

# The concept of writing in Sylvia Molloy's *Desarticulaciones*.

## El concepto de escritura(s) en *Desarticulaciones* de Sylvia Molloy.



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**Juan Martín Salandro**

National University of Mar del Plata

(ARGENTINA)

CE: [salandrojuanmartin@gmail.com](mailto:salandrojuanmartin@gmail.com)

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7642-734X>

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### Abstract.

The paper proposes a journey through the "novel" *Desarticulaciones* by the Argentinean writer Sylvia Molloy. The aim is to understand how, in this framework, writing is to make memory. Textualization is continuously at play between the orders of writing, orality, reading, literary criticism in order to recompose the absent other of dismemberment: M.L., the elusive interlocutor of the narrator's voice, suffers from an advanced stage of Alzheimer's disease. The disease is not only the loss of memory, but also of linguistic registers. This is why *Desarticulaciones* puts into play writing for the other, writing to the other so that he survives in the letter.

**Key words:** Memory. Writing. Alzheimer. Fragmentation.

### Resumen.

El trabajo propone un recorrido de la "novela" *Desarticulaciones* de la escritora argentina Sylvia Molloy. Se pretende entender cómo, en este marco, escribir es hacer memoria. La textualización se pone en juego continuamente entre los órdenes de la escritura, la oralidad, la lectura, la crítica literaria para recomponer el otro ausente de la desmemorización: M.L., interlocutor esquivo de la voz narradora, padece un estadio avanzado de Alzheimer. La enfermedad no es sólo la pérdida de la memoria, sino también de los registros lingüísticos. Es por esto que *Desarticulaciones* pone en juego escribir por otro, escribir al otro para que perviva en la letra.

**Palabras clave:** Memoria. Escritura. Alzheimer. Fragmentación.

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*"I am myself, in each instant, an enormous fact of memory".*

Paul Valéry

*"The wound bleeds twice, / in producing and remembering, / cold memory, insane  
lament, / enclosed cry of loneliness."*

Malon. "Cicatrizando."

In the following paper we propose a reading of *Desarticulaciones* (1996), by Argentine writer Sylvia Molloy, focusing on the concept of writing as a practice of memory. We are interested in exploring how the act of writing is configured in the text as a form of resistance in the face of loss: loss of language, of subjectivity, of the body, of the affective bond. The narrative constructed through discontinuous fragments is situated on the threshold between the testimonial and the fictional, between lived experience and the invention that seeks to give it form. The figure of M.L., an absent interlocutor affected by a process of progressive dememorization -recognizable in Alzheimer's- operates as a catalyst of the writing device, which unfolds in an attempt at symbolic reinscription of the other in language. It is thus proposed to inquire into the ways in which *Desarticulaciones* makes the gesture of writing a way of sustaining the existence of the other where biography, identity and memory become ungraspable.

### Fragments that vanish

First, we can dwell on the generic inscription of the text. Although it is editorially catalogued as a novel, it is immediately recognizable that Molloy's text could well problematize the traditional notion of novel. could be thought of as more akin to a diary, a logbook of the disease -despite the fact that the sections are not dated- or, perhaps, a series of partially unconnected notes. This idea is expressed laterally: "They were lists only comprehensible to her, but then it is the case of every list: if the subject who puts it together is missing, there is no one to make sense of it" (Molloy, 1996, p. 34). The fragments that make up

*Desarticulaciones* make sense one in relation to the other, yes, but in function of the subject that produces and organizes them. Like a list, which only makes sense to its author, the segments of the work must be read from this point of view, governed by the writing intention that runs through them. Defining this intention, then, will be central to understanding the "novel":

I have to write these texts while she is alive, while there is no death or closure, to try to understand this being/not being of a person who disarticulates before my eyes. I have to do it this way in order to go on, to make last a relationship that continues despite the ruin, that subsists even if there are hardly any words left (p. 9).

In this sort of epigraph, the narrative voice -a first person singular that takes charge of all the fragments- makes clear the motive that drives the text: the writing procedure is governed by the duty, necessity and desire expressed by the verb "I have". Likewise, the motive is clear. The causal "for" shows how writing has a precise purpose: the persistence of an ephemeral figure. The semantic field of fading temporality -while, to make last, to make last, to continue, to subsist, though barely- imprints the work with a remarkable urgency; one must write as a struggle against oblivion. To write is to make memory.

With this in mind, we can return to the form and genre of the text. Molloy does not pretend to write a "Memoir", in line with the tradition of biographies or historiography. *Disarticulations* reproduces the rhizomatic modulations of forgetting, remembering, selection and creation. Following in line with the Deleuzian concept, remembering does not make tracing, but mapping (Deleuze and Guattari, 2014, 17). The rhizomatic model proposed by Deleuze and Guattari allows us to think memory outside the chronological conception, a line that orders facts chronologically or, in the authors' terms, an arborescent logic. They propose to overcome the hierarchical logic: to break the center and think, in our case, memory as a network of relations, of multiple connections. In this sense, the writing of *Desarticulaciones* does not respond to the scheme of a traditional narrative, but follows the impulses of fragmentary evocation, in the manner of a rhizome that sprouts through associations, superimpositions and detours. This enables a structure of reminiscence that

does not seek an origin, but extends through a multiplicity of inputs and outputs, in the form of lists and notes that would be meaningless without their author, which the text thematizes.

"Funes el memorioso" (1942), by J.L. Borges, is an explicit hypotext in Molloy's work; we will return to it later, but it is pertinent for us to quote a fragment as an illustrative counterpoint: "Two or three times [Ireneo Funes] had reconstructed a whole day; he had never hesitated, but each reconstruction had required a whole day" (Borges, 1942, p. 63). Funes operates by "tracing" (Deleuze and Guattari, 2014). In him dwells an exact copy of the world, according to his perception. That absolute *racconto* of Funes nullifies any possibility of memory, it reproduces exactly preventing any creative/cognitive process on the record, a categorial construction and appropriation of experience. As Umberto Eco (1992) points out about this story, echoing the author:<sup>1</sup> "remembering everything means not recognizing anything anymore" (p. 14). The immediacy of details in "El alborotado mundo de Funes" (Borges 66) operates just like the evanescent immediacy of M.L. in *Desarticulaciones*. One by excess, the other by emptiness, they are alienated. Remembering, then, is a plural, open and dynamic practice that requires a process of forgetting and selection, of construction and representation of experience that borders on fiction-"Perhaps I am inventing what I am writing. No one, after all, could contradict me" (Molloy, 2010, p. 22); a practice that is forbidden to both M.L. and Ireneo Funes. Saturation annuls the subject, and, in becoming an object, the articulation of the text is lost; the memory, coherent in the memory system, as well as the subject as its continent, is disarticulated -hence the title of the novel-. This alienation of both characters -M.L. and Funes- by this saturation that prevents us from remembering places us on the hinge between "literal memory" and "exemplary memory" (Todorov, 1995). While the former is limited to preserving what happened without transformations, the latter seeks to extract a meaning from the past that can be projected into the present. In *Desarticulaciones*, the narrator, identifiable with Sylvia Molloy, does not propose an exact restitution of what she experienced with her friend, but an affective and

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<sup>1</sup> Borges writes: "I suspect, however, that he was not very capable of thinking. To think is to forget differences, to generalize, to abstract. In Funes's riotous world there were only details, almost immediate".

symbolic reconstruction of her presence. The writing does not record, it interprets: she does not pretend to keep her memory of M.L. in an archive, she seeks to re-signify it. Unlike Funes, whose prodigious retentiveness paralyzes him, the narrator employs a dynamic and vital form of memory, as fragile in the face of death/forgetfulness as the body itself. She implements an "ethics of testimony": she writes in order not to forget, to understand and, in this gesture, to rescue the other, to give him a place of survival in language.

The fragmentary form of the text, then, accounts for the random selection procedure of memory and quotation; the semiotic chaining that, although it can establish small sequences between the entries of the work, is governed by free association. Molloy uses the metaphor of the "flicker" (p. 31) to account for the procedure of memory in relation to the fragmentation of the novel, and this figure can be read in the manner of brief moments of light-the neuronal electrical impulse in a dissociated mind/brain-in the dark.

Returning to the literary nature of the work, Barthes' famous metaphor of the woven text-in "From the Work to the Text" (1971)-operates in relation to the figure of the shreds in *Disarticulations*, in correlation with the form of the work: "How does he who does not remember say *I*, what is the place of his enunciation when memory has been unwoven?" (Molloy, 2010, p. 19). The pronoun operates as a kind of relational word (Barrenechea 1972), governed by a strong semantic nuance. They are empty units that are filled in the instance of enunciation. Thus, to say "I" implies filling oneself with content, assuming a deixis and establishing a relationship with the "not I" -the other elements of the pronominal paradigm-. That is to say, the pronoun is traversed by its moment of enunciation, but when the subject that carries it vanishes, unweaves, returning to the metaphor of the text, this lexical category is completely emptied of meaning and memory. The pronoun is a nucleus of tension symbolic within the text. From them we can understand the writing process in *Desarticulaciones* as a futile exercise of recomposition. The novel is an attempt to grasp those fragments that are disarticulated: "They are notes that have outlived their usefulness [...] bits of writing that tell me that it once was" (p. 41). The semantic vacancy of the pronoun is sought to be filled again, in a desperate act to reinscribe M.L. in it: it is written by another to reestablish its deixis.

The whole text is governed by the irrepressible frenzy of the prefix "des-" that populates the morphosyntax of the prose, to which, uselessly, the narrating voice tries to oppose the "re-": to the disarticulation it is intended to oppose the "re-memorization" (p. 32) as a textual procedure: "In writing it down I am tempted by the idea of doing it as it was before [...] of recomposing it at its moment of greatest strength and not at its collapse" (38; the bold letters are ours). M.L. is the object of writing -that enclitic dative "the" in the verb-, the processes of writing it and recomposing it are exercised on her. Again the play of prefixes is established: re-compose-la is an attempt to return to the previous moment of the derumbe. "This is my continuity, that of the scribe" the narrative voice states; in the face of the debacle, the only thing left to do is to write. Memory and invention make up the fictional device that makes possible the practice of writing as creation and, simultaneously, preservation.

### The survival of the alphabet

Writing -writing to M.L., or writing through her- founds a survival.<sup>2</sup> It is to produce a textual space in which the letter will fix the experience. As Eco says: "Through the vegetal memory of the book we can remember [...] The book is an insurance of life, a small foretaste of immortality" (1991, p. 18-19). In the fragment "Identikit", when asked for her name, M.L. answers "Petra": "Petra, stone, insensitive, to describe who she is?" (Molloy, 2010, p. 19). Eco (1991) speaks of "vegetal memory" appealing to the materiality of the book object -junks, cellulose paper, etc.- as opposed to "lithic memory" -the carvings on stone monuments-. For the Italian, the former is polyphonic, allowing an open reading path that opposes the monolingualism of stone inscriptions. Books have an author's mark, a voice that takes charge of the discourse; those carved in stone do not. In this sense, the writing of *Disarticulations* seeks to preserve what vanishes, transforming the ungraspable experience of loss into an object that can be inhabited and reread. Unlike the stone, which fixes a single inscription -

<sup>2</sup> We could think, from another perspective, of *Desarticulaciones* as a writing of mourning, where speaking of the other implies questioning the constitutive otherness of the narrator; the other is written to write herself.



monolithic, monologic, monolinguistic-, Molloy's text is constant rereading, enunciated by a voice that doubts, corrects, fictionalizes. Thus we see the way in which the construction of the book operates in opposition to the petrification of illness with oscillation as a vital gesture.

A double movement is established: the active construction of memory through the story and the fixation of this procedure in the materiality of the word. Thus, in the last fragment - "Interruption"- to stop writing implies denying it a survival, "a continuity to which only I can attest" (p. 76). The game is established with the dedication of the book: "For M.L., who is still", that is, who would survive in the textual space.

At this point, the reflection on the intersubjective dimension of language becomes particularly important. Writing, then, also implies trying to rescue the space shared by both of them abroad -the characters, of Rioplatense origin, live in the United States-: the habitat of language. Molloy writes: "The mention of my name has lost its capacity to summon" (36). There is no denotation, therefore, there is no semiosis; there is a void of meaning. Next: "He spoke to me as tú - de tú and not de vos -. It was a cordial conversation [...] in a Spanish we have never spoken. I felt that I had lost something more than what was left in me." (p. 37). Language is an intersubjective habitat. The modulation of registers not only accounts for M.L.'s displacement or, rather, erasure of all place -no deixis, no place in language; she appeals to neutral forms and the norms of bourgeois politeness-, but also for the deterritorialization that the narratorial voice undergoes:

In talking to her I feel - or felt - connected to a not entirely illusory past. And with a place: *that of before*. Now I find myself talking to a void: there is no longer a house, there is no before, only an echo chamber (p. 73).

The space they cohabited is completely abolished in the abolished language. M.L.'s language is pure structure: "He has not forgotten the structure of language, one might even say that he has it more present than ever now that his mind is going dark" (p. 13). If we recover the Chomskyan cognitive models (Chomsky, 2009, 1965), we can think of the way in which M.L. fails to make the passage from the deep structure to the semantic component;

his generative grammar is pure form without content. The discursive microcosm that the narrator inhabited with M.L. was a point of identification, her subjectivity is defined from participating in certain registers with her interlocutor, but in the face of this semiotic void, the codetermination of both discursive actants disappears. Language, as a habitat, is a shared space -intersubjective-, that is why the loss - "there is no more"; "Void"- operates in a double dimension: for the patient and for herself; both are displaced from their space and their history. *Desarticulaciones* is constructed from an attempt to recompose that lost discursive place.

Earlier we spoke of the Borgean hypotext. This enters the novel as a common place among the characters and, at the same time, questions the dimension of the writing exercise set in motion:

The scene is a quotation. It is not based on the literal transfer of the same words from one text to another, but on the non-fortuitous encounter between what is one's own and what is not. And while not necessarily maddening, the quotation always alienates. It takes what is read, and rewrites it in order to reread it, but transformed: it has been -I repeat- alienated (Amante, p. 21).

Not only is it written from Borges, but it is rewritten to draw a bridge between the narrative voice and M.L., to inquire into the constitutive otherness of the other inhabitant of language. Language that is clearly intertextual. Thus, at the same time that "Funes..." is rewritten, M.L. is also rewritten.

However, M.L. shows flashes of textual production. We see the fragment "Que sí lee y escribe" (Who does read and write). In front of the box of "Havanna" alfajores, she reads "Alfonsina" (p. 64). M.L. "writes" a free associative process; she reads in "Havanna" the city of Mar del Plata -where the emblematic alfajores are made-, and before the phonic chain /alf/ she recomposes "**Alfonsina** [Storni]", -poet who committed suicide in that city-. In "Lógica" she carries out a similar process, to which the narrator points out: "I think that her explanation, in a certain sense perfectly logical (judged, therefore, judgment), was more to her liking. It was certainly more dramatic" (p. 15). The dramatic/drama relationship as a



theatrical or literary genre is not minor. Textualization, then, is constantly at play within the play in two orders: orality and writing. M.L. loses the domain of writing: "gone is the letter, the written name, which is another way of being in the world" (p. 41). However, this is the space where she will survive. Illness is understood in the novel not only as the loss of memory, but also as the annulment of this register. That is why the motif of *Desarticulaciones* is to write for another.

A certain rhetoric of the body is thus established that accompanies the subjective process of M.L.'s dememorization; hence the fragmentary form of the text. The section "Fracture" not only functions to introduce the hypotext of "Funes the Memorious" -the parallels between the leg wound, the irrepressible cataract of memories, etc.-, but also presents the material condition of M.L.'s body: in the face of no mind, no memory, the body becomes an object, depersonalized. She also suffers an accident and does not recognize her own broken leg. The fantasy of the unity of the self falls in the fracture -fragmentation; note the polysemy of the term-. But the textual procedure goes beyond the merely thematic. Molloy employs a lethargic syntax that dwells on lexical details: "When he began to lose his memory (I say wrong: I can only say when I noticed he began to lose it) he began to use his hands much more" (p. 44). The account in the past tense is interrupted by clarification or reformulation in the present tense, at the moment of writing. Molloy, like M.L. in this section - "Like a blind man with precursor hands"; again the reference to Borges-, runs through the objects, the words, to "orient herself in the present" (p. 45). But this produces an effect similar to that of Ireneo Funes, who cannot penetrate the procedure of thought because he is overwhelmed by the incommensurable details. Writing constantly dwells on its conditions of production. It questions whether what is written is true or fiction, the discourse is reformulated, and, at each *impasse*, M.L. is suspended; she is "abandoned" (p. 76). In this way, syntax becomes a rhetoric of the dememorized body.

### Conclusion

Throughout this journey, we have seen how *Desarticulaciones* articulates a poetics of the fragment as a form of resistance against the dissolution of the subject and language.

Writing appears as an exercise of impossible but necessary reconstruction: not to restore the lost totality, but to preserve the remains, the traces, the shreds of a link that refuses to disappear completely. Faced with the impossibility of "literal memory" -which condemns both Ireneo Funes and M.L. to paralysis or emptiness-, the narrator rehearses an "exemplary memory", according to Todorov's conceptualization, which transforms the lived experience into a story. In this passage from experience to language, not only M.L.'s survival is at stake, but also that of the writer: writing is the gesture that restores a place in the world. In this sense, *Desarticulaciones* can be read as a meditation on the limits of representation, but also as an affirmation of the performative power of writing: writing so that something, however minimal, remains. A text about loss that does not yield to silence, but rather makes the word a way of sustaining the bond, of inhabiting the mourning and, finally, of surviving it.

It would be useful to think, for future works, about the memory/politics link within the framework of exile writings: what does it imply to remember for another contextualized with illness and dissidence, the diaspora. Resonates, for example, in *Desarticulaciones*, an exercise like that of Tununa Mercado's *En estado de memoria* (1990). Both authors recover the text as a space producing subjectivity in exile -political, academic, somatic-. Sylvia Molloy's work inscribes her act of writing as a form of resistance against the disappearance -not forced, like the Argentinean "desaparecidos" with whom Mercado dialogues, but radical- of the other, . Both authors face loss: Mercado, the uprooting, the erasure of identity as a result of political exile; Molloy, the symbolic dismemberment produced by the illness of M.L. In both, writing becomes a place of reinscription of the absent, an attempt to sustain, through the letter, that which cannot be sustained in the body or in literal memory. In this intersection of writing and mourning, of evocation and exile -physical or cognitive-, a politics of memory is affirmed: writing to resist erasure, writing to preserve what persists in disappearing. As in Mercado, Molloy's text can also be read as a way of inhabiting a *non-place* -that of the language emptied by the disease- and of restoring, even if only partially, a common space through fragmentary evocation. If in Mercado it is a matter of giving a place in the letter to the bodies expelled from the official narrative, in Molloy, the letter is a refuge

for those who have lost all possibility of pronouncing their name: writing becomes, in both cases, an act of care and exemplary memory.

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