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The Quest for An Authentic Self: Memory and Identity in Philip Ridley's Mercury Fur

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Abstract

Although Philip Ridley's popular play Mercury Fur (2005) represents, by its display of disturbing powerful images of violence and rape, one of the most shocking examples of in-her-face theatre, the play's major concern is rather with the authentic individual self and authentic human relationships. The purpose of this study is to reveal the ways in which Ridley's dramatic work displays the search for an authentic self in a highly consumerist world. In this respect, Heidegger's 'theory of being' along with various postmodern concepts such as memory, forgetting, and identity are discussed in relation to the success or failure of some characters of the play, who try to attain an authentic image of the self.

Keywords: memory; forgetting; identity; Being; authentic self.

Introduction

The English theatre of the 1990s and later periods drops gradually its preoccupation with the concept of national identity in the light of the multi-national cultural mainstream and focuses more and more on the issue of individual identity. This new tendency might be explained by the postmodern crises of identity, which occurred as a result of the growing difficulty to distinguish between media distortions of simulated representations and the reality of the misrepresented identities. Moreover, the performances of this period indicate a preoccupation with "the failure of 'reality' to provide any stable counterpoint to the 'simulated' where the self's identity might be found" (Cambridge Histories Online, 2008: 500). Media representations of the celebrities led to the acknowledgement of the fact that a "famous" persona is no more than a construct, "something entirely 'other' to the celebrity's 'real' self"; consequently, theatrical productions, influenced by this preoccupation, have tried to reveal how the simulation of representation of a self fails in its attempts, strengthening thus the awareness of the lack of any underlying reality (CHO, 2008: 500).

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Such performances started to explore the identity and the individual's significance by the approach to the role-playing of the desired "other". The outcome of these theatrical productions was a kind of pessimistic apprehension, which originated in the postmodern premise that "role-play is always inadequate, 'identity' is 'always already' lost in the performers' failing attempt to find it" (CHO, 2008: 500).

In this study we argue that Philip Ridley's play *Mercury Fur* (2005) could be also considered a part of this theatrical trend. However, unlike the performances of his contemporary mainstream that abandoned the concept of national identity, Philip Ridley's play re-actualizes the role of memory in relation to both collective and individual identity, and also sets a quest for an authentic self and for genuine human relations.

Memory and Its Relation to Identity in *Mercury Fur*

In the postmodern discourse, the memory has become one of the most important concepts, which are used in the struggle against obliteration of both national and individual identities. Subject to manipulation itself, memory has been frequently used by the dominant powers in a society. As Milan Kundera aptly states in his work *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, "the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting", thus emphasizing the clash of power which is inherent to it (1996: 3). While insisting on the role of memory in resisting the power, the awareness of the abuse of power in the construction of a reality emerged gradually.

The political implication of the concept of memory came forth, and memory proved an efficient tool of the dominant ideology in its attempts to control and manipulate the collective and individual memory. Therefore, the dynamics of the struggle of the memory against forgetting develops into a struggle aiming to protect the true social and individual identity against the dominant political ideology that attempts to twist or erase it.

In his theoretical book *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004), Paul Ricoeur emphasizes Locke's theory in which memory is established as the criterion of identity:

The heart of the problem is the mobilization of memory in the service of the quest, the appeal, the demand for identity. In what follows from this, we recognize some disturbing symptoms: too much memory, in a certain region of the world, hence an abuse of memory; not enough memory elsewhere, hence an abuse of forgetting. It is in the problematic of identity that we have to seek the cause of the fragility of memory manipulated in this way. ... The fragility of identity consists in the fragility



of these responses in terms of what, claiming to give the recipe of the identity proclaimed and reclaimed. The problem is therefore carried back a step, from the fragility of memory to that of identity. (81)

Philip Ridley's play *Mercury Fur* focuses on the role of memory and its impact upon collective and individual identity. In fact, the absence of memory, attained in the post-apocalyptic world by the dominant power, threatens the possibility of characters to identify with a nation or with an image of the self.

Set in a dystopian environment, the play reveals the lives of young adolescents who enact the ruthless sexual phantasies of adults in order to survive in their brutal world. Gender boundaries are blurred; sibling relations are half-remembered as a result of the clash between public danger and private security. The identities of the protagonists are also threatened by some psychotropic "butterflies" that erase the past experiences from their memory, except those of the most traumatic and emotional moments, since these traumatic moments contribute to the creation of some hallucinations. The butterflies affect not only the memory, but also the morality and the humaneness of the characters; therefore, they have no remorse about providing a venue and a child in order to satisfy the criminal and pedophilic tastes of a wealthy client.

The playwright creates an apparently familiar, yet half-remembered language that has been greatly devastated by the impact of obliteration, but still conveys its own struggle to maintain some meaning, as in this example: "Show me, you nigger, Paki, wop, spic, Chinky, Muslim, Christian cunt!" (Ridley, 2005: 7). Still, language is the vehicle that brings about the forgotten memories into the present moment. Ridley radicalizes the situation of simulated moments, which leads to the fact that, as Anna Harpin claims, "[m]emory has dispossessed the rememberer" (Harpin, 2011: 107).

The protagonists seek refuge from the brutal present in some amnesiac memories of a previous life in which they feel the security of a familial hearth and the comfort of parental care. As Darren, while speaking to his elder brother Elliot 'remembers',

Know what I liked the best? Whatching telly late at night. That musical Mum and Dad liked. The mountains and all those kids going, 'Do, ray, me.' ... Remember that, Ell? We'd all sit on the sofa. Me in the middle. Mom on this side. Dad on that. ... Dad would order a big takeaway pizza. American hot. ... Dad would cut it up into four equal parts. Dad made sure each part had the same number of sausage bits so we wouldn't argue. ... Where're you, Ell?

Elliot The armchair." (Ridley, 2005: 12)



The perpetually blurring memories of the characters' past come up in psychic floods of some hallucinatory experiences which are produced by the effect of butterflies. The constant interplay between true and false memories of both childhood and adulthood experiences reveal the protagonists' fear of confronting the menacing present. The frequent act of witnessing violence and cruelty traumatizes the protagonists to the extent of their recurrent retreat into memory, which is never reliable and always blended with the constant perception of dangers and also with fantasies of the present sexual desire. In the case of Naz, for example, the act of remembering resembles a random encounter between the nostalgia for the lost family security, his experience of menace in the external world, and his sexual fantasies:

Hang on ... Hang on. ... Yeah! We was in the supermarket. Me. Mum. And...Stacey! That's her name! Stace! ... I hear a noise. A gang's rushing down the aisles. ... couple are about my age. ... They are screaming and waving these big knife things. ... Can hear Stace crying but I can't see her. The crying is real close. It seems to be coming from this big smashed fruit. It's all red inside and very juicy. It's got an eye. It's Stace! ... The gang drags her away and pull off her knickers. She's pissing herself. ... One of them gets his cock out and says he'll plug the leak. He sticks his cock in her. (Ridley, 2005: 33-4)

This moment of "remembering" might signify the need of people to return to a forgotten past, no matter how traumatic this past is. However, in the case of a half-remembered, half-simulated experience it seems that memories abandon their bodies and exist as collective, disowned and disembodied present. Dependent on the consumed butterflies, one can find himself or herself in some important historical moments, such as Kennedy's assassination. This piece of history becomes disowned, as anyone who takes a red butterfly with silver stripes can experience the assassination of Kennedy. Open to the distortions of everybody's memories or fantasies, this disembodied past becomes a disembodied present by transforming a real event into a piece of fiction:

Darren *It only works if you've got a memory of an assassination in ya somewhere.*

Naz *Don't think I've got anything like that.*

Darren *It can be from telly. Or old photos. Just look at as much of it as ya can before ya take one and – bingo! (Ridley, 2005: 37-8)*

The memory of people has been abused by the simulations of some past experiences to an extent that leads to the disturbing symptoms of a problematic identity. Such a fragile and easily manipulated memory develops a fragile identity, which would perpetually strive to identify with



the “other” and, therefore, fail in the attempt to find a true image of the self. Ridley represents this situation through one of Darren’s hallucinatory experiences, in which he becomes “the dark haired girl”, who is in fact Jacqueline Kennedy, the president’s wife, who sits next to him in the car at the moment of assassination. Darren experiences this moment in history as if he were Jacqueline Kennedy, the reality of this sequence being described with many sensorial details: “I can feel the sun on my face and hear the crowds cheering. ... Then I hear this chocking sound. I look at Kennedy. He’s clutching his throat. I think he’s swallowed his own spit or something” (Ridley, 2005: 39). However, without an original experience, the event becomes a simulacra, where the gender boundaries are blurred, and his fragile identity, greatly alienated from a personal experience, encounters accidentally with some personal sexual fantasies:

I look at Kennedy. Half his head is hanging off. And then ... Kapow! ... My cunt is getting juicy and creaming up. I fiddle with the bone and brains on me dress. I’m gonna come. I feel it. The sun. The heat. Bone. Brain. Blood. And then – gushhh! Me cunt sprays cunt juice all over the car. (Ridley, 2005: 39)

Being distant from the real world and his true self, Darren is unable to experience a pleasure of his own. Alienated from his self and unable to create a personal identity, he gets his satisfaction only as the “other” in a simulated experience. As memory is directly relevant to the creation of individual identity and the self, Darren fails to develop his true identity, for he does not possess a genuine memory, a personal experience that would be embraced and maintained by him throughout his life. In the absence of such an experience, Darren constantly constructs some images of the self and drifts between the ever shifting images of the “other”.

Besides the lack of individual memory, which is necessary for the development of the personal identity, the lack of collective memory thwarts the construction of a national identity and togetherness. Eyerman declares that

[m]emory provides individuals and collectives with a cognitive map, helping orient who they are, why they are here and where they are going. Memory in other words is central to individual and collective identity. ... Theories of identity formation, socialization, tend to conceptualize memory as part of the development of self and personality. Notions of collective identity building around this model (like the collective behavior school) theorize a ‘loss of self’, and thus of the constraints of memory (as super ego or ingrained habit) in accounting for collective behavior and the formation of new collective identities. (2004: 161)



Following the destruction of memory, Darren and other members of that “anarchic” society are not able to build a unity, which would link them to a common past and history; thus, they become unable to create their individual identities. With a vacuum left behind, a space is left available to be filled in. When Darren is together with Elliot, who is the only true connection with his past, his family, he desperately tries to cling to the remnants of his memory, which represents his family’s history, and consequently to fill the void he experiences. As Andrew Wyllie puts in, “[o]nly by retaining a sense of history can an individual or a culture exercise moral judgment or even self-preservation” (Wyllie, 2013: 72). Ridley, in fact, questions the ability of the act of remembering to enable the self, or people, or a moral sensibility for survival, an aspect which stands as a fundamental motif of the play.

The Authenticity of Being in *Mercury Fur*

Philip Ridley’s play *Mercury Fur* does not simply present the individuals whose identity creation is thwarted by the destruction of memory. It also brings in the destruction of moral awareness of a nation. Moreover, the play gains a metaphysical aspect, as we see in the characters whose fragile identities are not simply disembodied by the perpetually shifting simulated experiences, but grow exiled from their own Being. Martin Heidegger’s theory of Being, in which he questions the meaning of existence in its every aspect, could be a useful guide in our attempts to understand Ridley’s characters and their quest of the Self.

Heidegger defines Being as “anything which one apprehends as an entity” (Heidegger, 1962: 22); he also asserts that it is a very broad and indefinable concept, which is “deduced from its supreme universality” (Heidegger, 1962: 23). In order to explain the concept of Being, he emphasizes the importance of Dasein: “This entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being, we shall denote by the term ‘Dasein’” (Heidegger, 1962: 27). Therefore, Dasein is a very wide concept, which correlates each being that exists.

Considering the close relationship between Dasein and Self, Heidegger’s classification of Self as “the Self of one’s own Dasein” and “the Self of the Other” (1962: 166) can be interpreted in terms of being as authentic or inauthentic selves. The authentic self manages to discover his true self and own Dasein free from the Other’s existence, whereas the inauthentic self *stands in subjection [Botmässigkeit] to Others. It itself is not; its Being has been taken away by the Others. ... This Being-with-one-another dissolves one’s own Dasein completely into the kind of Being of ‘the*



Others', in such a way, indeed, that the Others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real dictatorship of the "they" is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as they [man] take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as they see and judge ... (Heidegger, 1962: 164)

The above mentioned "they" could correspond to anything from the external world, which threatens to eliminate one's own self by making it inauthentic. It could be an ideology, or a political movement, or every kind of power, or a ruling class, or the government that deprives the self of the ability to act outside the imposed ideology. Heidegger continues his explanation:

Thus the particular Dasein in its everydayness is disburdened by the "they". Not only that; by thus disburdening it of its Being, the "they" accommodates Dasein if Dasein has any tendency to take things easily and make them easy. And because the "they" constantly accommodates the particular Dasein by disburdening it of its Being, the "they" retains and enhances its stubborn dominion. (1962: 165)

In the context of the play, the post-apocalyptic external world of the anarchic society, which is dominated by the butterfly drugs that cause the memory loss, can be regarded as the "they" in Heideggerian terms, a fact which jeopardizes the characters' Dasein and self because of their disconnection with individual and collective memory. If the loss of memory equals to the loss of identity according to the theory of memory, it also signifies the emergence of inauthentic self in terms of the theory of Being.

Ridley's characters are individuals that experience the submission of the self to various ideological pressures, their very essence of being becomes also vulnerable to the impact of the dominant ideology. Having totally lost the connection with their collective past and history, they are unable to recognize even the simplest things and some of the most famous people like Marilyn Monroe, Kennedy, or places like Egypt and the pyramids, or the achievements of their ancestors, or other aspects that would define their national, social and individual identity, which is a fact that thwarts the creation of an authentic being.

Darren, Naz, and other people, who use butterflies, have lost their memories and become inauthentic beings that fail to discover their true identities, and are exiled from their own Beings, as slaves of the dominant system based on addiction. As Heidegger claims that the authority of the other accommodates the self, their Being is dominated by the anarchic system and drug addiction. They are dominated by "the Self of the other", which represents a distorted image of the self, created by the consumption



of the psychotropic butterflies, which drastically alter their perceptions of the world and deprives them of their own authority and, consequently, authenticity.

The only characters who are aware of dangers of the memory loss and seek an authentic experience and true self could be Elliot and Party Guest. Actually, the brutal sexual fantasies of Party Guest stand as the central image of perversion and depravity in the play, an event which we will attempt to present as the character's radical quest for an authentic experience in the conditions of the perpetually engendered reality of the present. He is aware of the butterflies and their devastating effect on the perception of reality and the true self, and tries to adopt a position that would be different from the rest. As he admits, "I've tried the odd butterfly. Don't tell the girlfriend. Ha! And...well, they're okay. But it ain't...it ain't real, is it? It ain't real skin. Real blood. Real pain" (Ridley, 2005: 96). Being part of the consumerist world and used to the commodification of human life and emotion, Party Guest tries to purchase a reality which rests on his dream of raping a Paki boy in a small episode-like moment which is prepared for him by the others. The possibility of "liveness" of a violent abuse excites him to the extreme, and he exclaims: "Wow! I'm creaming me pants just thinking about it. Not every day the horniest fucking fantasy of your whole fucking life comes true, is it?" (Ridley, 2005: 92). This sexual perversion functions as a parable which represents the excitement of the one seeking an authentic experience and is juxtaposed to the enthusiasm of the young boys willing to get an experience produced by the butterflies. Although Party Guest's depravity and perversion horrifies the reader/audience, the above mentioned juxtaposition transforms him into a seeker of his own Being which is constantly threatened by the inauthentic present. Contrary to other people who become inauthentic by their submission to the unreal experiences and memory loss, the Party Guest insists on having a real experience, based on his instinctual drives, which would determine the creation of his true self. He models his own story in an attempt to challenge the butterflies' reality: "It's Vietnam. Think jungle. Think helicopters. Think sweat" (Ridley, 2005: 97). He is very careful and over-sensible for every detail in his fantasy. The Party Piece's clothes, hair style, the song he will sing, and the war sounds constitute extremely important details for the creation of a perfect reality. His perverted desires and fantasies full of violence have become his own being, his true self, for they are the most intimate, personal, and special pieces of his identity and his existence. He struggles to protect his own being by holding on to his sexual fantasies, and this makes him believe that he possesses an authentic Self.



Party Guest apparently resists his transformation into a Being-with-one-another, a state which dissolves one's Dasein, and by his attempt to record the moments of torture and rape he challenges the possibility of being subjected by the "Others". Unlike the other characters who possess a half-remembered or altered past memories, he tries to record this unique "real" experience that would prevent his obliteration and the annihilation of his authentic self. In Heideggerian terms, Party Guest strives to correspond to the definition of an "authentic Being" that could be attained by someone who is conscious of his true self and is free from any environmental oppressions.

However, Ridley reveals the failure of Party Guest's quest for authenticity. Primarily, the playwright inserts dramatic irony in the identity of this character, who is called throughout the entire play as Party Guest. The character's lack of individual name already projects him as self-less person, a fact stressed by his violent, soul-less nature. Party Guest's exaggerated individualism signals also his enslavement to a simulated experience, which would be viewed through the lens of his camcorder, and is inevitably produced as an outcome of a community that rejects moral values in favor of commodification brought by the obsession with money. In his strife to attain an authentic self, Party Guest fails to become conscious of his true self, as he falls a victim to the environmental oppression of the capitalist's commodification of human life and emotion. He becomes a construction, submitting his own self to the pressures of his world's ideologies, to the extent that his very essence of Being is annihilated.

Phillip Ridley's preoccupation with the consumerist world that endangers the human potential to love is evident in *Mercury Fur*, and the playwright tries to seek a possibility to prevent the commodification of human emotion through the representation of a strong emotional bond between two brothers, Darren and Elliot. The playwright portrays his flawed characters that are still able to elicit audience's compassion, since in a world where human feelings and emotions are stimulated by psychotropic drugs they are driven by some recognizable but genuine human desires such as recognition, love, and authenticity. He presents the disintegrating family life of the two brothers who still desperately seek love and humanity. Their basic need to experience genuine feelings and emotions is expressed in extreme terms of love and aggression:

Elliot *I love you so much I could make you bleed and bleed.*

Darren *I love you so much I could Kill you and kill you.*

Elliot *I love you so much I could burst into flames.*

Darren *I love you so much I could burst into flames. (Ridley, 2005: 15)*



It seems that Ridley tries to “excavate the beautiful human remains” in a time when they experience the horror of war and are exposed on a daily basis to witness and participate in some unendurable atrocities (Harpin, 2011: 106). The act of witnessing the cruelty to the others creates in fact a self-mutilation, which leads to the inevitable evacuation of the Self. Imprisoned by the act of watching and rehearsing some impossible events, Ridley’s characters become exiled from their very own Being.

Unable to act outside the dominant demands of his society, Elliot, the elder brother, still tries to resist the submission of the self. In order to understand his own Being, Elliot tries to be grounded well into the matters of history. He is the only character in the play that avoids the butterflies and pays a great effort to protect both collective and individual memories. The remembering confers to Elliot a special status, which derives from a sense of agency that empowers him to act. He stands differently from all subjects of the community, who through the memory obliteration have erased their ability to act as a Being. Even the most frightening character, Spinx, expresses his respect:

Elliot ol’ son, your brain... it thrills me. Honest. Tell ya, the best time I ever had was when Lola was looking after ya. Remember? I used to come home and sit by ya bed and... fuck, ya’d talk and tell me stuff. I think you are special, Ell. Ya know that, don’t ya? (Ridley, 2005: 82)

This “special” quality endows Elliot to seek his own essence, his Being. He tries to perceive clues to his authentic Being in history or past memories, in something that would make him be unique, monumental in momentous history. In his desire to discover his “I” Elliot tries to juxtapose the authentic past to the perpetually simulated or hallucinatory present. However, from the abusive confrontation with the present he seems to dwell between the idealized versions of family experience and extremely traumatic moments of the past. He confesses to his brother Darren:

I’ve got things from before you were fucking born. Get inside my skull. You wouldn’t last a minute. You’d be screaming to get out (...) Slit my skull open. Know what it will be like? Like slitting open guts of a great white shark. Stuff’ll come out like you wouldn’t fucking believe (Ridley, 2005: 9).

Elliot’s “I”, defined by its elusiveness, becomes alternately concealed and brought into being by “things” he chooses to remember or forget. He wishes to remember collective history and beautiful moments of his past family life, but tries to erase from his memory that he sells butterflies and organizes very cruel “parties”. The act of remembering backfires him, as he experiences excruciating pain since he becomes more and more aware of the fact that he cannot return to an idyllic past, the moment of his



innocence, the moment in which he could have possessed an authentic Being.

Elliot cannot enjoy his life as it happens. To him, life is a torture and it could be experienced better in an idealized memory rather than in the time it occurs. He also tries to discover his authentic Being in the “I” of the others, like in the example of Theseus with the Minotaur. He almost experiences Theseus’ entrapment in the labyrinth and he wonders whether “he ever gonna find his way back out of the labyrinth? He could be trapped in there for ever” (Ridley, 2005: 82). Theseus’ labyrinth enmeshment overlaps with Elliot’s entrapment in repeated exposures to violence that constantly test the extremes of his human endurance. At the same time, it might be viewed in terms of Nietzsche’s concept of the eternal return and the repetition of time that deprives the one of the sense of agency and the ability to act. This eternal recurrence reveals the subjection of the individual, as he experiences a submission of the self by his inability to act outside the dominant ideology.

Perceiving his own “I” as a reduction to some repeated moments in history, Elliot considers life as unbearable. Without an essence or an agency of Being, Ridley’s character seems to question death as the only way out of this inescapable labyrinth. Since he is unable to act outside the imposed ideology, Elliot finds himself as a victim of a cruel and inescapable organization, where death seems to be a release from the never-ending torture.

However, in this existential despair, Ridley’s protagonists seem to have found, after all, the exit out of the labyrinth and the answer is discovered unexpectedly in the manifestation of human love and common humanity. The young people’s disentanglement from their labyrinthine experience functions almost like a cathartic irruption into an uncertain future that still bears hope to the ethical embracement of the Other.

Conclusion

Philip Ridley’s play *Mercury Fur* portrays a shocking inner quest for authenticity. Although failing in their attempts to attain an authentic sense of the self, Ridley’s protagonists attain a genuine awareness of the existential despair that, surprisingly, stimulates their ability to act. It is in this mostly acknowledged moment of their transgression that they discover strength, initiative and humaneness to stand against the dominant power and act as agents of their own moment in history. Failed at the individual level, Ridley’s characters find hope only as a group, as brothers or as friends. Being confronted with a traumatic past and present, Darren, Elliot, Naz and



others still demonstrate the necessity to recuperate their humaneness and ability to love the other prior to their confrontation with the truth about their self. Although the play presents an ambiguous future, the genuine emotion and love seem to be the hopeful healing necessary for a sick and traumatic present. In the brutal life they lead, Ridley's characters fail to become authentic Beings, but they attain an awareness of an authentic emotions and human relations through the regained morality, and this could be seen as their possible happiness.

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