and with its only use, we can get encouraging consequences in two senses: the students introduction to the active reading and the use of literature in aspects not very usuals .

- With these kind of methods we can organize situations that, although they are usually classified as clinical, they are in essence human experiences.

- Independently to the concret goals in this kind of research, the use of texts, tales or poems as communication meanings mechanisms can contribute to slow the isolation process of itself that is taking place in the classrooms.

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