

SENTIMENTAL SCHOOL MEMORIES IN LITERATURE: ZWEIG, PLA, CAMUS AND GIMÉNEZ*

*Memorias sentimentales de la escuela en la literatura:
Zweig, Pla, Camus y Giménez*

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Reception date: 03/05/2025 • Acceptation date: 16/10/2025

Abstract: This article explores sentimental school memories through four literary accounts, each representing a distinct model of memory. The first concerns the memory of a Viennese secondary school (Gymnasium) at the end of the nineteenth century, as recounted in Stefan Zweig's *The World of Yesterday*. The second, a decade later, concerns his Spanish counterpart Josep Pla, as portrayed in his biographical account of his formative years, *Girona*. A further decade brings us to Albert Camus's recollections of primary school in colonial Algiers, as recounted in *The First Man*. Finally, the Falange's orphanages of the Auxilio Social in the final years of the dark decade of the 1940s in Spain constitute the framework for Carlos Giménez's memories in *Paracuellos*. Collectively, these four accounts offer a journey into the significance these writers attribute to their formative years and the associated emotions.

Keywords: School memories; Stefan Zweig; Josep Pla; Albert Camus; Carlos Giménez

Resumen: *Este artículo explora la memoria sentimental de la escuela a través de cuatro relatos literarios que constituyen cuatro modelos específicos de memoria. El primero es la memoria de un instituto de bachillerato vienés de finales del siglo XIX, a través de la obra de Stefan Zweig *El mundo del ayer*. El segundo, una década posterior, la de su homólogo español Josep Pla en su obra biográfica sobre su etapa formativa *Girona*. Un salto de una década*

* This article has been prepared within the framework of the Spanish National Research Project PID2020-114249GB-I00/AEI/10.13039/501100011033.

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Cómo citar este artículo: Canales, Antonio Fco. «Sentimental school memories in literature: Zweig, Pla, Camus and Giménez». *Historia y Memoria de la Educación* 23 (2026): 127-152

nos conduce al siguiente relato, las memorias de su escuela primaria en el Argel colonial de Albert Camus en El primer hombre. Finalmente, los orfanaatos del Auxilio Social de la Falange en los años finales de la oscura década de los cuarenta en España constituyen el marco memorístico de Carlos Giménez en Paracuellos. Los cuatro relatos permiten realizar un recorrido por el sentido que estos cuatro escritores confieren a sus años de formación y por los sentimientos asociados a ellos.

Palabras claves: Memoria escolar; Stefan Zweig; Josep Pla; Albert Camus; Carlos Giménez.

This article aims to explore sentimental school memories through four literary accounts, each representing a distinct model of memory. The first concerns the memory of a Viennese secondary school (*Gymnasium*) at the end of the nineteenth century, as recounted in Stefan Zweig's *The World of Yesterday*. The second, a decade later, concerns his Spanish counterpart Josep Pla, as portrayed in his biographical account of his formative years, *Girona*. A further decade brings us to Albert Camus's recollections of primary school in colonial Algiers, as recounted in *The First Man*. Finally, the Falange's orphanages of the Auxilio Social in the final years of the dark decade of the 1940s in Spain constitute the framework for Carlos Giménez's memories in *Paracuellos*. Collectively, these four accounts offer a journey into the significance these writers attribute to their formative years and the associated emotions.

STEFAN ZWEIG OR SPLENDID CONTEMPT

A prime example of school memories can be found in the memoirs of Austrian author Stefan Zweig. Born into a wealthy family, Zweig's school memories, as is often the case among men of his class, centre not on his early schooling, but rather on his long secondary education, which he completed at the Maximilian Gymnasium in Vienna between 1892 and 1900.¹ The author mercilessly criticises the education he received at his secondary school for its reified, repetitive, and meaningless nature.² In his own words, it was a system dominated by "scholastic or scholastically manufactured material which we felt could have no relation to reality

¹ Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday* (London: Cassell and Company Ltd., 4th ed., 1947). Chapter "School in the Last Century," pp. 33-60. This edition is taken as a reference for citations in parentheses.

² Oliver Matuschek, *Three Lives: A Biography of Stefan Zweig* (London: Puskin Press, 2013), 32.

or to our personal interests. It was a dull, pointless learning that the old pedagogy forced upon us, not for the sake of life, but for the sake of learning" (p. 34). In this passage, Zweig deploys all the clichés of progressive pedagogical rhetoric. He contrasts apathetic and passive learning with active methods, and a lack of meaning, caused by a disconnection from the real world, life and the interests of the student as opposed to the desired meaningful learning linked to them. In short, a denial of *life* as the guiding principle of the school that constitutes the legacy of the New Education. It is, therefore, a familiar critique, appealing to the sensibilities of pedagogical progressivism. Actually, Zweig elaborates on these pedagogical topics by contrasting his school experience with the schools of the time, characterised by freedom, respect, independence, happiness and naturalness (p. 33). This opposition between the positive new and the despicable old, although common, is nonetheless paradoxical, as it is unlikely that a pedagogical innovator of the next generation would consider the Austrian school of the 1920s to be a model, but rather an archaic model to be demolished. This is undoubtedly the great paradox and the source of permanent dissatisfaction with pedagogical renewal: the demonisation of everything that precedes it, in which Zweig seems to engage in order to gain complicity.

But beyond pedagogical issues, one need only continue reading to realise that Zweig's dissatisfaction with his school does not stem from the usual reasons cited by progressive educational critics. For the young Zweig, the real world, life and personal interests have little to do with what we commonly understand by such things today, but rather with nothing less than Art with a capital A. Zweig criticises the Gymnasium not for being excessively literary, but because it failed to satisfy his cultured ambitions, because it was not sufficiently cultured for his lofty spirit, which yearns for culture. Zweig describes himself and his classmates as possessed by an artistic fanaticism that led them to be at the forefront of the poetry of the moment, and himself as prey to a feverish nervousness in the pursuit of Art. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that there came a time when "school began to bore and disturb us" (p. 39). For Zweig, the Viennese Gymnasium was incapable of responding to the learning needs of its students: "our pent-up desire for knowledge, our intellectual, artistic and sensuous inquisitiveness, which

found no nourishment in school, passionately yearned for all that went on outside of school" (p. 39).

Zweig's criticism of the educational system's inadequacy quickly hardens into contempt. Indeed, it is a paradoxical criticism, insofar as such institutions were often reproached precisely for its eminently cultural and literary character. But for Zweig, the institution fell short in this regard. His classmates, and notably himself, knew more than the teachers, who were portrayed as inept bureaucrats in their own field: "in many of the subjects which interested us we knew more than our poor teachers" (p. 39). As might be expected, there are classmates of the writer who refute this petulant view.³

It seems difficult to separate Zweig's contempt for his school from the radical intellectual arrogance that the author shamelessly displays in his memoirs. Only in one digression does he seem to briefly introduce a shadow of doubt about the "childish pride" (p. 43) implicit in his view, but he quickly dismisses it to reaffirm the intellectual superiority of the teenager over his teachers. He does not hesitate to claim that at the age of 16 he already knew everything about literature.⁴ He reiterates his readings of Nietzsche and Strindberg, which his teachers were unaware of, his mastery of the poetry of Baudelaire and Walt Whitman, his access to Valéry's poems two decades before the general educated public through an initiatory literary magazine (p. 43), and his passion for Rilke before he was known (p. 42). The author also adds their passion for theatre and reading the international press in cafés (p. 41). All this without a hint of irony, pity or even nostalgia.

In contrast to this sublime passion for grasping the spirit of Kultur, the mundane interests of today's teenagers, which give meaning to the pedagogical rhetoric of the opening sentence, played no role whatsoever. Among these youthful interests were certainly not sports, which Zweig solemnly despised,⁵ much less contact with the opposite sex, which he considered "time lost" (p. 54), and even less so any kind of erotic attraction to his male

³ Matuschek, *Three Lives*, 34.

⁴ Jean-Jacques Lafaye, *L'avenir de la Nostalgie: Une vie de Stefan Zweig : Essai*. (Paris: Le Félin, 1989), 23.

⁵ Matuschek, *Three Lives*, 35

peers. In fact, Zweig's approach to his classmates is emotionally non-existent; the intense adolescent emotions associated with friendship or camaraderie, if he had any, left no trace in his memory. The hormonal drive latent in other accounts of adolescence is completely absent in Zweig, who understands that the natural passion of puberty is a longing for poetry (p. 53).

In short, the author constructs a glacial narrative, devoid of any emotion and unilaterally intellectual. A completely implausible story, dominated by the arrogance, vanity and petulance of a spoilt child from a good family, raised in *Dutch sheets*, to use Benjamin Jarnés's apt expression,⁶ who before starting secondary school already spoke English, French and Italian, in addition to his native German.⁷ Even in the distressing situation of exile that led him to suicide, Zweig seems unwilling to show any cracks in this cerebral, intellectual figure, detached from affections and feelings. Only one small slip seems to scratch the surface of this monolith. Matuschek recounts that in 1932, on the school's centenary, Zweig refused to comply with the request to give a speech as a distinguished former pupil and instead sent a poem that began with the lines 'we called it 'school', and meant 'learning, fear, strictness, torment, coercion and confinement'".⁸ The ruthless verse seems to fit in with his splendid contempt for his Gymnasium. However, the introduction of the feeling of fear sheds new light on the rest of the associations and gives a new meaning that points to feelings of mortified insecurity that Zweig is careful to block out in his memoirs.

JOSEP PLA OR DETACHMENT

The counterpoint to this lofty yearning for Kultur can be found in the memoirs of another writer, sixteen years younger than Zweig and much less pretentious: the Catalan Josep Pla. Pla stands as the antithesis of the transcendent Zweig. He embodies the earthy, sceptical vision of the peasant, far removed from lofty philosophical and cultural refinement. In a way, Pla could be seen as a kind of Sancho Panza in contrast to the

⁶ Benjamín Jarnés, *Stefan Zweig, cumbre Apagada* (Torrelavega: Quálea, 2010), 69.

⁷ Lafaye, *L'avenir de la Nostalgie*, 17.

⁸ Matuschek, *Three Lives*, 27

sublime Zweig, abducted by the search for the Spirit. However, this position does not detract from the subtlety of his analyses, which reveal an ability to dissect reality that can only be achieved through irony.

Pla's school memories are set in this sardonic distance, which he captures in *Girona*, using as his *alter ego* a supposed deceased friend who asks him to take care of his papers.⁹ The description of the reasons that determined his education sets the tone for his story from the outset. Pla tells us that his family decided that he should study, just as they could have decided that he should work the land or keep the accounts for the family business. In any case, it was an arbitrary decision made by others, unrelated to his characteristics, his abilities, or, even less so, his interests. But for someone who does not share Zweig's petulance and who places himself in the same camp as ordinary mortals, such a disconnect did not deserve special mention. Here we find the first emotional feature of Pla's school memories: indifference, disaffection, what we might summarise as detachment. While Zweig sets himself up as the fierce protagonist of his Bildung, Pla disregards his own education and tells us that it was not for him, that he was simply passing through.

Josep Pla's early school years were spent in Palafrugell, his village in the Empordà county, at the school run by the Marist Brothers, who had been expelled from France by the laicist school legislation of the early 20th century. He always refers to this school in positive terms, highlighting its eminently moderate, liberal and practical character (pp. 15-8). The Marists did not emphasise the religious aspect, but rather "defended a normal, plain, certainly mediocre Catholicism, without too many wonders or excessive casuistry" (p. 16). In the pedagogical sphere, they offered a good primary education of an eminently commercial nature, "practical and clear" (p. 15), aimed at economic activities.

All these modest practical virtues, almost paradigmatic of Catalan *seny* (common sense), deserve Pla's continued praise. Criticism of his formative process begins when his family abandons them to embrace the pretentiousness of a liberal career, "out of a very intense desire for social advancement" (p. 18). This family decision triggered a long

⁹ Josep Pla, *Girona. Un llibre de records* (Barcelona: Destino, 1981). This edition is used as a reference for the quotations in parentheses. The quotations have been translated from the original Catalan.

academic career that began when, at the age of only ten, Pla passed the entrance exam in the secondary school in Figueres, although his father sent him to study at the one in Girona, which was considered to be more serious and of a higher academic standard (p. 18). While attending this *instituto* as a day pupil between 1909 and 1913, the young Pla boarded at another Marist school.

Like Zweig, Pla does not fail to note the mechanical, rote-learning and repetitive nature of education at the time. “I never saw any encouragement to study the relationships between things, any form of organic synthesis, any stimulation of mental gymnastics” (p. 165). In this sense, Pla reproduces the *topos* of school memory that continues to captivate us today despite its obvious inconsistency: it is claimed that the masterful literary skill and depth and subtlety in the analysis of situations and characters of those who remember are unrelated to the school education they received. Even in the rudiments of writing, did they learn to write by divine inspiration? Or were they born with a natural gift for it? On this point, Pla does not differ greatly from Zweig, although he does differ in his position on the much-vaunted lack of meaning in studies. In fact, the search for meaning in his education does not even cross the author’s mind. Pla has a Latin view from which the nonsense is rather to question the meaning of the curriculum. The curriculum is established by tradition and the State, and the only pragmatic attitude to take is to look for ways to pass and obtain the desired qualification with the minimum effort.

The result is a detached and demystifying memoir that does not gloss over the less heroic aspects of his education. In a picaresque style far removed from the intellectual grasp of Spirit by Zweig, Pla bluntly recounts the strategies employed by students to pass their subjects (pp. 166-170). Since state secondary school students were exempt from the official final exam, passing their subjects depended on their performance in class. Pla never mentions essays, exercises or exams and focuses his memoirs on reciting the lesson as a decisive assessment activity. The key to passing a subject, then, lay in guessing the day on which the student would be called upon to recite the lesson, a prediction that was not difficult given the routine nature of the teachers’ practices. Once the approximate date of the call had been established, the student could either memorise a lesson that, he insists, he did not understand at all or

practise the *illumination* of the guide questionnaire. This technique was a version of our current crib notes, consisting of writing down the content of the lesson between the lines of the official programme that the student was allowed to look at. Pla elaborates on the virtues of this technique with irony, even until the end of his university career. In fact, he concludes sardonically that making these crib notes was the “most efficient work” (pp. 169-170) he did in secondary school, as it trained him to make clear, simple and orderly summaries: “to get the most out of the texts”, in his words (p. 170).

Despite his detachment, Pla’s memories are not without intense emotions linked to the world of school. The author feels strongly motivated by the *instituto*’s museums. He is fascinated by the stuffed animals in the natural science cabinet, which included a six-metre snake, as well as the hanging human skeleton, which apparently was part of the equipment of Spanish schools in the first third of the century. If the science cabinet dazzles him, the sunset in the physics cabinet provokes an intense aesthetic emotion that cracks the facade of detachment that Pla has erected:

The oblique light first played on the glass, the gold, the metals of the apparatus, and everything was a silent crackling of tiny sparkles. Then, as if descending from the ceiling and seeping through the walls, the air thickened with a dim light – outside, the last glimmer of light still floated – and the petty, useless petulance of the machines faded melancholically (p. 156).

However, Pla allows himself few poetic licences that exude sentimentality. While Zweig insists on elevating himself towards intellectual spirituality, Pla prefers to dwell on corporeality. While the Austrian longs for rare editions of Rilke, the Catalan is entranced by sausages received from home to combat a hunger that repeatedly forms the backdrop to his school days (pp. 66, 81, 157 and 173). But appetite is not the only physical dimension of these formative years. Pla declares himself an enthusiastic footballer in his teenage years¹⁰ (pp. 81 and 176) as a “spell of biological and sensual whirlwind” (p. 35) and of a sensuality that he

¹⁰ After leaving secondary school, Pla played for the Ateneu Palafrugellenc team in his village. Josep Clara, “Expedient i exàmens de Josep Pla a l’Institut de Girona”, *Revista de Girona* 166 (1994), caption, 37.

describes as “frontal and beastly” (p. 175). Far from Zweig’s disinterest in women, Pla’s classmates would lustfully undress in their imagination the wives of the teachers they encountered on their Sunday walks (p. 145) and indulged with boundless imagination in salacious gossip about the city’s extramarital sex life, which was fed to them by the school’s day students (p. 174). Pla, obviously, did not run away to read Rilke, but for much more mundane purposes. In fact, he was expelled from school at the age of fifteen, in his final year of studies, because of a trip to visit a brothel.¹¹ Nevertheless, he finished secondary school with good grades as an independent student.¹²

In short, *Girona* is an example of memory from below, raw, without much poetic elaboration, much more credible and sincere than Zweig’s pretentious intellectual elaboration. Unlike Zweig, Pla was not a likable character, nor did he ever seem to want to be, and his misanthropy kept him from any temptation to construct an epic narrative of himself.

ALBERT CAMUS OR THE REVERENCE OF THE GIFTED GRANT HOLDER

The third type of memory discussed in this article evokes empathy—often enthusiastic empathy: Albert Camus’s school memories in his unfinished autobiography *The First Man*, a carefully constructed account of unmediated emotion.¹³ In this instance, the memories do not reflect dissatisfaction or disaffection. Camus’s school is not the objectified, repetitive, and meaningless environment frequently depicted in the memoirs of prominent writers; rather, it serves as a gateway to a reality radically different from his dark and impoverished surroundings: the discovery of the bright, compelling, and enriching world of culture and knowledge. Roberts, Gibbons and Heraud argue that *Bildungsroman* novels serve as an antidote to the narrow technocratic conceptions of contemporary education.¹⁴ There is little doubt that *The First Man* exemplifies this. In fact,

¹¹ Xavier Pla, *Un corazón furtivo. Vida de Josep Pla* (Barcelona: Destino, 2024), 135–6.

¹² Pla, *Un corazón furtivo*, 134.

¹³ Albert Camus, *The First Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1996) Chapter 6A, “School”, pp. 106–137. This edition is used as a reference for quotations in parentheses.

¹⁴ Peter Roberts, Andrew Gibbons, and Richard Heraud, “Introduction: Camus and Education,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 45, no. 11 (2013): 1086.

rather than merely serving as an antidote, it functions as a catalyst, as Camus both conceives and enacts the opposite of what is prescribed by the pedagogical knowledge conveyed in academic faculties.

Jacques, Camus's *alter ego*, does not disdain his school; rather, he is an enthusiastic admirer of it. He is also acutely aware that the foundations of his world were established there, and that without this education, his life would have taken a profoundly different trajectory. Indeed, he openly acknowledges this debt in a letter of thanks to his teacher following his receipt of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957: "But when I heard the news, my first thought, after my mother, was of you. Without you, without the affectionate hand you extended to the small poor child that I was, without your teaching, and your example, none of all this would have happened".¹⁵ This expression of humble gratitude positions Camus's school memories on a plane radically opposed to Zweig's contempt and Pla's detachment. His social background was decisive in this respect. Camus was born and raised in an impoverished environment in 1920s Algiers, largely devoid of cultural resources, whereas his intellectual peers had family cultural capital to draw upon independently of, and in contrast to, the school. It is significant that Camus, in his confrontation with Sartre and his followers, remarked that he did not preserve photographs in the family attic. Moreover, it could be added that his primary debt was owed to his school and his teacher.

B. Jacomino contends that Camus's school memories are not devoted to an institution *per se*, but rather to a heroic figure: his teacher, Monsieur Bernard.¹⁶ One can gain an understanding of Louis Germain's (his real name) personality and pedagogical philosophy through his reply to Camus. M. Germain/Bernard writes: "The pedagogue who does his job conscientiously overlooks no opportunity to know his pupils, his children, and these occur all the time. An answer, a gesture, a stance are amply revealing".¹⁷ Here, we find a vindication of teachers' empirical

¹⁵ Letter from Albert Camus to his teacher, M. Germain, 19 October 1957. Reproduced in Camus, *The First Man*, 257.

¹⁶ Baptiste Jacomino, "Camus et son maître d'école: la pédagogie républicaine de Monsieur Bernard est-elle désuète?" *Le Philosophe*, 37 (2012): 110.

¹⁷ Letter from teacher M. Germain to Albert Camus, 30 April 1959. Reproduced in Camus, *The First Man*, 296.

knowledge, as well as the hermeneutic dimension that highlights the personal relationship between teacher and student, a point discussed by F. Bárcena.¹⁸ Moreover, the letter provides insights that define M. Bernard and clearly situate him within the tradition of French republican education. Most importantly, and characteristically, he is defined by his status as a laicist teacher. This concern is evident in that he devoted nearly a quarter of his letter to his pupil Nobel, expressing his displeasure with the encroachment of confessional education. For M. Bernard, the principle of laicism rested on respect for the child's freedom of conscience and a firm refusal to indoctrinate: "I believe that throughout my career I have respected what is most sacred in a child: the right to seek out his own truth. I loved you all and I believe I did my best not to show my opinions and thus to influence your young minds".¹⁹ In this way, M. Bernard aligned himself with the fallacious outlined by Jules Ferry in his letter to teachers regarding the implementation of laicist education laws.²⁰

M. Bernard's affection was reciprocated by his pupil. The traits Camus highlights in his description of him foreshadow the values that would shape his relationship with school: "Robust, elegantly dressed [...] smelling of cologne" (p. 107). On the one hand, there is the sensory element—the smell—a foreshadowing of the olfactory memory that largely governs Camus's memory of school, as we shall see later. On the other, dignity and self-control. The teacher's neatness of dress embodies a refusal to be dragged down by his miserable surroundings—a quality that M. Bernard would later recognise reciprocally in his pupil.

However, M. Bernard is austere in his emotional expression—a strict teacher, even a supporter of corporal punishment—despite its being condemned by the pedagogy of the time. Camus, on the other hand, is untroubled by corporal punishment, as it was not out of place in an environment where children were routinely beaten. Camus also offers a second, and far more interesting, justification: such corporal punishment was predictable and fair; everyone knew the circumstances under

¹⁸ Fernando Bárcena Orbe, "Maestros y discípulos. Anatomía de una relación". *Teoría de la Educación. Revista Interuniversitaria* 30, no. 2 (2018): 87.

¹⁹ Letter from teacher M. Germain, 298.

²⁰ Jules Ferry, *Lettre aux instituteurs*. (Paris: FE éditions Jacques-Marie Laffont éditeur, 2015).

which it was imposed, and it was applied equally to all (p. 118). This is another key sentiment in Camus's republican school memories: the child's innate and radical sense of justice grounded in equality—a feeling now at risk due to the deconstruction of equality as the horizon of justice, under the guise of celebrating diversity. Thus, in Camus's time, authoritarian and even violent schools could be perceived by children as fundamentally fair, provided they were egalitarian. By contrast, it is worth asking what notions of justice today's schoolchildren internalize within the multilateral negotiation on which contemporary education is based.

Additionally, M. Bernard was likely a nationalist teacher—or at least a patriot. He had fought in the Great War and read to his pupils passages from the novel *Les Croix de Bois* about the war, which moved Camus to tears (p. 115). The teacher also maintained a strong camaraderie with his fellow soldiers, which compelled him to protect war orphans. His sense of loyalty to his comrades led him to stand in for them in front of their children, in his own words.

This was the case with Camus, whose father died at the Battle of the Marne in 1914, when he was just one year old. Consequently, Camus was a war orphan who grew up in an extremely poor family, consisting of his brother, his mother—who did odd jobs in households—an uncle, and a strict, authoritarian grandmother who, like Lorca's Bernarda Alba, managed the family's survival in the impoverished neighbourhoods of the colonies. It is hard to imagine greater marginalisation. From the perspective of educational sociology, Camus was, to say the least, a prime candidate for academic failure. His linguistic situation only reinforced this destiny: the entire family was illiterate, his uncle was deaf and mute, only uttering onomatopoeic sounds, and his mother also had hearing impairments and difficulty expressing herself.²¹ Adding to this, the head of the family—his grandmother—was from Menorca, which meant that her language was neither French nor Spanish, but probably a dialectal variant of Catalan spoken in the Balearic Islands before standardisation.

Given this background, one might expect Camus's school memories to mirror those of Zweig and Pla regarding the meaninglessness of

²¹ Robert Zaretsky, *Albert Camus. Elements of a life*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 11

schooling, in a proletarian version infused with social critique: school as a bourgeois instrument alien to the child's culture, coercively imposing its values to eradicate the genuine popular subculture. However, the opposite is observed.

Undoubtedly, Camus's humble acknowledgment²² of his debt to school helps resolve this apparent paradox. From the perspective of linguistic determinism, trivialized in our faculties by certain readings of Bernstein, Camus was, rather than condemned, merely sentenced; yet he went on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Clearly, he had to learn somewhere the language he wielded so masterfully, and it is evident that this place was his school. Camus recognizes this; unlike Zweig, who had little to be thankful for speaking four languages before entering school, and would likely have done so regardless, given his vanity. In this regard, Camus aligns closely with Pla, who also required formal training in the cultured language because he spoke colloquial Catalan at home, and who greatly valued the Marists' instruction in Spanish. These examples remind us that schooling in a second language was a widespread phenomenon in Europe prior to the Second World War, and highlight a second, now largely overlooked, issue: the language of the school, like all of its codes, was always another language, even for speakers of the same tongue.

However, despite the apparent contradiction between his family and school environments, school was not an inhospitable place for Camus—a scene of latent violence—but rather a source of happiness: "Only school gave Jacques and Pierre these joys" (p. 113). Indeed, this happiness was physically manifest in the child. In the words of his teacher: "Your pleasure at being in school burst out all over. Your face showed optimism.²³ How is such happiness possible in a place that has nothing to do with the child's environment? Camus's answer is clear: precisely because of that. "And no doubt what they so passionately loved in school was that they were not a home, where want and ignorance made life harder and more bleak, as if closed in on itself; poverty is a fortress without drawbridges" (pp. 113).

²² "For Camus, the first imperative is to be honest - intellectually honest." Ignacio L. Götz "Camus and the Art of Teaching," *Educational Theory* 37, no. 3 (1987): 266.

²³ Letter from teacher M. Germain, p. 296.

For Camus, school thus serves as a bridge to another world—a world full of possibilities, entirely disconnected from the child's impoverished environment. This radical disconnection, which might have produced estrangement, instead evokes fascination in Camus and draws him closer. This attraction to disconnection reaches its zenith in the school textbooks and readings that depicted the reality of the metropolis, of children living amid snow, cold, and water—a reality completely foreign to the children of Algiers, who knew nothing but “the sirocco, the dust, the prodigious and brief showers, the sand of the beaches and the sea blazing under the sun” (p. 112). And yet Camus is enthusiastic. For him, “these stories were as exotic as they could possibly be” (p. 113) in a positive sense:

they were part of the powerful poetry of school, which was nourished also by the smell of varnished rules and pen cases; the delicious taste of the strap of his satchel that he would chew [...] the sharp bitter smell of purple ink, especially when hist turn came to fill the inkwells with a cork through which a bent glass tube had been pushed, and Jacques happily sniffed the opening of the tube, the soft feel of the smooth glossy pages in certain books, which also gave off the good smell of print and glue, and finally, on rainy days, the smell of wet wool that emanated from the wool coats at the back of the classroom (p. 113).

It is difficult to imagine a more beautiful declaration of love for school. It constitutes an almost Proustian memory of the material culture of schooling in sensory terms: memories linked to pleasant smells, tastes, and textures. An olfactory memory emerges here, already noted in relation to the teacher, and which, curiously, is also present in Zweig. Schools have a distinctive smell, and that smell serves as a powerful mnemonic resource. Recalling his secondary school, Zweig describes the “musty, mouldy smell” characteristic of Austrian official buildings, which he terms a *treasury* smell: “the smell of overheated, crowded rooms, never properly aired, which first attached itself to our clothes and then to our soul” (pp. 34–35). Zweig is unwilling to concede anything to his school; he is monolithically merciless. In contrast to Camus's pleasurable sensuality, his school literally *stinks*, even in a physical sense.

Camus loves school because it provides him with what he lacks at home. The question remains, however, why what the school offers is so fascinating, while modern pedagogy often elicits the opposite reaction. It would be worthwhile to investigate the underlying connection between Camus's socio-family environment and the school world, which appear so contradictory. Throughout his work, Camus provides evidence of a clear empathy between the two worlds—not obviously at a formal cultural level, but morally and civically. Although immersed in poverty, Camus's family was not devoid of values; on the contrary, it maintained a robust moral framework that served as a boundary between poverty and marginality, realities that are by no means equivalent. This morality constituted a pre-existing structure receptive to what the school had to offer. Consequently, the school's contribution, though unfamiliar, acquires meaning as a response to a deficit. From the perspective of marginality, such identification would be unthinkable; the incommensurability becomes absolute, and the *drawbridge* is definitively raised.

This family morality appears to be grounded in a concept of dignity that manifests as a resolute refusal to allow poverty to lead to moral degeneration or the loss of human dignity. Its most obvious expression is physical appearance. The teacher says, "until then it seemed to me to be in the same position as your classmates. You always had what you needed. Like your brother, you were nicely dressed."²⁴ This clearly exemplifies the modesty of the poor, a Herculean effort that, as the teacher acknowledged, fell on the shoulders of women: "I don't think I can find a greater compliment to your mother." In any case, it was the same dignity that the humble teacher exercised in his attire in the torrid and dusty Algiers, as already indicated. In this, as in so many other things, Camus and his teacher recognise each other. This resistance to being swept away was also evident in other, more clearly moral areas. In the discussion about the bloody actions of the Arabs in the war, Camus's father declared that "a man doesn't let himself do that kind of thing! That's what makes a man, or otherwise ..." (p. 52). Self-control thus became a moral imperative, denying the justification of immorality, even in the

²⁴ Letter from teacher M. Germain, p. 297.

worst situations, and resisting the exoneration of moral norms through circumstances.²⁵

Camus did not bring the knowledge acquired at home to school, but he did bring a willingness to receive it. The school “fed a hunger in them more basic even to the child than to the man, and that is the hunger for discovery” (p. 114). School offers nourishment only insofar as this hunger already exists. This clearly reflects a conception of meaningful learning and motivation *avant la lettre*, yet one radically different from ours, as it does not appeal to the child’s environment or desires, but to the intrinsic values of culture and knowledge, which must suffice on their own, grounded in the belief that the human condition entails the desire to know and improve oneself. What Camus emphasizes about the pedagogy of his school is not the mere transmission of knowledge, but a prior recognition of the dignity of the child: “They were judged worthy to discover the world” (p. 114). Ultimately, this represents a genuine respect for the child that rejects infantilisation and constitutes the necessary premise of any active pedagogy or authentic discovery methodology.

Camus’s experience of school as a means of emancipation and self-improvement was constrained by the educational structures of the time. Universal republican schooling existed as an end in itself, with no continuity. Academic education continued in secondary school, but this institution was disconnected from popular schooling and clearly socially elitist. It was in no way part of the horizon accessible to the popular sectors. Faced with this situation, M. Bernard demonstrated his commitment to his most academically gifted poor students by preparing them, free of charge, for the entrance examination to secondary school (lycée) and securing a grant. In Camus’s case, the teacher had to persuade his grandmother, who could not see the value of this path given the high cost of foregoing the income the teenager could have contributed to the family over those seven years. We do not know what M. Bernard said to the grandmother, as the boy was sent out of the room, but Camus’s destiny was effectively determined in this conversation.

Algiers, 1923—but it could just as easily have been any village in Spain in the 1950s, or even any of our neighbourhoods today, with a

²⁵ Alain Finkielkraut. *Un corazón inteligente* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2010), 103.

recently arrived population as the protagonists. Camus's experience is by no means isolated. In many memoirs of children from humble backgrounds, or belonging to excluded groups such as women, who have succeeded in the education system, one finds the figure of the teacher who opens the door to a world to which they were not socially destined. Literary and cinematic fiction abound with such examples, from Miss Moffat in Emlyn Williams' *The Corn is Green* to Mrs. Sandra Wilkinson in *Billy Elliot*. Hence the heroic dimension Camus attributes to M. Bernard.

Naturally, the story can also be viewed from another perspective, as a paradigmatic example of the limited and calculated social mobility offered by the French meritocratic system. From this viewpoint, M. Bernard, far from being a heroic figure, might be seen as the cold selector of the few who deserved to break free from their class destiny and ascend socially, thereby perpetuating the condemnation of the rest to the underworld—a kind of Angel of Death deciding who would be saved. In short, an agent serving to reproduce the system that rewards those who have correctly internalized the values of the system of domination embodied by the school through *déclassement*. Perhaps no one has described this process of leaving one's own social class inherent in classical French meritocracy more harshly than Colette in *Claudine at School*, when she explains the reasons why young aspiring female teachers accepted the harsh living conditions of teacher training school: "But at least they would bear hats and would not make clothes for other people or look after animals or draw buckets from the well, and they would despise their parents".²⁶

From this perspective, Camus would be one of the *meritocrats* smug with their success that Michael Young criticises in his classic late-1950s book.²⁷ He exemplifies the *gifted grant holder*. Indeed, it is not implausible that his entire account represents little more than an exercise in reconstructing memory from the internalisation of the values of the system that Camus retrospectively projects onto his family; ultimately, a

²⁶ Colette, *Claudine at School* (London, Seeker and Warburg, 1956), 176.

²⁷ Michael Young, *The rise of the meritocracy, 1870-2033: an essay on education and equality*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1958), presented and discussed, along with other recent authors, by Antonio Viñao Frago, *Meritocracia, Igualdad, Educación: Por una vuelta a la historia social de la educación* (Murcia: Diego Marín, 2023).

sophisticated mystification of his betrayal of his own people. Given the abundant literature enamoured with Camus's story, it would undoubtedly be valuable to pursue this line of demystifying analysis. However, a structural approach cannot erase the existence of children endowed with a sensitivity and thirst for knowledge that, sociologically, they should not have possessed, nor the embarrassing identification with them by those who followed their path. After all, Billy Elliot did not want money or social advancement—he just wanted to dance, and Albert Camus wanted to know, think, and write. It is clear that, without school and their teacher, neither would have achieved this.

CARLOS GIMÉNEZ OR IRREDENTIST MEMORY

Finally, as a counterpoint to Camus's bright and positive sentimental memory, it is worth examining the memory of the dark side of educational institutions. The comic artist Carlos Giménez captured his school experiences of the Auxilio Social boarding schools in post-Civil War Spain in four comic books entitled *Paracuellos*.²⁸ Giménez's narratives fully align with the movement to reclaim historical memory that has been shaping Spanish society for more than two decades. Beyond personal recollections, his work constitutes a denunciation of the suffering endured by the children of the dispossessed, and of the cruelty with which they were treated—not only because they were poor, but also because they were the children of the defeated: the heirs of the sin against God and Spain committed by their parents.

Giménez was not, strictly speaking, the son of someone who had suffered reprisals from the regime, but rather a collateral victim of the appalling poverty imposed by Francoism. Born in 1941 in the devastated post-war Madrid, the author was orphaned by his father and, after his mother was admitted to a hospital in Bilbao with tuberculosis, he was placed in the Auxilio Social shelters, where he remained for eight years.²⁹ Auxilio Social was a charitable institution affiliated with the Falange,

²⁸ Carlos Giménez, *Todo Paracuellos* (Barcelona, DeBolsillo, 2007). This compilation edition is used as a reference for quotations. The original album is added to these quotations. The quotations have been translated from Spanish.

²⁹ Pierre-Alain de Bois, *Carlos Giménez: de la denuncia a la transmisión de la memoria* (Madrid: Marmotilla, 2020), 24.

established during the civil war on the Nazi model of the Winterhilfe, and it remained linked to the Fascist single party after the conflict.³⁰ This political affiliation accentuated its ideological dimension within that grim post-war Spain.

In this memoir, there are clearly no affectionate teachers who dignify the pupils, as in the case of Camus, nor indifferent bureaucrats who are moderately severe out of self-preservation, as in Zweig and Pla; rather, there are cruel figures, vectors of hatred and perpetrators of humiliation and violence. The children of *Paracuellos* are subjected to abuse in every aspect of their existence and live in fear of constant physical and psychological punishment. This pervasive abuse includes attempts at sexual assault by a caretaker, which culminate in the victim being repeatedly beaten.³¹ Physical violence by caregivers, Falange instructors, and priests is a recurring theme throughout the comic strips. According to Giménez himself, it reflects an intensification of the widespread violence that characterised post-war Spain. The Auxilio Social homes were “the logical monster that spawned a monstrous society” (p. 22).³² However, this contextualisation by the author functions more as a means of distancing himself from the mature present than as a faithful reflection of the raw anger of his early memories. In the comics, the violence is not generic, but brutal and even methodically cruel, as in the case of the double slap invented by Father Rodríguez, which prevented the child from falling to the ground and allowed the beating to continue.³³ This climate of violence was exacerbated by abusive children themselves, such as Porterito, for whom Giménez reserves a vicarious revenge.³⁴ Added to this physical violence was ongoing psychological abuse aimed at causing suffering through humiliation and the denial of any hint of happiness. In short, cruelty in all its manifestations—from physical brutality to psychological sophistication—created, in Danielle Corrado’s view, an “atmosphere

³⁰ For Auxilio Social and its children, see Ángela Cenarro Lagunas, *La sonrisa de la Falange: Auxilio Social en la guerra civil y en la posguerra* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2006) and *Los niños del Auxilio Social* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 2009).

³¹ Carlos Giménez, “Auxilio social, VIII. Adolfo, el conquistador”, *Paracuellos* 2, 160–167.

³² Carlos Giménez, “Por si a alguien le interesa”, introduction to *Todo Paracuellos*, 22.

³³ Carlos Giménez, “Paracuellos V. Piscurros”, *Paracuellos* 3, 260–261.

³⁴ Carlos Giménez, “Porterito. Paracuellos del Jarama, 1952”, *Paracuellos* 1, 96–99.

of omnipresent tension".³⁵ The physical appearance of the caregivers embodies this perpetual cruelty in the illustrations. The author provides close-ups of "grotesque, terrifying faces that share a number of common features: deep wrinkles, sagging skin, and arched eyebrows forming perpetually angry expressions, brimming with contempt and aggression".³⁶ Corrado correctly identifies anger as the most characteristic feature of these women.

Nevertheless, Giménez's comics are not devoid of moments of happiness. The comics (*tebeos*) themselves constitute a promise of escape from hell and instil a modicum of hope, according to De Bois,³⁷ a perception closely linked to the author's professional vocation. Notably, as in Camus, the recollection of these happy moments is intertwined with sensory memory, specifically olfactory. When the child finally acquires the longed-for comics after numerous sacrifices, he postpones the pleasure of reading, first savouring "that smell... that magical smell of new comics".³⁸ However, this happiness is fleeting, for Miss Sagrario, in a fit of her characteristic anger, seizes them and burns them in an act of extreme cruelty.

In reality, rather than redeeming and re-educating the children of the vanquished—those *little savages* who seemed, according to one of the terrifying caregivers, to have come from Siberia³⁹—the explicit aim of the institution, Giménez's memoir suggests that its true objective was to obliterate any trace of human dignity in them and impress upon them that they had no place in the New Spain other than to bow their heads and obey the so-called decent citizens for the remainder of their lives; that they had, *vicariously*, lost a war for a reason. As Juan Marsé notes in the prologue to the complete edition, "those children evoked by Carlos

³⁵ Danielle Corrado, "Carlos Giménez y el pacto autobiográfico", in *Historietas, comics y tebeos españoles*, ed. Viviane Alary (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2002), 177.

³⁶ Corrado, "Carlos Giménez", 177.

³⁷ Bois, *Carlos Giménez*, 33.

³⁸ Carlos Giménez, "Auxilio Social IX. El cachorro, el catecismo y la señorita de Castellón", *Paracuellos* 2, 175.

³⁹ Carlos Giménez, "Auxilio Social II. ¡Rezad, Rezad, malditos!", *Paracuellos* 2, 111

Giménez's pencil were already condemned by the outcome of the civil war and the bloody Triumphant Years of the victorious side.”⁴⁰

Giménez's work is notably original. Firstly, it is remarkable for articulating memory—traumatic memory at that—through comics, a medium which, in 1976, when the cartoons first began to be published, was not typically associated with serious subjects. Equally significant is the process of remembrance that underpins the four volumes. The resumption of the series at the turn of the century, nearly two decades after the initial volumes, occurred within a new framework of collective memory in Spanish society, building upon the foundations laid by the first wave of demands for historical memory regarding the Franco Regime. In Giménez's work, individual memories yield to a shared experience, recalled collectively alongside others who had endured the same institutions.⁴¹ This process arguably reoriented the intentionality of Giménez's narrative. According to De Bois, in the later volumes, the desire to avoid forgetting gave way to the reconstruction of a collective memory.⁴² In doing so, while participating in the wave of historical memory, Giménez went further, paradoxically confirming the critiques advanced by opponents of the memorialist movement. Ultimately, this evolution corroborates Santos Juliá's thesis that there was no *pact of silence* during the Transition,⁴³ contrary to what had been alleged; on the contrary, extensive documentation regarding the Franco Regime and its atrocities was published, with *Paracuellos* serving as a prime example. The question, therefore, is not merely to reveal what was supposedly concealed, but to integrate these events—already documented—into a coherent collective memory. This development situates the *Paracuellos* series within Halbwachs's framework of horizontal and vertical memory:⁴⁴ horizontal in that it unites members of a generation, and vertical in that it facilitates the transmission of memory from one generation to the next.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Juan Marsé, “Paracuellos. Aventuras y testimonios”, prologue to *Todo Paracuellos*, 8.

⁴¹ Bois, *Carlos Giménez*, 121.

⁴² Bois, *Carlos Giménez*, 131.

⁴³ Santos Juliá, “Echar al olvido. Memoria y amnistía en la transición a la democracia,” *Claves de Razón Práctica* 129 (2003):107.

⁴⁴ Maurice Halbwachs, *On collective memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1992).

⁴⁵ Bois, *Carlos Giménez*, 121.

In any case, this evolution cannot obscure the fact that, overall, Giménez conveys a bitter and devastating memory of school, and, above all, a militant memory: both testimonial and vindictive. This is what you did, or rather, this is what you did to us—let it be known.

FOR AN IRKSOME MEMORY

This article has examined four distinct modes of remembering school as experienced by its authors. Firstly, there is the memory of those at the top—typically associated with secondary education, the formative stage that shapes individuals destined to occupy positions in society—in two contrasting versions: the petulant account of Stefan Zweig, dissatisfied with excellence, and the demystifying, down-to-earth account of Josep Pla: the capture of the Spirit as opposed to sausages and brothels. In contrast, there are the memories of those at the bottom, the excluded, also presented in two versions. On the one hand, the epic of the poor elementary schoolboy, captivated by knowledge and culture, nurtured and guided by his teacher—or, if one prefers, the account of the gifted grant holder whose success in the system may be interpreted as a form of betrayal of his own people. In either interpretation, the narrative positions school as central to personal growth and emancipation. On the other hand, there is the militant and vindictive memory of the defeated children, as recounted by Carlos Giménez—a memory that confronts the past and demands some form of redress, even if only moral.

It is for the reader to decide with which of the two they most identify. From a historiographical perspective, the balance favours Pla and Giménez, as they best correspond to the common trajectories of the past. Zweig's account is untenable due to its implausibility, and Camus's because it is atypical, although the fact that most of his readers are successful products of the same educational system skews its true statistical relevance. However, this does not impede the reader's emotional identification, as memory has little to do with history, aside from the minor point that both operate in the past. At this juncture, it is essential not to conflate the two spheres and to remain acutely aware of the boundaries between memory and history. The criteria for validating one or the other

are entirely distinct.⁴⁶ Any attempt to contrast subjectivity with reality becomes an absurd and ultimately meaningless exercise. From the perspective of memory, therefore, all four models are valid. In truth, the sole requirement for those who remember is a measure of honesty or sincerity. In the context of this article, it is unnecessary to specify which of the four authors may fail to meet this standard, and if he does, it is all the more lamentable.

In any case, the principal virtue of individual memories lies in their plurality. Ultimately, individual memory is the most democratic form of memory, since anyone can remember and, with a measure of fortune, narrate their recollections with varying degrees of eloquence. Historical memory, by contrast, demands organisation, negotiation, and, ultimately, power. Not everyone has a place within historical memory, neither in the dominant narrative nor in the alternatives we seek to construct. All historical memory is, to some extent, official memory, yet fortunately there will always exist alternative memories whose primary virtue is to resist a single, overarching narrative. Beyond critical memories—which ultimately aim to be incorporated into the grand narrative of historical memory—it is essential to vindicate uncomfortable memories: those that defy integration into the narrative through which we wish to interpret the past, particularly the memories of victims on the ostensibly *good* side: the Berlin women subjected to mass rape by the Red Army; those abducted by revolutionary control patrols in Barcelona during the summer of 1936; African Americans repressed during the Harlem riots of 1943 while their compatriots fought in Europe against fascist racism; or those sterilised under Swedish social-democratic eugenics programmes. Memory is often said to be resilient, at least against the death that is oblivion. Yet, rather than speaking of resilient memories, I suggest that the duty of memory compels us to embrace irksome memories. After all, challenging Power is always a salutary exercise, whether in the realm of history or of memory.

⁴⁶ Antonio Fco. Canales, “Against Citizenship: Defending the teaching of History as a discipline,” *Revista de Educación* 1 (2025): 8.

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